

# Counting Inconsistencies

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An Analysis of American  
Jewish Population Studies,  
with a Focus on Jews of Color

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# Executive Summary

This project set out to understand how many Jews of Color live in the United States. We defined Jews of Color broadly to include anyone who identified as non-white.

To assess the size of this population, we undertook a meta-analysis of national and community-level Jewish population studies. When we began systematically analyzing the data and the survey strategies deployed to collect it, we found grave inconsistencies that likely resulted in a systematic undercounting of Jews of Color.

Given these inconsistencies, we can, at best, make only an educated guess about the population of Jews of Color in the United States.

- **We can approximate that Jews of Color represent at least 12-15% of American Jews.**
- **More younger people identify as nonwhite than older people do. With cohort replacement, this means that the future of American Jewry is diverse.**

These conclusions are derived from data that suffers from inconsistent approaches to examining the racial and ethnic identification of American Jews.

Researchers introduced inconsistencies in four main ways.

- Some surveys did **not include questions about race and ethnicity.**
- Some study designs sampled respondents in ways that **likely undercounted Jews of Color.**
- When asked, **questions about race and ethnicity were not comparable** across studies and often confused multiple types of identity.
- **Employing nonstandard questions also created mismatches** with reference surveys used to weight Jewish population estimates.

Based on these issues, we recommend that future Jewish population studies adopt better and more consistent practices for sampling populations, weighting responses, and formulating more comprehensive and sensitively-worded questions.

# 25 different population studies

## 15 Local and Community Studies

- Los Angeles 1997
- Seattle 2014
- Phoenix 2002
- Atlanta 2006
- Denver/Boulder 2007
- Philadelphia 2009
- Chicago 2010
- Cleveland 2011
- New York 2011
- Miami 2014
- Boston 2015
- Pittsburgh 2017
- SF Bay Area 2017
- Washington DC 2017

## 7 National Population Studies

- 1970 NJPS
- 1990 NJPS
- 1990 NSRI
- 2000 NJPS
- 2002 HARI
- 2013 Pew
- American Jewish Population Project (AJPP)

## 4 Population Specific Studies

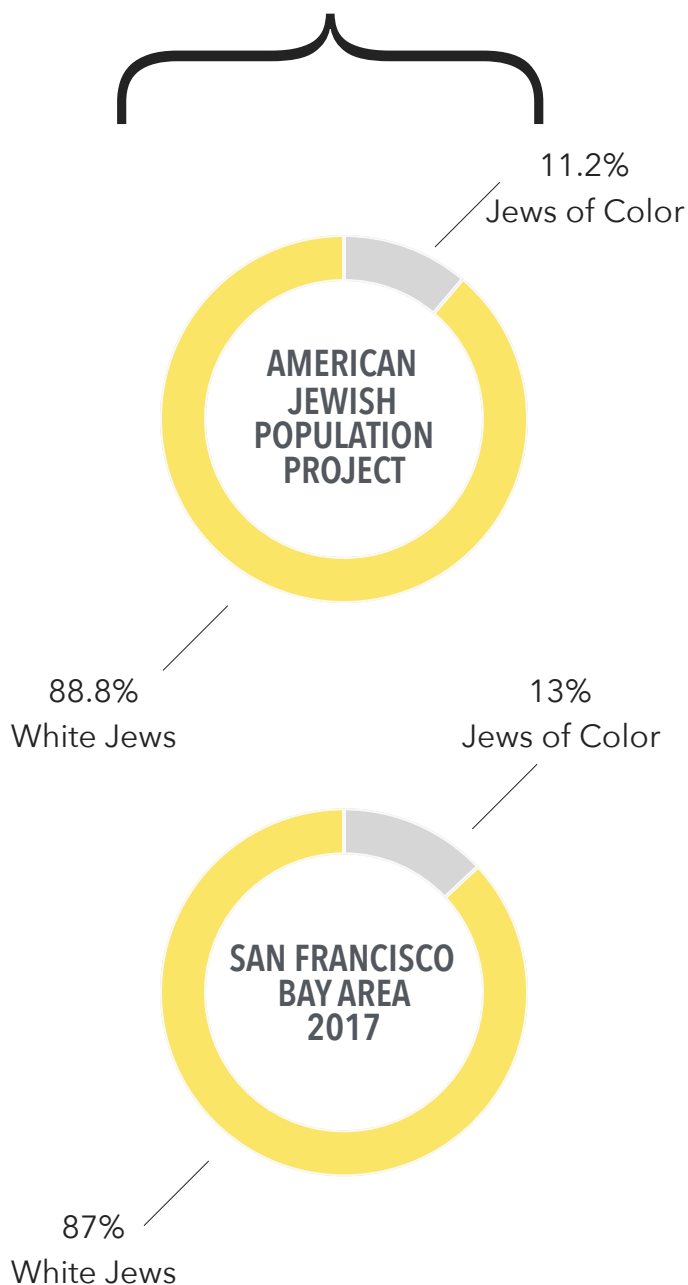
- Generation Now
- Generation Next
- Jewish Futures Project
- Hillel International Research on College Students

