

Jewish Community Centers and Their Jewish Members:

Profiles in Religious and Ethnic Identity

The NJPS 2000-01 and the JCC Movement:
Briefing Paper Number 3

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November 2004



The
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Over the years, Jewish Community Centers in North America have become increasingly engaged in stimulating and facilitating their members' diverse paths of Jewish growth and development. Emblematic of that long-standing and continually increasing commitment, JCCA's Hagshama report (2004), the movement's most recent key strategic planning document, focused on, "Inspiring Jewish Journeys," as its central theme. The recently inaugurated Mandel Center for Jewish Education, aiming to further enhance the movement's dedication to Jewish education in all its varieties, bears further testimony to the movement's ongoing and increasing attention to enriching the Jewish ambience, culture, and education in JCCs.

To inform and support these expanding efforts at Jewish educational intensification, this report profiles the religious and ethnic identity contours of the Jewish members of Jewish Community Centers in the United States. It explores how the Jewish members of JCCs engage as Jews, and how they may differ from other affiliated Jews and the larger group of unaffiliated Jews around the country.

The Data

The analysis draws upon the National Jewish Population Study 2000/01, sponsored by the United Jewish Communities. Interviewers surveyed 4,523 Jewish households by telephone throughout the United States. The results reported below derive from the weighted sample, adjusted so as to reflect true national distributions with respect to region, Jewish population density, and number of telephone lines in the household. (To be clear, the data do not include Canada. In several studies, Canadian Jews score higher than American Jews on many indices of Jewish involvement. Presumably, this pattern extends to Jewish Community Center members as well.)

Since the NJPS was designed as a study of American Jews, the survey 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.

Comparing Three Groups: JCC Members, Otherwise Affiliated, Unaffiliated

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.

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 RESULTS

JCC members are largely in-married, ethnically connected, and religiously active

Perhaps understandably, the quite visible and prominent recreation and fitness activities taking place almost daily in almost every JCC central facility strongly influence the public image of Jewish Community Centers. Thus, when many people, even well-informed Jewish communal leaders, think of JCCs, they tend to think of runners on treadmills, teen-agers playing basketball, youngsters in swimming pools, and people of all ages in health clubs. Outside observers may think less readily of other activities that equally characterize today's JCCs. These include Jewish pre-schools, JCC summer camps (both day and residential), senior activities, and Jewish educational and cultural activities, among others. Perhaps for this reason, observers may not readily think of JCCs as drawing upon those who are Jewishly engaged (however defined), as well as upon Jews of a wide diversity of Jewish background and commitment.

In point of fact, as we demonstrate presently, Jews in JCCs display patterns of Jewish identity and communal involvement that very closely resemble the "affiliated" Jewish population in the United States, a group that is much more intensely involved in conventional Jewish life than their counterparts – the unaffiliated. Most simply, on all measures of Jewish involvement, JCC members are substantially more engaged than the unaffiliated. Moreover, JCC members even surpass the otherwise affiliated in almost all available indices of Jewish involvement.

High Rates of In-marriage and in-group friendship

To take a very illustrative set of findings, we may first examine the in-marriage rates (among those who are married). Among the unaffiliated, under half (46%) of those married are married to Jews. In contrast, 87% of the otherwise affiliated are in-married and even more (91%) of JCC members are in-married. Clearly, despite efforts to reach out to the intermarried, JCCs have remained much more attractive to the in-married, and are even more attractive (relatively) to in-married Jews than are other institutions in Jewish life. In essence, JCCs attract those Jews who, in particular, seek to socialize with other Jews, or at least in environs where most other people are Jewish.

The majority of JCC members also report that most of their friends are Jewish (59%), compared to just half of the otherwise affiliated. Of the unaffiliated, only 15% said that most of their friends are Jewish. To some extent, people with Jewish friends find their way to JCCs, and JCC members find their friends (other Jews) at their JCCs.

	Unaffiliated	Affiliated, not JCC	JCC members
In-married (of all married)*	46%	87%	91%
Most Jewish friends	15%	50%	59%

*Entries are the "individual in-marriage rate." That is, it refers to percent of Jewish individuals who are married to Jews, a number higher than the "couple in-marriage rate," that is, the percent of couples with a Jewish spouse who are in-married.

JCC Members Affiliate Elsewhere Too

Fully 80% of JCC Jewish adult members belong to congregations, and 58% belong to other Jewish organizations (e.g., Hadassah, B'nai B'rith, etc.). Forty percent of JCC members have had an adult Jewish educational experience (compared to 38% of affiliated Jews and 6% of the unaffiliated). While only 4% of the unaffiliated volunteered in a Jewish context, 37% of affiliated Jews and, even more, 45% of JCC members did so.

