

# SOCIALLY DISTANT

Challenges Facing Jewish  
Young Adults during the  
COVID-19 Pandemic

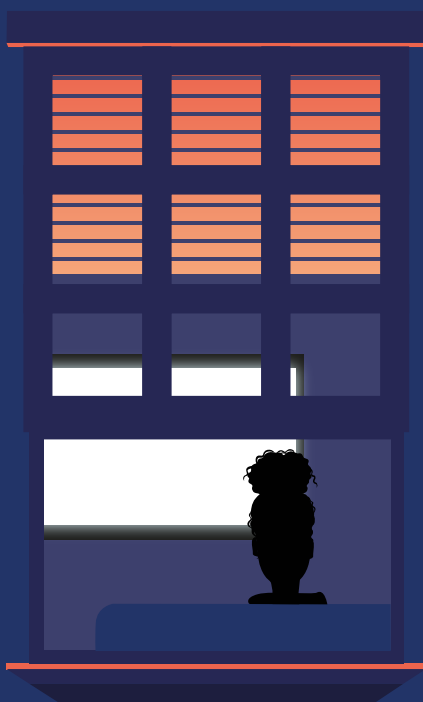
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## Brandeis

COHEN CENTER FOR  
MODERN JEWISH STUDIES

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The Cohen Center is also the home of the Steinhardt Social Research Institute (SSRI). Established in 2005, SSRI uses innovative research methods to collect and analyze socio-demographic data on the Jewish community.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the concurrent economic and social turmoil of 2020 have been experienced throughout the United States—no geographic location or demographic group has been untouched. The present study focuses on one group, Jewish young adults (ages 18-32), who applied to participate in summer 2020 Birthright Israel trips but could not go because the trips were suspended in response to the pandemic. The study is an extension of our program of research assessing the impact of Birthright Israel and one of a series of studies developed by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies to assess the pandemic's health, economic, and social toll on American Jews. The findings draw on data from two surveys of two independent samples conducted in June-July and September of 2020. Conducting surveys at two time points makes it possible to analyze how experiences changed over the course of the summer. Data were collected from 1,084 individuals in the June-July survey (AAPOR RR2=12.8%) and from 1,134 individuals in the September survey (AAPOR RR2=15.8%).

This report examines the unfolding situation during the summer of 2020 and provides a “snapshot” of the various ways in which Jewish young adults in the United States have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report examines the **health effects** and **economic consequences** of the pandemic; levels of **concern about health and the economy, police violence, protests, and the presidential election**; and the degree to which these concerns shifted over the summer. The study also documents how Jewish young adults are managing their **mental health** and the potential **role of the Jewish community in addressing the current needs of Jewish young adults** in the United States.

## KEY FINDINGS:

- In the period between June and September 2020, 13% of respondents reported having ever been infected with COVID-19, with 3% reporting they became seriously ill. However, over 45% of respondents reported that someone close to them was infected, including 14% who reported that someone close to them became seriously ill and 4% who knew someone close to them who died from the disease.
- Respondents appeared more concerned about spreading the virus to others (33% were “very concerned”) than about getting infected themselves (14% were “very concerned”). In addition, 41% indicated they had a lot of responsibility to curb the spread, and 44% reported they had some responsibility to do so.

- The majority of respondents reported taking the basic precautions of wearing a mask or face covering and avoiding large gatherings most or all of the time. However, support for these measures differed along political lines. Liberals (who represent 61% of all respondents) were more likely than both moderates and conservatives to wear a mask all or most of the time, to avoid large gatherings, and to wear a mask when socializing with people they did not live with.
- Relatively few Birthright applicants reported serious economic consequences related to the pandemic, in part because almost 70% of respondents were still financially dependent on their parents. Of those who were financially independent, over 60% reported that their financial standing was unaffected or even improved during the pandemic, and this remained true even in September.
- Although politically liberal and conservative respondents had different—sometimes even diametrically opposed—concerns about recent events in the United States, both groups were more likely to express concerns about issues related to the recent political turmoil in the United States than anything related to the virus. For liberals (61% of respondents), concerns about police violence and the upcoming election were the most pressing over the summer. Among political conservatives (17% of respondents), destruction of property during recent protests was the top concern in June-July and September. In June-July, moderate respondents (22% of respondents) were most concerned about police violence and the election. But by September these concerns had declined somewhat, and concerns about property destruction and the economic effects of the pandemic had begun to rise.
- More time spent alone due to the necessity of social distancing appears to have taken a toll on the mental health of many applicants. Around one quarter of respondents reported that they felt lonely “often” or “all the time,” and there was no significant change in reports of loneliness over the course of the summer. About 20% of respondents at both time points reported that mental health difficulties impeded their day-to-day life “often” or “all the time” in the past week, and only 22%-25% reported that they were “never” affected by such serious mental health difficulties.
- The Jewish community has made demonstrable efforts to reach out to young Jews, although the effect of this outreach has been limited. About half of Birthright applicants were aware of opportunities to engage with Jewish life online, but only one quarter indicated that these opportunities matched their interests or that they had peers who regularly participated in these activities.
- Participation in online Jewish activities over the summer was strongly related to how often respondents participated in Jewish activities before the pandemic. Those who had limited engagement with Jewish life before the pandemic were unlikely to participate in online activities during the pandemic, while those who were already highly engaged with Jewish life were highly likely to make the shift to online Jewish programming and religious services.

Although these results are limited to Jewish young adults who applied to Birthright Israel in 2020, other research suggests that American young adults in general are facing similar challenges. Our findings reinforce other recent research that suggests the biggest danger facing young adults in a post-COVID world may not be medical or even economic, but emotional. Most of the young Jewish adults we surveyed were healthy and relatively well insulated from the most serious financial effects of the pandemic.

Nevertheless, they are lonely, and in some cases scared, not only about the pandemic itself, but also about their future and the outlook for the country. Institutions and organizations in the Jewish community and beyond that serve young adults should recognize that social and mental health support might be the most pressing current need for young adults in the United States.

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# INTRODUCTION

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the concurrent economic and social turmoil of 2020 have been experienced throughout the United States—no geographic location or demographic group has been untouched. The present study focuses on one group, Jewish young adults (ages 18-32) who applied to participate in summer of 2020 Birthright Israel trips but could not go because the trips were suspended in response to the pandemic. The study is an extension of our program of research assessing the impact of Birthright Israel and one of a series of studies developed by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies to assess the pandemic's health, economic, and social toll on American Jews (Aronson et al., 2020). The findings in this report focus specifically on the challenges facing this particular group of Jewish young adults but are relevant to the impact of the pandemic on American young adults more broadly.

## YOUNG ADULTS AND THE CRISES OF 2020

The period beginning in March 2020 has been marked by an unprecedented health crisis, economic upheaval, and social turmoil. In the spring and early summer, urban population centers on the East Coast that are home to

several of America's largest Jewish communities were hit especially hard by the pandemic. By September, millions of Americans had become infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and over 200,000 had died (Rosen et al., 2020). Efforts to slow the spread of the virus came with their own cost, leaving millions of Americans out of work, with schools and businesses shuttered, and many Americans struggling to adapt to quarantines and social-distancing requirements. In early summer, demonstrations protesting police violence against Black Americans sprung up around the country with young adults often in the forefront of the movement (Freedman & O'Brien, 2020). These events served as a backdrop for the increasingly contentious 2020 US presidential contest between former Vice-President Joe Biden and President Donald Trump.

These tumultuous events have profoundly affected the lives of virtually all Americans, but there are reasons to be especially concerned about their impact on young adults. Although young adults appear to be less likely to become seriously ill with COVID-19 than older adults (Kang & Jung, 2020), they may be much more vulnerable to the social effects of the crisis. For example, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars and commentators were worried about a mental health crisis on American

college campuses (Hibbs & Rostain, 2019; Lipson et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2019). Since the pandemic, the stressors on college students increased as students were forced to separate from their social support networks and move back to their parents' homes to complete the semester online. By fall, while some returned to campuses with various levels of restrictions on in-person gatherings and teaching, others continued to learn on-line.