# Defining Jews of Color

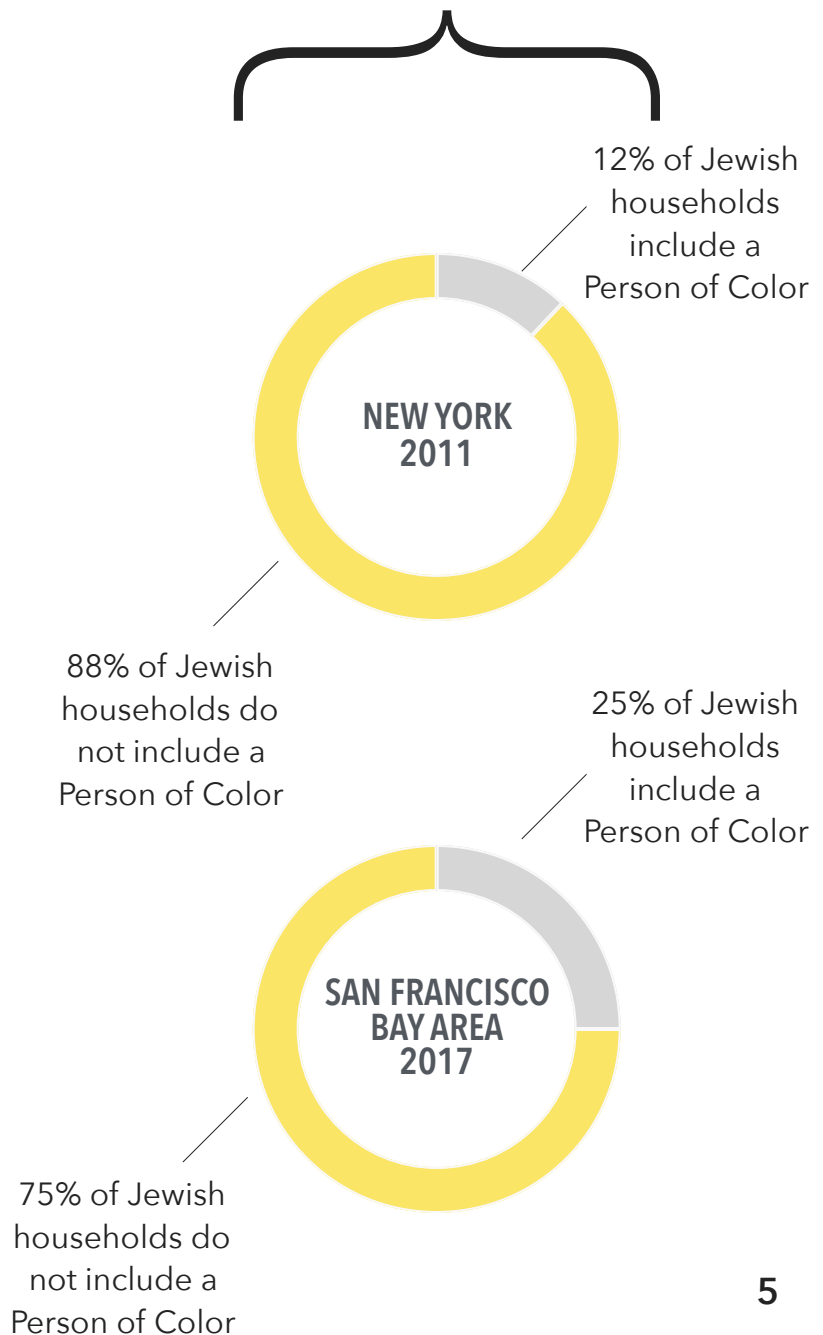
- We did not enter this project with a strict definition of who qualified as a “Jew of Color” that we imposed on the studies.
- Our approach emerged from the various studies, whether they were defined by self-identification, religious movement, familial ancestry, or some other means.
- Where possible, we employed the same definitions as the studies we included, so as to remain as close as possible to the source data which, for our purposes, included the responses to the surveys *and* (importantly) the survey instruments and sampling strategies.

