Our Crowd? Intra-ethnic Frictions in the Economic Integration of Immigrants*

Sara Benetti† Elijah Locke‡ Ross Mattheis§

Extended Abstract

November 2024

With 281 million international migrants today, the scale of migration highlights the vital importance of understanding the drivers of and barriers to the successful economic integration of immigrants (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024). A large literature has shown that social networks among co-nationals are one important source of economic opportunity for migrants (Battisti et al., 2022; Beaman, 2012; Damm, 2009; Edin et al., 2003; Martén et al., 2019; Munshi, 2003). Pushing in the opposite direction, discrimination from natives harms the labor market outcomes of immigrants (Esses, 2021; Rich, 2014) and a rapidly growing literature suggests that anti-immigrant sentiment increases following waves of migration (Alesina & Tabellini, 2024; Colantone & Stanig, 2019; Rodrik, 2021). But incumbent immigrants may be exposed to the same discriminatory pressures from natives and therefore may be incentivized to *differentiate* themselves from new arrivals. Do incumbent migrants attempt to differentiate themselves from more recent waves? And consequently, do frictions between waves of migrants hinder the economic integration of new arrivals?

This project addresses these questions in the context of two historical waves of Jewish migrants to the United States—the first predominately German, arriving between 1840 and 1880, and the latter arriving primarily from the Russian Empire between 1880 and WWI—that differed dramatically along economic, political, and religious dimensions (Birmingham, 1967). Although immigrants from both waves belonged to the same ethnoreligious group, fled due to increasingly circumscribed

*Benetti kindly acknowledges financial support from the Centre for Innovative Data in Economics Research (CIDER), Small Grants in Innovative Data #270. No known potential conflicts of interest or financial relationships apply to the authors.

†Vancouver School of Economics, University of British Columbia. Email: sbenet02@student.ubc.ca.

‡Department of Economics, Boston University. Email: elocke@bu.edu

§Department of Economics, Harvard University. Email: mattheis@g.harvard.edu

economic opportunities, and brought with them some similar occupational backgrounds, their similarities stop largely there (Dillon & Godley, 2012; Herman, 1977). Russian Jewish migrants arrived poorer than the previous wave, with distinct language, dress, religious adherence, and views toward American society and capitalism (Berman, 1963; Kosak, 2000; Ruppin & Namier, 1934) and historical accounts suggest that tensions between incumbents and newcomers were salient and shaped the evolution of the Jewish community in the United States in the context of rising antisemitism among native Non-Jewish (Cohen & Fein, 1985; Dinnerstein, 1995; Waxman, 1983).

This historical context provides key advantages for studying the relationship between waves of migration from the same ethnic group amid discrimination from natives. Beyond the clear differences between the two waves in this context, studying the Jewish population allows for a *richer depiction of how the identity and cultural practices of a minority group may change in response to economic incentives*. In addition to naming and marriage patterns, occupational and residential choices that can be observed in the census, we can study changes in religious practices, the economic value of cultural signals, and the investment in charitable as well as other institutions. While the Jewish ethnic group is considered one of the most successful in the U.S. today (Burstein, 2007), Jewish immigrants were historically as poor and under threat of discrimination as many other groups (Chiswick, 1991; Diner, 2004), and understanding the process of economic integration of Jewish migrants historically can inform our understanding of and policy discussions about migration today (Abramitzky & Boustan, 2022).

The key empirical challenge in focusing on Jews in the United States is their *identification in census data*. The Decennial Census has never directly asked respondents about their religion, so it does not include a category of "Jewish" or "Hebrew" (Goldstein, 2005). Following Abramitzky et al. (2024), this project uses distinctive names to find Jewish individuals in the complete count census, deviating in a few ways because of important differences in the empirical context. First, attention is restricted to *distinctive surnames*, as given names are used as an outcome in part of the analysis. Second, to capture distinctive surnames of German origin, the sample of Yiddish speakers in the 1920 and 1930 censuses is supplemented with 835 thousand burial records for Jewish individuals in the U.S. from a Jewish genealogical site, jewishgen.org. 75.9% of first and second generation immigrants who reported speaking Yiddish in the 1920 census were from the Russian Empire. Last, a different rule for defining the threshold for distinctive Jewish surnames is used.

