



Learning about the Montreal Jewish Community in 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MARCH 2021

Foreword

Dear Colleagues,

We are pleased to share with you our latest findings about the Montreal Jewish community. Based on data collected from a study which Federation CJA began in 2019, with support from the Jewish Community Foundation of Montreal, we now have a better understanding of the interests and desires of Jewish-identified and Jewish-adjacent people in the greater Montreal Jewish community.

We set out to do this study to assess the Jewish education, engagement, religious, cultural and social service interests of individuals in our community who have connected, participated, or engaged over the years with the array of institutions and programs being offered.

We have learned that we have a very unique Jewish community in Montreal. Our community is one that is diverse, while networked and connected to one another. It is a community that cares deeply about supporting its vulnerable, protecting its rich history, and securing its future. It is a community that places importance on Jewish education, celebrating Jewish holidays, and visiting Israel. We are committed to supporting the desire of families in our community to raise their children Jewishly by continuing to offer a variety of Jewish programming including camps, family programs, Shabbat events, and Israel travel opportunities.

As a result of this study, stakeholders can better understand the interests and desires of our community so that we can provide the programs, services, and initiatives that meet their needs and keep them engaged. Our community has shared with us what makes the rich tapestry of Jewish life in Montreal—and we must continue to make connection, inclusion, accessibility, and belonging our priorities in order to foster a unified and engaged community.

This study was made possible with the support of the Jewish Community Foundation of Montreal, a true partner and collaborator in our efforts to ensure a thriving, vibrant Jewish community in Montreal for future generations.

Thank you for your interest in this important work.



Gail Adelson Marcovitz
President



Yair Szlak
Chief Executive Officer

Introduction

The Montreal Jewish community is recognized for its unique cultural offerings, strong connection to Israel, and solid and centralized communal infrastructure that brings together a diverse and dynamic Jewish community. This diversity includes Jews of Sephardi and Ashkenazi heritage; English, French, Yiddish, Russian, and Hebrew speakers; and Haredi and secular groups. The community also includes people from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, residing in geographic areas throughout and around the island of Montreal.

These unique features of the community are set against a backdrop of broad trends and issues that many Jewish communities across North America (both in the US and in Canada) are contending with such as: shrinking legacy organizations (such as Federations and synagogues); talks of consolidations and mergers as some markets contract or redundancies and duplications are found; decreased financial sustainability of Jewish day schools; and a decreasing importance of religion for most Jews.

In late 2019, Federation CJA (FCJA), with support from the Jewish Community Foundation of Montreal, commissioned a study that would help community stakeholders better understand the interests and desires of Jewish-identified and Jewish-adjacent people in the greater Montreal Jewish community. FCJA sought to learn:

- ③ What Jewish programming, services, opportunities, or resources are desired by community members (whether they are currently available or not)?
- ③ How do various subpopulations of the community differ in their needs and interests?
- ③ What brings community members to choose not to avail themselves of programming and services within the Jewish community?



Study Design

The study was designed to learn about the Jewish educational, social, religious, and cultural experiences and interests of a broad array of Jewish-identified and Jewish-adjacent individuals across the community. Data collection began in late 2019, was paused due to COVID-19 in March 2020, resumed in September 2020, and concluded in late fall 2020. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to provide a rich portrait of community members' interests and desires.

QUANTITATIVE COMPONENT (SURVEY)

A survey, codesigned with FCJA leadership, was fielded widely (using anonymous links) with the help of Federation agencies and communal organizations from September 3 through October 3, 2020. FCJA professionals were provided with real-time response rate updates for specific populations and helped push the survey to various community partners to gain additional responses from a broad array of community members. In total, the survey garnered responses from 2,470 individuals.

The survey was designed to assess the Jewish education, engagement, and social service interests of, primarily, the individuals in this community who are somehow "connected"—who have, over the years, participated or engaged in some way, shape, or form with the array of institutions and programs that this community has to offer. The survey was not designed to determine the demographic makeup of the community—number of Jews/Jewish households, gender, age, geographic distribution, etc.

In addition to collecting basic Jewish and general demographics, the survey included three main "blocks" of questions. These sections focused on:

Assessing Interests: Questions about the types of leisure, social, cultural, educational, and religious activities respondents were interested in for themselves that have Jewish content or are hosted under Jewish auspices.

Health and Human Services: Questions about individual health and human services needs in the previous 12 months.

Community Connection and Barriers to Participation: Questions that asked about respondents' connection to the Montreal Jewish community and possible barriers they might experience that limit participation.

Two additional sections appeared for subgroups of interest to FCJA:

Families with Children: Questions about the Jewish educational priorities for families with young children and their satisfaction with the variety and quality of Jewish educational offerings for their children.

Interfaith Families: Questions about experiences of interfaith families in the Montreal Jewish community.