# Based on available data, we estimate that Jews of Color represent approximately 12-15% of the American Jewish population.

Percentages of Jews of Color



Percentages of Jewish Households with People of Color in them



# Deriving the Population Estimate

**We derived the population estimate by extrapolating from the most reliable available data, which we limited to three studies:** New York (2011), SF Bay Area (2017), and the American Jewish Population Project (AJPP).

The SF Bay Area and AJPP studies had the most robust data and most thorough analyses of Jews of Color that reported responses at the individual. The New York Study reported findings at the household level.

To arrive at the lower estimate:



1. The AJPP is the most methodologically rigorous of the studies included in this effort. We can assume that the percentage of Jews of Color in the United States is not less than 11.2%
2. The San Francisco study found 13% percent of Jews in that sample to identify as Jews of Color.
3. Assessing the difference led us to estimate 12% as a reasonable lower limit.

To arrive at the upper estimate:



1. The AJPP did not include Jews who did not claim Judaism as their religion. Jews of Color are between 2-3 times as likely as White-identified Jews to claim that Judaism is not their religion (based on our analysis of the Pew 2013 data).
2. The San Francisco study relied on sampling methodologies that included Federation-provided lists and Distinctive Jewish Names. These methods likely undercount Jews of Color.
3. The New York Study found that 14% of Jewish households are multiracial. Accounting for undercounting, we approximated an upper estimate of 15%.

# American Jewish households are increasingly multiracial

**With each successive cohort, the number of multiracial and nonwhite households has increased.** This tracks with almost every major population study of the United States, which document the transformation of the country into one in which the total number of “minority” residents outnumbers the total number of white-identified ones.

New York  
2011

- *12% of Jewish households include nonwhite and multiracial members.*
- *65% of the people living in multiracial households are under 45 years of age.*

