ORANGE COUNTY
JEWISH
COMMUNITY
County-wide Youth
Services Committee:
Youth Development
Report

May 1995

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Gary Tobin, Ph.D.
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Center for Modern Jewish
Studies
Institute for
Community and Religion
Brandeis University

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Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies
Institute for Community and Religion
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INTRODUCTION

In order to successfully foster the development of positive Jewish identity through education and involvement, the organized Jewish community must place a greater emphasis on serving teens. It is particularly important to act now because the number of Jewish teens is projected to increase tremendously in the next few years.

The teen years are a critical stage in human development. Psychologically, as Erik Erikson has argued, the major task of adolescence is identity formation, which in turn influences an individual’s career selection and choice of spouse, as well as the types and degree of community commitments he or she makes. Socially, individuals move away from the family toward the peer group, with the ultimate goal of independence.

Sadly, just as boys and girls are making the transition to independent adulthood, their involvement in Jewish education and Jewish organizations decreases dramatically. A recent study by Brandeis University and the Jewish Education Service of North America revealed that only 60% of Jewish children between the ages of thirteen and fifteen continued receiving a formal Jewish education and less than 25% of those between the ages of sixteen and eighteen did so. A survey of 1,113 Jewish teens who participated in the JCC Maccabi Youth Games in August, 1993 was conducted by the Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University and the Jewish Community Center Association (JCCA). It underscored just how little time the average Jewish adolescent (who did not attend day school) was engaged in Jewish education or other informal Jewish experiences. The typical participant spends a mere one hour and thirty-five minutes in Sunday school or afternoon Hebrew School per week—one-quarter of the amount of time he or she devotes to watching television.

The Jewish Community Center Association’s Youth Development Project responds to these challenges. The Project’s mission is to permanently strengthen the abilities of the JCCs to assist the approximately 900,000 young people who each year participate in Center programs and services across the United States. The Youth Development Project focuses on planning and revenue enhancement.

Orange County was chosen as a model site for the Project. The model project has three goals:
• to develop the Orange County Jewish Community Center’s capacity to plan more effectively;
• to provide insight into the Center’s planning process; and
• to build community.

This report is part of the Youth Development Project. The report is
This report includes data gathered from four major sources. First, a focus group of nine Jewish Community Center youth workers was convened in April, 1993. This group was moderated by Avi Namak of the Jewish Community Center Association. Mr. Namak also conducted twenty-one key informant interviews between October and December of 1994. The key informants included eight lay leaders, seven rabbis, four agency directors, and two synagogue educators. In addition, focus groups with teens and their parents were facilitated. The first of these groups was comprised of teens who occupy leadership positions in the Jewish community. The second group was made up of teens who are involved in the Jewish community but who are not in leadership roles. The third group was comprised of involved teens. The fourth focus group was comprised of uninvolved teens. The final group consisted of parents of involved teens. Simon Klarfeld from Brandeis University moderated these focus groups. The Orange County Jewish Community Center professionals also compiled an inventory of teen programs run by Orange County Jewish community organizations.
Teens are very interested in traveling to Israel on organized youth programs. Most teens who have been to Israel plan to return. Those individuals who have not gone would like to go. Cost is the major barrier to Israel trips; most teens stated that they required scholarships in order to afford the trips. Parents are concerned about safety on the trips, but felt that trip organizers can provide sufficient safeguards.

Parents are concerned about providing an environment in which their children will be encouraged to find alternatives to drugs and become better integrated into the Jewish community. Preventing intermarriage is a major issue for parents.

Youth workers, parents, and key informants all agree that the Jewish community commits insufficient resources to teen programming. More money needs to be allocated to teen programs.

Informants believe that there is significant potential for greatly expanding fundraising for youth programs.

Key informants recognize that the geographic dispersion of Orange County's Jewish population makes it imperative that a central organization such as the JCC coordinate the development of programs for Jewish teens. Key informants felt that their own organizations' programming is effective in promoting Jewish identity among participating youths. They feel that the JCC's programs should complement those provided by other Jewish organizations. These key informants also report that the JCC is perceived generally as having made a significant impact in its brief tenure, as well as working for the good of the community.
council; how to run a Shabbaton; preparing for a trip to Israel; keeping the spirit of Israel alive when teens return; a guide to post-Israel trip programs; how to manage a youth department.

- conducting regional training conferences to help lay and professional leaders from other communities create similar programs.

