

2014

# HIGHLIGHTS Demographic Survey of American Jewish College Students 2014

Ariela Keysar

*Trinity College*, [ariela.keysar@trincoll.edu](mailto:ariela.keysar@trincoll.edu)

Barry A. Kosmin

*Trinity College*, [barry.kosmin@trincoll.edu](mailto:barry.kosmin@trincoll.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/facpub>

 Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

## HIGHLIGHTS

### Demographic Survey of American Jewish College Students 2014

Ariela Keysar and Barry A. Kosmin

Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut

The national online Demographic Survey of American College Students interviewed 1,157 self-identified Jewish students in March-April, 2014.

The *Wordle* illustration below presents the top 25 responses named by students when asked in an open-ended question to specify the concerns of young Jews like themselves. American college students named Israel as their top concern. The strength of their concern is all the more impressive as the interviews occurred well before this summer's conflict in Gaza.

Chart 1

“In your opinion, what are the crucial issues concerning young Jewish people like yourself today?”



#### *Israel*

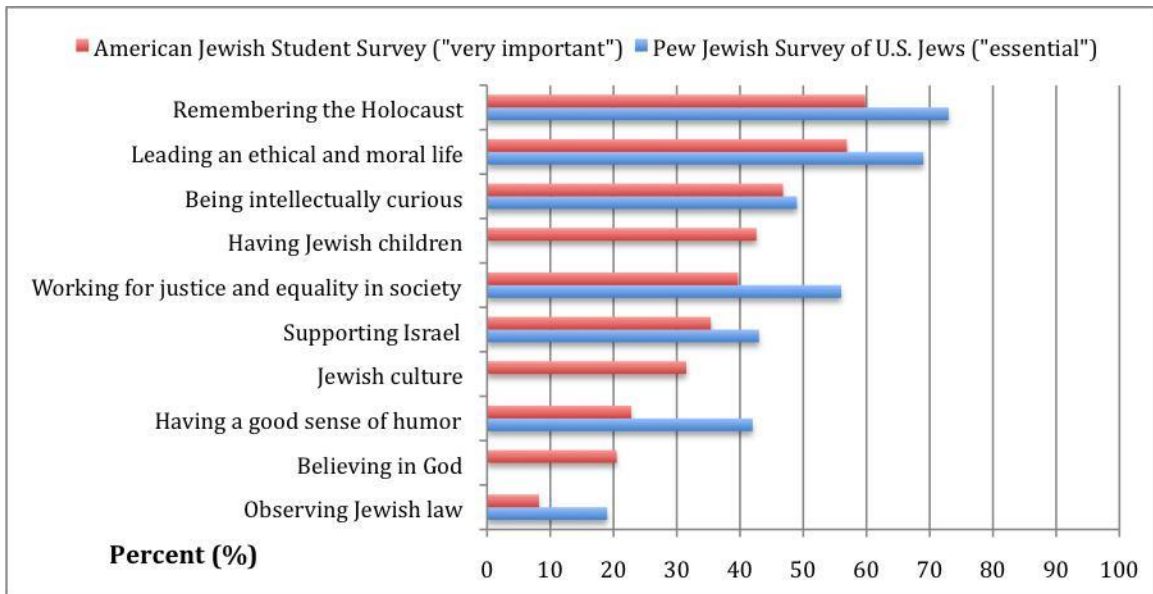
Sixty-two percent of the Jewish college students surveyed have visited Israel; 21% have participated in a Taglit Birthright Israel trip. These students' connections to Israel are stronger than those of adult American Jews in general, of whom only 43% have visited Israel (Pew, 2013). In addition 52 % of the students reported that they had “close friends or family in Israel.”

We have shown in previous research that attachment to Israel is a visible marker of other, sometimes less visible aspects of Jewish identity, religious and cultural. The *Wordle* diagram of the most frequently cited items illustrates that “Judaism” and “Identity” follow Israel as top concerns for the students.

*Identity*

Chart 2

“How important is each of the following to what BEING JEWISH means to you personally?”