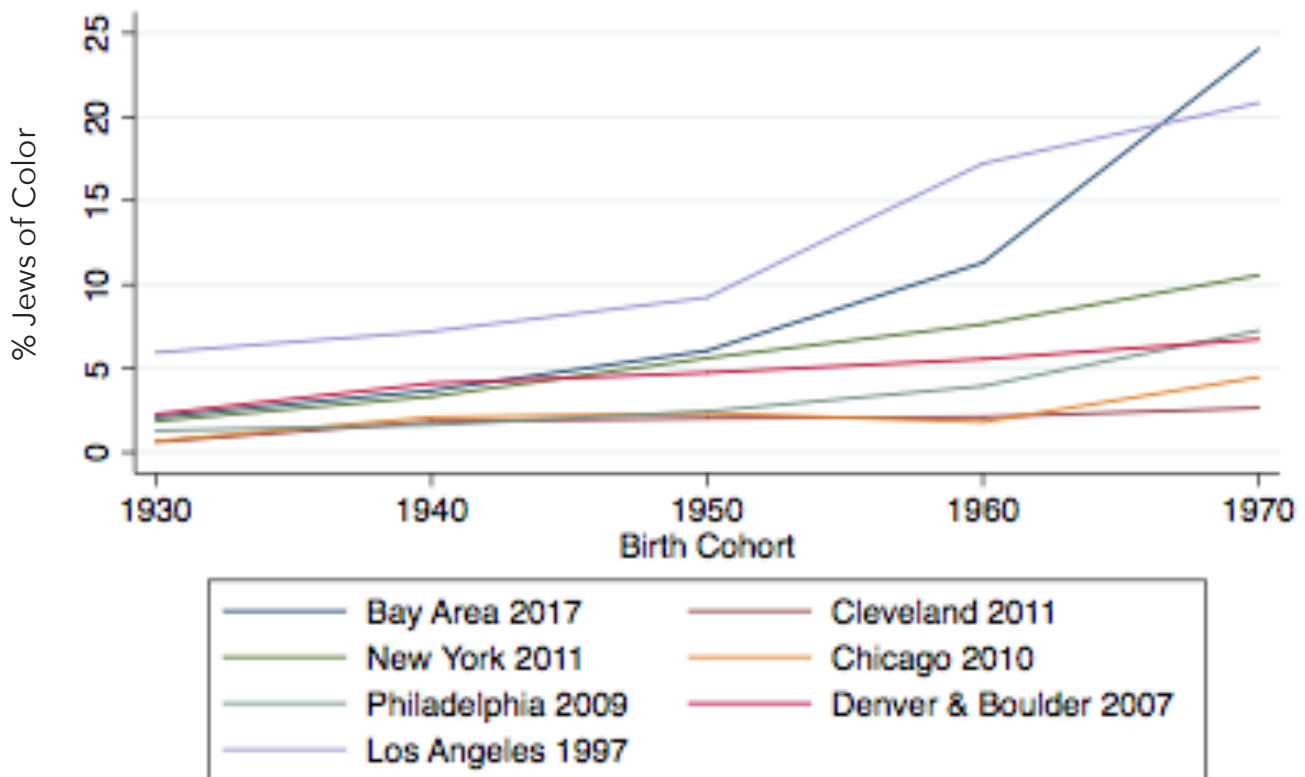
SF Bay Area  
2017

- *25% of Jewish households include nonwhite and multiracial members.*
- *65% of the people living in multiracial households are under 49 years of age.*
- *38% are under age 35.*



# By birth cohort, the percentage of Jews of Color has risen consistently

Percentage of Jewish Population of Color by Birth Cohort  
American Jewish Community Studies



**As younger, more ethnically and racially diverse cohorts replace older, more homogeneous ones, the basic makeup of the American Jewish community will likely change.**

Note: This graph stops at 1970 because the data grows increasingly inconsistent; sometime studies ask only about the identity of respondents, while other studies ask about the identities of everyone in a given household.

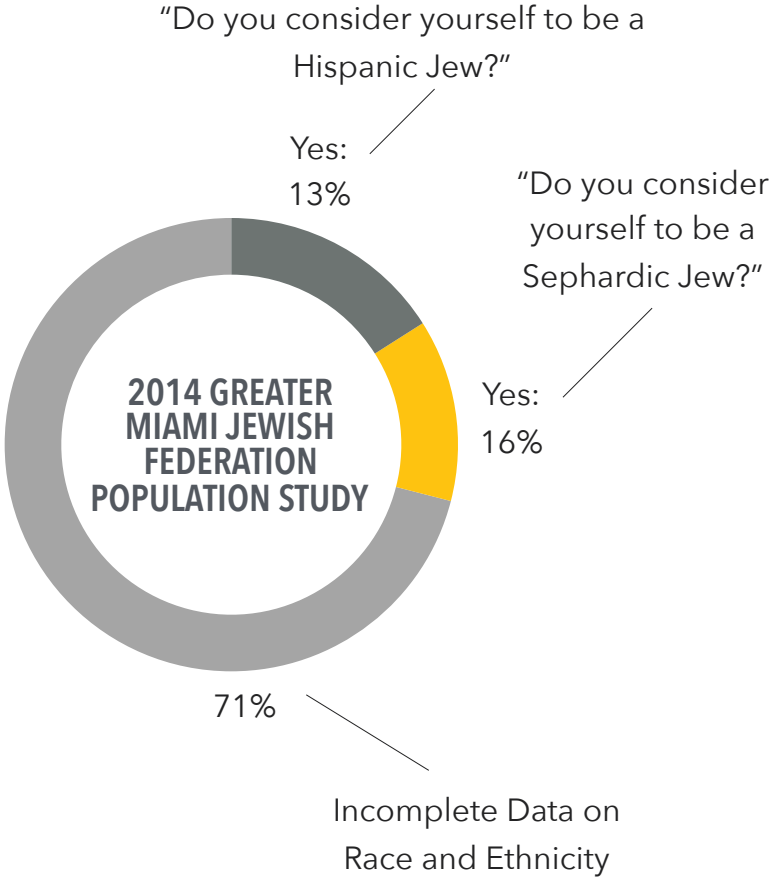
# Population studies of American Jews have inconsistently counted Jews of Color

