

THE RELIGIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF NEW YORK CITY'S POPULATION

NEVA R. DEARDORFF¹

GOVERNMENTAL agencies including the United States Census Bureau are not permitted to question residents about their religious affiliation in inquiries about the characteristics of the general population. Therefore, no official data deriving from the people themselves now exist on this subject. All data on religion to be found in official volumes and such publications as the World Almanac come from organized religious bodies. The figures are based upon whatever membership standards these organizations employ and the records they may elect to keep. The national figures are aggregates of the particular territorial divisions in use by each denominational and sectarian group. Often these are not coterminous with political boundaries. From such data it is quite impossible to construct a picture of the broad religious groupings of given urban and rural communities throughout the United States.

For some specific administrative purposes, public agencies may ask people about their religious affiliation or background (children to be placed in foster homes, patients in hospitals, juvenile court cases, etc.), but the figures emerging from such questioning, when and if they do emerge for a local community, are not reliable guides to estimates for the religious groups in its total population. Moreover, without basic population figures to which these administrative data can be related, their publication has led at times to considerable "puzzlement" and not a little embarrassment. Hence there is often reluctance to make them public. It is only on the rare occasions when some voluntary agency makes a careful enumeration of a sample of the population that there is opportunity to learn about this rather significant phase of community life.²

¹ Consultant, Health Insurance Plan of Greater New York.

² For a description of the efforts that have been made to ascertain the size of the Jewish population see Robison, Sophia M.: Problems and Techniques in Jewish Demography. *Jewish Social Service Quarterly*, June, 1949.

Within the last twenty years there have been two occasions in New York City when sizable inquiries based on a sampling of the population have been made on this subject, both under voluntary auspices. The first of these was the youth study for the year 1935³ and the second was the survey made in 1952 by the committee in charge of a study of the experience of the Health Insurance Plan of Greater New York.

The Youth Survey. The Youth Study was conducted by the Research Bureau of the Welfare Council (now the Welfare and Health Council) with the aid of a large staff of field workers and technicians assigned by work relief agencies. Every one-hundredth dwelling unit throughout the five boroughs was spotted on the Real Property Inventory and thereafter was visited. All the young persons between the ages of 16 and 24 years residing in these units were interviewed at considerable length about their education, work experience, and recreational interests. Since many recreational organizations are operated and financed under sectarian auspices, it was pertinent to inquire of these young persons as to their religious backgrounds. It thus became possible to estimate the size of the youth population in areas throughout the City to which the various sectarian agencies were addressing themselves. The 9,041 young people were asked whether they were Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, or of other affiliation and were assured that they need not answer if they had any objection to the question. Only 2.2 per cent of the returns showed this item as "other" or "not reported." None of the reluctance that had been anticipated was encountered. For want of a better term, this affiliation was called adherence to a "religio-cultural" group.

When the returns for the youth study were tabulated the results indicated a distribution quite different from the then current beliefs and assumptions as to the relative size of these groups in the City. At first, there was doubt at the Research Bureau that they could be right. It was known that the sample

³ McGill and Matthews: *THE YOUTH OF NEW YORK CITY*. The Macmillan Company, New York, 1940.

itself was representative for population characteristics reported in the United States Census, but there is always the possibility of error either in the recording or tabulation of a new item. In order to check for these possibilities every return was carefully re-examined for other evidence—birthplace of parents, schools attended, membership in clubs, etc.—that would support or contradict the designation of religion. The reports proved to be internally consistent and the tabulations correct. The figures were then issued with full confidence in their accuracy. They showed that of these young persons, those of Catholic background appeared in 48.6 per cent of the total, Protestant in 17.8 per cent, Jewish in 31.4 per cent, other religions or not reported in 2.2 per cent. The distribution of *white* young persons showed 50.1 per cent Catholic, 32.7 per cent Jewish, 15 per cent Protestant, and 2.2 per cent other or not reported.

It was understood, of course, that no claim was made that all of these young persons were actively functioning members of churches, synagogues, or temples, or that their names were on church registers, or that if on such registers, they would remain so for the rest of their lives. The figures, however, did reflect their religio-cultural settings as of the time of the survey. At the very least, these would be the religious institutions to which they were most likely to turn for those forms of religious association of which they would feel any need and from which they might seek recreational services.

