STATEN ISLAND JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER:
Youth Development Study

April 1995

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INTRODUCTION

The Staten Island JCC was chosen as one of the first model sites of the Youth Development Project, a joint undertaking of the JCC Association of North America and the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University. The project was made possible by the generous support of the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund.

The intent of the Youth Development Project in Staten Island was to gather information which could be used in advancing the planning and fundraising capabilities of the JCC’s Teen Department. The project was overseen by a specially-appointed Commission chaired by Stephen Blumert. (See Appendix I.) Members of the Commission worked in tandem with Center staff to gather information from teenagers and youth professionals on Staten Island. Consultants from the JCC Association and the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies provided technical assistance and professional training. The consultants were responsible for the design of the study, the analysis of data, and the preparation of this final report.

Along the course of the project, JCC professional staff and lay leaders received training in the skills needed to effectively conduct a teen study. Training sessions covered the following topics: principles of designing a study, interview and focus group techniques, and the application of study findings to departmental planning.
Teen Focus Groups

The second stage of the Youth Development Project involved a series of eight focus groups with teens (9th through 12th graders, from the North and South Shores, JCC members and non-members):

- 9th grade CIT (Counselors-In-Training) boys
- 9th grade boys
- 9th grade girls
- 10-12th grade boys
- 10-12th grade girls
- North Shore members
- North Shore non-members
- South Shore members

(See Appendix III for demographic and other background information on focus group participants.)

These discussions provided the Center an important communications tool as they gave voice to a range of active and inactive, affiliated and unaffiliated teens. Focus group findings concern how teens spend their free time, how they spend their money, what kinds of activities are of interest to them, as well as their feelings about the JCC and their sense of the Jewish identity of the Center.
MAJOR FINDINGS

Key Informant Interviews

There is a substantial teenage population on Staten Island and programs seek to serve large numbers. The United Activities Unlimited (UAU) and the Police Athletic League (PAL), two South Shore agencies, have recreational programs which serve 5,000 to 10,000 youngsters, 100 to 300 a night. In some neighborhoods UAU and PAL programs are “bursting at the seams.” There are 4,000 students at Tottenville High School alone. The school has athletic teams as well as close to 80 clubs. The YMCA Teen Center (for 11 to 15 year olds) sees about 200 teens on an average Friday night. For Jewish teens there are seven BBYO chapters on Staten Island (three for girls, four for boys). These serve about 150 teens on a regular basis.

What do Teens Want?

Interviewees corroborated what we have been finding in national and local studies of Jewish adolescents: Teens are largely interested in hanging out and playing sports. They tend to go where their friends are and to join clubs or activities if their friends are involved. Teens also want independence and autonomy—in decision making, and in planning and carrying out activities.

What do the Youth Organizations Need?

The primary needs of the youth-serving organizations are place and space. The Teen Center at the YMCA, for example, is strong in sports. It has swimming, basketball, kickball, whiffleball, gymnastics, a fitness center, and so on. On Saturday nights the entire facility (fitness center included) is closed to the public and used only by the teens. Still the YMCA says it needs to enlarge its space and build a teen recreation center. The interviewee from Community Board 3 would like to see the South Shore develop a network of neighborhood “drop-in” centers for teens, places where they can constructively hang out in a supervised environment. The BBYO advisors also expressed a need for a local facility with its own gym—a place where they could hold dances, a place the teens might feel is their own.

The other major need is for funding to hire more adult supervisors. Several key informants mentioned that they would like to move from volunteers to paid coaches, staff, and advisors. Increases in paid staff would allow them to increase the size and quality of programs. At the same time, it would address the current problem of burnout among unpaid volunteers.

What Makes a Program Successful?

Interviewees across agencies say that the critical measure of success is attendance: If teens come, the program is deemed a success. Given this definition, it is easier to produce successful programs with tweens and young teens than it is with older teens.
Summary

The key informant interviews were a valuable opportunity for the JCC to speak with various individuals connected with youth services on Staten Island, and to learn about some of the attempts being made to provide safe and enjoyable programming for teens on the Island. The needs, however, are great and significant gaps in services continue to exist. Most notable are the needs for adequate facilities for running athletic, social, and recreational programs, and the need for funding for additional staff.

The JCC has few ties to the other youth-serving organizations on the Island. More could be done to develop functional relationships with other agencies and groups and to establish the JCC’s role as a center for teens on Staten Island.