We identified **four primary ways** in which population data on American Jews inconsistently counted Jews of Color.

1. Some studies **did not ask about race or ethnicity** at all.
2. Some study designs **sampled respondents** in ways that likely undercounted Jews of Color.
3. When asked, **questions about race and ethnicity were not comparable** across studies and often confused multiple types of identity.
4. **Employing nonstandard questions also created mismatches** with reference surveys used to weight Jewish population estimates.

# Some surveys did not ask about race or ethnicity

- The 2014 Greater Miami Jewish Federation Population Study asked about Hispanic and Sephardic identification, but **did not ask about any other racial or ethnic identity category, including white**. The result is a portrait with incomplete data for 71% of the community.
- The 2015 Greater Boston Community Study appeared to have **no direct questions about race or ethnicity at all**.
- **None of the population-specific studies included in this meta-analysis asked about racial or ethnic identity.**



# Survey designs sampled respondents in ways that likely result in undercounting Jews of Color

**Three popular sampling strategies likely worked against the inclusion of Jews of Color in survey samples:**

Philadelphia 2009, Seattle 2014, Pittsburgh 2017, Washington DC 2017 partially sampled on "distinctive Jewish names."



Many Jews of Color do not have names that would be readily identified as "Jewish."

Atlanta 2006, Chicago 2010, Miami 2014, SF Bay Area 2017 all relied heavily on Jewish community lists.



Jews of Color are underrepresented in Jewish community organizations or donor lists.

AJPP only included Jews by religion.



Jews of Color are about three times as likely as Jews who identify as white to identify as Jewish but not by religion.

# Survey questions and options were often inconsistently worded

**Sometimes, both questions and responses conflate family origin, racial, ethnic, national, and even denominational identities.**

NJPS 1990: "Regarding your Jewish ethnicity, do you consider yourself to be Sephardi, Ashkenazi, or something else?"



Options included: Sephardi, Ashkenazi, something else, Russian, Just Jewish, DK / Decline, None, No religion, Christian, Mixed, Hasidic, American Jew

SF Bay Area 2017: "What racial or ethnic group best describes you?"



Options: White, Black or African-American, Hispanic or Latino, Asian or Asian-American, Native American, Middle Eastern, Mixed Race, Other