The Committee should ensure that the Community Calendar is widely distributed, attractively designed, and informative, containing information that enables interested teens (and their parents) to obtain details about the activities. The Community Calendar that the County-wide Youth Services Committee has constructed is an excellent first step toward coordinating and publicizing youth activities.

The JCC and other Jewish organizations should consider including teen representatives on the JCC Board of Directors. Teen empowerment should be a major goal of the comprehensive youth services program. Teen representation on boards would help ensure that teens’ needs and interests would be taken into account in the organizations’ overall operations. This would also send a powerful message to the Jewish community that teens are valued participants in communal life, and to the teens themselves that their views and participation are important.

Teens should be involved in planning and implementing programs. This would provide them with a sense of ownership and empowerment, which may also help secure the programs’ success. In addition, teen involvement in planning and implementing programs would help satisfy the desire for independence expressed in all the focus groups. The role of the youth worker would therefore be to empower teens to plan and run their own activities as much as possible, giving them the resources and support required for this work. For the educational and religious programs, the youth worker needs to bring in as many talented informal educators as possible to present various “hot” issues to teens interested in developing themselves as young adults and Jews.

Jewish communal organizations should consider making efforts to provide scholarship assistance for young people whose families cannot afford to send them to Israel without aid.

Revenue Development

The JCC and other Jewish organizations must be more aggressive in revenue development for youth. The profession-
ence that also helps build friendships. Although adult supervision is required for any trip, these events should be designed to promote teens’ sense of autonomy from adults.

**The Jewish community should consider establishing an Israel Center.** There is substantial interest among teens in traveling to Israel on organized youth programs, and parents support their children’s desire to go to Israel. The Center would help teens learn about Israel programs, including available funding. The Center would also coordinate activities to stimulate interest in Israel trips in collaboration with synagogues, youth groups, and other organizations. Moreover, the Center would provide the space, personnel, and other resources to help returning teens integrate their Israel experiences into their daily lives. The Center’s follow-up with returnees would be aimed at using this potentially transformational experience as a catalyst to spark a more intense lifelong engagement with the Jewish community. Follow-up activities and programs would take place year-round.

**The JCC and the Jewish community should consider working with Judaica experts to design ways to infuse Jewish values and teachings into existing programming—to come through the “back door” but still make the JCC an unequivocally Jewish place.**

**Space Expansion**

*The Jewish community should contemplate providing a space for teens to socialize informally.* Teen-run Saturday night “coffee houses” should also be organized to give teens a chance to socialize.

*Given current space limitations, the JCC should consider expanding its space capacity as well as establishing its own satellite sites.*

*Satellite programming is necessary to reach dispersed teen populations in Orange County.*

**Marketing**

*Jewish community organizations should strive to keep in touch with teens’ and parents’ experiences and opinions.* Focus groups and other systematic forms of information gathering provide valuable information about the needs and interests of Jewish parents and teens. Information gathering generates a storehouse of data which has relevance to the community’s efforts to market its programs and services, involve teens, and reach out to those who are inactive. Moreover, our experience shows that people very much appreciate being asked their opinions and given a forum for expressing their views. The groups
DATA ANALYSIS

Survey of Orange County Programming for Jewish Teens

There are an estimated 100,000 Jews in Orange County, of whom approximately 6,500 are teenagers. The survey of teen programs in Orange County shows that only 1,000 teens, or 15% of the county’s total Jewish teen population, currently participate in programs sponsored by Jewish community organizations. This figure is almost certainly inflated since it reflects total participants from all programs and does not take into account the fact that teens may participate in more than one program and therefore be counted more than once. This low level of participation in teen programs is not surprising, given that relatively few teens attend religious school. Only 855 students are currently enrolled in religious school in grades 6-12.

The most popular Jewish teen programs in Orange County are Club JCC, which has 226 participants, Teen Connection with 225 participants, and BBYO with 169 participants. Adat Noar reported having 107 teens involved, while Talit has 98. Seventy-six teens are involved in Teen Travel, 55 were members of the Maccabi team, and 35 attended Camp Ramah.

The geographic distribution of teen participants is extremely uneven. Areas such as Irvine, Huntington Beach, and Fullerton have high levels of participation, while areas such as Buena Park, Walnut, West Covina, Covina, Temple City, etc. have very low levels.

