



**Brandeis** | MAURICE AND MARILYN  
COHEN CENTER FOR  
MODERN JEWISH STUDIES

# Building Resilient Jewish Communities: COVID-19 and Jewish Community Response

**Presentation by  
Prof. Leonard Saxe &  
Dr. Janet Krasner Aronson**

Hosted by Brandeis University  
President Ron Liebowitz

**September 8, 2020**

<http://go.brandeis.edu/brjc>

# Introduction

- **Background**

- “Social Epidemiological” study of COVID-19’s impact on American Jews
- Sample represents diversity of Jews known to communal organizations

- **Action Research**

- Collaboration with partner communities to develop “actionable” findings
- Focus is on comparisons, not only accurate population estimates

- **Tonight’s Goals**

- Share “snapshots” of findings:
  - ✓ Economic and mental health impact
  - ✓ Online Jewish life
- Identify implications for Jewish communal organizations

# Study

- **Surveys**

- Fielded from May 19 to July 30, 2020
- List-based samples of “known Jews”
- From 10 federated communities across the United States

- **Respondents**

- ~15,000 individuals
- Diverse by pre-Covid economic situation, age, geography
- Different levels of participation in Jewish life and connections with Jewish organizations
- 4% are/were sick with COVID-19; and for ~15%, someone close to them was sick or passed away as a result of COVID-19

# Isolation

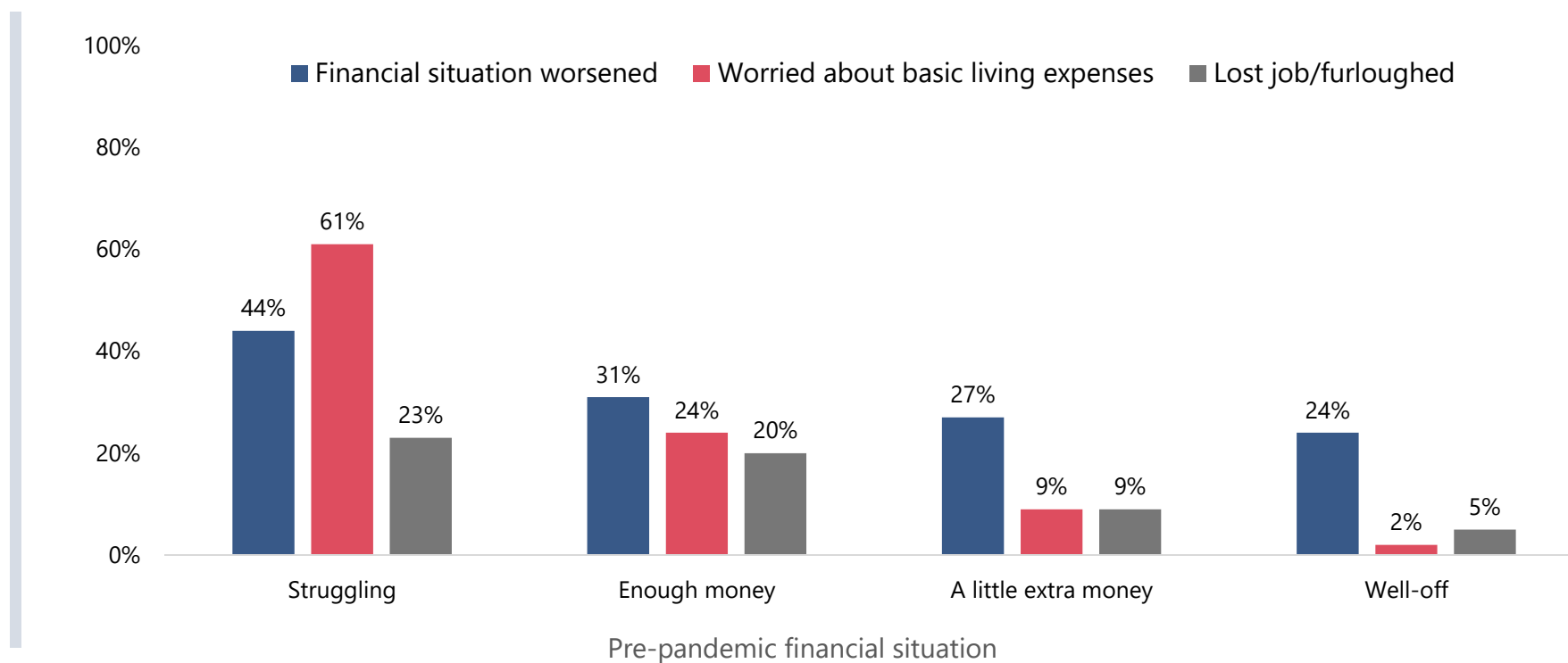
*“Staying home without direct human contact for a very long period of time has been very rough, even with heavy use of electronic and phone communication ... ”*