Young adults who were in the early stages of their career were also impacted. Many had jobs, internships, and other opportunities terminated, and others faced furloughs and pay reductions. The immediate impact of these disruptions became apparent as early as March 2020, when Pew reported that compared to older adults, young adults suffered more in terms of their financial and mental health situation (Keeter, 2020).

## RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES OF JEWISH YOUNG ADULTS

Jewish young adults, like their American peers, faced similar disruptions, and there is now some systematic data detailing the effects of the pandemic and the ensuing economic downturn on this age group. A series of surveys of Jewish adults in 10 communities across the United States, conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies in May and June of 2020, indicated that Jewish young adults, compared to those who were older, appeared to have more difficulty coping with the effects of the pandemic and were more likely to have lost study opportunities, jobs, and income (Aronson et al., 2020; Aronson & Saxe, 2020). The data also pointed to the negative effects of the pandemic on the

emotional well-being of young adults, despite their substantial social networks.

In addition to these challenges, Jewish young adults experienced the cancellation of programs and activities that had become normative elements of the Jewish young adult experience. Travel to Israel on Birthright Israel was suspended, affecting tens of thousands of US Jewish young adults. Other travel opportunities to Israel including return visits, internships, and educational programs were cancelled or delayed. Almost all Jewish summer camps—whose staff are primarily Jewish young adults—were closed. By the end of the summer, when the academic year began, and the Jewish community was preparing to celebrate the High Holidays, Jewish students, studying remotely or in socially distanced settings, had to navigate a new landscape of finding their place in a campus Jewish community.

During the pandemic, Jewish organizations focused their attention on providing immediate relief to the most vulnerable community members, establishing virtual connections, and shifting Jewish religious services and educational programming to online platforms (Chabin, 2020; The Jewish Federations of North America, 2020). But the restrictions on social gatherings imposed by the pandemic, thwarted traditional efforts to reach out to Jewish young adults who typically have few ties to Jewish institutions. Along with the suspension of Birthright trips, outreach efforts on campuses that rely on in-person contact and social gatherings were mostly on hold. Although Jewish organizations dramatically expanded online programming specifically targeted at Jewish young adults, the extent to which these efforts reached the intended target audience, lowered the barrier of entry, and allowed young adults

to become involved with the Jewish community without leaving their home is unclear, as is their staying power.

The economic, mental health, and political stressors discussed above also suggest that young Jews have needs that go beyond the traditional foci of outreach programs targeted at young adults. For Jewish institutions and organizations that serve Jewish young adults, and those that are concerned about the relationships among Jews across the world, it is essential to understand the different ways in which Jewish young adults have been affected by the pandemic—physically, economically, and psychologically. This is particularly true for programs that hope to relaunch and adapt their programming to the new reality.

## ROADMAP TO THE REPORT

This report examines the unfolding situation during the summer of 2020 and provides a “snapshot” of the various ways in which Birthright applicants, and by extension Jewish young adults in the United States, have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The

report begins by describing the **health effects** and **economic consequences** of the pandemic on Jewish young adults. The report then explores how health and economic concerns compare to other **concerns about police violence, protests, and the presidential election**, and the degree to which these concerns shifted over the summer. We then explore how Jewish young adults, including undergraduates, are coping with these overlapping crises in terms of managing their **mental health**. Finally, we look at the potential **role of the Jewish community in addressing the current needs of Jewish young adults** in the United States. We look at the success of Jewish organizations in reaching young adults during the pandemic, levels of engagement in Jewish online life, and the role of Jewish identity as a source of emotional stability for Jewish young adults.

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## ABOUT THE STUDY

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Data presented in this report come from two surveys of two independent samples conducted in June-July and September of 2020. Conducting surveys at two time points makes it possible to analyze how experiences changed over the course of the summer. The sample frame was 22,767 individuals who applied and were eligible to participate in summer 2020 Birthright Israel trips. Due to the pandemic, Birthright trips were canceled, and thus none of these applicants participated in a trip.

Data were collected from 1,084 individuals in the June-July survey (AAPOR RR2=12.8%) and from 1,134 individuals in the September survey (AAPOR RR2=15.8%). Although Birthright Israel applicants are not a random sample of the broader population of American Jewish young adults, they include young American Jews with different levels of

Jewish experience and background, including those with high levels of Jewish engagement who had already been to Israel, as well as those with no prior exposure to Jewish education or experiences.<sup>1</sup> In addition to providing reliable estimates of the attitudes and behaviors of Birthright Israel applicants, these data consequently provide insight into the challenges facing Jewish young adults more broadly.

Throughout this report, we also discuss results from similarly worded questions asked in contemporaneous surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center. The Pew data allow us to examine how this sample of American Jewish young adults compares to American young adults (ages 18-29) more generally.

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# ABOUT THE SAMPLE

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Although the pandemic has been far-reaching, Americans were not affected equally by the events that transpired in the first half of 2020. Understanding the characteristics of those who took part in this study is an important first step of our analysis.

Like Jews in general, the young Jews in our sample were concentrated on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts (see Tighe et al., 2019). About one third come from the mid-Atlantic region, which includes New York City and New Jersey, and an additional 9% from the Northeast, including New England. Relatively few come from the Midwest or South (Table 1). This geographic distribution

suggests that many of those Jews in our sample experienced some of the early, serious impacts of the pandemic.

At the time they applied to Birthright, most (62%) of these young Jews were undergraduate students. A small percentage were still in high school or attending graduate school (Table 2). The timing suggests that the majority of individuals in our sample were directly affected by colleges and universities closing in the 2020 spring semester.

**Table 1. Geographic area of residence February 2020**

	%
Northeast	9%
Mid-Atlantic	34%
Midwest	10%
South	23%
Mountain	5%
Pacific	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

Note: Birthright registration data

**Table 2. Student status February 2020**

	%
High School student	6%
Undergraduate student	62%
Graduate student	5%
Not a student	27%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

Note: Birthright registration data

Sixty-nine percent of these young Jews reported that before the pandemic they were financially dependent on their parents. A small percentage who were financially independent before the pandemic reported that at that time they were struggling financially (Table 3).

Like other Jews in the United States (Tighe et al., 2020), these Jewish young adults predominantly identified as political liberals (61%) (Table 4).

**Table 3. Financial situation pre-pandemic**

	%
Financially dependent on parents	69%
Financially independent	
Could not make ends meet	1%
Just managed to make ends meet	6%
Had enough money	13%
Had some extra money	9%
Well off	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

Note: June-July and September 2020 data combined  
 Question Text: “Before the coronavirus crisis started would you say you were...?”

**Table 4. Political views**

	%
Liberal	61%
Moderate	22%
Conservative	17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

Note: June-July and September 2020 data combined  
 Question Text: “In terms of political views, people often classify themselves as “liberal,” “moderate,” or “conservative.” Where would you place yourself on this scale?”

## HEALTH EFFECTS

We begin by looking at the ways in which the virus itself has affected the lives of Jewish young adults. In the period between June and September 2020, 13% of respondents reported having ever been infected with COVID-19, with 3% reporting they became seriously ill (Table 5, column 1).

Table 5. Covid exposure  
(Respondent and close person)

	Respondent COVID exposure	Close person COVID exposure
No Covid	71%	38%
Covid, not ill	10%	28%
Covid, seriously ill	3%	14%
Covid, died		4%
Don't know	16%	16%
Total	100%	100%

Note: June-July and September 2020 data combined  
Question text: “Do you think that YOU OR SOMEONE **CLOSE TO YOU** (e.g., parents, significant other, grandparents, sibling, close friend) have had coronavirus (COVID-19), whether or not you or they have been tested?”; “Did YOU OR SOMEONE CLOSE TO YOU become very ill due to coronavirus (COVID-19), whether or not you or they were hospitalized?”; “Did anyone **close to you** pass away from COVID-19?”