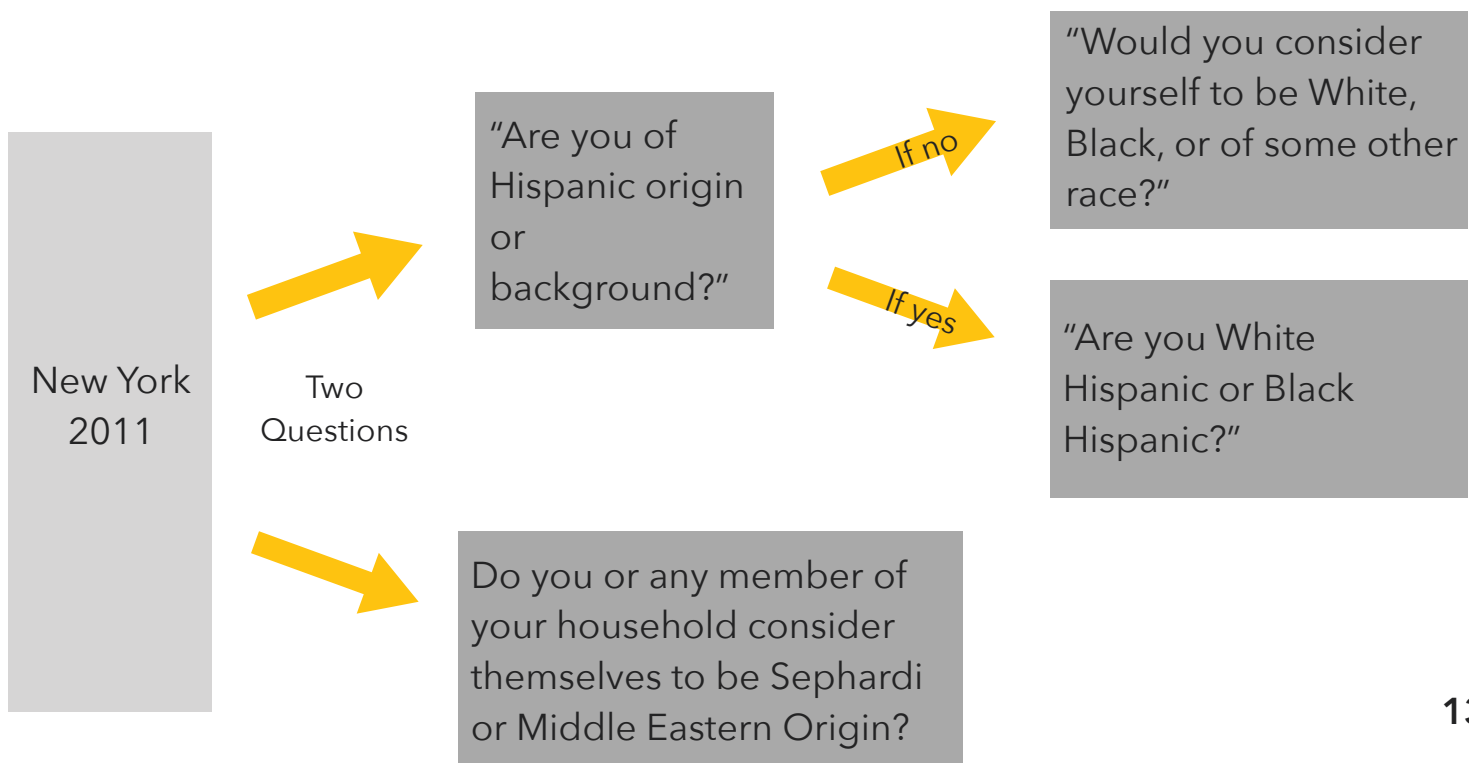
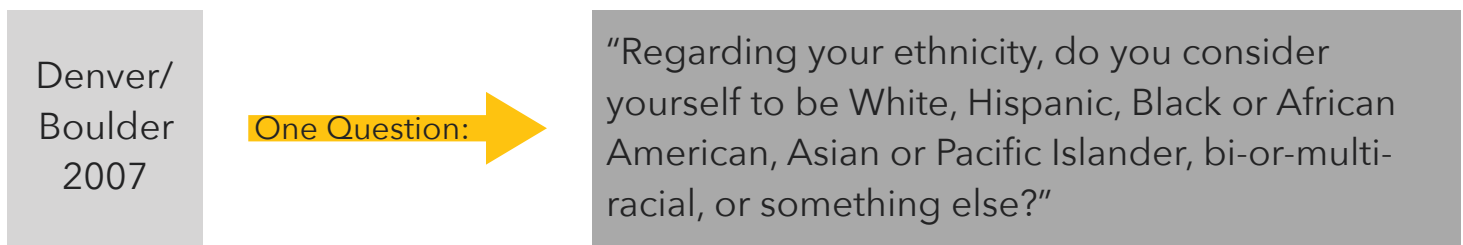
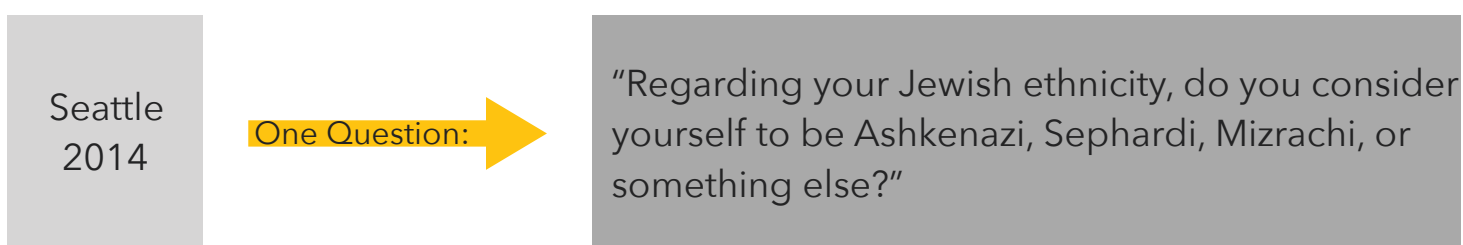
Miami 2014: "Do you consider yourself / does any adult in your household consider themselves to be:"