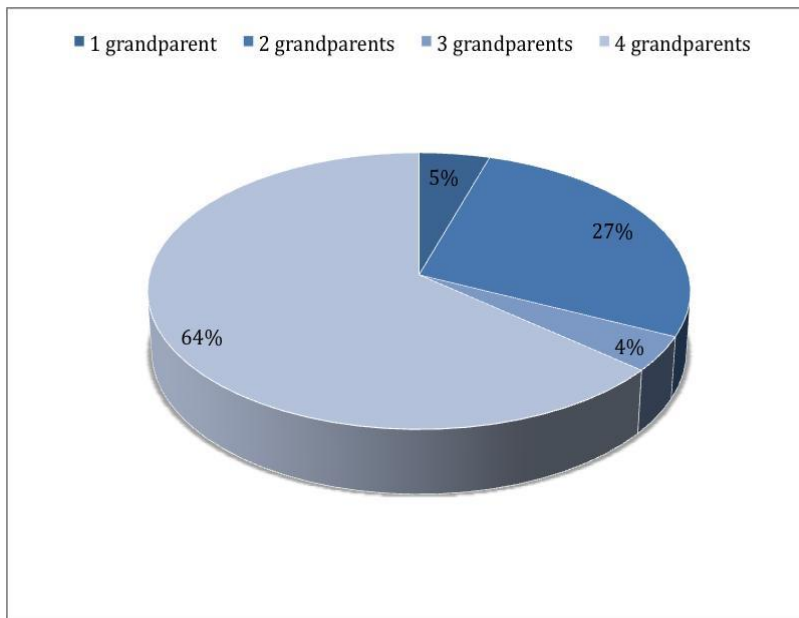
Notice the differences between Chart 1 (self-identified crucial issues for young people) and Chart 2 (what being Jewish means to them). Note also that these college students are remarkably similar to American Jews in general in the way they perceive their Jewish identity, as seen in the Pew results in Chart 2. Being Jewish for them personally means mostly, “remembering the Holocaust,” “leading an ethical and moral life,” and “being intellectually curious.” Belief in God and religious observance score very low. The Pew Survey of U.S. Jews discovered approximately the same patterns.

The students also emphasize the importance of “having Jewish children.” This is revealing since only about two-thirds of the students had four Jewish grandparents.

One of the unique contributions of the 2014 Jewish college student survey is a series of questions pertaining to grandparents. As seen in the pie chart below, one-third of the students were raised in interfaith families with one, two or even three non-Jewish grandparents. A fraction (1%) of students had no Jewish grandparents. Apparently they were adopted. A special report will be dedicated to intergenerational relationships covering three generations: the students, their parents and their grandparents.

Chart 3

“Thinking about your grandparents, how many are/were Jewish?”

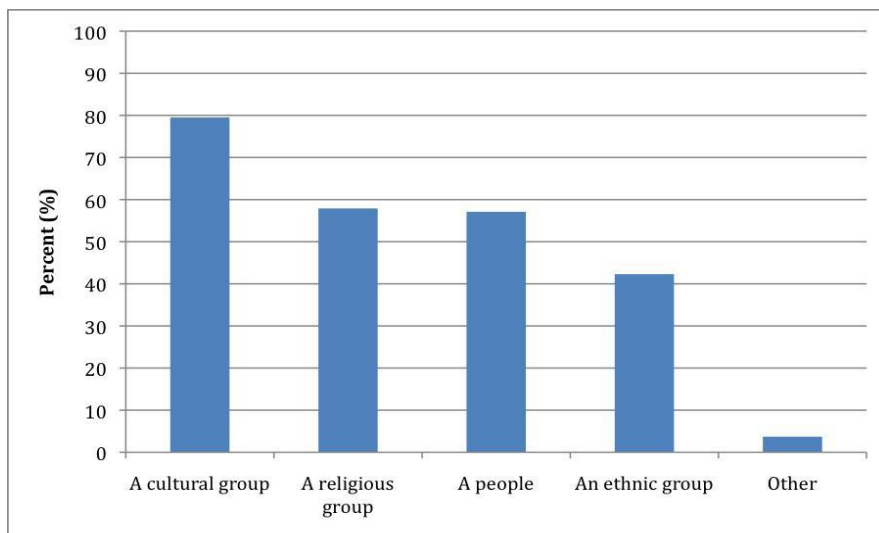


### *Judaism: Religion & Culture*

For a great majority (80%) of college students, being a Jew in America today primarily means being part of a cultural group.

