

Demographic Characteristics of JCC Members: Comparisons with Affiliated and Unaffiliated Jews in the United States

The NJPS 2000-01 and the JCC Movement:
Briefing Paper Number 2

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October 2004



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The Questions

Which Jews join Jewish Community Centers in the United States? How do JCC members differ from other American Jews in terms of their age, family configurations, social status and other major socio-demographic characteristics?

The profile of the current membership of Jewish Community Centers has a direct bearing upon JCCs' ongoing efforts to recruit and retain JCC members. Knowing who the JCCs currently reach can suggest the sort of constituencies that may be most amenable for further membership recruitment efforts. And, knowing who the JCCs fail to attract can provide clues to the sorts of barriers that inhibit Jews from joining Jewish Community Centers. Thus, understanding who we are now reaching is critical to addressing two related questions:

- a) How do we do a better job of reaching our "natural" constituencies?
- b) How can we do a better job of reaching the sorts of populations that do not readily affiliate with Jewish Community Centers?

Joining a Jewish Community Center is, of course, an act of Jewish communal affiliation, somewhat comparable to joining other Jewish institutions such as synagogues and other Jewish organizations. Thus, to better understand who joins JCCs, we would do well to compare JCC members both with other affiliated Jews (Jews who affiliate with other Jewish institutions) and with non-affiliated Jews (those who belong neither to JCCs nor other institutions in Jewish life). In so doing, we can learn whether JCC members are indeed generally part and parcel of the largely affiliated

population, or whether they are more similar to unaffiliated Jews. In a sense, we can ask to what extent JCCs function more as Jewish “in-reach” connectors, thickening the bonds among the largely affiliated, and to what extent they serve as Jewish “outreach” gateways, attracting Jews who are otherwise uninvolved in conventional Jewish life, with the implicit and explicit hope that they both find Jewish meaning in the JCC and also go on to eventually affiliate in other ways with the organized Jewish community. To be clear, these data include only Jews who indicated that they are dues-paying members of JCCs. These data do not include those who use JCC services without becoming a member.

The Sample

To address these questions, we turn to National Jewish Population Study (NJPS), sponsored by the United Jewish Communities. Fielded in 2000-01, the survey consists of over 4,500 Jewish households across the United States. (Canada is not included, and patterns in Canada may well differ from those found in the United States.) To be clear, these data apply only to Jews (defined very broadly).

Since it was designed as a study of American Jews, the NJPS does not encompass non-Jews, except for those who may be living in households with an adult Jew. The exclusion of non-Jews from this analysis yields a portrait of JCC membership that differs somewhat from a portrait that would include both Jewish and non-Jewish JCC members.

The Three Groups: JCC Members, Otherwise Affiliated, Unaffiliated

To understand who joins JCCs, we compare the characteristics among three groups:

- 1) Members of JCCs (people who said that they or someone in their household pays dues to a Jewish Community Center).
- 2) Jews who are otherwise affiliated, by belonging to congregations or other Jewish organizations (such as, most widely, Hadassah and B’nai B’rith).
- 3) Unaffiliated Jews, who report no membership in JCCs, synagogues, or other Jewish organizations.

Respectively, the three groups amount to 17%, 30%, and 53% of American Jewish adults. (Since a few JCCs do not offer formal memberships and operate on a fee-for-service basis, the actual proportion of adult Jews in the United States who are affiliated with JCCs is slightly higher than that reported here.)

The tendency for different sorts of Jews to join JCCs as days-paying members in part reflects the general tendency of Jews to affiliate with any Jewish institution, and in part reflects the special tendency of Jews to affiliate specifically with a JCC. That is, as we shall see, Jews who join JCCs tend to join other Jewish institutions. Accordingly, in examining the findings, we will be alert to detecting both processes in operation, both joining Jewish life in general and joining JCCs in particular. Some groups in the population may over- or under-affiliate with JCCs simply because they tend to over- or under-affiliate with Jewish communal life in general. In addition, certain groups in the population may over- or under-affiliate with JCCs specifically, relative to their general rates of affiliating with Jewish institutions. That is, in certain circumstances we will find that JCCs perform exceedingly well or poorly in penetrating the markets of affiliated Jews.