Options:  
a. A Sephardic Jew  
b. A Hispanic Jew  
c. What country is your family from?

# Nonstandard language makes comparisons between Jewish population studies difficult

**Studies did not share enough common approaches to questions about race and ethnicity to generate reliable comparisons between them.**



# Nonstandard language makes comparisons to reference surveys difficult

For most reliable comparisons, survey questions should match those of their reference surveys. **Seemingly subtle changes in the wording can result in mismatches in what is intended to be comparable data.**

The table below focuses on differences in how questions were worded between the New York Jewish Population Study and its reference population, the American Community Survey (ACS).

The ACS explicitly lists a wider range of Hispanic and nonwhite answer options for people to choose, which typically results in higher counts for those populations.

	New York (2011)	American Community (2009)
Q1	Are you of Hispanic origin or background?	Is Person 1 [defined as a person living in the residence of the respondent] of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?
Q2 (if "yes" to Q1)	Are you white Hispanic or black Hispanic?	What is Person 1's race? [Provides 15 options]
Q3 (if "no" to Q1)	Would you consider yourself to be White, Black, or of some other race?	---
Q4 (asked if partnered, if children and if Q3 was anything other than "mixed race /biracial")	Including your spouse/ partner and children in the household, how would you best describe your household?	--- [The ACS records race and Hispanic origin separately for all individuals in the household, not in a single response for the household as a whole.]

# Conclusions

American Jewish population studies have neglected to systematically and consistently ask about the racial and ethnic identities of American Jews. The result has been that we know little about the composition and size of the population of Jews of Color.

This has been due, in part, to the working assumption that the vast majority of American Jews identify as White. This has been the default position of most American Jews for decades.

This assumption obscures the diversity of the American Jewish community and, in the process, it directs allocations of communal energy, attention, and resources in ways that do not represent the range of experiences and identities of American Jews.

By undercounting Jews of Color, American Jewish population studies have misrepresented the diversity of American Jewish communities.

If our estimates are indicative of current and future trends, then researchers, community professionals, organizations, foundations, clergy, educators, and other leaders ought to consider the following:

- Statistically speaking, every *minyan* in America includes at least one person of color.
- Most *b'nai mitzvah* cohorts likely include families that have members who are nonwhite.
- American Jews who identify as nonwhite cluster in younger age cohorts.

Continuing to inconsistently account for Jews of Color in population studies means ignoring a significant minority of the population – one that will likely grow in size and significance in the coming years.

American Jews deserve better, more finely-tuned approaches to accounting for the diversity of the Jewish community.



# Recommendations for future research

- Employ more sensitive sampling frames that do not rely significantly on:
  - Self-identified “Jews by Religion”
  - “Distinctive Jewish Names”
  - Community organization affiliations
- Develop consistency for survey question language.
- Best practices in the social sciences ask separate questions for self-identified race, perceived race, and known ancestry/geographic origins. This can help to reveal otherwise hidden population diversity.
- Consider adopting consistent weighting schemes among community and national studies (e.g.: employ the same set of characteristics or reference populations across studies).
- At minimum, follow federal guidelines for collecting data on race and ethnicity to ensure that the questions and categories match those in reference studies.

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