

VOLUNTEERING + VALUES

A REPAIR THE WORLD Report on Jewish Young Adults

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



REPAIR THE WORLD works to inspire American Jews and their communities to give their time and effort to serve those in need. We aim to make service a defining part of American Jewish life.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Volunteer service, defined as productive work, performed with minimal or no compensation and intended to further the “social good,” is experiencing a renaissance among the millennial generation of American young adults. At the same time, momentum is building in the American Jewish community for a renewed commitment to Jewish young adult volunteering both within and beyond communal borders. Indicative of the growing focus on elevating service as a Jewish communal norm was the creation in 2009 of Repair the World as a central organization for Jewish service-learning and volunteer efforts. However, despite growing interest, little was known about the full extent of Jewish young adults’ service commitments. National surveys of volunteering either did not include information about the religious identity of respondents or contained too small a sample of Jewish young adults to allow for meaningful analysis.

The goal of the current study was to understand the full extent of Jewish young adults’ volunteer habits and preferences. This research was commissioned by Repair the World and was conducted as a collaborative effort between researchers at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS) at Brandeis University and Gerstein|Agne Strategic Communications. The major component of this research was the development and administration of a survey of the volunteer commitments, motivations, and attitudes of a sample of Jewish young adults between the ages of 18–35 from across the spectrum of Jewish identities and levels of Jewish engagement. The report develops a portrait of the motivations that cause Jewish young adults to volunteer, the varieties of service in which they engage, and the ways in which they construe the connections among their involvement in volunteering, Jewish values, and identity. The report concludes with discussion of the most promising points of leverage to increase commitment to service and encourage Jewish young adults to see volunteering as a Jewish act.

... FINDINGS ...

Volunteering

The majority of contemporary Jewish young adults engage in volunteer work. However, it is also true that for many volunteering is an infrequent and episodic activity. Jewish young adults volunteer because they want to help those in less fortunate circumstances and make positive changes in their communities. Much of the volunteer work of Jewish young adults is comprised of local efforts to ameliorate disparities in economic resources and educational opportunity and often entails activities such as collecting, sorting, and distributing goods, tutoring, leading recreational programs, and providing manual labor for construction and repair.

Most Jewish young adults are politically and civically involved, but tend to participate when the investment of time and energy is low or when the behavior is well integrated into the course of their regular routine. The most common forms of civic engagement among these Jewish young adults comprise what could be called “low-threshold activism” such as signing petitions, donating money, and making purchasing decisions that are in line with their political and social values.

Among Jewish young adults, volunteering, and especially the development of a pattern of regular volunteering, is the result of social learning and modeling of behavior that originates in the home and is

reinforced by peers. Jewish young adults who are most likely to volunteer have a history of high school participation in volunteering, and those who volunteer on a regular basis came from homes with parents who volunteered. Jewish young adults who are highly engaged in religious life are also more likely to volunteer and do so on a regular basis. Volunteering is also supported by an attitudinal disposition that values helping those facing hardship and serving the needs of the larger community. Women and those who come from homes with one non-Jewish parent are also more likely to volunteer, although not more likely to become regular volunteers.

The volunteer commitments of Jewish young adults are influenced, and too often limited, by opportunity. Following self-initiated interest, the most common avenue of volunteer recruitment for Jewish young adults is through family and friends. Factors that constrain the extent or variety of social networks, such as gender or disengagement from religious life, also limit knowledge of volunteer opportunities and peers with whom to volunteer. Logistical concerns such as finding volunteer work that is geographically accessible and accommodating of busy schedules also serve to limit the volunteer commitments of Jewish young adults.

Jewish young adults want to “make a difference,” and the majority appears to have a sense of personal efficacy. However, those subgroups that are least likely to volunteer also have the weakest belief that their volunteer efforts can contribute to desired effects. The personal relevance of the causes for which Jewish young adults are being asked to volunteer may also play a role in their decision making. Many Jewish young adults do not find their way into volunteer opportunities related to the causes about which they care most deeply. Volunteer options related to the full spectrum of Jewish young adult concerns may either not be available or may not be well known among this demographic.

Volunteering through the Jewish Community

Only a small portion of Jewish young adults prefer to or actually do volunteer with Jewish organizations. This form of volunteering is predicted by a trajectory of in-depth Jewish education and involvement, starting in childhood and extending into the present. The minority of Jewish young adults who volunteer through Jewish organizations do so to support their own people and community. By contrast, the vast majority of Jewish young adults say it does not matter if they volunteer with a Jewish or non-Jewish organization. Instead, the reasons they give for choosing any volunteer option center on whether the activity involves a cause or issue that is personally meaningful to them. Most Jewish young adults appear at least open to the idea of volunteering through Jewish organizations, however, they do not know what opportunities exist and of greater concern, they do not perceive Jewish volunteer options as addressing their most deeply held concerns.

Volunteering through a Jewish Perspective

Jewish young adults are primarily drawn to service through universal rather than Jewish-based values or identity. Whether or not young adults see connections between Jewish identity and volunteering is closely related to the overall integration and prominence of their Jewish identity amidst other aspects of their conception of self. At one end of the spectrum are young adults for whom the Jewish component of their identity stands front and center in everything they do. These are the Jewish young adults most likely to see their volunteer work grounded in Jewish values of compassionate helping and social justice. For young adults at the other end of the spectrum, however, volunteering is an activity partitioned off from their

Jewish identity in much the same way that their Jewish identity is separate from many aspects of their lives. Although they embrace the values of caring and social justice, they perceive them as universal values rather than particularistic Jewish ones and frame their service work accordingly. Only a very small portion of Jewish young adults volunteer as a means to represent the Jewish community to the larger society.

... STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS ...

Repair the World has positioned itself to influence the intersection between Jewish young adult involvement in volunteering and the development of a Jewish lens for understanding the meaning and salience of service. The current survey data provides some important guidance as to how to more effectively engage Jewish young adults in service and help them to see their volunteer work through the prism of Jewish tradition, values, and identity.

- **Start early to build the habit of volunteering:** Volunteering is clearly a socially learned behavior and, once established, a habit likely to continue throughout the lifespan. Programming that encourages Jews in their formative teen years to engage in volunteering and introduces them to a Jewish perspective on service needs to be developed and expanded. Jewish service learning that combines hands-on work with reflection and study needs to be woven into formal and informal Jewish educational programming, including supplementary and day schools as well as camps and youth groups. Immersive Jewish service learning programs for teens will also need to be expanded.
- **Develop effective framing messages:** Efforts to mobilize social consciousness and encourage collective action can be bolstered by the use of messages that provide an appealing and motivating framework. The current data suggest that describing service in universal terms and as a responsibility of Jews to help others in need, regardless of religious affiliation, is convincing to a broad cross section of Jewish young adults. For many, this message is as effective as similar ones couched in non-Jewish terms. The utility of this framing of service comes from its appeal to those Jewish young adults who do not see their service through a Jewish lens. By contrast, tying service to the goal of helping the Jewish community specifically is not a strong entry point.
- **Expand volunteer options that relate to core concerns:** Jewish young adults are most motivated to serve when they think they can make a difference in the lives of others, and when they can work on issues about which they care deeply. For those issue areas where volunteer options are limited or non-existent, new opportunities, under Jewish and non-Jewish auspices, will need to be developed. Suitable volunteer opportunities that already exist may need to be better advertised to Jewish young adults, in particular Jewish service efforts that address the very universal issues high on the list of concerns of Jewish young adults.
- **Create flexible, local options for volunteering:** Time is a valued and scarce resource for Jewish young adults, and all strategies must include tactical provisions that make volunteering time-friendly. Where feasible, emphasis should be placed on expanding volunteer opportunities that offer a flexible schedule, have options for short-term commitments, and are located where Jewish young adults reside.

- **Recruit through existing social networks and build new ones around volunteering:** Recognizing the role of peer groups in promoting volunteer activity, special emphasis should be placed on tapping social circles as a method of recruitment. Many Jewish young adults indicate a strong preference for volunteer opportunities that allow them to work with friends or with peers as part of a team. Highlighting the social or team aspect of volunteer work or creating “Posse” models of volunteering that bring together groups of Jewish young adults and enable them to volunteer together over time present an exciting option for expanding the reach of volunteering among this demographic.
- **Partner with non-Jewish organizations:** Jewish young adults are drawn to service that serves all people regardless of religion and addresses issues that extend beyond Jewish communal boundaries. Repair the World should invest in building partnerships with non-Jewish organizations that are leading volunteer efforts on the universal concerns about which Jewish young adults care deeply. Partnering with non-Jewish volunteer organizations is a tangible way to demonstrate the paired commitment of the Jewish community to both universal causes and Jewish values. Equally important is that these collaborations allow young adults to address their issues of concern through a Jewish portal of service and can be used to increase their understanding of Jewish perspectives on service. Partnerships can also be a vehicle for encouraging Jewish young adults to identify all their volunteer work, regardless of who it serves, as a Jewish act.
- **Leverage “low-threshold activism” and Jewish young adults’ belief that they can make a difference:** Most Jewish young adults believe their actions can make a difference and most engage in low-threshold forms of activism. These forms of civic engagement can serve as an entry point to volunteer engagement. Pathways need to be developed that lead Jewish young adults from simpler forms of activism toward graduated levels of commitment and volunteer involvement. In much the same manner, entry level or brief volunteer experiences should be followed by opportunities for more in-depth volunteer work and skill development.
- **Frame volunteering as a Jewish act:** Efforts are needed to educate Jewish young adults of the rich connections between Jewish thought and volunteering in such a way that young adults from across the entire spectrum of Jewish identity “own” a Jewish perspective on service. Widespread efforts are needed that draw attention to and link the universal and Jewish values that young adults already hold with the universal causes about which they care most deeply. Spreading a Jewish perspective on volunteering may be facilitated by peer “connectors” that have ties to a broad array of social networks.
- **Build the knowledge base regarding harder to reach groups:** Important questions remain about how best to draw certain subgroups such as men and Jewish young adults with the most limited Jewish involvement into volunteering and encourage them to see this activity through a Jewish lens. Additional research to explore the unique concerns and needs of these groups is necessary if Repair the World is to spread a commitment to volunteering throughout this generation of Jewish young adults.

Jewish young adults believe they can make the world a better place, and they want to work toward the common good. Repair the World’s mission to make service a defining part of Jewish life for young adults faces a unique set of challenges and will require navigating generational as well as Jewish identity dynamics. However, equally apparent is the potential of Jewish young adult volunteering to address pressing social issues domestically and abroad and to bring Jewish identity and values into the forefront of efforts to serve the common good.