

Leading Surnames Among American Jews

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Abstract

Data from a 1982 nationwide American Cancer Society survey of more than a million Americans show the most common surnames among American Jews as well as the percent of those reported as Jewish with these particular surnames. Comparison with data for Israel shows some similarities in the surnames among Jews in the two countries (e.g., *Cohen* is the single most common surname in both) but also some very marked differences in rankings.

Although American Jewish culture has been the subject of numerous works, relatively little attention has been given to the study of surnames among America's Jews. The study of Jewish family names, while complex, has been well addressed by Benzion C. Kaganoff in his book *A Dictionary of Jewish Names and their History*. In addition, Robert Singerman has compiled an extensive bibliography of the numerous books and articles dealing with Jewish names and naming practices. Thus we do know which surnames Jews have historically held and how they were derived. We also know that particular names have come into use within each area where Jews have settled. What is not known is the prevalence of particular names common to American Jews. And since there is increasing evidence that even so-called "Jewish" names are also held by non-Jews, it is important to determine the proportion of Jews who hold such "Jewish" names. Such data would be invaluable to social scientists and others concerned with population estimates.

Jews have some of the more common surnames in America (such as *Smith* or *Brown*), resulting either from deliberate change of name (Silberman 59) or from intermarriage. However, other common surnames are found among English-speaking Jewish populations because Yiddish and English family names were often similar to each other (e.g., *Miller*). American Jews also have surnames that were common in Central Europe and are also held by non-Jewish persons of German origin (such as *Schwartz* or *Weiss*). Some traditionally Jewish names, such as *Cohen* and

Levy, are direct transliterations of Hebrew words. The former name refers to a family of priestly lineage, the latter to a Jew of Levitic extraction. Likewise, *Levin* and *Levine* are names assigned to those of Levitic descent (Kaganoff 24). Other names used by descendants of the priestly caste, the Kohanim, include *Katz* (an acronym for *Kohen tzedeck* 'priest of righteousness') and *Kaplan* (a Slavic form).

Although the history of name changing and adaptation would seem to be an essential part of the story of settlement in America, there have been only a few brief historical accounts and virtually no systematic studies of this phenomenon. An interesting, although limited, exception to this general pattern is Marc Lee Raphael's study of name changes among the Jews of Columbus, Ohio. Raphael reported that seven of the forty-three members of a 1912 first-grade class located in this immigrant Jewish community later changed their names (34).

An important article in the demographic literature illustrating the use of statistical onomastics in ethnic group research is that of Eui-Hang Shin and Eui-Young Yu regarding the Korean American population. The authors developed a method for estimating the size of this population on the basis of the number of persons with a single surname: *Kim*. They were effective in doing so because (1) *Kim* is a surname unique to Koreans and (2) *Kim* is extraordinarily common among Koreans, occurring in about 22 percent of the population. Shin and Yu observed that similar techniques can be extended to other ethnic populations with unique surnames (358). Among Jews, as among most other groups, no single surname is so widespread as is *Kim* among Koreans. Thus a considerable number of surnames must be selected in order to design a reliable sample of the population.

Social scientists have most frequently used "Jewish" names to estimate Jewish populations by calculating the ratio between persons with particular "distinctive" surnames and all Jews. An extensive literature exists in this area (Himmelfarb 249-50), but there are problems with this method. A major problem is that the proportion of Jews with distinctive names varies from place to place and over time (Massarik 183). Another problem lies in devising a means of excluding or of identifying non-Jews with so-called distinctive Jewish surnames.

A survey of American Jews, if sufficiently large, might provide information on the distribution of surnames by frequency, but not the number or proportion of non-Jews with the same name. A survey of non-Jews and Jews could yield such information but only if it were

exceedingly large, since Jews are only about three percent of the U.S. adult population.