This finding is similar to that of Pew for the same time period: 14% of all US adults (regardless of age) reported having tested positive for the virus or reported being pretty sure they had the virus (Kramer, 2020).

In contrast, overall, 46% of respondents reported that someone close to them was infected, including 14% who reported that someone close to them became seriously ill and 4% who knew someone close to them who died from the disease (Table 5, column 2).

Although relatively few of these young Jews were personally sickened by the disease, many of them experienced its effects on those close to them. Perhaps because of this, these Jewish young adults appeared more concerned about spreading the virus to others (33% were “very concerned”) than about getting infected themselves (14% were “very concerned”) (Table 6). Levels of concern about getting sick and unknowingly spreading the virus to others were similar to those reported in June among American young adults as a whole (Pew Research Center, 2020).<sup>2</sup>

Table 6. Concern about getting and spreading COVID

	<b>Concern will get coronavirus and require hospitalization</b>	<b>Concern might spread coronavirus to other people</b>
Not at all concerned	20%	6%
Not too concerned	36%	17%
Somewhat concerned	30%	44%
Very concerned	14%	33%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Note: September 2020 data

Question text: “How concerned are you that you might spread the coronavirus to other people without knowing that you have it?”; “How concerned are you that you will get the coronavirus and require hospitalization?”

In addition to their concerns about immediate family and friends, many young Jews felt a personal responsibility to curb the spread of the virus. Forty-one percent indicated they had “a lot” of responsibility to curb the spread, and 44% reported they had “some” responsibility to do so (Table 7).

Table 7. Personal responsibility to curb COVID spread

	<b>%</b>
None at all	4%
Not much	11%
Some	44%
A lot	41%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

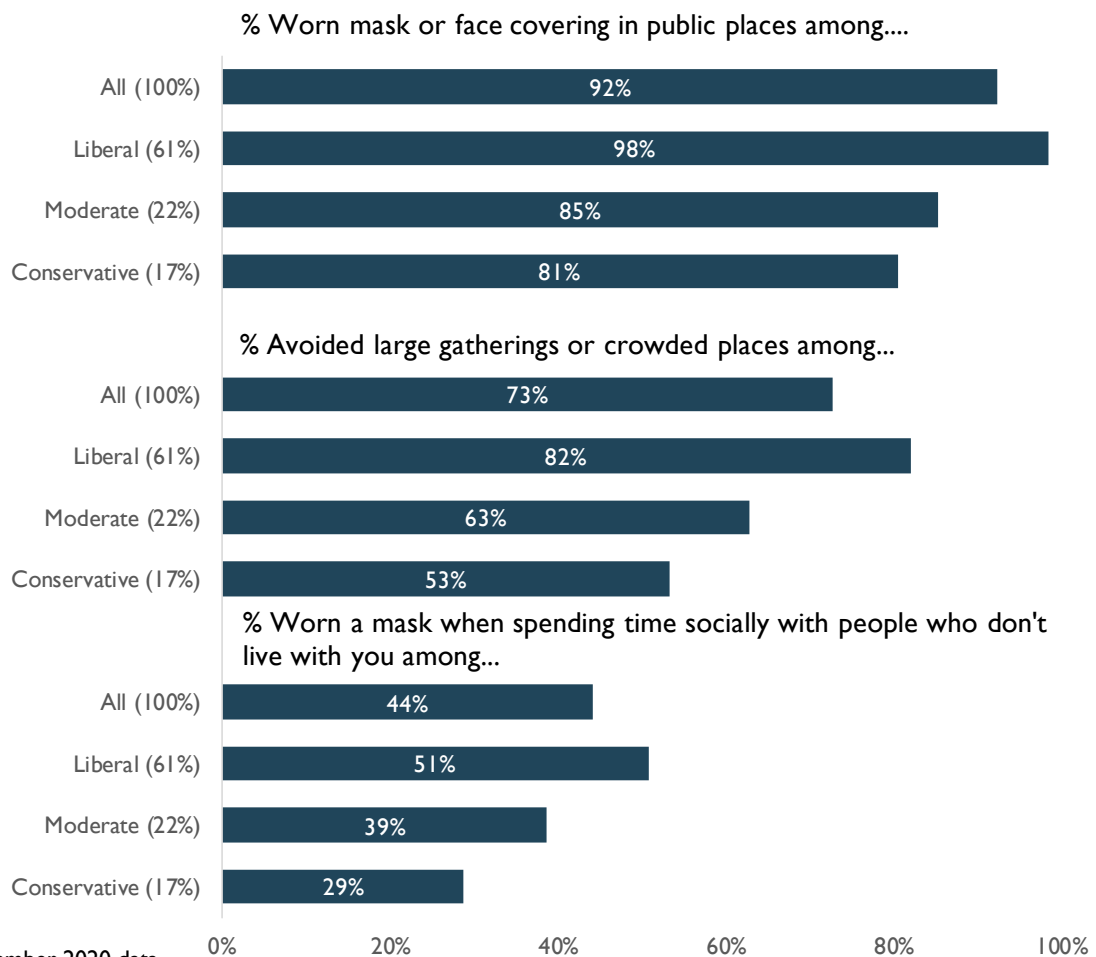
Note: September 2020 data

Question text: “How much PERSONAL responsibility do you feel you have to curb the spread of coronavirus?”

The majority of respondents reported taking the basic precautions of wearing a mask or face covering and avoiding large gatherings most or all of the time. However, taking concrete measures to slow the spread of the disease differed along political lines. Liberals

(who represent 61% of all respondents) were more likely than both moderates and conservatives to wear a mask all or most of the time, to avoid large gatherings, and to wear a mask when socializing with people they do not live with (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1. Taken COVID precautions most or all of the time by personal political views



Note: September 2020 data  
 Question Text: "In the PAST MONTH how often have you..."

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# ECONOMIC EFFECTS

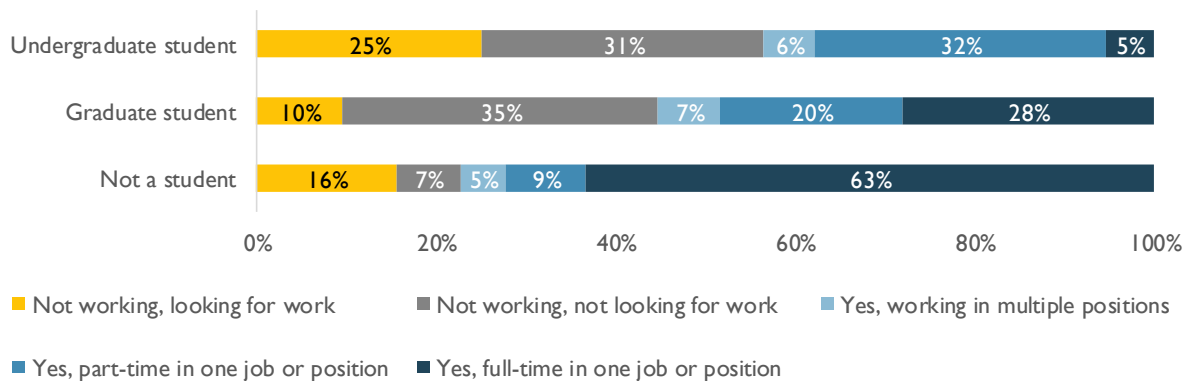
In September 2020, the employment status of our respondents varied by whether they were non-students, undergraduate students, or graduate students. Among non-students, 77% were working full or part time in one or more positions, but 16% were unemployed and actively looking for work.

Unsurprisingly, undergraduate and graduate students were less likely to be working full time and more likely to be unemployed but not looking for work. However, a quarter of undergraduates reported that they were looking for work, suggesting that their financial situation may have been negatively impacted by the lack of on-campus jobs (Figure 2).

