



Russians in the New York Metro Area

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QUICK FACTS:

Place of Origin:

Russia (primarily Moscow and St. Petersburg)

Significant Subgroups:

Russian ethnic Jews (70-90%); Russian non-Jews (10-30%)

Location in Metro New York:

Brooklyn (Brighton Beach, Bath Beach, Gravesend, Sheepshead Bay, Midwood, Starrett City, Bensonhurst, Bay Ridge, Borough Park, Williamsburg); Queens (Forest Hills, Rego Park); Manhattan (Washington Heights); Bronx (Co-op City); New Jersey (Fair Lawn); Staten Island (Great Kills)

Population in Metro New York:

110,000 (Community Estimate); 122,941 (ACS 2008 Born in Russia)

Population in New York City:

87,182 (ACS 2008 Born in Russia)

Primary Religion:

Judaism

Secondary Religions:

Nonreligious, Russian Orthodox

Status of Christian Witness:

Less than 2% evangelical. Initial (localized) church planting within the past two years.

Primary Language:

Russian

Registry of Peoples Codes:

108454, 108452

Significant Notes:

Recent Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union now make up about 25% of New York City's Jewish population.

Russian Jews in America form the largest Russian-speaking Jewish population in the world.

A local New Yorker gargled out questions to a Russian dentist as she worked on his teeth in a Harlem dentistry. "So, you don't live in Brooklyn?" he managed to mutter in response to her saying she first lived in Manhattan and now New Jersey. "Absolutely not!" she claimed, "Those Russians are trying to live in the past. They never get out and experience New York." The dentist's comments allude to the conflicting identities experienced by Russians in New York today. Coming off a heavy dose of communism, the new Russian immigrants have been uniquely positioned to form new identities in their adopted city. As a result, they have splintered into groups defined by being more Jewish, more Russian, more American, more Orthodox Christian, more atheist, more sophisticated, or even more open to other religions like evangelical Christianity. While religious identity has been muddled by the effects of communism, an estimated seventy to ninety percent of all Russians in New York City are ethnically Jews.¹ Without including Russian-speaking people from other former Soviet republics, there are around 110 thousand Russians in the New York Metro area.²

When Did They Come to New York?

Even though Russians have been immigrating to New York City since the 1800s, it is the large influx of immigrants in the last few decades that has made the word "Russian" synonymous with certain parts of New York City.³ In the 1970s, many Soviet Jews were allowed to leave their country for Israel. This opened the way for many to come to America as well. More recently, policy changes under Mikhail Gorbachev allowed Russians to more freely leave the country and, in 1989, the United States Congress designated Soviet Jews as eligible to receive refugee status if they could prove they had a credible fear of persecution.⁴ As a result, the 1990s witnessed an influx of more Soviet Jews to New York City than any other immigrant group. While economics was the main motivation for migration, religious persecution in Russia provided strong motivation as well.

Where Do They Live?

Unlike the Harlem dentist who sees herself on the "more sophisticated" side of Russian identity, sixty-two percent of Russians in New York City live in Brooklyn (ACS 2008). In particular, the south Brooklyn neighborhoods of Brighton Beach, Bath Beach, Gravesend, Sheepshead Bay, Bensonhurst, Starrett City, and Midwood have a strong Russian flavor.

What Do They Believe?

Periodically along streets in Jewish neighborhoods in Brooklyn, plastered signs appear that appeal to the Orthodox Jewish community to save their Russian Jewish brothers from being swept away by Christian missionaries in Jewish disguise. According to a 2000 survey of Russian-speakers in New York, forty-one percent identify their religion as Judaism within their first three years in America, but this increases to sixty-four percent for those who have been in America nine years or more.⁵ Having lived under a communist system that suppressed belief in God for decades, many Russian Jews in New York have awakened their faith by becoming members of Orthodox synagogues. However, as the Brooklyn signs indicate, a growing minority have converted to evangelical Christianity. At least ten percent of Russians in Metro New York belong to the Russian Orthodox Church.

What Are Their Lives Like?

If one were to stroll down Brighton Beach Avenue in winter, one would notice an abundance of women extravagantly promenading in fur coats. Russians love fashion, classical music, plays, ballroom dancing, and the sophisticated lifestyle. While some have realistically entered that world, for others it is a false veneer that hides the psychological trauma of adjusting to America and being a highly educated professional forced to work a lower-level job.

How Can I Pray?

∞ Pray for the continued success of evangelical church plants focused on reaching Russian Jews and that Russian Christians would have confidence in Christ in the midst of persecution.

∞ Russians have one of the highest suicide rates in the city. Pray that they would find hope, worth, and meaning in Christ.



Photo by Joanna Johnson

1. In a Research Institute of New Americans (RINA) study titled, "Russian Jew-ish Immigrants in New York City: Status, Identity, and Integration" (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2000), 71 percent of Russian speakers interviewed were Jewish. In a 2004 survey by RINA, 91 percent of Russian speakers identified themselves as definitely having a Jewish identity. See RINA, "Russian-Jewish Opinion Survey 2004," American Jewish Committee, <http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=ijlT12PHKOG&b=846741&ct=1030151> (accessed January 16, 2010). RINA, "Russian Jewish Immigrants in New York City," 2000, estimates 400,000 Russian-speaking Jews live in Metro New York. Surveys, including ones done by RINA, indicate that 70%-90% of Russian speakers in Metro New York are ethnically Jewish. If this range is averaged out to 80%, then 100,000 non-Jewish Russian-speakers also live in Metro New York. In RINA, "Russian-Jewish Opinion Survey 2004," 22% of Russian-speakers interviewed identified themselves as immigrants from the Russian Republic of the former Soviet Union. Twenty-two percent of 500,000 is 110,000.

2. RINA's "Russian Jewish Immigrants in New York City" estimates 400,000 Russian-speaking Jews living in Metro New York. Surveys, including those by RINA, indicate that 70-90 percent of Russian speakers in Metro New York are ethnically Jewish. If this range is averaged out to 80 percent, then 100,000 non-Jewish Russian-speakers also live in Metro New York. In "Russian-Jewish Opinion Survey 2004," 22 percent of Russian-speakers interviewed identified themselves as immigrants from the Russian Republic of the former Soviet Union. Twenty-two percent of 500,000 is 110,000. Samuel Kliger, "The Religion of New York Jews from the Former Soviet Union," in *New York Glory*, p 149.

3. The first three major waves of Russian migration occurred from the 1880s to 1914, the 1920s through the 1930s, and the few years following the Second World War. However, the subsequent generations of these immigrants more readily identify themselves as Americans and are generally not included when talking about the Russians of New York.

4. Samuel Kliger, "The Religion of New York Jews from the Former Soviet Union," in Tony Carnes, Anna Karpathakis, eds., *New York Glory: Religion in the City* (New York: New York UP, 2001), 149.

5. RINA, "Russian Jewish Immigrants in New York City."