Because the project focuses on locations in which the Jewish population represented a small share of the full population, this project uses a careful and conservative threshold to define the set of distinctive Jewish names.[1] Specifically, after requiring that distinctive surnames be at least 100 times as common in the Jewish population as in the Non-Jewish population and accounting for the size of the Jewish population in the 1900 census, about six thousand distinctive surnames with an additional three thousand alternative spellings are identified. Using this threshold, about 90% of the sample identified as Jewish via distinctive surname will actually be Jewish.[2]

Once we have the sample of classified Jewish respondents from the census over several decades, we can analyze the effects of the Russian newcomers on the assimilation of incumbent German Jews. Using census data information, we measure the cultural, residential, and occupational assimilation of incumbent Jews in a city or town in a decade.[3] To provide a richer picture of the cultural response, we digitize information from the American Jewish Yearbooks on Jewish institutions including religious schools, synagogues, clubs, and charities in the U.S. between 1890 and 1927.[4] This allows us to consider numerous locations in our study, ranging from large metropolitan areas to medium-small towns. We base our analysis on an event study framework. The treatment comes from the number of Russian Jewish newcomers who arrive in a city or town in a decade. The intensity of treatment depends on the relative size of the newcomers to the incumbents.

In the first part of our analysis, we use an indicator variable equal to one if a Jewish individual can be successfully linked to the subsequent census. Using our novel method, we rely on a strict definition of distinctively Jewish surnames to identify Jewish individuals in the census.

[1] Identifying the Jewish population via distinctive surnames when the Jewish population is small presents a challenge. To illustrate, let ν_n^J and ν_n^G be the proportion of the Jewish and Non-Jewish populations with surname n, and let π be the overall share of Jewish individuals in the population. By Bayes' rule, the probability that an individual drawn at random conditional on having surname n is $\frac{\pi\nu_n^J}{\pi\nu_n^J+(1-\pi)\nu_n^G}$. If the Jewish share of the population is 1%, and the surname n is ten times as common in the Jewish population, the sample of individuals with surname n will be only 9% Jewish in expectation.

[2] This statistic follows from Bayes' rule applied to all distinctive names, weighted by their frequency in the census, and assuming that the Jewish population makes up 1.5% of the total population, as estimates suggest in 1900.

[3] The main information we use from the census is the given name of children in the household, the respondent's occupation, the city or town of residence, and the sequential enumeration that reflects the order in which respondents were interviewed.

[4] The overlap between the Jewish ethnic and religious identity allows the identification of a Jewish community in a certain location through typical institutions (e.g., synagogues and Jewish charity organizations). Therefore, another advantage of focusing on Jewish migration is the availability of detailed information about Jewish communities throughout the US territory, including lists of local and national Jewish organizations and religious congregations. The AJYB has been published annually since 1899 and includes the directory of local US Jewish institutions until 1927; since, for most institutions, the directory reports the year of foundation, with this data we can reconstruct the evolution of Jewish religious and non-religious institutions across the United States over several decades.

Consequently, the inability to link an individual across census decades is interpreted as a likely indication of surname Americanization. We then analyze several measures of immigrant assimilation, including the distinctiveness of Jewish names given to children, residence in predominantly Jewish neighborhoods, and employment in Jewish-dominated occupations. Using a staggered difference-in-differences design, our preliminary analysis investigates the impact of Russian Jewish migration on the incumbent German Jewish population. Initial results suggest patterns consistent with migration out of Jewish enclaves and increased rates of surname Americanization among the German Jewish population following the arrival of Russian Jewish migrants. Notably, those who remained within the German Jewish community were instead more likely to retain distinctively Jewish first names and occupations, at levels not fully explained by selective migration alone, indicating heterogeneous effects. With the digitization of Jewish institutional data, we aim to enrich our analysis, adding further nuance to the understanding of how Jewish communities evolved after the arrival of Russian immigrants. This expanded dataset will complement our findings at the individual level, offering deeper insights into the broader dynamics at play.

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