## COMPARISON POINT

Unemployment rates among Jewish young adults who were not students (16%) were higher than the 8.9% unemployment rate for all Americans in the third quarter of 2020 but close to the 18% unemployment rate for those ages 18-19 and 15% for those ages 20-24 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

Figure 2. Employment by student status



Note: September 2020 data  
 Question text: "Are you CURRENTLY working for pay?"

Among those who were actively looking for a job, only 8% reported being very confident that they would find a new job in the next few months (Table 8). At the same time, among those who currently have a job, only 3% were very worried about losing it (Table 9).

As noted above, more than two thirds of respondents reported being financially dependent on their parents. The remaining one third who were financially independent were asked how their financial situation changed during the pandemic. There were no significant differences in responses to this question between June-July and September, suggesting that the financial situation for young Jews had not appreciably changed in the intervening months. In both time points, about half of these young Jews reported that their financial situation was roughly the same as it was before the pandemic. Around 30% reported that their situation was somewhat or much worse than before, but around 20% reported that their financial situation improved (Figure 3).

## COMPARISON POINT

In comparison, in August 2020, the Pew Research Center found that since the pandemic began, 35% of all Americans ages 18-29 had problems paying their bills, and 39% reported having used money from their savings or retirement accounts (Parker, Minkin, & Bennet, 2020), suggesting that young adult Jews may be experiencing slightly less severe economic consequences compared to their non-Jewish peers.

**Table 8. Confidence in finding new job (currently looking for work)**

	%
Not at all confident	13%
Not too confident	37%
Somewhat confident	42%
Very confident	8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

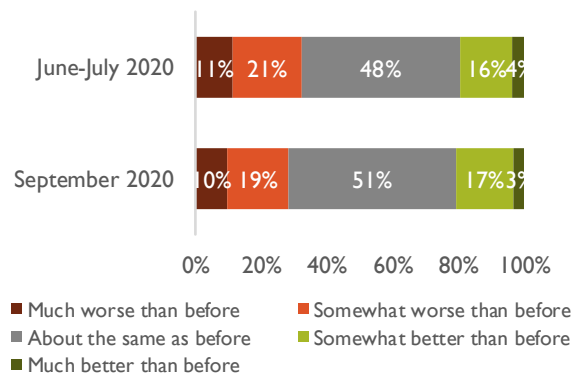
Note: September 2020 data  
Question text: “How confident are you about finding a job in the next few months?”

**Table 9. Worry about losing job (currently employed)**

	%
Not at all worried	43%
Not too worried	37%
Somewhat worried	17%
Very worried	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

Note: September 2020 data  
Question text: “How worried are you that you will lose your job in the next few months?”

**Figure 3. Change in financial situation**



Note: June-July and September 2020 data  
Question text: “Compared to the time before the coronavirus crisis, how is your financial situation today?”

# COMPETING CONCERNS AND CRISES DURING SUMMER 2020

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We next examine how concerns over COVID-19, including over the costs and benefits of lifting government restrictions, stack up against other prominent issues facing America during this time. In June-July and September, respondents were asked how concerned they were about seven different issues. These issues included the health and economic effects of the pandemic and related COVID-19 restrictions, police violence against Black Americans, destruction of property by protestors, and the outcome of the presidential election.

Respondents' concerns about these issues were heavily influenced by political ideology: politically liberal and conservative respondents had very different concerns. To illustrate this fact, we show the changing proportion of respondents who were "very concerned" about each of the above issues in June-July and September, separately for liberals, moderates, and conservatives (Figure 4). For political liberals (61% of respondents), concerns about police violence and the upcoming election were more acute than concerns about COVID. Over the summer, concerns about police violence declined somewhat, but concerns about the election

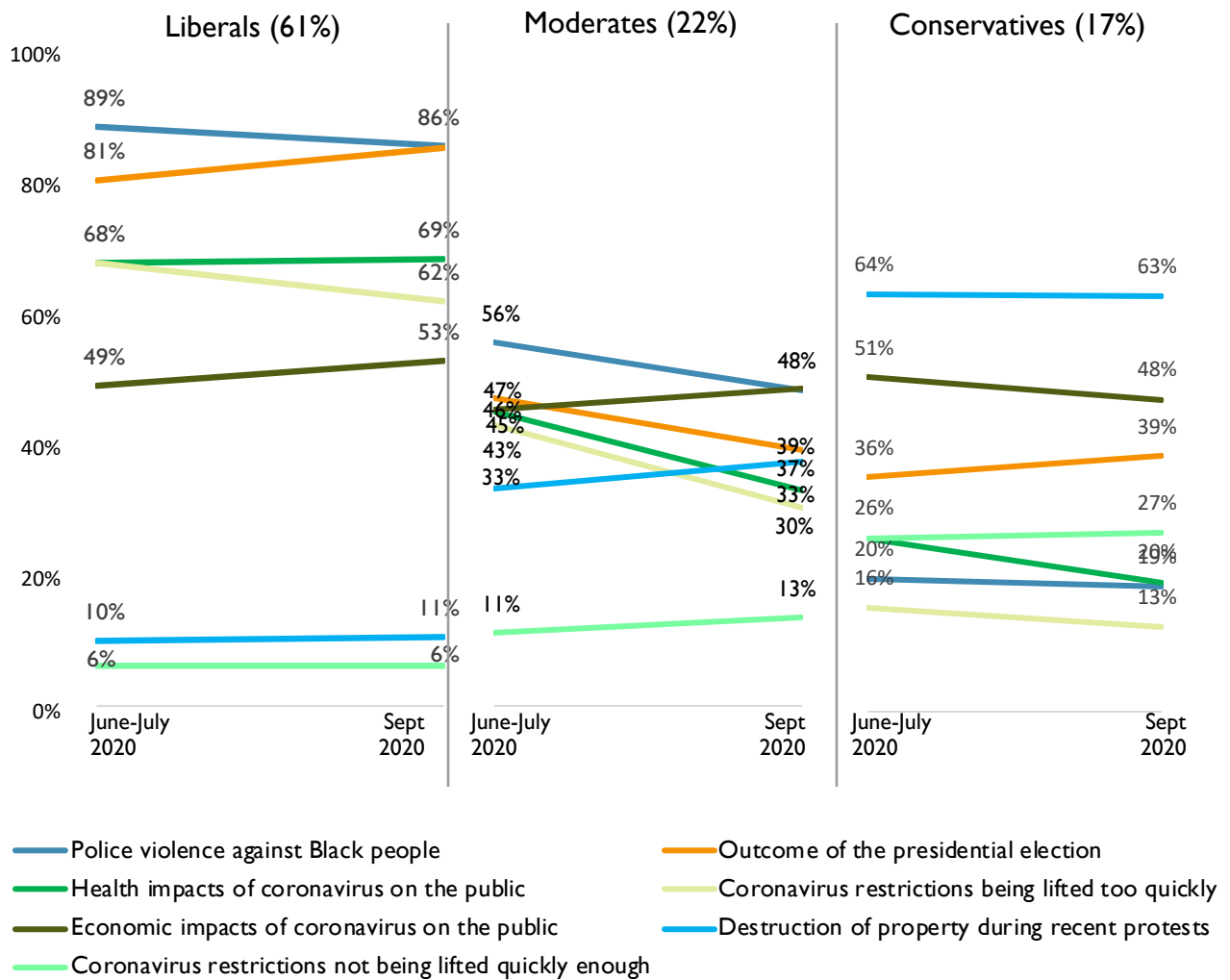
increased. Nevertheless, about 70% of respondents were very concerned about the health impacts of COVID, and this share did not change appreciably over the course of the summer. Few liberal Jews were concerned about COVID restrictions being lifted too slowly or the destruction of property during protests.

For the 17% of respondents who identified as politically conservative the situation was very different. For these respondents, destruction of property during recent protests was the top concern in both June-July and September. Only 20% of conservative respondents reported being very concerned about police violence towards Black Americans, and even fewer were very concerned about COVID restrictions being lifted too quickly. Conservatives were about as likely as liberals to express concern about the economic effects of COVID but far less likely to be concerned about the health effects or the outcome of the 2020 presidential election. In general, conservatives' views were even more static during the summer than those of liberals, with the only noticeable change being a decline in concerns about the health effects of COVID.