Chart 4

“When you think what it means to be a young Jew in America today, would you say that it means being a member of ...”

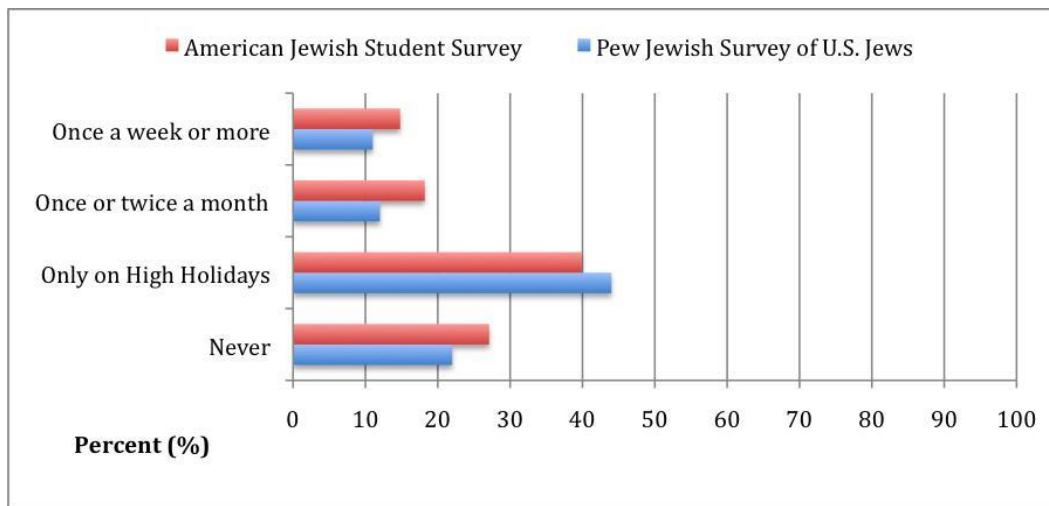


## A. Religion

College students are more polarized than American Jewish adults in general. A higher percentage say they attend regularly synagogue services, while at the same a higher percentage say they never attend services.

Chart 5

“Aside from special occasions like weddings, funerals and bar mitzvahs, how often do you attend Jewish religious services at a synagogue, temple, minyan?”



The low level of religiosity is not surprising given the pattern of worldviews among the Jewish students. A plurality of 39% consider themselves to be secular, 31% said they were spiritual and 23% said they were religious (unsure 7%). This contrasts with the overall worldviews pattern for American university students in general which in 2013 were more evenly distributed: religious 32%, spiritual 32%, and secular 28%.

## B. Culture

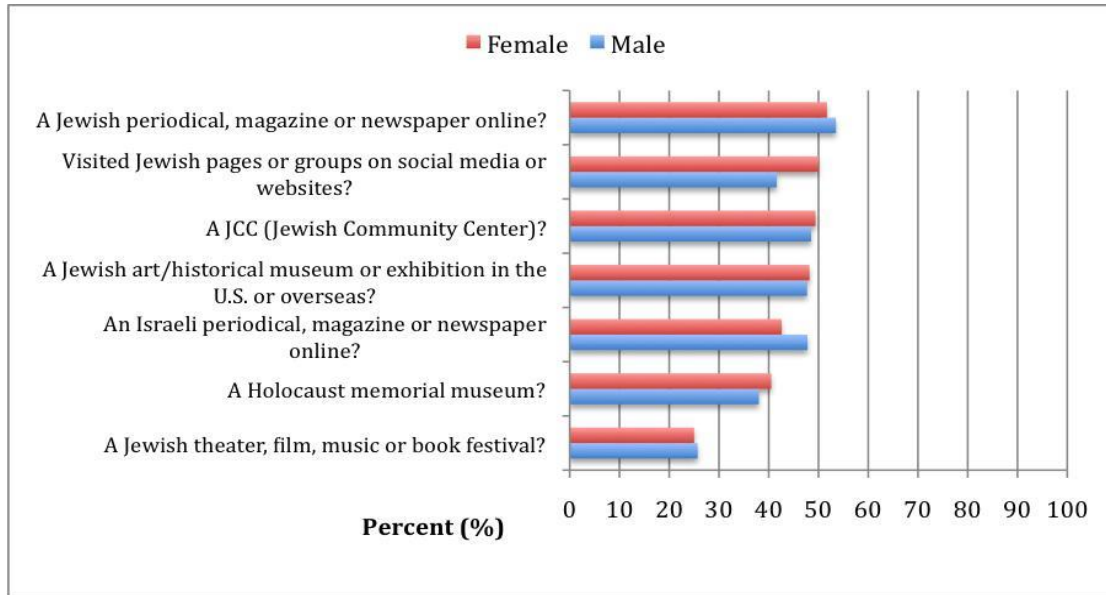
College students are more engaged in cultural Jewish activities than in religious activities. They read Jewish periodicals, visit Jewish pages on social media and visit a Jewish museum more than they do a synagogue. On culture issues, as in dating (Chart 6 below), males and females exhibit strongly similar behavior.