QUALITATIVE COMPONENT (INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS)

In-person and virtual focus groups and interviews were conducted with 160 people, with attention paid to specific subgroups of interest to FCJA leadership, including Francophone, Haredi, LGBTQ+, Interfaith, and Russian-Speaking Jews. Focus groups included participants with a range of levels of engagement in Jewish communal activities. Voices of agency and synagogue professionals and volunteers, as well as members of FCJA's Board of Directors, were also included in the study.



Survey Demographics

Survey respondents represent a diverse cross-section of the Jewish community in Montreal, including individuals distributed geographically across and around the island of Montreal (with 44% in Cote St. Luc and Hampstead); with varying mother tongues (English 70%, French 13%, Yiddish 6%, Hebrew 3%, Russian 2%); and of a diversity of ages/generations, gender, and relationship/family status (including 24% single, 76% in a relationship, and 41% families with children). Additionally, the respondent pool included individuals representing a range of socioeconomic status brackets: 13% categorized as low SES; 33% medium SES; and 54% high SES.¹

In terms of connection to the community, 65% report that they or someone in their household are members a synagogue, and 52% report that they or someone in their household are members of other Jewish organizations. Nearly 80% indicate that most or all their friends are Jewish. Denominationally, 36% identified as Orthodox/Modern Orthodox/Chabad/Haredi; 26% as Just Jewish/Post-denominational; 23% as Conservative; and 15% as Reform/Renewal/Reconstructionist/Humanist.

NOTES

¹ These socioeconomic brackets are consistent with the Environics (2018) Study of Canadian Jewry. The approach uses self-perception of income rather than a specific income amount for categorization. Responses to the question, "Which of the following best describes your total household income at the present time?" were categorized into three categories. Responses of: "Not enough for you and you are having a hard time," and "Not enough for you and you are stretched" were categorized as low SES; "Just enough for you, so that you do not have major problems" were categorized as medium SES, and "Good enough for you and you can save from it" were categorized as high SES.

Key Findings

The study provides insight into the priorities and interests of a cross-section of Montreal's Jewish community and importantly presents some important challenges to participation and engagement. It also provides important perspectives from families with children (ages 0-18) and their experiences and satisfaction with the variety and quality of Jewish education in Montreal.

Importance of Providing Social Services and Overall Satisfaction

One of the unique characteristics of the Montreal Jewish community that emerges from the study is the extent to which respondents place importance on providing direct social services to its most vulnerable populations through Jewish auspices. On average, 72% indicate that this is very important, suggesting that they view the Jewish community as responsible for taking care of its own. Concerns for the elderly rank high, but notably so do concerns for youth and families. This reflects a community that is both concerned with protecting its legacy as well as its future. Additionally, respondents who utilize the community's social and health services tend to be highly satisfied with those services (an average of 3.65 out of 4).

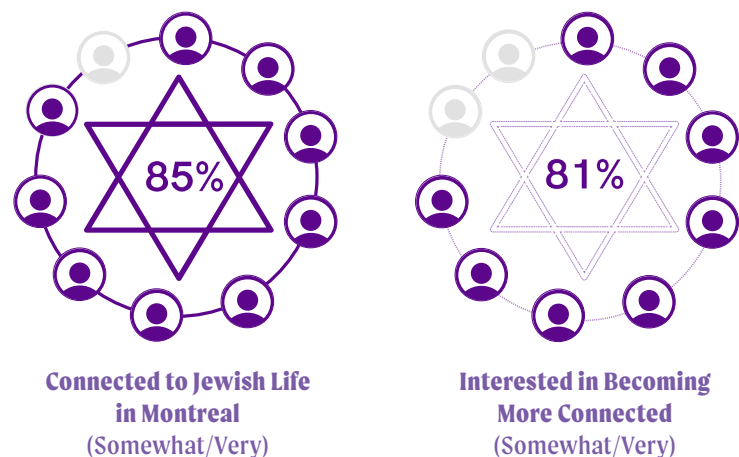
What Do People Want (or Want More of)?

One of the main areas of inquiry captured in the study was to learn what individuals want or want more of from the Montreal Jewish community and what their interests and desires are when it comes to their Jewish lives. When looking at data according to these subgroups, it is important to keep in mind that many of the subgroups may overlap with one another. For example, 90% of Francophone respondents are Sephardic; 49% of those in the low SES group are Orthodox (compared to 32% Orthodox in the high SES group); 12% of interfaith respondents identify as LGBTQ+ (vs. 1% of inmarried); and 32% of the low SES group are Sephardic (vs. 15% of the high SES group).

CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY

Forty-two percent (42%) of respondents indicated that they feel very connected to Jewish life in Montreal, and just over one-quarter expressed an interest in becoming more connected to the community. Interest in becoming more connected varies by subgroup, with highest interest among Sephardi, Millennials, Orthodox, and families with young children, and lower interest among the Silent generation and Reform-affiliated subgroups.