*“Personally, the hardest impact has been how lonely I am. I am used to spending time with lots of friends and family and being completely alone is really difficult for me.”*

*“Sense of isolation; inability to visit and celebrate with family; frustration (and anger) with federal and state governments' response to the crisis.”*

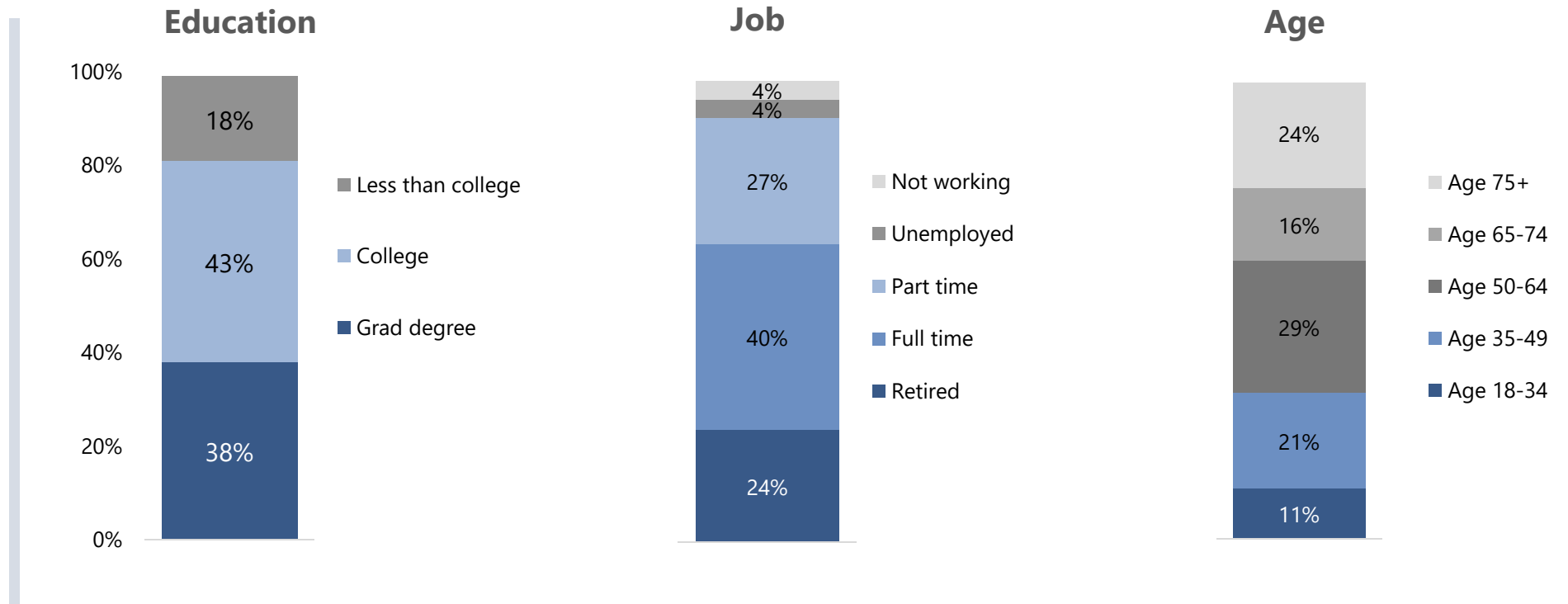
# Financial situation worsened most for those struggling before pandemic