### *Anti-Semitism*

Anti-Semitism is on the radar of Jewish college students since 55% report experiencing anti-Semitism on campus in the past year, mainly from an individual student. Nevertheless, more than 66% of the students are always ‘open’ about their Jewish identity on campus.

Chart 6

“In the last 12 months, have you visited...”



### *Intermarriage*

As we found a decade ago (Keysar and Kosmin, 2004), only a small minority of Jewish college students limit themselves to dating only Jews. This generation might wish to have Jewish children in the future but currently they are not worried about inter-dating.

Chart 7

“Which of the following applies to you regarding your relationships?”

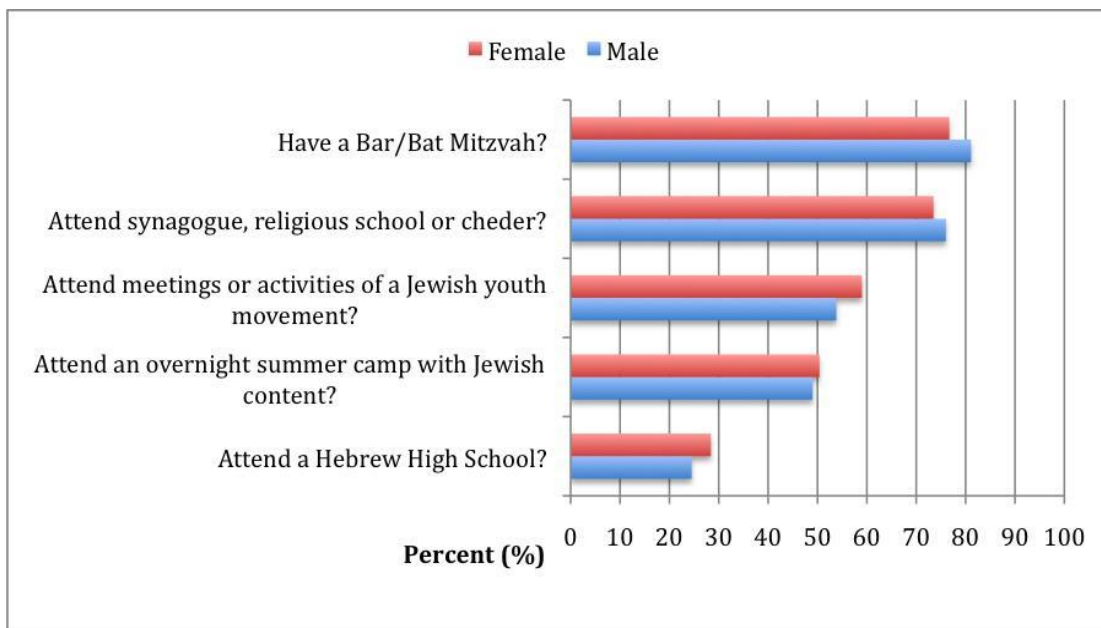
	Male	Female
All my previous boyfriends/girlfriends have been Jewish	14	12
My current relationship is my first one and s/he is Jewish	6	6
Some, but not all, of my previous boyfriends/girlfriends have been Jewish	31	31
My current relationship is my first one and s/he is not Jewish	7	7
None of my previous boyfriends/girlfriends have been Jewish	22	20
I have never been in a relationship	19	21
Prefer not to say	2	3
Don't know	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

## *Egalitarianism*

There were no statistically significant differences between the dating patterns of male and female Jewish college students (Chart 7). Perhaps part of the explanation is their similar Jewish educational experiences growing up: bar/bat mitzvah, Jewish youth group activities, attendance at Jewish summer camps, and religious school. In all, we found only minor differences between the upbringing of males and females of this millennial generation (Chart 8). This is very much an egalitarian generation in outlook and experiences.