Exhibit I: Connection to Jewish Life and Interest in Being More Connected



Of the 15% who indicated that they are not currently connected to the Montreal Jewish community, 20% express an interest in becoming more connected. We heard in focus groups a sense of longing for connection and belonging more than any specific programmatic/organizational need.

*“At the end, it’s all about community. It’s all about connecting.
It’s all about people in your life.”*



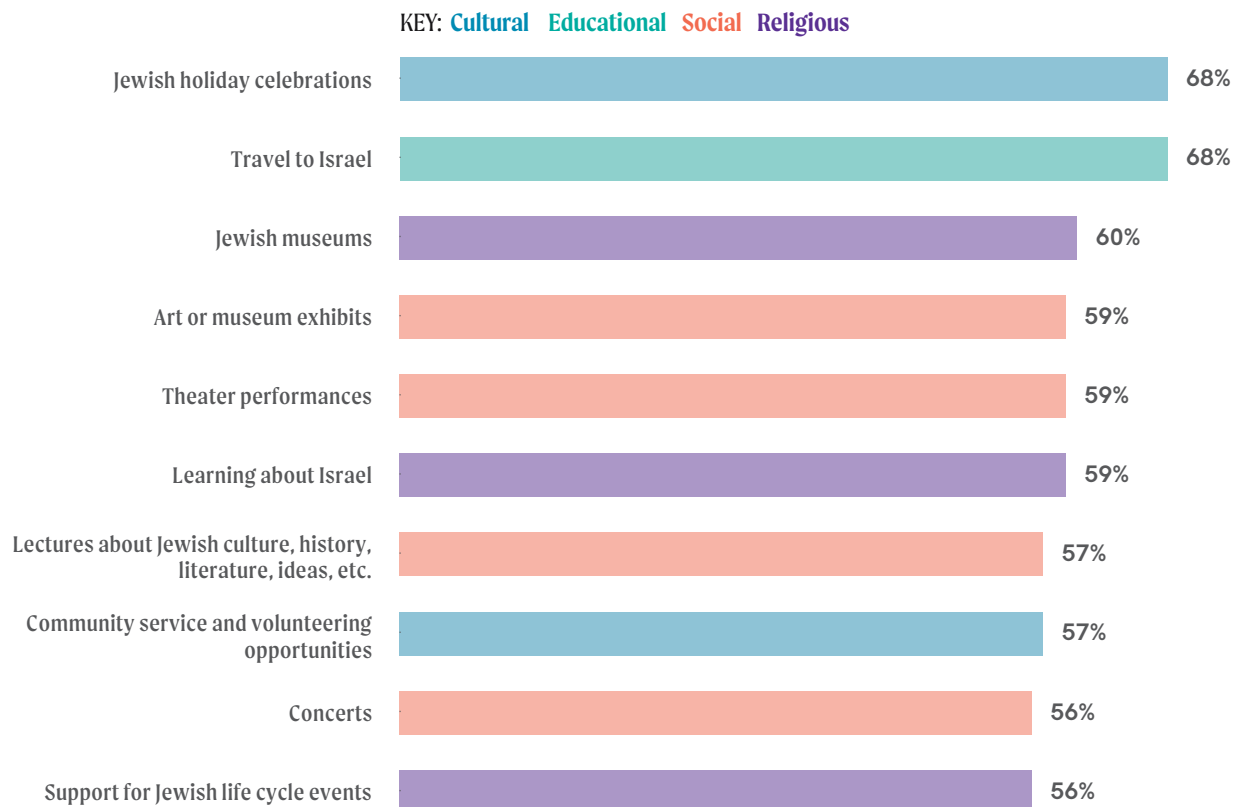
*“To me it’s community, when I think of my Judaism, it’s having a
community, people to connect with, have similar experiences with
and grow altogether with same beliefs and understandings.”*



GAUGING INTEREST IN DIFFERENT KINDS OF PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES

The survey asked about peoples’ interest in various educational, social, religious, and cultural activities and programs. The educational domain included things like learning about Israel, and Jewish text study. The social domain included activities like volunteering, sports activities, and travel to Israel. The religious domain included activities like Jewish holiday celebrations and lifecycle events, traditional synagogue services or alternative spiritual experiences. The cultural domain included activities like theater and art exhibits, concerts, and Jewish cooking classes. For each activity, respondents were asked to rate their level of interest on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = “Not at all interested” and 5 = “Extremely interested.”

Exhibit 2: Top 10 Interests Across All Domains (% Interested/Extremely Interested)



While overall, **educational**, **social**, and **religious** interest were all rated similarly (with 2.9 average interest out of 5), **cultural interest stood out with much higher ratings on average** (average interest ratings of 3.3/5). This tends to hold true across a variety of subgroups including across generations, levels of connection to the community, and especially among certain marginalized groups like LGBTQ+ and Interfaith. An exploration of interests by subgroups reveals important nuances that speak to the diversity of the Montreal community.

