

A Review of the 2015 Greater Boston Jewish Community Study

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Every ten years since 1965, Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP), the Boston federation, has conducted a community study. The 2005 study electrified the Jewish media with the finding that 60% of interfaith couples in Boston were raising their children as Jews. The 2015 Study, conducted by the Cohen Center and Steinhardt Institute at Brandeis, reveals a wealth of information that while not as dramatic, still strongly supports programmatic efforts to engage interfaith families Jewishly. The Study is also important for creating an Index of Jewish Engagement and identifies five groups with distinctive patterns of how they engage in Jewish life and community.

The basic demographic data from the Study (pp. 1-2, 11) is:

- 248,000 Jews, the fourth largest Jewish community in the US as defined by federation service area (includes North Shore) (after NY, LA, Chicago), 7% of the area population
- 190,600 Jewish adults in 123,400 Jewish households (defined as including at least one Jewish adult); a population increase of 4.6% since 2005 (not including increase due to adding North Shore to catchment area)
- 8% Israeli, 7% Russian-born and –speaking, 7% LGBTQ
- 71,100 children live in Jewish households; 57,400 are being raised Jewish. The Study uses categories from the Pew Report – Jews by religion (JBR) are people who say that their religion is Jewish, Jews of no religion (JNR) say they are Jewish but not that their religion is Jewish. The Study adds a category of Jews of multiple religions (JMR). Of the 57,400 children being raised Jewish: 62% (35,800) are Jewish by religion, 28% (16,100) are Jews of no religion, and 10% (5,600) are Jews of multiple religions.

The key intermarriage data from the Study includes:

- 47% of couples in Jewish households are interfaith couples, 53% are two-Jewish couples (of the latter, 5% include a convert) (16)
- 57% of children of intermarried couples are raised exclusively Jewish (42% JBR, 15% JNR), 12% Jewish and another religion, 21% no religion, 10% another religion. These rates have remained steady since 2005. (34)
 - By comparison, 94% of children of inmarried couples are raised exclusively Jewish (65% JBR, 28% JNR); 1% are raised Jewish and another religion, 5% no religion. (34)
 - Of Jewish children, 53% have inmarried parents, 32% have intermarried parents. (33)
- The Study reports that 30% of Russian-born or Russian-speaking Jews are in-married; that indicates that 70% of married Russian Jews are in interfaith relationships. Similarly, 80% of Israeli Jews are in-married, indicating that 20% are interfaith. Of LGBTQ married/partnered Jews, 69% are interfaith. (17)

- The Study notes comparisons between intermarried and inmarried Jews on numerous Jewish behaviours and attitudes, including providing children with formal and informal education, synagogue membership and participation, ritual practice, and connection to Israel, all of which and more are summarized in the following table:

Jewish behavior/attitude	% of Intermarried	% of Inmarried	Comments
Children Education (p 35 - 38)			
Child in pre-school	12	27	
Child in part-time school	19	34	
Child in day school	2	10	
Child in day camp	9	19	
Child in overnight camp	7	27	
Child in youth group	15	17	
Child on Israel trip	8	37	
Involved with school/camp	10	23	
Donate to school/camp	8	22	
Synagogue Participation (p 42)			
Synagogue member	23 (37 of those with children)	57 (64 of those with children)	Figure in parentheses is % of intermarried or inmarried if there are children at home
Attended services in past year	57 (83)	87 (93)	Increase from 2005 in never attend 18 to 28
Attended High Holy Day services	42 (61)	75 (83)	
Attend religious program	37 (56)	56 (61)	
Interested in religious programs	15 (13)	22 (16)	
Involved in synagogue	27 (50)	61 (71)	
Involved in Chabad, Aish, etc.	22 (35)	48 (54)	
Donate to synagogue	22 (35)	48 (54)	
Ritual Practice (p. 43-44)			
Hanukkah candles	79 (100)	96 (100)	
Seder	70 (93)	96 (99)	
Ever light Shabbat candles	34 (59)	70 (81)	Similar to 2005; decline in “always” 18 to 9
Any Kosher practice	14 (22)	45 (45)	Similar to 2005
Memberships and Activities (p 45)			
JCC member	7	9	
Member of other organization	12	28	
Attend program past year	46	74	