Financial hardships

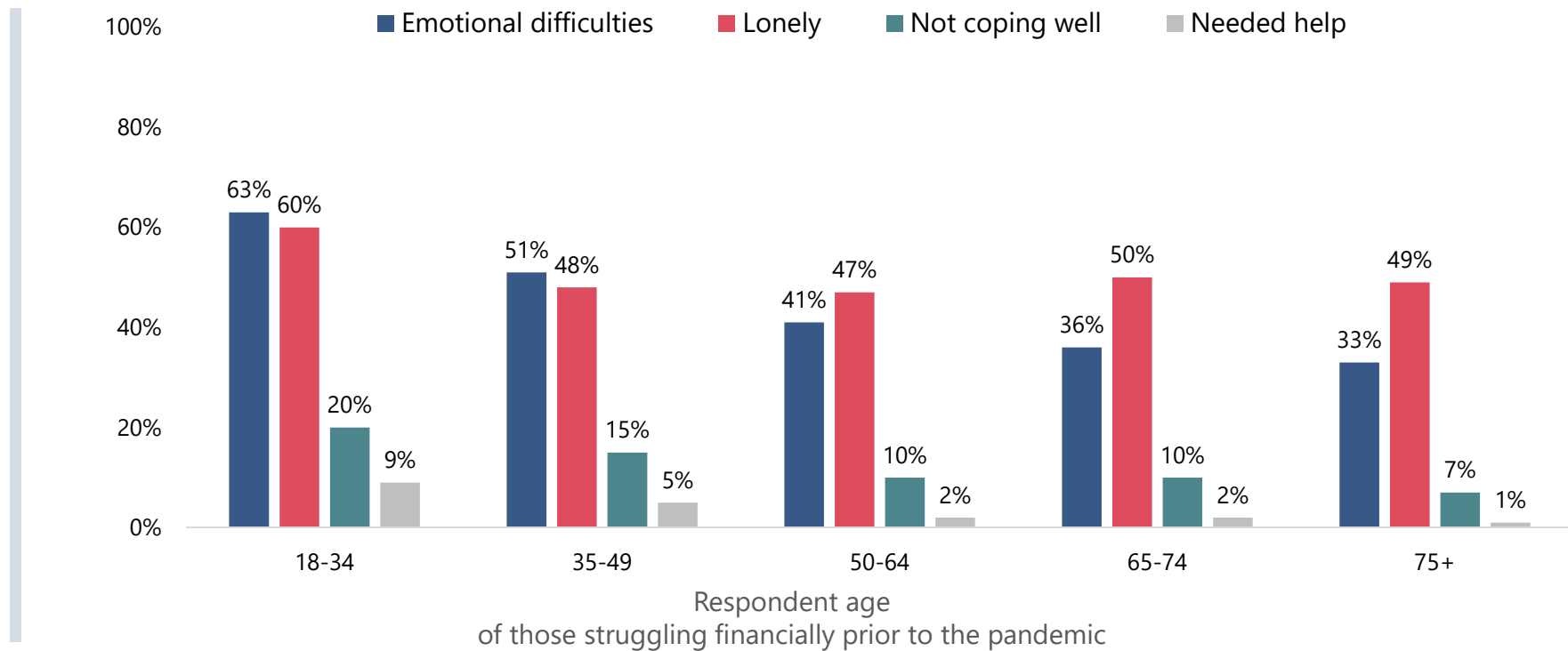


# Who is struggling financially?

Pre-pandemic characteristics of those who were struggling financially

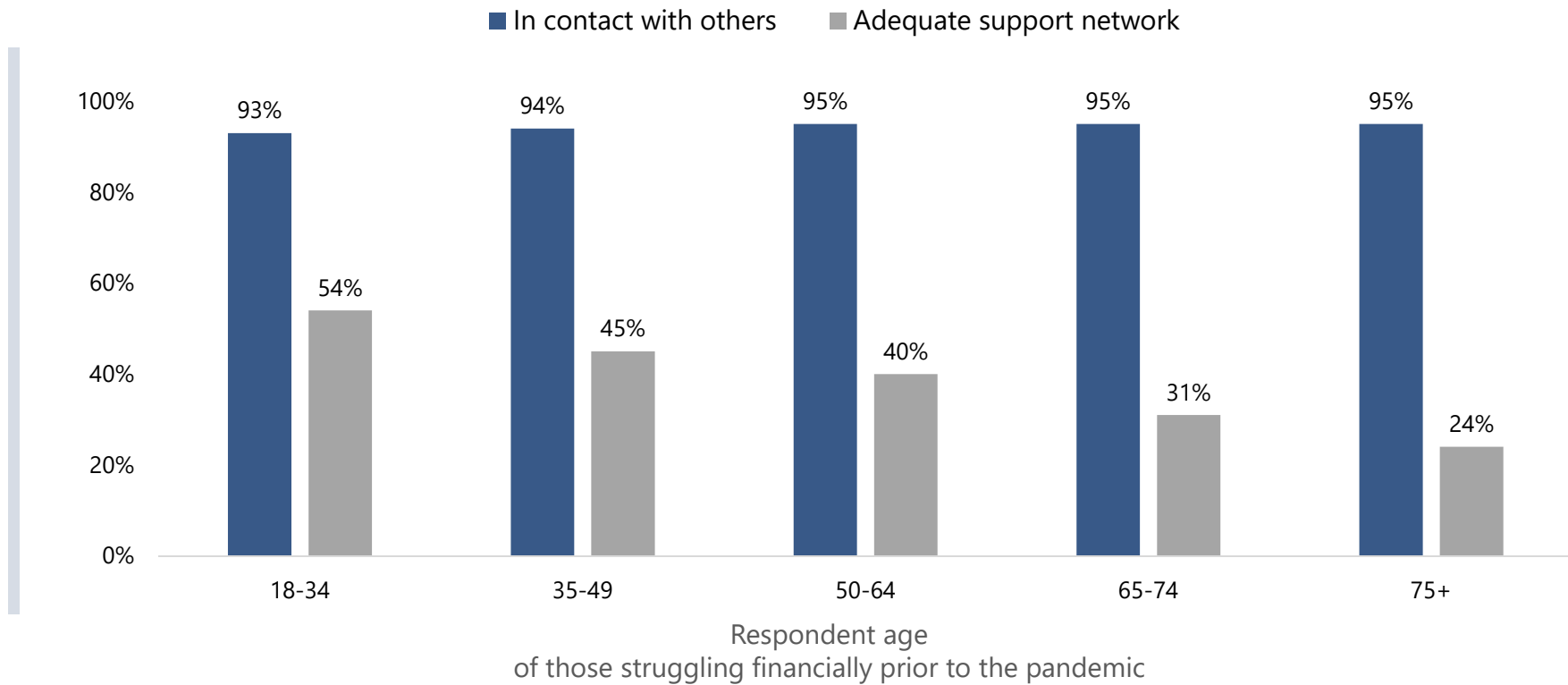


# Greater emotional difficulties for younger respondents... who were struggling financially prior to the pandemic



Emotional difficulties: Emotional or mental difficulties hurt ability to live day-to-day life in past week sometimes, often, or all the time  
 Not coping well: Coping not at all or not too well  
 Needed help: Needed help accessing mental health services

# ...Despite having stronger social networks



In contact with others: In contact with family and friends not living with you sometimes or often in past week  
Lonely: Felt lonely in past week sometimes, often, or all the time  
Adequate support network: Fair number or a lot of people you can rely on



# Mental Health

*“Feeling powerless and lonely.”*

*“The stress of the unknown, of changing how we live every day, has been extremely challenging. Feeling of loss of control, not being able to have any say on when we can go back to having everything normal again.”*

*“Fear, anxiety, insecurity about what the future may bring. My work and hobbies have disappeared ... ”*

*“The stress of being helpless in the face of the pandemic and watching others not contributing to its resolution.”*

## Part 2. Online Jewish Life



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## How has Jewish life changed?