The data reported here are from a survey of 1.2 million American men and women conducted in 1982 by the American Cancer Society (ACS). Study subjects were usually friends, neighbors, or relatives of ACS volunteers. Subjects completed a questionnaire which identified numerous demographic characteristics, including religion, as well as various health characteristics (Stellman and Garfinkel). Since the study plan included follow-up of subjects for several years, full names were reported. All study subjects were members of households with at least one person forty-five years of age or older; all family members at least thirty years old living within these households were enrolled. Although enrollees were selected from every state in the nation, the study population was not a random sample and differed in many respects from the general U.S. population. For example, the average educational level of the sample population was much higher. Approximately four percent of study subjects were Jewish (Stellman and Garfinkel 1058).

Surnames of a major subset of the ACS data set, consisting of all enrolled persons forty-five years of age and over, were examined. The subset was limited to persons forty-five and over because, according to the ACS procedures, the only persons under that age who were selected for the study were those who had persons forty-five and older in their families.

The number of persons forty-five years and over classified by religion totaled 1,045,685.¹ Of these, 47,871, or 4.6 percent, were Jewish. Only the most common names among the Jews could be examined. The numbers sampled were not sufficiently large to draw conclusions about rank order or distinctiveness for less common names. Even for the twenty-five most common surnames shown in Table 1, the ranking, other than for the name *Cohen*, must be considered approximate. For example, a name that ranks tenth in the ACS data, might rank higher or lower if a still larger or a more representative sample were available. The names shown in Table 1 were held by at least 130 Jews in the ACS study.

Table 2 shows the proportion of Jews represented among all those surveyed holding the surnames listed in Table 1. Seventeen of these typically "Jewish" surnames were held mostly by Jews, with proportions ranging from 77 percent to 95 percent. A majority of the holders of three other "Jewish" surnames also were Jewish. However, for two of these names, the Jewish majority was quite small. Consequently, these names

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Table 1. Twenty-five most common Jewish surnames, ranked in ACS Survey order.

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent of All Jews in Survey</u>
1	Cohen	550	1.14
2	Miller	303	0.63
3	Schwartz	285	0.59
4	Friedman	266	0.55
5	Levine	234	0.48
6	Kaplan	212	0.44
7	Levy	208	0.43
8	Katz	204	0.42
9	Goldberg	196	0.40
10	Goldstein	194	0.40
11	Shapiro	189	0.39
12	Klein	176	0.36
13	Greenberg	163	0.34
14	Stein	161	0.33
15	Rosenberg	159	0.33
16	Stern	152	0.31
17	Gordon	145	0.30
18	Feldman	144	0.30
19	Weiss	143	0.29
20	Rubin	136	0.28
21	Bernstein	135	0.28
22	Kaufman	133	0.27
23	Levin	132	0.27
24	Rosen	130	0.27
25	Weiner	130	0.27

are not reliable indicators of religious origin. A large minority (over one third) who held three other names ranked among the top twenty-five were Jewish. Two of the twenty-five names most commonly found among American Jews (*Gordon* and *Miller*) are also common among non-Jews.

It is of interest to compare the rankings of the most common Jewish surnames from the ACS study with two other available sources: a list for New York City and the population register of the state of Israel. The New York City list, made available by the Health Department of the City of New York, is a tally of decedents during the years 1979-1981 who were coded as interred in Jewish cemeteries.² A large majority of the 43,000 Jewish decedents—more than three-fourths—were over sixty-five years of age. The second list is derived from a published

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study (Eliassaf 279-80) of the 4.6 million names in the population file of Israel in 1979. This file includes the Arab population, but Jewish Israelis predominate, especially in the ranking of the twenty-five most common surnames.

As might be expected, the ranking of the ACS names and those for the New York City group do not differ greatly. The top ten names in the ACS file and on the New York City list are the same, although the individual rankings differ somewhat. Only five of the top twenty-five names in the ACS study are not among the top twenty-five in New York City, and three of the missing names fall just outside this range. Conversely, there are very marked differences between the names of American

Table 2. Percent of persons with particular surnames reported as Jewish (ACS Survey).