Attend program monthly	9	25	
Types of program attended (p 46)			
Religious	37	60	
Cultural	36	45	
Educational	35	45	
Community service	20	27	
Israel	7	19	
Family/parentin	13	18	
Volunteering (p 48)			
Volunteer in past month	40	40	
Jewish volunteering	17	31	
Education	62	56	
Poverty/social justice	56	41	
Medical/health	47	37	
Arts/culture	47	32	
Israel	27	45	
Political activism	36	30	
Philanthropy (p 49)			
Donate	87	88	
Donate to Jewish cause	60	80	
Donate to Jewish <2,500	57	46	
Donate to Jewish >2,500	28	43	
To synagogue	38	63	
To Jewish social services	28	39	
To Jewish education	14	29	
CJP (p 50)			
Aware of CJP	67	82	
Involved with CJP	10	24	
Donate to CJP	13	31	
Rate CJP excellent/good	35	47	
Don't know	50	36	
Cultural Activities (p 54)			
Listen to Jewish music	18	48	
Read Jewish literature	26	41	
Visit Jewish websites	32	61	
Concerned about anti-Semitism (p 55)			
In local area	33	53	
At college	57	75	
Worldwide	86	95	
Connection to Israel (57-62)			
Birthright	18	8	Not eligible if went on prior group trip

Emotional Connection to Israel:			
• not at all	28	7	
• a little	22	18	
• somewhat	34	34	
• very much	16	41	
Consider Israel important cause	61	77	
Attend Israel program	7	19	
Interest in Israel program	19	28	
Involved in advocacy	6	18	
Follow news about Israel:			
• never	44	16	
• one/two times a month	29	24	
• weekly	19	39	
• daily	7	21	
Get news from American Jewish press	41	64	

The Study created an Index of Jewish Engagement based on a “latent cluster analysis” of fourteen Jewish behaviors, and found five behavior patterns. The apparent motivation for creating the index is the feeling that dichotomies like engaged/not engaged, religious/not religious and different denominations “are inadequate descriptors of contemporary Jewish behavior.” “Boston Jewry is characterized by diverse ways of being involved in Jewish life...” The Index was designed to identify opportunities for increased engagement that can be targeted towards groups with different needs and interests. (3, 22)

The fourteen activities include public (in institutions, like synagogue membership) and private (home-based, like seder) ways people engage in four dimensions: family and home-based, ritual, cultural and organizational (22):

- Family – seder and Hanukkah candles
- Ritual – kosher, Shabbat candles, attend services regularly, attend HHD services
- Cultural – listen to music, read literature, access websites, follow news about Israel
- Organizational – join synagogue, attend programs, volunteer, donate.

Two patterns at the ends of the spectrum (23) are:

- Minimally Involved 17% - occasional or intermittent participation in private and public activities
- Immersed 15% engage in ritual activities, cultural and communal organizations, and family-based behaviors

In between, there are three groups, which are similar on some behaviors but not all (23):

- Familial 24% engage primarily through family and home-based behaviors
- Affiliated 26% engage through family and communal organizations
- Cultural 18% engage through family and cultural activities

With respect to the intermarried and the Index:

- Of the intermarried, 27% are Minimally Involved, 30% are Familial, 28% are Affiliated, 11% are Cultural, 5% are Immersed.
- The percentage who feel it is very important that their children marry someone Jewish is 31% overall; 7% of the Minimally Involved, 9% of the Familial, 31% of the Affiliated, 40% of the Cultural, 63% of the Immersed (31)
- The percentage who feel it is very important that their grandchildren are raised Jewish is 46% overall; 10% of the Minimally Involved, 18% of the Familial, 51% of the Affiliated, 55% of the Cultural, 85% of the Immersed (31)

More information about the Index:

- Judaism is not only a religion, but also an ethnicity, a culture, a people, and a heritage. (21) Both the JBR/JNR categories and looking at denominations are too broad to provide insight about a range of Jewish behaviors and attitudes within each group. The Index focuses on behaviors, the ways in which individuals occupy and involve themselves in Jewish life, concrete and measurable expressions of Jewish identity, in many cases correlated with demographic characteristics, background and attitudes.
- Jewish adults' decisions to take part in activities may reflect the value and meaning they find in the activities, the priority they place on them, the level of skills and resources that enable them to participate, and the opportunities available and known to them. (22) We are interested in how Boston-area Jews participate in Jewish life, in addition to how they think about their Jewish identities.
- A table on page 24 shows percentages of participation in various behaviors by the five groups. Overall, the most common Jewish behaviors are celebration of holidays that are home- and family-based (seder and Chanukkah candles). (The Minimally Involved do less of these; other groups are nearly universal). Only in the Immersed group are ritual practices "normative." (24) The Cultural group is distinguished by a high level of cultural activities; many do attend non-religious programs, over half attend HHD services, synagogue membership is uncommon. The Affiliated are higher on communal activities, less on cultural one. The Familial are high on family-based activities, low on all others. (25)
- Patterns of engagement are loosely linked to demographics. (26) Ages 35-49 are most likely to be Affiliated (41% of Affiliated have children). Ages 50-64 are largest share of Immersed. Ages 18-34 equally likely to be Minimally Involved, Familial or Cultural, less likely to be Affiliated or Immersed. More economically prosperous are more Affiliated. (27)
- Jewish behavior patterns are associated with attitudes about being Jewish. (30) A majority of those in the highest three patterns feel Judaism is very much a matter of community, compared to less than one third of the two lower groups. A majority of the Immersed and nearly half of the Affiliated feel it is very much a matter of religion; the other three groups, far less. (31) All groups most agree that Judaism is a heritage and feel least that it is an ethnicity. Overall, connection to worldwide Jewish community is stronger than to Israel, which is stronger than to the local community. The percentage who feel Judaism is very much part of their daily life ranges from 1% of the Minimally Involved to 67% of the Immersed.
- Nearly all Affiliated, Cultural and Immersed raise children Jewish; 79% of Familial do, only 3% of Minimally Involved do. (34)