Chart 8

“When you were growing up, did you...”



## METHODOLOGY

This online research study interviewed 1,157 self-identified Jewish students.<sup>1</sup> Despite its size and wide geographical coverage (see below), it cannot claim to be a nationally representative random sample for a number of practical reasons. Firstly, there is no known universe of the American Jewish student population and thus there is no sampling frame available for surveying it. Secondly, there is no available sampling frame for 4-year College and university student population of the U.S as a whole. Furthermore, there is no consensus among scholars and the Jewish communities concerning “who is a Jew?” and so the social boundaries of the Jewish population.

Low cooperation or response rates to surveys in general is a contemporary problem as reflected in the Pew Research Center’s 2013 telephone survey of U.S. Jews. Despite the geographic stratification of households in residential areas of high Jewish density, Pew achieved a 16% response rate with seven call-backs. The Trinity College on-line student surveys achieved 10-12% response rates with only one reminder. Students responded to an invitation by e-mail to participate in the survey. The sampling frame was taken from open-access databases of college students. Students were offered an incentive for their participation, a chance to win a gift certificate.

Our Jewish student sampling frame utilized an old identification technique; Distinctive Jewish Names (DJNs). However, the DJN list was updated to include 250 distinctively Jewish surnames covering Israeli, Sephardi, Russian and Iranian origin in addition to the usual and obvious Ashkenazi surnames. Yet even with a wider sampling frame our methodology inevitably resulted in a skew among the sub-sample of children of intermarriage towards those with Jewish fathers, since the Jewish surname is generally passed down by the father.

The net was deliberately cast wide: An e-mail message to the students said: “*We would like you to complete this survey if you consider yourself to be Jewish in any way, such as by religion, culture, ethnicity, parentage or ancestry.*” The methodology of an online survey using emails restricted our ability to contact and interview students at locations where privacy laws for state university systems, such as in California, prevented us; we sampled only private colleges in those states.

Nevertheless, in terms of key characteristics the Jewish students seem to mirror the overall national sample of American students, which we surveyed in 2013. That is not surprising because there was an overlap in coverage between the 38 colleges in the ARIS 2013<sup>2</sup> national college survey and the 55 institutions in the 2014 Jewish survey of which 23 were private and 32 were public universities. Freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors as well as a few graduate students took part. In both surveys, 59% of respondents were women and 41% men, reflecting the larger female student presence on U.S. campuses today. The similarity of the demographic

---

<sup>1</sup>This research project is supported by funding grants from the Pears Foundation, U.K.; Posen Foundation, Switzerland; Zachs and Mendelson Foundations, Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup>[http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2013/10/ARIS-2013\\_Students-Oct-01-final-draft.pdf](http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2013/10/ARIS-2013_Students-Oct-01-final-draft.pdf)



and educational characteristics allows for robust comparisons across the two national surveys of American students.

## **Authors**

Dr. Ariela Keysar, a demographer, is associate research professor in public policy and law and the associate director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture at Trinity College. She is a principal investigator of the Demographic Survey of American Jewish College Students, 2014; the National College Students Survey 2013; the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) 2008; and the Worldviews and Opinions of Scientists: India 2007-08. She is co-editor of *Secularism, Women & The State: The Mediterranean World in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 2009; *Secularism & Science in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 2008, and co-author of *Religion in a Free Market, Religious and Non-Religious Americans: Who, What, Why, and Where* (Paramount Market Publishing), 2006; and *The Next Generation: American Jewish Children and Adolescents*, SUNY Press, 2000.

Dr. Barry A. Kosmin is currently Research Professor of Public Policy and Law at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut and Founding Director of its Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSSC). He is a Senior Associate of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, University of Oxford, England.

Dr. Kosmin has been a principal investigator of the American Religious Identification Survey series since its inception in 1990 as well as national social surveys in Europe, Africa and Asia. He was Director of the U.S 1990 National Jewish Population Survey for the Council of Jewish Federations.