

# So, How Many Hindus Are There in the US?

US Census Bureau's American Community Survey provides the best answer

**HINDUISM TODAY** was recently asked to provide a definitive estimate of Hindus in America. Our conclusion: as of 2008, there are more than 2,290,000 Hindus in the US.

**T**HERE ARE NO OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT statistics on the number of adherents to any particular religion in America, because the US Census does not collect data on religion. Estimates are made mostly by national polls. These are useful for large religious communities, but inaccurate for small ones. For Hinduism, we believe the soundest approach is based on the number of people in America of Indian origin. A single assumption is then made, that the percentage of Hindus among Americans of Indian origin is the same as the percentage of Hindus in India, 81 percent.

One could quibble with this assumption. Some claim—without providing any evidence—that there is a greater percentage of Christians among the immigrants than in India. But with just 2.3% Christians in India, even a doubling of that percentage in America would make only a slight difference.

The US Census Bureau conducts an ongoing statistical study called American Community Survey, which provides yearly updates to the decennial American census. The Survey offers up-to-date information on demographics, housing, society and the economy in America, based on a sample of three million households interviewed each year (out of 105 million). The 2006 Survey, which was released in October, 2007, counted 2,482,141 Asian Indians. This includes those of Indian origin coming from countries such as Trinidad, Kenya, Surinam and Fiji.

To update this figure for 2008, we must consider the average annual growth rate for Asian Indians. In the year 2000, the decennial census counted 1,678,765 Asian Indians; the Survey estimated 2,482,141 in 2006, which works out to an annual growth rate of about 6.8 percent.

Using that growth rate to extrapolate the 2006 Survey result two years, we calculate 2,831,190 Asian Indians in 2008. Assuming 81% of these Asian Indians are Hindus, just

as in India, we conclude that of the 2,831,190 Asian Indians, 2,290,000 are Hindu—QED! But despite the compelling logic of this analysis, HINDUISM TODAY has never seen it published elsewhere.

population of the US. In addition, many new immigrants originate in societies and states where responding to personal questions over the telephone is an alien experience, and discussions of one's religious beliefs and identification are deemed to be risky." The report's conclusion mentions the impressive growth of Hinduism in America, observing, "there are more than three times as many Hindus in the US today as there were in 1990. Undoubtedly, due to the limitations of this study, we have not picked up the full impact of those changes yet." Unfortunately, the ARIS estimate is typically quoted as fact, with no mention of these caveats.

Other figures are based on even less concrete information than the ARIS results. Harvard's Pluralism Project estimates 1,300,000 Hindus, based on the 2004 *World Almanac* figure of 1,285,000—which, in turn, was based on information from the 1999 *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* estimates 1,032,000 Hindus in America by 2000. The *World Christian Encyclopedia* (1985 edition) projected 700,000 Hindus in 2000, at 0.3% of the population, based on census date from the 1980s. The popular website [www.adherents.com](http://www.adherents.com) uses the ARIS figure, but updates it using growth estimates. All are no more than educated guesses.

## Is that all?

Many Americans who are not ethnic Indians embrace Hindu practice or belief to one degree or another. Hundreds of thousands have flocked to swamis, pundits, saints and teachers from India since the 1960s. A 2005 Harris poll commissioned by *Yoga Journal* found that 16.5 million Americans practice yoga regularly. A 2004 Gallup Poll found 72 million Americans—24%—believe in reincarnation, an astonishing number that has held steady for decades and cuts across all religious affiliations, including even 10% of evangelical Christians. There is almost certainly overlap among these groups, but it is reasonable to state that at least a quarter of Americans share significant Hindu beliefs and practices. 



**Getting the numbers right:** A precise count is hard to achieve, but we can demonstrate that Hindus in America are far more numerous than estimates have suggested

## What about the other estimates?

An oft-cited number for Hindus in America—the figure cited on the US Census Bureau website itself—is derived from the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) conducted in 2001 by the City University of New York. This was a telephone survey involving 50,281 households.

ARIS concluded that 0.4% of America's population, or about 1.2 million people in 2008, are Hindu. In the absence of a more extensive study, this has become a semi-official number, sustained by the ARIS report's easy availability at the main US Census Bureau website. Before the advent of the American Community Survey, there was no way of challenging ARIS' conclusions.

The ARIS report forthrightly acknowledges its limits. It admits, "because the survey depends on telephone interviews, overcoming language barriers has proven prohibitively costly. In effect, this survey has interviewed only the English-speaking