- Of the patterns:
 - Minimally involved (17% of all Jewish adults): 15% inmarried, 85% intermarried
 - Familial (24% of all): 34% inmarried, 66% intermarried
 - Affiliated (26% of all): 62% inmarried, 38% intermarried
 - Cultural (18% of all): 66% inmarried, 34% intermarried
 - Immersed (15% of all): 87% inmarried, 13% intermarried

Other intermarriage-related data:

- 61,200 non-Jews live in Jewish households – 47,500 adults and 13,700 children. The 13,700 children are raised with no religion, or in another religion. The 47,500 adults includes those who say they are not Jewish, which includes 4,200 who have Jewish parents or were raised Jewish but do not consider themselves Jewish in any way (there are 5,400 such people outside of Jewish households also). The 47,500 also includes, for purposes of this study, 4,300 “Affinity Jews” – those who say they are Jewish, but have no Jewish parents, were not raised Jewish and did not convert (there there are another 400 such people outside of Jewish households). (12-13)
- 68% of young adults 18-34 are married/cohabitating; of 29% who are married, 63% are in-married, so 37% are intermarried; of 39% who are cohabitating, 51% have Jewish partner, so 49% are interfaith. (17)

Other basic demographic data:

- Of all Jewish adults: Jewish by religion (76% of adults, 146,800 individuals; Pew figure was 78%), Jews of no religion (20%, 37,200), and (different from Pew) Jews of multiple religions (3%, 6,600) (12)
- 37% (44,200) belong to a synagogue/other type of congregation; nearly one quarter to an alternative congregational structure (independent minyan, Chabad, other organization with services)
 - Rate is comparable to rest of country (39%) but declined since 42% in 2005 (39)
 - 51% of households with Jewish children are members cf 32% of households without Jewish children (39)
 - Based on analysis of synagogue records, there has been an 11% decline in dues-paying household memberships from 2006 to 2015; only a 5% decline in synagogue membership; suggests an offsetting increase in alternative model memberships (40)
 - Among brick and mortar synagogue households, 7% Orthodox, 30% Conservative, 41% Reform, 4% Reconstructionist or Renewal, 22% non-denominational/unaffiliated
- 56% attend High Holiday services; 72% attended services at least once in past year
- 63% donate to at least one Jewish organization; 23% volunteer for a Jewish organization
- one fifth are members of a Jewish organization other than synagogue or JCC; three fifths attended at least one religious, cultural, educational program in past year, 18% one a month
- 61% participate in at least one informal Jewish activity (Shabbat meal, Jewish book club), 17% monthly
- private Jewish cultural activities are common: reading literature 31%, listening to music 35%, visiting websites 44%
- 92% have at least one Jew among closest friends, 53% say at least half of closest friends are Jewish

- 85% light Hanukkah candles, 82% attend Passover seder, 52% light Shabbat candles at least occasionally, 30% observe some form of kashrut
- almost one fifth of preschool age children attend Jewish preschool; one third of Jewish children K-12 are enrolled in Jewish education – 26% part-time, 7% day school
 - Participation in Jewish education (35) – 7% of eligible children go to day school, 2,600 in total; 26% go to supplemental school, 10,000 in total; 13% attended day camp, 20% overnight camp, 11% in youth group, 23% of high school students to Israel on peer trip.
- two-thirds have been to Israel at least once, one third multiple times; more than half have friends or family in Israel; 82% feel emotional connection to Israel, 30% very connected; two fifths attend or are interested in Israel programming and say Israel advocacy is very important cause to them; substantial increase in travel to Israel since 2005 (46%) and higher than national (43%) (57-62)
- 26% Reform, 24% secular, 21% just Jewish, 18% Conservative, 4% Orthodox, 4% Reconstructionist, 3% other; % of Reform/Conservative was 74% in 2005, now 44%; secular/just Jewish increase from 17% to 45% (14-15)