A question immediately arose as to the representative character of these figures when applied to the total, as distinguished from the youth population. Would the other age groups show approximately the same distribution? This question could not be categorically answered from the data of the youth survey, but it so happened that the Welfare Council's Research Bureau, again with the aid of the work relief administrations, was then conducting a statistical study of all persons discharged from hospitals, public and voluntary, in New York City in the year 1933. It is customary for hospital admission offices to record routinely the religious affiliation of patients. This is done not

as a requirement for admission, but in preparation for any emergency for which a clergyman would be called. Over 576,000 hospital discharges were included in this study. These referred, of course, to persons of all ages as they flowed through the 113 hospitals included in the study. When the figures were compiled, it was found that of the New York City residents, 47.3 per cent were Catholic, 22.2 Protestant, 19.0 per cent Jewish, 1.1 per cent of other religions and 10.4 per cent were not reported. Almost half of the reports without designation of religion were from hospitals operated under Jewish auspices which, as a matter of principle, refrained from inquiring about the religion of patients. It is a fair assumption that a large fraction of these patients were of Jewish background and that the 19 per cent specifically reported as Jewish would have been considerably augmented had these cases not been obscured. It was thought that the figures for the Protestants were a little inflated by reason of the comparatively high rate of admission to hospitals of Negroes, a high proportion of whom are Protestant. The striking similarity of the findings of the two studies as to the percentage of Catholic and Protestant groups raised a strong presumption that the youth study figures would hold for the total population.

The Study of the Health Insurance Plan (H.I.P.). As in the case of the youth survey, the 1952 study of the Health Insurance Plan of Greater New York made by an independent committee under the chairmanship of Dr. Lowell Reed, President of The Johns Hopkins University, included in its inquiry a question on religio-cultural background. For this inquiry two samples of population have been used, one an "area probability sample" of the total population of New York City and the other a random sample of the persons in households with one or more persons insured under the Plan.

The first sample covered 13,558 persons in 4,190 households, and the second 10,981 persons in 3,235 households. The data for these two groups—recorded by trained interviewers who visited the households—are subject to some sampling error, but

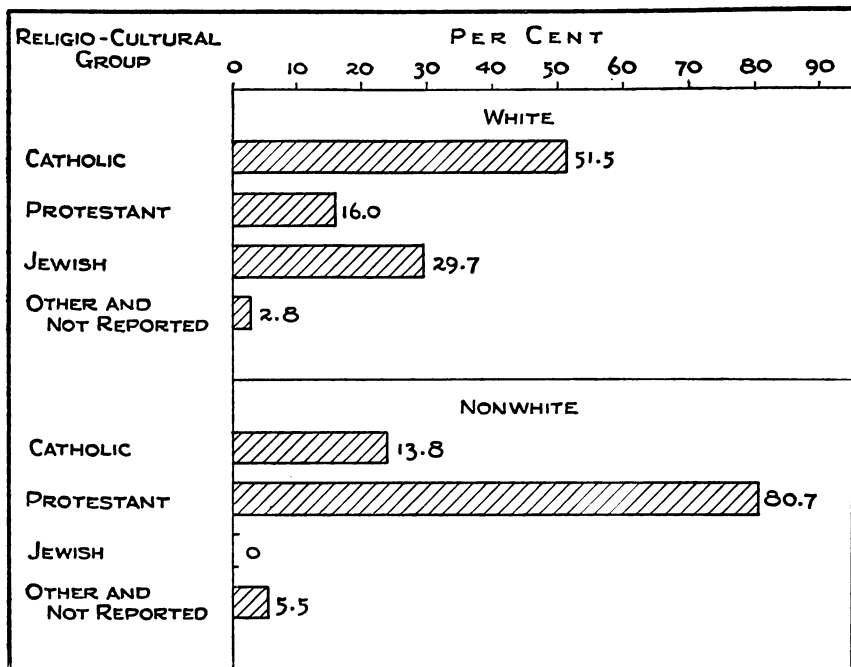


Fig. 1. Percentage distribution among religio-cultural groups of the white and non-white population in New York City, 1952.