Teen Focus Groups

How Teens Spend Their Time

• After school time is spent doing homework, watching television, talking on the phone and hanging out with friends. Some also work, play sports or have sports practice, or practice music. A few mentioned spending time on their computer.

• Homework and studying do not necessarily consume huge blocks of time. Most say they finish all their homework in school or they do it at home in less than an hour. A few others take one to two hours for homework.

• Not surprisingly, hanging out is the #1 activity and the teens engage in this a lot—‘All weekend.’ ‘Every day.’ ‘Hours and hours.’ Hanging out means ‘being with people and doing nothing.’

• Sports is probably tied for #1. There seems to be no time limit to playing sports: ‘It usually comes out to whenever you get tired.’

• Some are involved in outside classes and activities: BBYO, USY, NCSY; gymnastics club; school plays; sports; newspaper; clubs; dancing school; cheer leading; music lessons.

The Teen Economy

• One-third of focus group participants work for pay during the school year. They work in a parent’s office, mow lawns, wash cars, baby sit, have a paper route, or work at the JCC. Many are camp counselors during the summer.

• Many get a weekly allowance from their parents. Allowances generally go from $10 a week on up. Some have to “work” for their allowance (clean the house or keep their own room neat). A few of the girls get only $5. Others are given money as needed:

  “I just get money when I need stuff.”
friends.” “You don’t feel like an outcast or something.” “People you can trust and have a lot of fun with.” Some of the boys emphasized “girls” as the sine qua non of a great party.

- There is drinking and smoking (marijuana included) at parties—things that could not happen at the JCC. According to participants, parents are unaware that they go to parties where there is beer drinking.

**What Teens Would be Willing to Do at the JCC**

Some focus group participants have rational explanations for why they do not use the Center more: “I think if I had more free time I would go.” “I like what I do at school. I am satisfied with those activities.” Others believe that if there were “better events,” their friends would be more likely to come to the JCC. Their suggestions follow.

- A dance (if there was a cool DJ who knew the right music; chaperons not parents).

- Although the JCC rock festival gets good marks, concerts are a more difficult sell. It would have to be a top band that they like, at a reasonable price. No one agrees on bands let alone genre of music. Moreover, some of the participants say they do not usually go to concerts.

Asked why they did not go to the JCC rock concert, answers varied: “I don’t like rock.” “It was garbage.”

“I like heavy metal rock.” “If I go to a concert, it is going to be a band that I know and I have seen before.”

- Sports are a must. The basketball court is described as the best facility at the Center. The fitness area is too small, too enclosed. The basketball leagues are not the same caliber as other leagues. One said he likes the high school leagues and the possibility of playing in the men’s league (“If you give them respect and treat them like adults, they will acknowledge you.”)

- There is interest in travel: “To make it more attractive, it would have to be something like going skiing or going to Great Adventure for the day. Something that is away from Staten Island. It is more attractive if it is overnight.”

Suggestions include: Great Adventure; beach; ski trip; bowling; professional sporting events (hockey, basketball games); rafting (“You’d have to go on a real river”); mountain biking; a party in a hotel (“You are away from home and you feel like you are on vacation. You have your freedom.”); trips into the city; inter-city JCC exchange.

Israel was mentioned by several participants in two of the groups.

- Participants generally like the idea of a hang-out lounge with pool tables and videos.
Insights into Teens and the JCC

- Teens do not necessarily know what is going on at the JCC and what the JCC has to offer. They don’t remember getting mailings (although one complained about getting too much mail from the Center). They do not know about different programs offered. When they were told about the dances at the China Club, for example, one responded: “If I heard about that I might go.” Other examples: They did not know whether non-Jews were allowed in the Center, whether they were old enough to use the exercise room, and whether the weight room was open to teenagers. They do not have a schedule. They do not know when the courts are free. They were unaware of the existence of the rap groups.

- Teens like to choose or plan their own programs. Some were unaware of the Teen Council and had the impression that teens had no say in programming. In any event, participants would generally like to have more say.

- Teens are more likely to respond to a phone call than to something received in the mail. “If this [the invitation to the focus group] had been a letter, we wouldn’t have come. When people call people, you feel more like you want to come.”

- Teens do not like to have a lot of rules. This was mentioned with regard to camp, the lounge program, and the beach party dance. For example, they resented not being able to go outside at the beach party.

They like “nice” staff; younger, college-age staff.

- Teens are fickle and they always want something new. “Say I go to one of your dances one week and it is great. The next time that I go, I have this anticipation that it is going to be the same thing.” So, this person concludes, it always has to be “something new and exciting.”