The 22% of respondents who identified as politically moderate were understandably somewhere in between. As with liberals, police violence against Black Americans was the top concern, although only 56% of moderates were very concerned about this issue in June-July, compared to almost 90% of liberals, and levels of concern fell even further in September when they were tied with economic impacts of COVID. For moderates,

concern about the destruction of property by protestors increased over the course of the summer, while worries about the health impacts of COVID, and even the outcome of the presidential election, declined. In general, concerns by moderates exhibited less stability compared to those expressed by liberals or conservatives.

Figure 4. Competing concerns by political views (% “very much” concerned)



Note: June-July and September 2020 data

Question text: “Thinking about recent events in the United States, how concerned are you about each of the following?”

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS – HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

In September, respondents expressed in their own words their greatest hopes for the coming year. These responses provide another window into the extent to which the overlapping issues discussed above are pressing in the minds of young Jews.<sup>4</sup>

Although 30% of those who responded to an open-ended question expressed hopes for a COVID vaccine or that the pandemic would be brought under control, many others most fervently hoped for an improvement in America's political situation.

Twenty-two percent expressed hopes related to social or political change: "I hope that the police departments are reformed, and we make significant progress towards solving racial inequity."

Fourteen percent mentioned a desire for greater political unity and less political divisiveness, with one respondent expressing the hope that "we can come together and start to have more empathy for each other in general." Another respondent noted a contrast between their desire for the future and their expectations writing, "I deeply hope for a world in which there is less anger and animosity and hate. But I don't feel hopeful about that at all."

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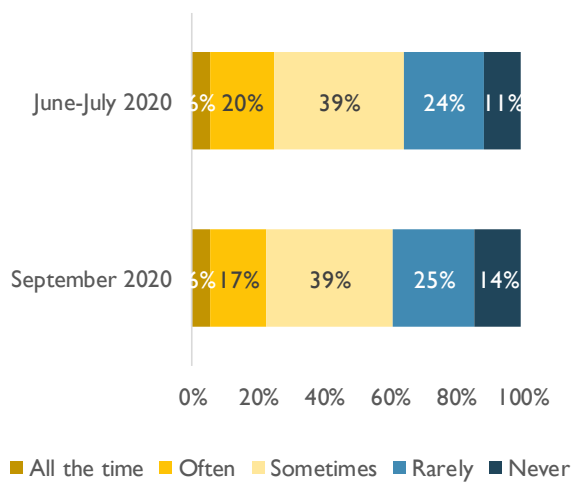
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# MENTAL HEALTH

The next section explores how the stressors experienced by young adults in 2020 are affecting Jewish young adults’ emotional wellbeing. In both June-July and September, we asked respondents how often they felt lonely in the week prior to the survey. Around one quarter of respondents reported that they felt lonely “often” or “all the time,” and there was no significant change in reports of loneliness over the course of the summer (Figure 5).

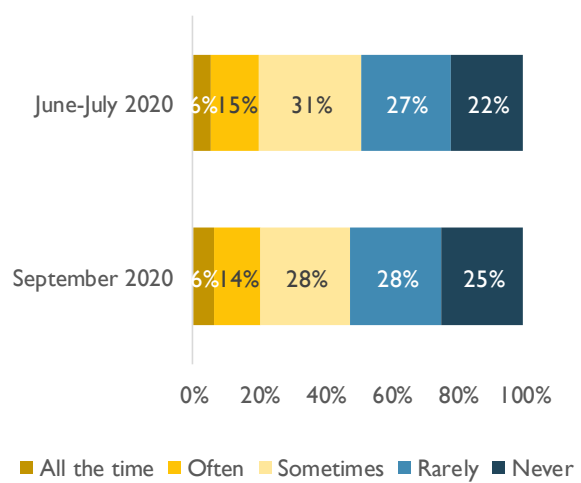
Respondents in both surveys were also asked how often they felt that emotional or mental difficulties hurt their ability to live their day-to-day life. Once again, there were no significant differences in respondents’ reports of mental health difficulties between June-July and September. About 20% of respondents in both time points reported that mental health difficulties impeded their day-to-day life “often” or “all the time,” and only 22%-25% reported that they were “never” affected by such serious mental health difficulties (Figure 6).

Figure 5. Frequency felt lonely in past week



Note: June-July and September 2020 data  
 Question text: “LAST WEEK, how often did you feel lonely?”

Figure 6. Frequency felt mental difficulties in past week



Note: June-July and September 2020 data  
 Question text: “LAST WEEK, how often did you feel that emotional or mental difficulties hurt your ability to live your day-to-day life?”

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## COMPARISON POINT

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Pew found that in March over 60% of all Americans ages 18-29, reported feeling some level of emotional distress during the pandemic, with one third reporting “high distress,” higher than any other age group (Schaeffer & Raine, 2020).

In June, a study of Jews in 10 different communities found that 51% of Jewish young adults reported experiencing emotional difficulties at least sometimes in the past week, more than any other age group (Aronson & Saxe, 2020).

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## IN THEIR OWN WORDS – THE SOCIAL COST OF THE PANDEMIC

In June-July, respondents described in their own words the biggest personal impact of the coronavirus crisis. Thirty-six percent of those who responded<sup>5</sup> specifically mentioned the impact of the pandemic on their social lives, far more than the proportion who mentioned concerns about employment (17%) or physical health (3%).

For example, one respondent wrote that the biggest impact of the pandemic was “not being able to see all of my friends in the same way, and having school be online means I won't see some of them for more than a year.” Another wrote that, due to the pandemic, “I lost a lot of opportunities, and it felt like just as I was figuring out what I wanted to do and straightened out my life, this hit and complicated everything.”

Additionally, 15% of those responding to this question expressed concerns over the impact of the pandemic on their mental health. One respondent reported feeling “constant anxiety, not just about health of my loved ones but about every aspect of everyday life being impacted in some way.” Other respondents expressed concerns about returning to live with parents, with one writing, “While in high school, I struggled with my mental health and returning to my home has brought up some of the feelings again.” Another respondent expressed similar feelings: “Personally being back at home and that environment has been really difficult, and not having an apartment yet or any other place to go makes me feel restricted and a bit worse mentally.”

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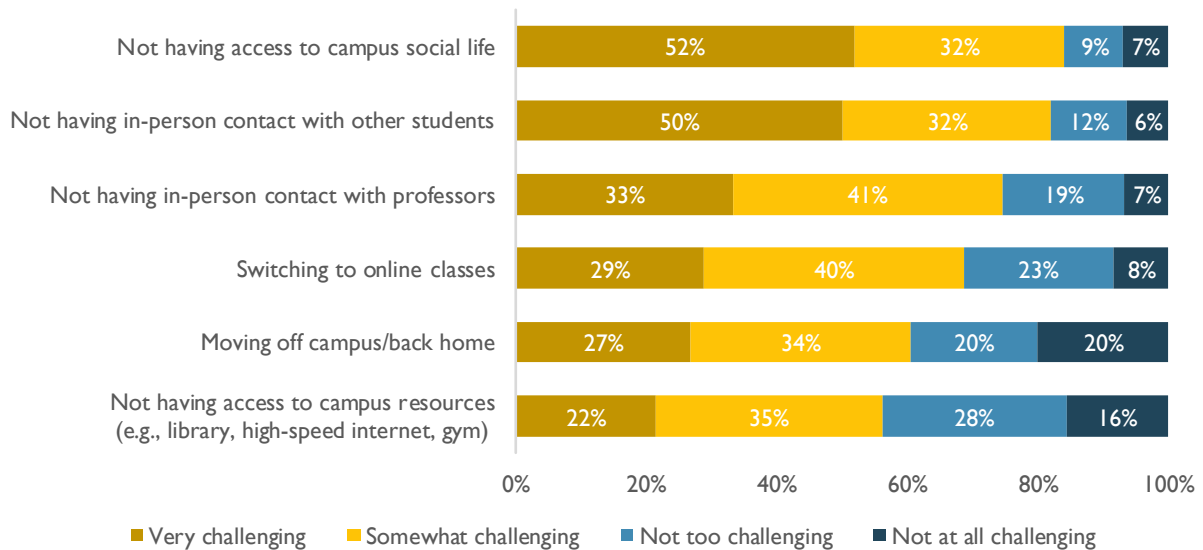