when those for the City sample are compared with the 1950 census for common items, the sample stands up very well. The proportions of Catholic, Protestant and Jewish persons in the City sample and the H.I.P. sample followed the same general pattern though there was some deviation by reason of the fact that at the time of the survey, that is, the spring of 1952, the H.I.P. did not have quite as high a proportion of Negroes as obtains in the City as a whole. Correspondingly, it was found to be a little short in the relative number of Protestants when compared with the figures for the City. But the differences are not great, with a consequent reinforcement of the data for each sample and the thesis that the City sample faithfully reflects conditions in the total population.

Since the sample for the City is the primary object of interest here, the findings will be given in some detail for it in the statistical tables below. In brief, 47.6 per cent of the population was reported as in households headed by a person of Catholic

background, 22.8 per cent Protestant, 26.4 per cent Jewish, 1.6 per cent other and 1.6 per cent not reported. The question on religious affiliation—incidentally the last on a long schedule of

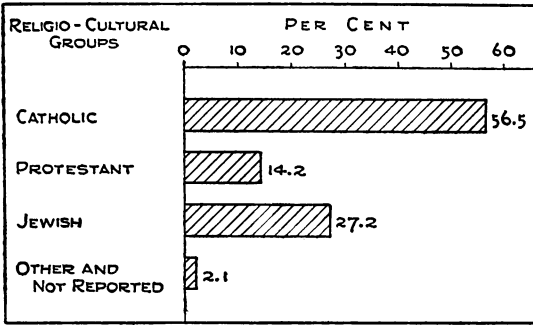


Fig. 2. White children under 15 years in New York City, percentage distribution among religio-cultural groups, 1952.

questions relating to matters of health and medical care—was one of the most completely reported. It would seem that religious freedom and tolerance in the City have come to be so widely taken for granted that people generally are not afraid

to talk about their religious connection, at least to an interviewer on a scientific inquiry.

Some changes occurred in the youth population between the years 1935 and 1952. The proportion of Protestants among persons aged 16 to 24 has advanced over that reported in the youth survey from 17.8 to 20.9 per cent. The figure for white Protestants declined from 15.0 per cent in 1935 to 13.9 per cent in 1952. The increase in Protestant youth has been due to the

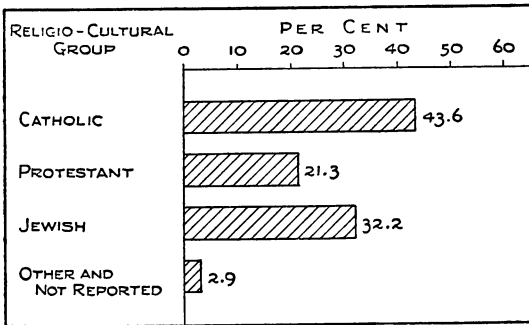


Fig. 3. White persons aged 65 years and over in New York City, percentage distribution among religio-cultural groups, 1952.

growth of the non-white population. The relative size of the Jewish youth population declined from 31.4 to 24.1 per cent. Considering only white youth, the Jewish contingent declined from 32.7 to 27.1 per cent. This corroborates the popular

belief that in recent years Jewish people have been leaving New York City to go to the suburbs, to other parts of the United States, and even to other parts of the world. Their proportion

RACE OF HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD	TOTAL	RELIGION OF HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD			
		Catholic	Protestant	Jewish	Other and Not Reported
TOTAL	13,558	6,459	3,088	3,581	430 ¹
White	12,094	6,240	1,933	3,578	343
Males	5,810	2,977	897	1,770	166
Females	6,284	3,263	1,036	1,808	177
Non-White	1,381	191	1,115	—	75
Males	601	74	484	—	43
Females	780	117	631	—	32
Not Reported	83	28	40	3	12
Males	35	10	21	—	4
Females	48	18	19	3	8

¹ Other religions, 214; not reported, 216.

Table 1. A sample of New York City's population, classified by race, sex and religio-cultural group, 1952.

in the total population could also have receded through the relatively greater increase in the size of other groups.