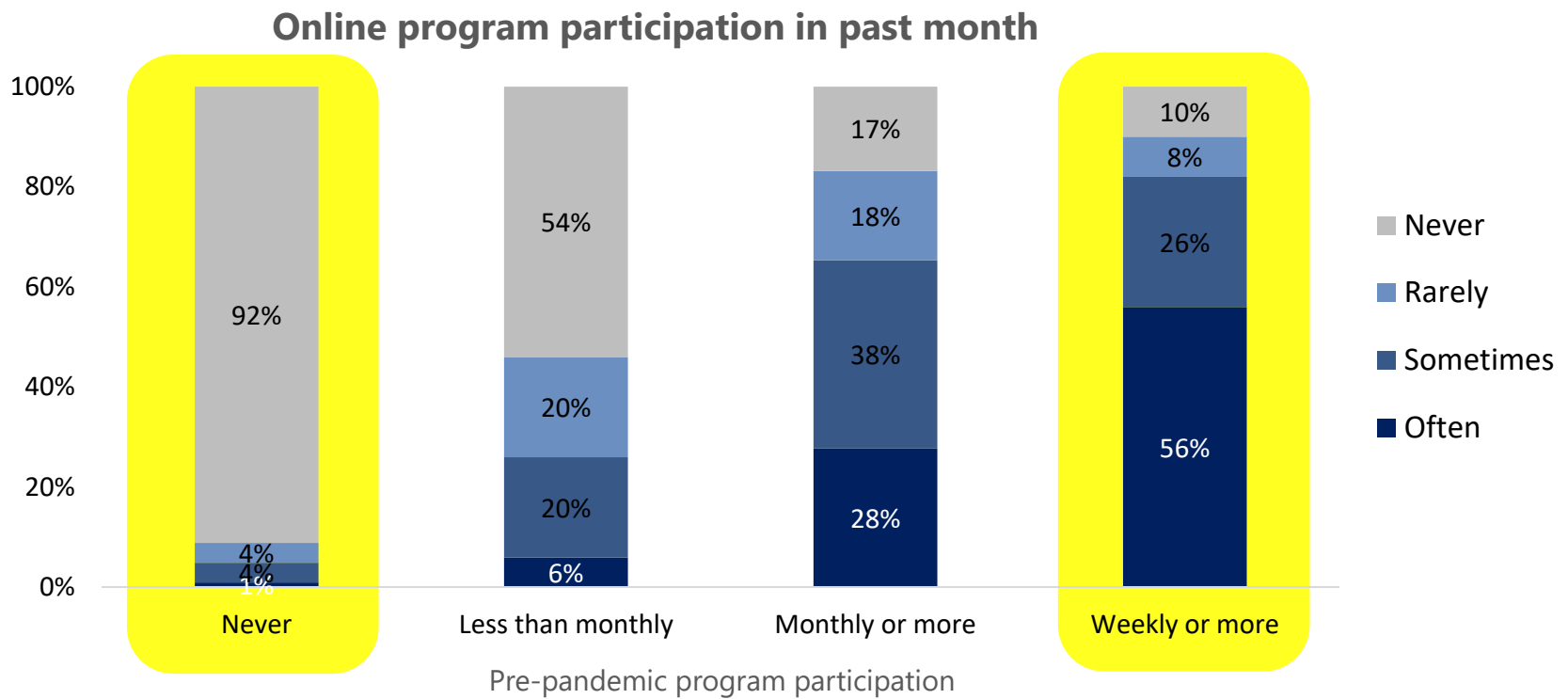
Among those who attend a seder in a typical year (93%) ...