They say that the schedule at camp and programs at the JCC get repetitious, predictable: “I’ve been coming here like 9 or 10 years...8 years... like it has been the same. We come here and play baseball, play basketball and go home. You’ve got to get some new things.”

- Friends are essential. “Where my friends go, I go. If I don’t know anybody, I won’t go.” Participants say they are more likely to come to an event if they know at least one other person.

- They like to be with their own age group. As a 9th grade girl said, “We don’t want the 21-year-olds coming or the 10- or 11-year-olds.” The only exception are the teenage boys who claim to be interested in girls of any age.
LESSONS FROM THE STUDY

Key informant interviews were an educational process for everyone—Commission members, JCC staff, and the various people interviewed. JCC professional and lay leaders heard firsthand from professionals in the community about the opportunities and challenges inherent in providing services to teens. At the same time, they learned a valuable technique for gathering information. This technique can readily be applied to other JCC planning projects—whether these concern preschoolers, single parents, intermarried couples, senior citizens or other target groups.

Key informants who knew little about the JCC or had misinformation about its location, facilities, population, programs, and services learned more about the Center. All had a chance to discuss their work with representatives of the JCC. In this way the key informant interviews served as a form of outreach into the community, an opportunity for the Center to establish itself as a player on the landscape of teen programs on the Island.

The teen focus groups provided the Center an important communications tool. The teens that came to the focus groups apparently enjoyed the experience. They appreciated the opportunity to express their ideas and feelings and to relate their own experiences. Reaching out to inactive teens has special significance for the Staten Island JCC. Given the Center’s strong teen leadership group, it is important for the Teen Department to regularly and systematically communicate with all kinds of teens, and not just the active leaders.

The adults involved in running the focus groups learned to listen non-defensively—not to insist on a particular answer, not to leap to correct misinformation. This skill, along with the other skills needed to design and conduct focus groups, will serve the JCC well in gathering information in other departments and with other populations at the Center.

In organizing focus groups, the Center faced an abiding difficulty in reaching unaffiliated teens. Very few non-members came to focus groups even with repeated phone calls, follow-up, and a monetary incentive. The end result was that the process focused on “insiders”—those who are already members of the Center and connected in some way to its activities. Given limited time and resources, it is probably more cost-effective to pursue the affiliated teens and to build a strong program for them. The others may follow. Ultimately it is more satisfying and more valuable to place inreach to members as the primary thrust for building the Teen Department.

The study was not designed to include the parents of teens. One of the main tasks of adolescence is developing independence and autonomy, crafting an identity separate from that of one’s parents. Eventually, a parent’s approval of an activity can be the “kiss of death”
**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

There is a great need for quality, low-cost teen programming on Staten Island. Teen programming is a “growth industry” on Staten Island. There are large numbers of teens and various organizations and agencies attempting to meet their needs. Local officials and public and private funders have a strong interest in teen services. As a result, there are great opportunities for the JCC to develop its teen program, to seek functional relationships with other youth-serving organizations in the area, and to establish itself as a leader in teen services on Staten Island.

There is no single formula that will work to bring in teens. Although teens express general interest in sports, hanging out, and travel, these mean very different things to different individuals. In terms of classes, cultural arts, and social/recreational activities, each person offered a singular vision of what he or she would like to see at the JCC. Moreover, teens are fickle—they always want something new. As a result, what works this month, may not work next month. What fails with this year’s group could be a huge success with next year’s group. The Center has to be prepared to experiment with its teen offerings and to accept the continual need to modify or replace existing programs and activities.

 Teens need their own space. The Staten Island JCC is a multi-use facility par excellence—every corner and every room is used for a variety of purposes. It may never be possible to have space set aside exclusively for teens, particularly since the hours they would use it are limited. It is possible, however, to have space specifically designed and appointed as teen space. Although the space may be used by other groups during off-hours, anyone coming into the space should immediately recognize that this place is “owned” by the teens.

The teen program does not necessarily need to be confined to the Center building. Focus group data are clear: teens like to travel. They want to go away, and they almost do not care where. They want to get away from home and expand their boundaries and horizons. This desire to move out into the world is a mark of adolescence—one which the Center can continue to capitalize on in its teen programming.