The accompanying statistical tables and charts set forth the figures on the distribution of the persons in each of the religio-cultural groups by age, sex and race. It should be reiterated that these data come from an "area probability sample" of 13,558 persons enumerated in New York City in the spring of 1952. They do not include members of families away from home in the armed forces or in college, nor permanently institutionalized persons.

Table 2. Percentage distribution of New York City's white and non-white population, each sex, by religio-cultural group, 1952.

RACE	TOTAL	CATHOLIC	PROTESTANT	JEWISH	OTHER AND NOT REPORTED
TOTAL	100.0 ¹	47.6	22.8	26.4	3.2
White	100.0	51.5	16.0	29.7	2.8
Males	100.0	51.2	15.4	30.5	2.9
Females	100.0	51.9	16.5	28.8	2.8
Non-White	100.0	13.8	80.7	—	5.5
Males	100.0	12.3	80.5	—	7.3
Females	100.0	15.0	80.9	—	4.1

¹ Includes 83 persons with race not reported.

AGE	TOTAL	CATHOLIC	PROTESTANT	JEWISH	OTHER AND NOT REPORTED
<i>White</i>					
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Under 15	25.0	27.4	22.2	23.0	18.1
15-44	42.6	45.4	37.1	40.6	40.8
45-65	22.4	19.4	27.8	24.9	23.6
65 and Over	7.0	5.9	9.3	7.6	7.0
Not Reported	3.0	1.9	3.6	3.9	10.5
<i>Non-White</i>					
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Under 15	32.4	22.0	35.4	—	13.3
15-44	42.4	48.2	41.7	—	36.7
45-64	15.9	18.4	14.9	—	25.3
65 and Over	3.9	5.7	3.3	—	6.7
Not Reported	5.4	5.7	4.7	—	18.0

Table 3. Percentage distribution of New York City's white and non-white population by religio-cultural group and by age, 1952.

These data are in the nature of a by-product of the Special Research Study of the H.I.P. which relates essentially to questions of illness, disability, medical care and health insurance. It is expected that the Project which has been financed by the Commonwealth Fund and the Rockefeller Foundation, will be completed within the next twelve months. The release at this time of these figures has been made in response to the request of other agencies, including the National Cancer Institute which is studying the incidence of some forms of cancer in these religio-cultural groups. The figures provide a population base to which data of other kinds can be related, and comparable rates for the several religio-cultural groups established.

The 13,558 persons in the sample are in the ratio of one to slightly less than 597 persons in the general population, estimated by the New York City Health Department as 8,089,000 on July 1, 1952. A rough approximation of the size of any segment of population shown in Table 1, can be obtained by multiplying the number there given for it by 597. The relative size of the religio-cultural groups shown here cannot be assumed to be uniform throughout each of the five boroughs that compose

AGE GROUP	TOTAL	CATHOLIC	PROTESTANT	JEWISH	OTHER, AND NOT REPORTED
<i>White</i>					
TOTAL	100.0	51.5	16.0	29.7	2.8
Under 15	100.0	56.5	14.2	27.2	2.1
15-44	100.0	55.1	13.9	28.3	2.7
45-64	100.0	44.5	19.8	32.7	3.0
65 and Over	100.0	43.6	21.3	32.2	2.9
Not Reported	100.0	32.9	19.2	38.0	9.0
<i>Non-White</i>					
TOTAL	100.0	13.8	80.7	—	5.5
Under 15	100.0	9.4	88.4	—	2.2
15-44	100.0	15.7	79.4	—	4.9
45-64	100.0	15.9	75.5	—	8.6
65 and Over	100.0	20.8	69.8	—	9.4
Not Reported	100.0	14.7	69.3	—	16.0

Table 4. Percentage distribution by religio-cultural group each age group, white and non-white population, New York City, 1952.

the City. Differences in racial and in age composition among the boroughs carry with them implications as to the proportionate size of each religio-cultural group within the respective borough. The several percentage distributions shown in Tables 2, 3 and 4 which contain religio-cultural distributions for sex, age and racial groups may be of help in working out estimates for the boroughs if there is any need for or interest in such figures.