# HOW UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS COPEd WITH THE CRISIS

Our data suggest that mental health challenges and a lack of social connection are an especially serious concern for Jewish undergraduates. In June-July, we asked respondents who were undergraduates at the time they applied to Birthright how challenging they found different aspects of the initial shut-down of in-person instruction in the last part of the spring 2020 semester. Students overwhelmingly indicated that the

most challenging aspect of the transition to online learning was not academics, loss of campus resources, or even the logistics of suddenly moving off campus, but the loss of social contact with other students. At least half of undergraduate Jews reported that lack of contact with other students and the loss of campus social life were “very challenging” (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Challenging aspects of college shut down

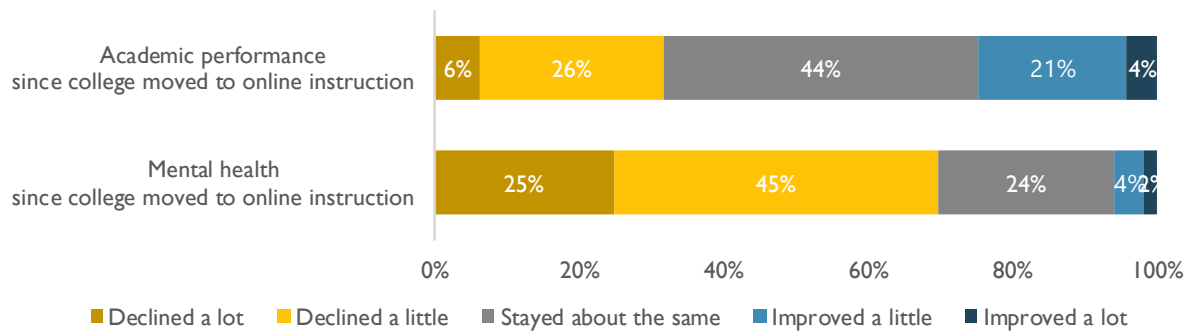


Note: June-July 2020 data  
 Question text: “College students were affected by the coronavirus crisis in many ways. For you personally, how challenging were each of the following?”

A similar story emerged when students were asked about changes in their academic performance and mental health since the transition to online learning. In June-July, 44% of undergraduates reported that the transition to online learning had little impact on their academic performance. Although 32% reported that their academic

performance declined, 25% reported that it actually improved. The situation was very different for mental health. Seventy percent of students reported that their mental health declined since their campuses closed, 24% reported it stayed the same, and 6% reported that it improved (Figure 8).

**Figure 8. Change in academic performance and mental health after transition to online instruction (spring 2020)**



Note: June-July 2020 data

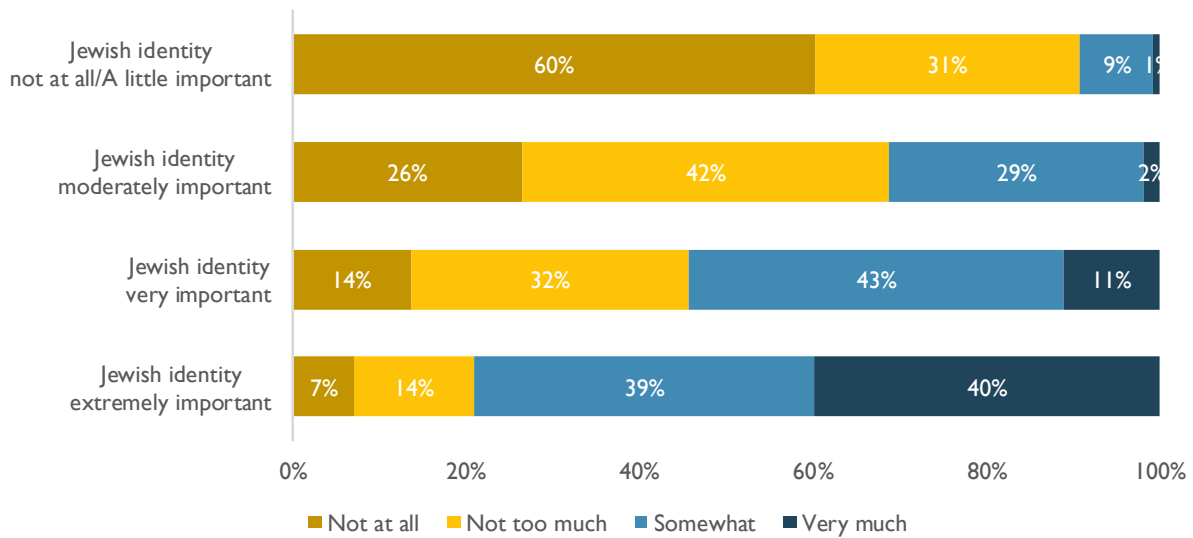
Question text: "Thinking about the period after your college or university moved to online instruction, would you say that during this period your....?"

# JEWISH LIFE DURING THE PANDEMIC

This section explores the role being Jewish and efforts put forth by the Jewish community played in mitigating the impacts of the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, the extent to which respondents felt that being Jewish had helped them cope with the crisis depended greatly on how important they felt that being Jewish was to their identity in the first place. Among those who felt that being Jewish was “not at all” or only “a little” important, almost none felt that being Jewish helped them cope

with the crisis. However, among those who thought that being Jewish was “extremely” important to their sense of identity, 40% reported that it helped them cope with the crisis “very much” (Figure 9). This suggests that for those Jewish young adults who have a strong sense of Jewish identity, being Jewish may provide an important bulwark against some of the challenges confronting young adults.

Figure 9. Being Jewish helped cope with the crisis by centrality of Jewish identity



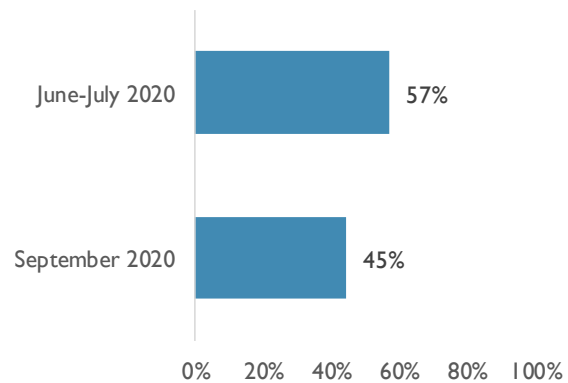
Note: June-July and September 2020 data combined  
 Questions text: “To what extent do you feel that being Jewish has helped you cope with the crisis?”; “How important is being Jewish to how you think about yourself?”

With restrictions on in-person gatherings and a halt to international travel, Jewish organizations serving young adults had to adapt to the new reality of the pandemic. With the pivot to online programming came the challenge of letting Jewish young adults know of existing opportunities. In June-July, 57% of respondents reported that in the preceding month they were invited by a family member, friend, or Jewish organization to participate in some form of online Jewish activity, but by September this figure had declined to 45%. This suggests that the surge of outreach undertaken in the early months of the pandemic declined somewhat in subsequent months (Figure 10).

Notwithstanding this decline, awareness of Jewish opportunities did not significantly change over the course of the summer. Overall, slightly less than half of the respondents knew about opportunities to engage in Jewish life online. But only about one quarter felt that the online events they knew about matched their interests or that they knew friends who had participated in such events (Figure 11).