- 16% had a seder in the usual way
- 57% of non-Orthodox had a virtual seder
- 18% did not have a seder

“*The biggest impact [of the pandemic] has been the sadness of knowing the shuls are deserted. Community togetherness, both in prayer and socializing, has been compromised.*”

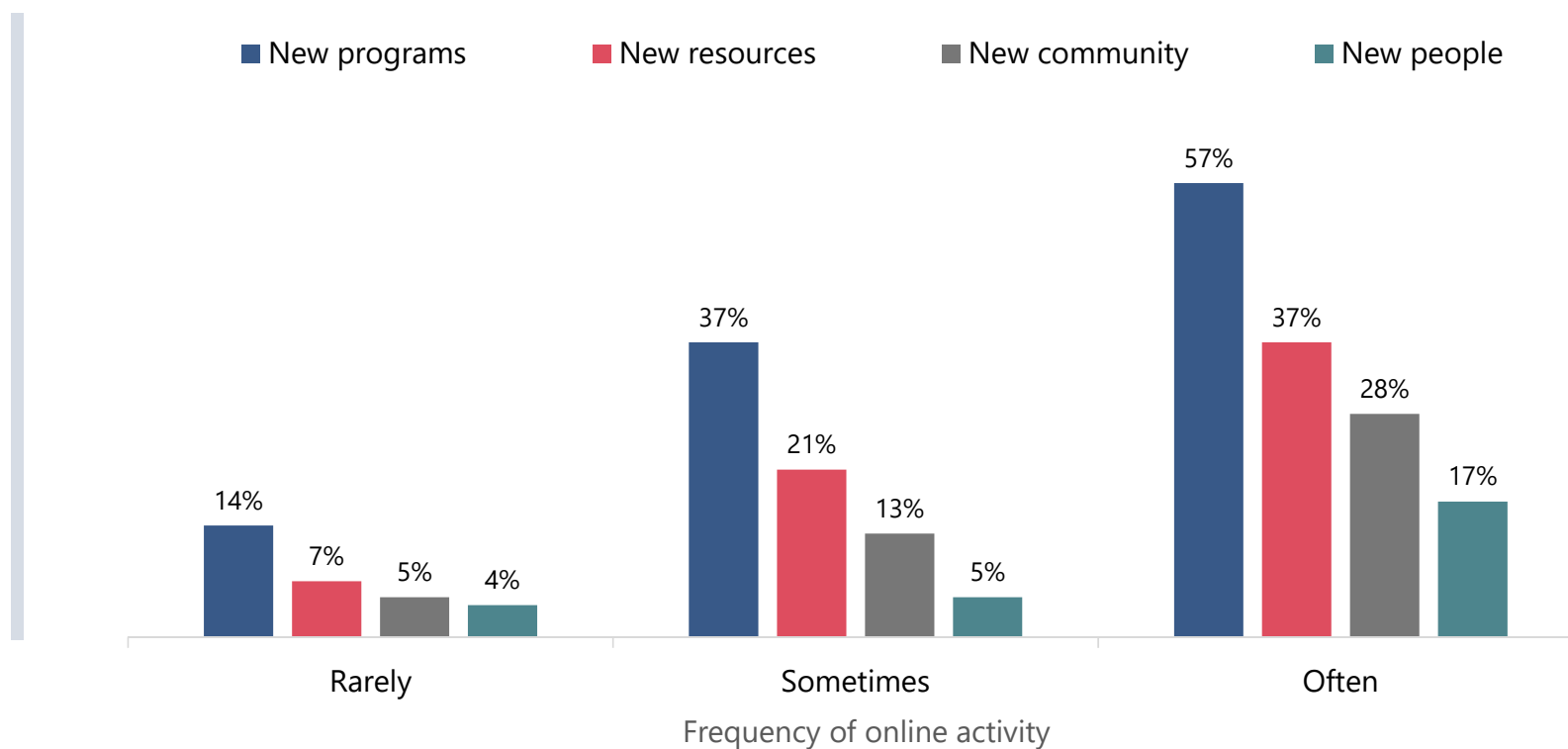
# Online Jewish life: Who participates?