Cost issues need more attention. Many of the teens on Staten Island work for pay. The amount they are willing to pay for programs is modest, perhaps insufficient for the kind of benefit they would like to receive. At the same time, JCC programs are not necessarily competitive when it comes to value for the dollar. Staff expressed the belief that teens can get the same programs for less elsewhere. Other organizations can offer similar activities for less either because they use more volunteer staff and/or because they draw a larger number of participants from a wider region to help defray costs. In some instances, cost rather than image may be the obstacle in attracting teens to JCC programs.
CONCLUSION

As anticipated, the focus groups showed that teens primarily spend their time hanging out and/or playing sports; homework and studying do not necessarily consume huge blocks of time. One-third of the focus group participants work for pay during the school year; many get a weekly allowance from their parents. The amount they are willing to pay for programs is modest, perhaps insufficient for the kind of benefit they would like to receive.

Participants offered rich suggestions for activities and programs the JCC Teen Department might offer. These primarily focused on music, sports and fitness, travel and a teen “hang-out:” lounge.

The focus group results also reveal much about teens. For example, they show that teens do not necessarily know what is going on at the JCC or what the JCC has to offer. They like to choose or plan their own programs and bristle at being “over-supervised.” They are fickle and always want something new. Their decisions are largely influenced by their friends: “Where my friends go, I go.”

Several lessons can be drawn from the focus group findings: First, there is no single formula that will work to bring teens into the JCC. Although they express general interest in sports, hanging out, and travel, these mean very different things to different individuals. Second, teens need their own space. Even if the space is used by other groups during off-hours, it still needs to be identifiable “teen space.” At the same time, the teen program does not necessarily need to be confined to the Center building. Teens like to travel: They want to go away and they almost do not care where. This desire to move out into the world is a mark of adolescence—one which the Center can continue to capitalize on in its teen programming.

Finally, the focus groups show that teens are comfortable with the Jewish identity of the Center. Jewish teens of different backgrounds feel comfortable at the Center. They recognize that the Center provides a Jewish environment but they also see that it is open to their non-Jewish friends. The Center needs to consider how it can build from this point to include Jewish content and Jewish values in its work with teens—how it can extend comfort in a Jewish atmosphere to interest in Jewish life and perhaps enthusiasm for Judaism.
APPENDIX II
Key Informant Interviewees

Captain Clarke
Captain, 122nd Precinct
Louis DeLuca
Executive Director,
United Activities Unlimited (UAU)

Charles Dluzniewski
Junior High School Principal, Redhook;
soccer coach with
Staten Island United Soccer League

Alex Ferrara
Student Activities Coordinator
Tottenville High School

Christine Flynn
Youth Coordinator
Community Board 3

Alan Fogel
BBYO Advisor

Ariella Goldstein
BBYO Advisor

Guy Molinari
Borough President of Staten Island

John Semerad
YMCA Youth Coordinator
<table>
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<th><strong>Attend Summer Camp</strong></th>
<th><strong>Average Number of Hours Work per Week</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>77%</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Overnight Camp</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>79%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Jewish Camp</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trips to Israel</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Twice or more</td>
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<th><strong>Birthplace</strong></th>
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<td>Staten Island</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other NY city or town</td>
<td>47%</td>
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<td>Other US state</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foreign country</td>
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<th><strong>Work for Pay</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>67%</td>
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In discussions about the study and the Commission, I have been confronted with the following question: Did you need to gather all those people and do all this work just to come up with the idea of holding dances and having game rooms? My answer is no, perhaps not. But how else do you find out what the teenagers themselves want, and what services and policies they actually prefer?

One problem I found in working on the Commission is that adults are quick to suggest programming ideas, and then become quite emphatic about how successful and important those ideas are. The more important issue is finding out what the teenagers want. This is a framework for listening.

The focus groups were a very ambitious undertaking. We would certainly have liked to have gotten more of the disaffected population, but the disaffected are by definition either unwilling to participate or difficult to locate. Such an undertaking would be much more ambitious, and would require a significantly greater investment of both time and money. In the interim, providing programming that is more enticing to our core population may provide positive word-of-mouth about the JCC in schools and other places where teens gather.

I believe the Staten Island JCC has a solid foundation on which to build. The Teen Department is run by dedicated and creative individuals. The Youth Board and Teen Council attract a group of intelligent, insightful teenagers to our Center. If this study is of use in helping those individuals make future programming choices, then it has served its purpose. If and when we begin planning the physical structure of a flagship site, I would strongly urge the use of focus groups to get the teens' thoughts and ideas about how to make such a site attractive to them.