Respondents were also asked if they actually engaged in any form of online Jewish activity in the month prior to the survey. Frequent participation in Jewish activities was rare (Figure 12), and there was no significant change in participation levels over the course of the summer.<sup>7</sup> The most popular forms of activity were searching for Jewish information online and watching Jewish or Israeli films or TV shows, with 6% of respondents reported doing both “often” in the past month.

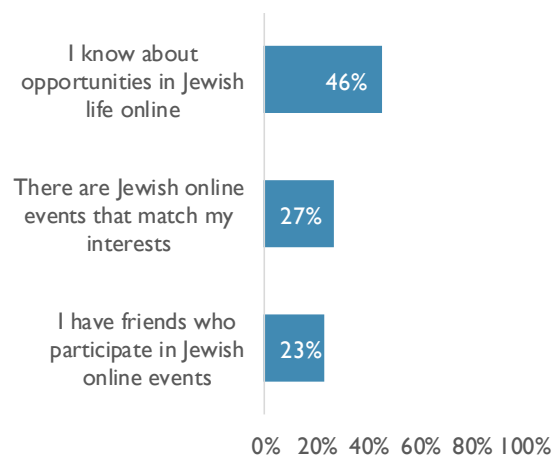
**Figure 10. Invited to participate in online Jewish activity (past month)**



Note: June-July and September 2020 data

Question text: “In the past MONTH, were you invited by any of the following to participate in online Jewish events, sessions or activities?”

**Figure 11. Awareness and interest in online Jewish opportunities**



Note: June-July and September 2020 data combined

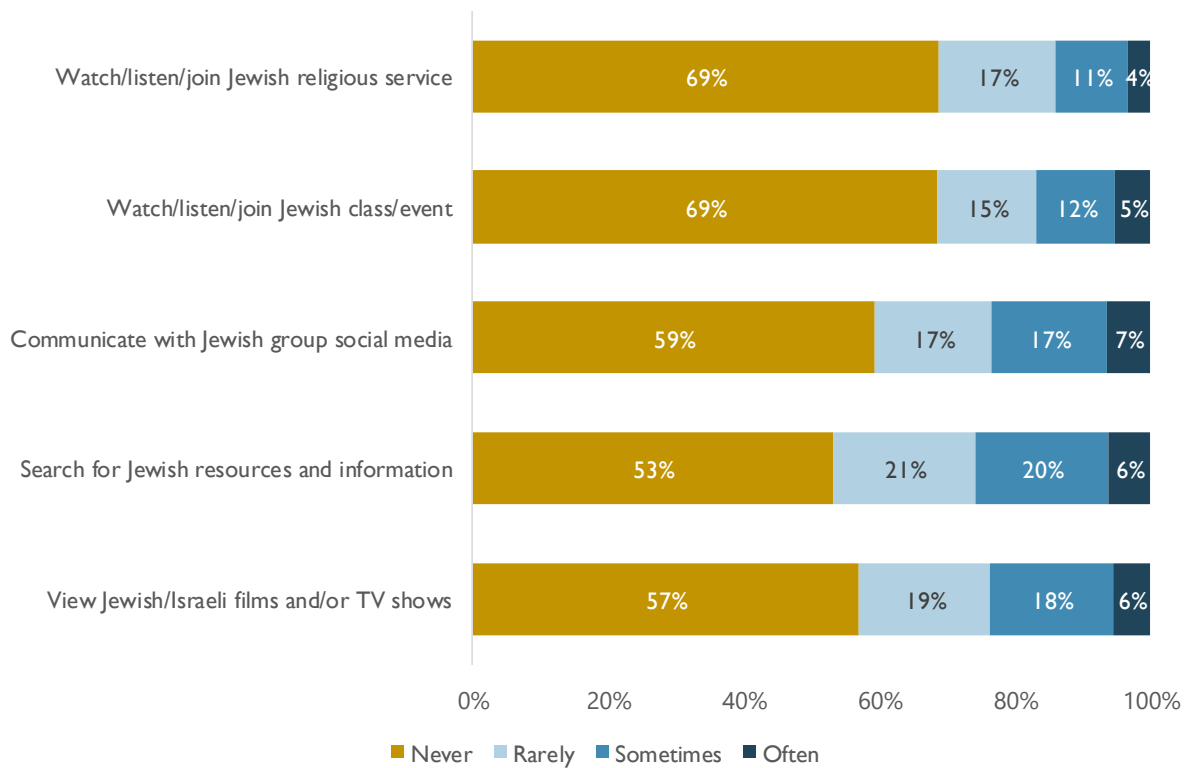
Question text: “Which of the following statements is true for you?”

Participation in online Jewish activities was strongly related to how often respondents participated in Jewish activities before the pandemic. Figure 13 shows the percentage of respondents who reported participating in an online Jewish class or event in the past month by how frequently they attended Jewish programs or activities in a “typical” year. Among those who typically attended Jewish programs once a month or more, 37% reported joining online Jewish classes or programs “sometimes” or “often” in the past month. Those who attended Jewish programs once a year or so before the pandemic were less likely to participate in events during the pandemic, and those who typically never

participated in Jewish events did not participate during the pandemic.

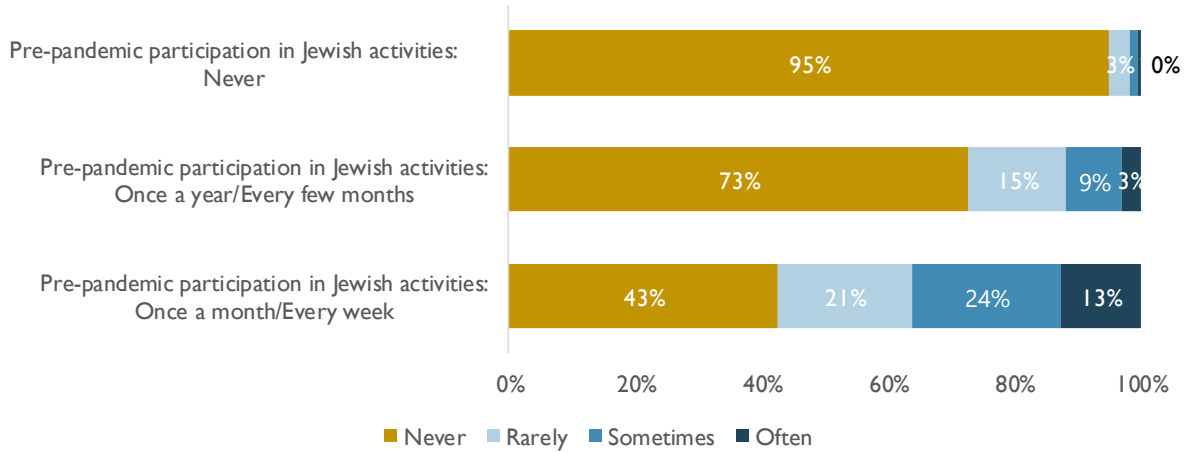
A similar finding emerges with regard to online Jewish religious services: Those respondents who usually attended Jewish religious services in a “typical” year also participated online during the pandemic. Sixty percent of those who attended at least monthly before the pandemic reported at least some attendance at online services in the past month. In contrast, few respondents who did not typically attend services before the pandemic attended them online during the pandemic (Figure 14).

Figure 12. Participation in Jewish online activities (past month)



Note: June-July and September 2020 data combined  
 Question text: “In the PAST MONTH, how often did you do any of the following activities online?”