Online Jewish life primarily appealed to those who were most engaged before



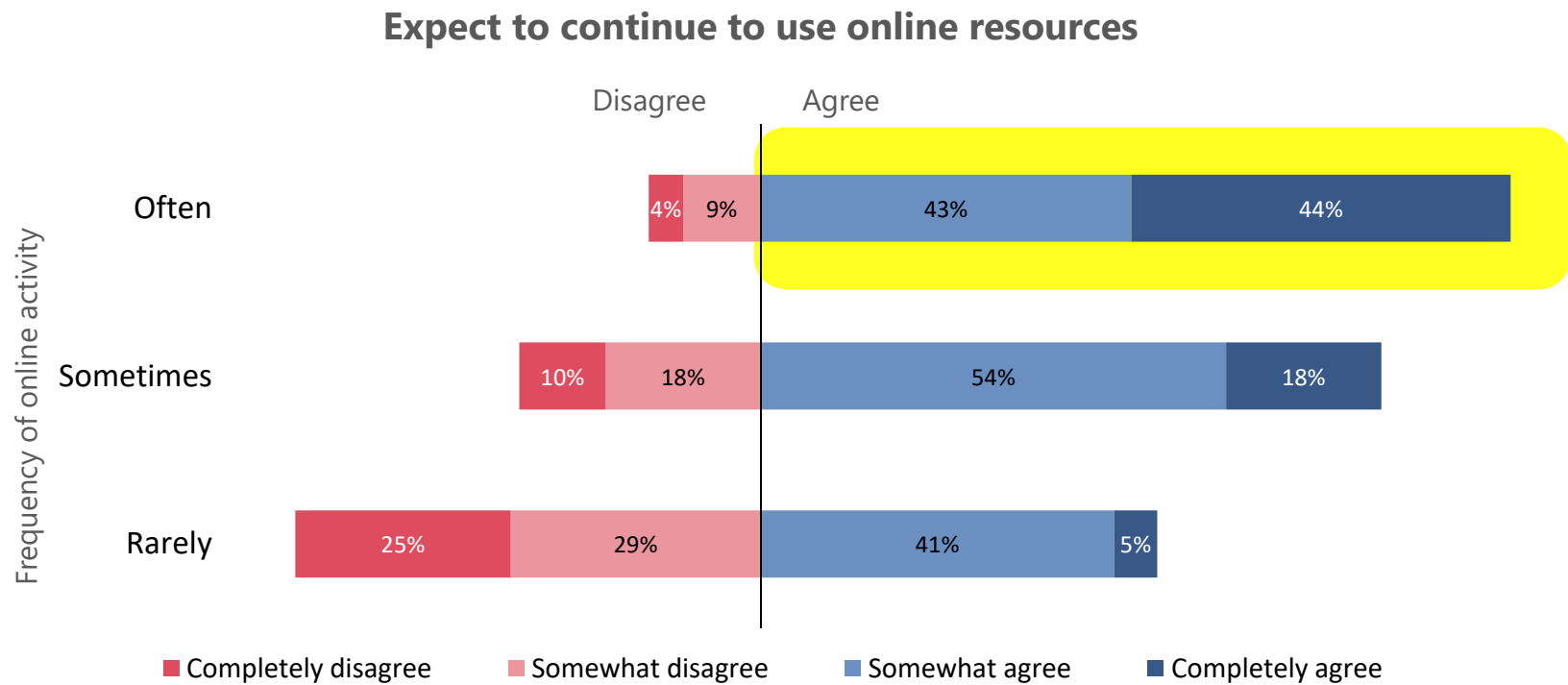
# Access to new activities

The majority accessed new programs and resources; few met new people



# The majority will participate online in the future

Over 85% of frequent users of online Jewish life expect to continue to participate



## Online Jewish life: Opportunities and challenges

*“I have not traditionally been able to attend weekly services at my synagogue because they start too early. However, now we all make it a priority to end our work/school activities by 5:00 on Friday, log into services, and spend that time together as a family.”*

*“We have had a weekly Zoom “meeting” to celebrate Shabbat every Friday evening since mid-March. It includes our children, grandchildren and extended family. We've talked about continuing the new tradition after social isolation ends.”*

*“The biggest personal impact [of the pandemic] is isolation. It has confirmed for me that being with and around people is indispensable. This cannot be overcome with technology.”*

# Participating Communities

The Associated: Jewish Federation of Baltimore

Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston

Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles

Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest New Jersey

Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh

Jewish Federation of Greater Washington

Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County

Jewish Federation of South Palm Beach County

Jewish Federation of St. Louis

Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago

## **Additional Funders**

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