JCC members, then, grow out of the affiliated Jewish population, and their involvement in JCCs undoubtedly stimulates and sustains involvement in other Jewish voluntary venues.

	Unaffiliated	Affiliated, not JCC	JCC members
Synagogue member	0%	83%	80%
Other Jewish org member	0%	45%	58%
Attended adult Jewish education	6%	38%	40%
Volunteered in a Jewish context	4%	37%	45%

Frequent Marking of the Jewish Calendar

JCC members outscore the unaffiliated and even the otherwise affiliated on almost all measures of ritual behavior. The vast majority of JCC members attend High Holiday services (87%), and 36% attend Sabbath services at least once a month. Most JCC members also celebrate the two most popular Jewish ritual practices- attending a Passover seder (93%) and lighting Chanukah candles (92%). Over three quarters (77%) of JCC members fasted on Yom Kippur, and almost half (48%) said that they usually light Sabbath candles.

	Unaffiliated	Affiliated, not JCC	JCC members
Attend High Holiday services	22%	83%	87%
Attend services once a month+	2%	27%	36%
Usually attend Passover seder	46%	91%	93%
Usually light Chanukkah candles	55%	93%	92%
Fast on Yom Kippur	27%	73%	77%
Usually light Sabbath candles	8%	41%	48%

A methodological note: To be sure, respondents on all surveys tend to over-report socially desirable behavior and the JCC members may well have done so here as well. But, if they have, so have the other respondents. Hence, if these results exaggerate actual ritual performance among American Jews, the exaggeration occurs for all groups of respondents, and not just JCC members. If so, then the gaps between JCC members and the others can be presumed to be genuine, even if all estimates need to be reduced somewhat.

Widely Connected to Israel

Over half of JCC members have been to Israel (55%), and 30% have visited more than once. Again, these measures exceed those reported by otherwise affiliated Jews by small margins, and unaffiliated by very wide margins. With respect to their feelings about Israel, almost half, 45%, said that they feel very attached to Israel, compared to 38% of the otherwise affiliated sample and just 17% of the unaffiliated.

	Unaffiliated	Affiliated, not JCC	JCC members
Been to Israel	20%	51%	56%
Been to Israel twice or more	6%	26%	30%
Very attached to Israel	17%	38%	45%

Sizable Giving to Federations and Other Jewish Causes

A third of JCC members (33%) contribute at least \$100 to their Federation campaigns (more than the corresponding figure – 22% – among the otherwise affiliated). Over half– 56%– gave at least \$100 to Jewish charities other than Federation (compared to 48% among the otherwise affiliated and 8% to the unaffiliated). Jews in all three categories also reported giving at least \$100 to non-Jewish charities: 36% for the unaffiliated and 50% for the otherwise affiliated, 51% for JCC members.

	Unaffiliated	Affiliated, not JCC	JCC members
Gave \$100+ to Federation	3%	22%	33%
Gave \$100+ to another Jewish charity	8%	48%	56%
Gave \$100+ to a non Jewish charity	36%	50%	51%

Positive Attitudes toward Being Jewish

JCC members considerably outscored the other two categories when asked if being Jewish was very important to them. Fully 71% of JCC members indicated that this is the case, compared to 64% of the otherwise affiliated and 32% of the unaffiliated. The numbers drop when the same question was asked about religion: 48% of JCC members said that religion is very important, compared to 43% of the otherwise affiliated and 19% of the unaffiliated. When asked if they believe in God, 85% of JCC members and otherwise affiliated Jews said yes, compared to 69% of the unaffiliated.

Notably, notwithstanding the now-outdated impression of JCCs as secularist institutions, JCC members report attitudes toward religion and God that indicate as high rates of religiosity as that expressed by otherwise affiliated American Jews (the large majority of which qualify as affiliated by way of their synagogue membership).

	Unaffiliated	Affiliated, not JCC	JCC members
Being Jewish is very important	32%	64%	71%
Religion is very important	19%	43%	48%
Believes in God	69%	85%	85%

Clearly, JCC members are Jewishly engaged, both in religious and ethnic terms. The implications for membership policies of this current state of affairs merits serious attention and exploration.

Conclusion and Implications

JCC members clearly score relatively high on all measures of Jewish engagement. JCCs are places that attract connected Jews and, undoubtedly, foster, sustain, and enhance their connection. JCC members constitute over a third of all affiliated Jews in the United States, making the JCCs the largest single institutional form of affiliation, followed in turn by Reform congregations.

For those policymakers and practitioners engaged in expanding JCC membership, the results suggest a greater readiness on the part of the otherwise affiliated to join JCCs than among those who are totally unaffiliated.

For those concerned with the overall infrastructure of Jewish institutional life, the JCCs emerge as a key linchpin in the effort to engage Jews, and to link them to wider and more meaningful involvement in Jewish institutional life.



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