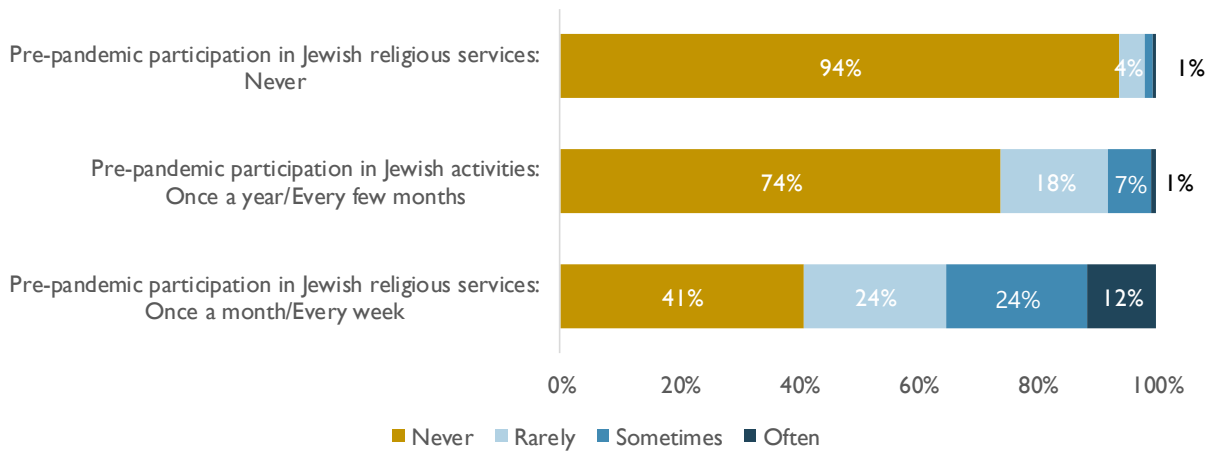
Figure 13. Participation in online Jewish class or event in the past month by past attendance



Note: June-July and September 2020 data combined

Questions text: “In a typical year, how often do you attend any type of program or activity sponsored by a Jewish organization or group?”; “In the PAST MONTH, how often did you do any of the following activities online... Watched/listened/joined a Jewish class, session or event.”

Figure 14. Attending online Jewish religious service in the past month by past attendance



Note: June-July and September 2020 data combined

Questions text: “Before the coronavirus crisis, in a typical year, aside from special occasions like weddings and funerals, how often did you attend any type of organized Jewish religious services?” “In the PAST MONTH, how often did you do any of the following activities online... Watched/listened/joined a Jewish religious service.”

## DISCUSSION

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The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly affected those who participated in our study in profound ways, although not always directly. Despite the fact that they were concentrated in geographic areas that were especially hard hit by the virus during the early months of the pandemic, relatively few Birthright applicants became severely ill with COVID themselves. Although many had a family member or close friend who became infected, only 14% knew someone who became seriously ill and an additional 4% knew someone who died from the virus. Nevertheless, respondents appeared to view the virus as a serious threat—most felt they had a personal responsibility to curb its spread and were taking appropriate preventative actions.

While compared to other age groups young adults in the United States are feeling the brunt of the economic downturn more acutely, relatively few Birthright applicants reported serious economic consequences related to the pandemic. Almost 70% of respondents were still financially dependent on their parents. Of those who were financially independent, the majority reported that their financial standing remained constant

or even improved, and this remained true even in September. Among those who held a job in September, most were not worried about losing the job they had, although many of those who were looking for work expressed little confidence about finding a new job. For Birthright applicants, other concerns beyond the health and economic effects of the pandemic were more pressing. Although politically liberal and conservative respondents had different—sometimes even diametrically opposed—concerns about recent events in the United States, both groups were more likely to express concerns about issues related to the recent political turmoil in the United States than anything related to the virus. For liberals, the locus of this concern was police violence towards Black Americans, while conservatives were most concerned about the destruction of property by protesters, and this was true in both June-July and September. In June-July, moderate respondents looked similar to liberals, being most concerned about police violence and the election. But by September these concerns had declined somewhat, and concerns about property destruction and the economic effects of the pandemic had begun to rise.

These overlapping crises are, however, only a part of the challenges Jewish young adults were facing during the pandemic. The restrictions on their ability to engage with others, perhaps exacerbated by the turmoil around them, appear to have taken a toll on the mental health of many applicants. Around one quarter of respondents reported feeling lonely often or all the time, and a similar proportion reported that emotional and mental health difficulties frequently affected their ability to live their day-to-day lives. In June-July, many respondents referred to the pandemic's disruption of social connections and exacerbation of existing mental health difficulties. Mental health issues also appeared to be the biggest concern for undergraduate students. When asked about the myriad disruptions to campus life in spring 2020, students overwhelmingly listed the loss of social connections and social life, as well as their mental health, as the most challenging issues they were facing.

These findings echo other research, which found that the pandemic has had a serious impact on the mental health of young adults in general (Keeter, 2020) and that loneliness, due to lost social connections, is one of the major drivers of the troubling increase in mental health difficulties among young adults during the pandemic (Lee, Cadigan, & Rhew, 2020; Liu et al., 2020). Like their non-Jewish peers, Jewish young adults are being forced to navigate a profound disruption to their social lives during a period in which they are attempting to construct and interrogate their own identities (Arnett, Žukauskienė, & Sugimura, 2020).

In the face of such hardships, it is heartening to see that the Jewish community has clearly made efforts to reach out to young Jews who were denied an opportunity to participate in

Birthright and other Jewish programs and provide other opportunities for (online) Jewish engagement. Although about half of Birthright applicants were aware of opportunities to engage with Jewish life online, only one quarter indicated that these opportunities matched their interests or that they had peers who regularly participated. Actual engagement with Jewish online life followed the pattern of Jewish engagement prior to the pandemic. Echoing earlier findings (Aronson & Saxe, 2020), those who had limited engagement with Jewish life before the pandemic were unlikely to participate in online activities during the pandemic, while those who were already highly engaged with Jewish life were highly likely to make the shift to online Jewish programming and religious services.

However, even these efforts at online engagement may be of limited help in assuaging the loneliness and isolation felt by many young Jews. Other research suggests that ephemeral online engagement is unlikely to dramatically relieve loneliness or mental health difficulties, and that what is needed are deeper, more substantive connections, such as with a social support network (Wright et al., under review), and these types of relationships may be difficult to promote in the midst of a pandemic. With multiple COVID-19 vaccines on the horizon, the Jewish community may wish to prioritize efforts that could help rebuild lost social connections as the pandemic recedes. In particular, continued support for programs that develop and sustain social connections among peers and sponsorship of new initiatives that address these needs should be an explicit focus of Jewish organizations that serve young adults.



## CONCLUSION

Although these results are limited to Jewish young adults who applied to Birthright Israel in 2020, other research suggests that American young adults in general are facing similar challenges. Our findings reinforce other recent research suggesting that the biggest danger facing young adults in a post-COVID world may not be medical or even economic, but psychological. Most of the young Jewish adults we surveyed were healthy and relatively well insulated from the most

serious financial effects of the pandemic. Nevertheless, they are lonely, and in some cases scared, not only about the pandemic itself, but also about their future and the outlook for the country. Institutions and organizations in the Jewish community and beyond that serve young adults should recognize that social and mental health support might be the most pressing current need for young adults in the United States.

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# NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See Technical Appendix A for sample characteristics.

<sup>2</sup> Pew found that 46% of young adults were at least somewhat concerned about getting sick, and 71% were concerned about infecting others. The Jewish young adults in our sample were slightly less likely than young adults in the general population to be *very* concerned about getting sick, perhaps reflecting the fact that Jews are underrepresented in the populations most vulnerable to COVID-19.

<sup>3</sup> We ran an OLS model on a combined measure of these three activities controlling for feelings of personal responsibility, ideology, having two Jewish parents, Jewish education, student status, age and gender. In this model those who felt a higher level of personal responsibility to control the spread of the virus were significantly more likely to take precautions, but even after controlling for feelings of personal responsibility, moderate or conservative respondents were still significantly less likely to take precautions compared to liberals.

<sup>4</sup> Seventy-five percent of respondents wrote a response to this question.

<sup>5</sup> Sixty percent responded to the question.

<sup>6</sup> Chi-square test not significant.

<sup>7</sup> Chi-square test not significant.

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