Teen and Parent Focus Groups

The four teen focus groups, largely consisting of highly affiliated teens, show moderate involvement in the Jewish community. Most of the teens attend synagogue a few times a year or about once a month. About as many attended Jewish summer camp as did not. A great many of them identify themselves as Reform (Tables 1-3).

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said of such a program sponsored by his synagogue: “It was cool. It was a place where about fifteen teams got together with a rabbi from L.A. and talked about contemporary issues.” Another teen leader said her confirmation class was like that: “I wish it [confirmation class] had gone on. You could talk about something that you couldn’t talk about at school. It is kind of nice sometimes to talk to someone that knows so much more about it. To bounce questions off them.” Most of the unaffiliated teens do not consider themselves religious, in contrast to participants in the other focus groups.

Teens are interested in participating in community service projects. Unaffiliated teens were particularly enthusiastic about volunteer service. Suggested activities included working with programs to eliminate poverty, alleviate hunger and homelessness, provide help to people with AIDS, and tutor disadvantaged youth.

The involved youths take a less militant stance against adult supervision of teen activities than do those in the unaffiliated group. The unaffiliated teens stressed the importance of activities that had minimal adult supervision. For example, one boy liked a JCC summer camp because, “You would wake up whenever you wanted. You had to tell the [counselor] where you were going, but you could go on a hike.” Another said of a JCC program, “Don’t make it like a school program. Like check in at seven and you are on your own.”

At the same time, involved teens also appreciate activities that allow them independence from adults. A teen leader stated that a recent BBYO trip was ideal because: “The weekend is 100% youth planned, youth run.” One involved teen suggested programming be planned by “a council of a leader and a couple other people, plus representatives from each of the different groups to get their input to see what they like—BBYO, USY, and all the youth groups.” Others heartily supported this idea. Parents also thought that this was a good suggestion. Commenting on the commitment of the youths who organized a JCC dance, one mother said, “Those kids invested so much of their energy. They felt so good because they were able to plan it.” Most individuals in all the groups were interested in participating in events like trips, retreats, and overnight camps that they see as fostering friendships and as relatively free from adult supervision. It should be noted that most teens also like the idea of such events because they involve travel outside Orange County, which they consider a boring place to live.

The geographic dispersion of the Jewish population in Orange County means that many of these teens live relatively far from the JCC. Distance is a barrier to
Key informants feel that their own organizations' programming is effective in promoting Jewish identity among youths. At the same time, these key informants feel that the JCC's services should complement rather than compete with those provided by other Jewish organizations. These individuals also believe that the geographic dispersion of Orange County's Jewish population makes it imperative that a central organization such as the JCC provide an opportunity for Jewish teens to gather.

The informants report that the JCC is generally perceived as having made a significant impact in its brief tenure, as well as having worked for the good of the community.
CONCLUSION

The teenage years are critical in forming identity. Teens are at a stage in their lives in which they strive for personal autonomy, yet continually run up against adult strictures. Moreover, for American Jewish teens, retaining positive ties to Jewish institutions and friendship networks is often difficult. The demands of secular American life, with its standards of success and pressures to conform, frequently run counter to Jewish values and commitments. This conflict is especially acute for Orange County teens due to the absence of a geographic concentration of Jews, the ascendance of proselytizing Christians, and the area’s tradition of antisemitism.

The JCC and other Jewish community organizations have an opportunity to help mold future generations of Jews in Orange County. Teen programming is currently under-funded and scattered in different agencies throughout the county. While a dedicated core of teens is active in existing programs, most teens are not involved in youth activities offered by the Jewish community. By innovative programming, increased funding, and coordination with existing youth programs, the JCC can act as a central node in a network of teen activities that reaches unaffiliated youths and helps foster strong Jewish identity and commitment to the Jewish community. Jewish teens in Orange County would benefit greatly if the Jewish community offered more structured social programs (including sports activities), unstructured socializing, and educational and religious programming. Because teens’ interests vary widely, the Jewish community needs to consider implementing a wide range of programming. Moreover, teens themselves must be involved in the planning and implementation of programs. Not only will this promote programming success, but it will also help develop youth leadership. A coordinated, comprehensive effort is necessary to meet these challenges that teens face. Fostering teens’ independence within a context that promotes continuity through Jewish traditions is a difficult task. However, the stakes are too high to allow the status quo to continue.
APPENDIX I
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Work 415 386-2604
Fax 415 386-2060
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