Region: Under-affiliated in the West, More affiliated in the Mid-Atlantic

The regional variations in JCC membership reflect the tendencies of Jews in those regions to generally affiliate with Jewish institutions. For example, among JCC members, just 16% are found in the West (the Census category consisting of Pacific and Mountain States), and among otherwise affiliated Jews about the same number (17%) are located in the West. In contrast, among unaffiliated Jews, a disproportionate number (29%) are found in the West. Thus, the West is home to relatively few JCC members and to relatively few Jews who join congregations and other organizations, but, at the same time, the West is home to a much larger segment of unaffiliated Jewish adults. Clearly, Western Jews are under-represented relatively among JCC members, but this under-representation can be totally attributed to the smaller likelihood of Jews in the West to affiliate in any way with Jewish life.

If JCCs tend to have weaker membership penetration than elsewhere, this trend is largely a consequence of low rates of Jewish communal affiliation generally in the Western states. By the same logic, we also find that JCC members are relatively over-concentrated in the Middle Atlantic region (consisting in part of New York, New

Jersey and Pennsylvania), also consistent with Jewish communal affiliation patterns generally in this region.

In other words, on a broad regional basis, fluctuations in the penetration of JCCs into the Jewish population generally are closely tied to the tendency of local Jews to affiliate with any sort of Jewish institution.

REGIONAL CENSUS DIVISIONS FOR JCC MEMBERS, OTHERWISE AFFILIATED, AND UNAFFILIATED				
Census divisions*	Unaffiliated	Affiliated (not JCC)	JCC members	Total
New England	6.6%	7.5%	6.6%	6.9%
Mid Atlantic	28.9%	39.1%	41.4%	34.1%
Midwest	11.4%	13.6%	11.7%	12.1%
South	24.0%	22.4%	24.6%	23.5%
West	29.1%	17.4%	15.7%	23.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*States comprising the census divisions:

New England: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont

Middle Atlantic: New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania

Midwest: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin

South: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia

West: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming

Fewer young adults in JCCs, and more seniors

Compared with the Jewish population at large, and even the affiliated population in particular, JCCs attract relatively small number of Jews under the age of 35. Just 15% of JCC adult Jews fall in this age bracket, as contrasted with 25% of those who are otherwise affiliated, and as many as 33% of the unaffiliated. Thus, other Jewish institutions more successfully reach the young adult constituency than do JCCs. Younger adults fail to join JCCs not only because they are less likely to join any Jewish institution. In addition, they are especially unlikely to affiliate with JCCs as compared with their relatively greater tendency to join congregations and other Jewish organizations.

The patterns among senior adults (those 65 and over) are reversed, demonstrating the relative strength of JCCs in appealing to the older age bracket. These Jews are more likely to affiliate with Jewish institutions in general. However, in addition to this general tendency, JCC members especially consist of those over 65. They represent 36% of JCC Jewish members, just 24% of the membership in other Jewish institutions, and only 20% of the unaffiliated.

Given the relative proportions of young adults and older adults among JCC members, we may readily conclude that the JCC age profile is considerably older than the profile of the unaffiliated, and even somewhat older than the profile of those who are affiliated with Jewish institutions other than Jewish Community Centers.

AGE DISTRIBUTIONS AMONG JCC MEMBERS, OTHERWISE AFFILIATED, UNAFFILIATED				
6 age groups	Unaffiliated	Affiliated (not JCC)	JCC members	Total
Under 35	33.4%	25.4%	15.4%	27.9%
35-44	16.0%	14.5%	15.8%	15.5%
45-54	18.8%	22.9%	21.6%	20.5%
55-64	11.9%	13.6%	11.6%	12.3%
65-74	10.3%	11.6%	17.4%	11.9%
75+	9.6%	12.0%	18.2%	11.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Family configurations: The under-represented singles

Consistent with the age patterns presented immediately above, we find that JCCs dramatically under-enroll those who are unmarried with no children. Just 11% of JCC Jewish members fall in this category, as contrasted with more than twice as many among otherwise affiliated Jews (where singles comprise 23% of the population), and more than three times as many of the unaffiliated (38%).

On the other hand, JCC membership disproportionately consists of those who are parents of school-age children (24%), empty nesters (39%), and widows (10%).

In each case, the JCC proportion is larger than the comparable number among the otherwise affiliated, where the figures are larger, in turn, than those for the

unaffiliated. The special appeal to parents of school-age children reflects the child-oriented services that undoubtedly draw families to many JCCs. The special appeal JCCs exert for empty nesters and the widowed may well reflect JCCs special appeal to older Jewish adults who are more accessible both by virtue of their geographic location and their strongly held Jewish ethnic identities.