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Very High (75% and over)	Bernstein	92.5
	Cohen	91.5
	Feldman	76.6
	Friedman	85.8
	Goldberg	95.1
	Goldstein	94.6
	Greenberg	90.1
	Kaplan	90.5
	Katz	88.7
	Levin	89.8
	Levine	84.8
	Levy	79.7
	Rosen	82.3
	Rosenberg	81.1
	Rubin	91.9
	Shapiro	92.6
Weiner	85.0	
High (50% - 74%)	Schwartz	53.9
	Stein	53.3
	Stern	73.4
Moderately High (25% - 49%)	Kaufman	46.3
	Klein	33.6
	Weiss	38.4
Low (<25%)	Gordon	16.0
	Miller	5.4

Jews (based on the ACS data) and the Israeli Jews. These differences derive from the fact that unlike American Jewry, which is largely derived from Eastern Europe, the major share of Israel's Jews originate from North Africa and the Middle East. In addition, large numbers of Israelis have Hebraized their family names. On the other hand, in past decades many American Jews Anglicized their surnames (Silberman 59). In the view of some onomasts, as many as one third to one half of all American Jews may have changed their names (Hook 267).

Of the top ten Jewish surnames in the U.S., only four (*Cohen, Friedman, Levy, and Katz*) are among the ten leading surnames in Israel, and two (*Miller and Kaplan*) are not among the one hundred most common names in Israel. Of the top twenty-five names in the U.S., only seven are among the twenty-five leading names in Israel (the four given above, plus *Schwartz, Klein, and Rosenberg*), and nine (e.g., *Stein, Gordon*) are not among the one hundred most common names in Israel (Table 3). Similarly, a number of surnames most common among Jews in Israel (e.g., *Mizrachi, Eiton, Dahon*) are relatively rare in the United States. Generally, these are names common among North African Jews, a major subgroup of the Israeli population but a tiny minority among U.S. Jews. These patterns point out the uniqueness of the surname distribution of American Jews and, indeed, the striking variation among the surnames of Jews that undoubtedly exists from country to country.

In summary, the findings indicate that a large subgroup of American Jewry can be identified solely on the basis of surname, but this selection will be imperfect as the population so selected will include non-Jews. It is very important, therefore, to determine who is identified when particular surnames are selected to represent Jews in sample studies.³ It is also important to bear in mind that a substantial share of the American Jewish population will have no chance of selection when a surname approach is used. A key research question, therefore, concerns differences that may exist between characteristics of American Jews with common Jewish surnames and those with other or Anglicized names.⁴ Researchers who choose to use surnames to represent American Jews must determine to what extent this is likely to affect their research methodologies.

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Table 3. Comparison of top twenty-five Jewish names in ACS Survey with New York City decedents and with Names' Survey in Israel.

<u>Name</u>	<u>ACS</u>	<u>New York City</u>	<u>Israel</u>
Cohen	1	1	1
Miller	2	8*	**
Schwartz	3	2	14
Friedman	4	6	7
Levine	5	4	33
Kaplan	6	8*	**
Levy	7	10	2
Katz	8	5	9
Goldberg	9	7	57
Goldstein	10	3	47
Shapiro	11	11	27
Klein	12	15	22
Greenberg	13	14	28
Stein	14	21*	**
Rosenberg	15	13	25
Stern	16	21*	48
Gordon	17	26	**
Feldman	18	29	70
Weiss	19	12	66
Rubin	20	18*	81
Bernstein	21	18*	**
Kaufman	22	31	**
Levin	23	92*	**
Rosen	24*	20	**
Weiner	24*	51	**

*Tie
**Not ranked in top 100.

Notes

1. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Paolo Boffetta for preparing statistical data from the files of persons enrolled in the ACS study.

2. I greatly appreciate the cooperation of the New York City Health Department in providing death record surname data in machine-readable form.

3. In a recent death record study, researchers classified some decedents as Jewish based on their surnames, but made no attempt to measure the extent to which the names selected were likely to be held by Jews (Phillips and King 728). Included were names such as *Klein* and *Weiss*, shown in Table 2 to be held by Jews less than 40 percent of the time. Among other names (not shown in Table 2) included that are unlikely to be held predominately by Jews were *Gross* (only 23 percent of ACS sample persons with this name were Jewish), *Becker*, and *Roth*.

4. Perhaps this issue can be investigated using data from a large-scale survey of American Jews planned for 1990.

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