FAMILY TYPE FOR JCC MEMBERS, OTHERWISE AFFILIATED, UNAFFILIATED				
Family type	Unaffiliated	Affiliated (not JCC)	JCC members	Total
Unmarried, no kids	38.8%	23.1%	11.4%	29.4%
Married, no kids	10.1%	7.5%	6.2%	8.7%
Single parent	5.8%	6.5%	4.3%	5.8%
Parents of preschoolers	5.2%	4.6%	5.4%	5.0%
Parents of schoolage kids	10.3%	17.9%	23.8%	14.9%
Empty nesters	23.2%	32.7%	38.9%	28.7%
Widow(er)	6.7%	7.6%	10.0%	7.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Education and Income: An upscale JCC membership

JCC members disproportionately report upscale socioeconomic characteristics. To illustrate, almost 30% of all JCC Jewish members hold a graduate degree, as compared with 28% of otherwise affiliated Jews and just 21% of the unaffiliated. Just as they are better educated, so to do JCC members report greater affluence. As many as 35% report household incomes of \$100,000 or more, as compared with 30% of the otherwise affiliated and just 20% of the unaffiliated.

From the point of view of both educational attainment and household income, JCC membership patterns reflect the wider tendency of more upscale Americans to affiliate more frequently. While America is (or, at least, has been) a nation of joiners, joining is very much a function of social class, with more upscale individuals joining and belonging more than others. With these tendencies acknowledged, JCC affiliation patterns are even more decidedly upscale than those characterizing congregations and other Jewish organizations, all of which reflect the impact of social class.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT FOR JCC MEMBERS, OTHERWISE AFFILIATED, UNAFFILIATED

Education	Unaffiliated	Affiliated (not JCC)	JCC members	Total
HS degree or less	47.4%	41.4%	42.0%	44.7%
BA	31.7%	30.9%	28.3%	30.8%
Graduate degree	20.9%	27.8%	29.7%	24.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

INCOME FOR JCC MEMBERS, OTHERWISE AFFILIATED, UNAFFILIATED

Income (thousands)	Unaffiliated	Affiliated (not JCC)	JCC members	Total
Less than 25	23.8%	15.0%	14.6%	19.9%
25-50 (49,999)	25.0%	21.6%	22.3%	23.6%
50-100 (99,999)	31.5%	33.4%	28.0%	31.5%
100-150 (149,999)	12.8%	16.1%	16.9%	14.4%
150+	6.9%	13.9%	18.2%	10.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Summary and Conclusions

JCC membership patterns resemble but are still distinctive from the patterns characterizing other Jewish institutions, such as congregations and other Jewish organizations.

In particular ...

1. JCC members, as are members of other institutions, are relatively more concentrated in the Northeast and under-represented in the West.
2. While all Jewish institutions exhibit a somewhat older age profile, the JCC age profile is even older than that found for other forms of Jewish affiliation.
3. JCCs especially appeal to parents of school-age children as well as empty-nesters and widow(er)s. Relatively few non-married young adults join JCCs, even in comparison with congregations.
4. JCC members, in terms of education and income, are slightly more upscale than their counterparts in other Jewish institutions; those affiliated with all sorts of Jewish institutions report more upscale profiles than the unaffiliated.

A final comment: Clearly these patterns present both challenges and opportunities. In particular, JCCs will need to attend to their older age profiles and devise ways to reach younger constituencies. Perhaps parents of pre-school children, a natural consumer of JCC services, offers a prime target audience for more intensive membership recruitment efforts. The JCCs of the West are challenged both by lower rates of Jewish institutional affiliation generally, and probably by the prevalence of good weather - as good weather has been shown to draw people away from community activities, especially those held indoors. In addition, Jewish institutions in the West are newer and therefore less established than those in the rest of the country, especially the Northeast. Newer institutions tend to have lower affiliation rates than those having deep roots in the community.

The upscale profile of JCC members constitutes a valuable resource, but, at the same time, JCC leaders are eager to maintain inclusive membership policies that remain inviting to all, regardless of economic ability. Balancing competing considerations in this area, as in all others, remains the challenge to reflective and effective JCC leadership, both lay and professional.



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