Generation:² Millennials and Gen X respondents indicate higher interest in **social** and **religious** activities, while older generations are more interested in **cultural** activities. There are no significant generational differences in **educational** interests.

Denomination: Levels of interest (in all activities) are higher overall among the Orthodox affiliated, with **religious** and **educational** activities significantly higher for this group. **Cultural** activities are by far of highest interest to non-Orthodox affiliated compared to the **educational**, **social**, and **religious** areas, though **culture** remains of high interest to the Orthodox group as well.

Socioeconomic Status: Interest levels across **educational**, **social**, and **religious** activities are higher among those with lower socioeconomic status, with **religious** interests ranking highest for this subgroup, just slightly above the others. This is likely due to the high coincidence of Orthodox affiliation and low SES. This suggests an inverse relationship between income and interest (the higher one's income the less overall interest in Jewish communal activities across the board).

Mother Tongue/Heritage Language: Interest levels across domains are high among Francophone respondents (who are 90% Sephardic), and interest in **religious** activities is among the highest in this subgroup, consistent with findings for coincident subgroups like low SES and Orthodox. For the Russian-Speaking Jews subgroup, **social** and **cultural** interests are much stronger than **religious** activities.

Relationship Status: **Social** programs hold steady interest across different relationship statuses, but interest in **religious** activities is higher among families with children, likely because of higher interest in family holiday and Shabbat programming for this demographic.

Marginalized Groups: Interest in **cultural** activities is significantly higher among more marginal groups like LGBTQ+ and interfaith than the other areas of activity.

Level of Connection to Community: There appears to be a positive and mutually reinforcing relationship between respondents' connection to the community and their levels of interest. Those who feel more strongly connected to the community tend to demonstrate higher levels of interest across all domains—but particularly in **religious** activities and programs. Those who are less connected place least importance in **religious** activities and highest interest in the **cultural** area. This reinforcing relationship might suggest that getting people "in the door," through attending and participating, could increase desire for more connection.

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² **Generation Z:** Born between 2000 to 2016; currently ages 5 to 21; **Millennials (or Generation Y):** Born between 1980 to 2000; currently ages 21–41; **Generation X:** Born between 1965 to 1979; currently ages 41–55; **Baby Boomers:** Born between 1946 to 1964; currently ages 56–74; **Silent:** Born before 1946; currently 75 and older.

Overall, across these four domains, the way people learn about these opportunities and offerings for the community is by word of mouth (68%) more than any other mode of communication, with synagogue communications (51%), social media (48%), and email (48%) next in line.

In sum, cultural programs and activities are of greatest interest across a wide variety of subpopulations of the Jewish community in Montreal. Nevertheless, understanding how this plays out differently among subgroups provides important nuance that allows the community to attend and adapt to the unique needs of different subsectors of the community.

Deep Dive: What's Important to Families with Children?

When asked about their hopes and dreams for their children, a majority of respondents indicated that celebrating holidays (85%), visiting Israel (70%), and having Jewish friends (66%) were very important—much more so than general participation in Jewish communal activities (51%), belonging to youth organizations (29%), keeping kosher (29%), or attending a supplementary school program (8%). Other areas of engagement might be considered “flashpoints” for families: very important to some and less so to others. This is particularly true regarding how important it is for these families that their children marry someone Jewish or attend a Jewish day school, synagogue, or summer camp.

Certain activities appear to be of moderate importance overall, yet they are of very high importance to certain subgroups. In general, the segmentation here is consistent. Orthodox, Sephardi, and low SES subgroups (not mutually exclusive) rank these higher than subgroups identifying as secular and Reform.

⊖ Marry someone who identifies as Jewish
⊖ Attend a Jewish day school

⊖ Attend Jewish summer camp
⊖ Attend synagogue

Variety and Quality of Educational Offerings

In both the survey and focus groups, study participants made clear that Jewish education is a core value. Nevertheless, only 38% of those participating in organized Jewish educational programming indicated that they were very satisfied with the variety of educational offerings available to families in Montreal.

“I would never compromise my children’s Jewish education for anything in the world.”



“Faudrait établir certaines priorités pour assurer la pérennité de notre communauté et cela commence par assurer l’éducation juive pour tous nos enfants.”





The perceived quality of educational programming ranges widely depending on venue, with overnight immersive experiences and preschool ranking significantly higher than others like day school, day camp, and yeshivas. Jewish supplementary school ranked the lowest, with only 37% very satisfied with the quality of the program. Focus group data suggest that within the day school system, quality concerns stem from both Jewish and secular components of the program.

“People should not graduate from Jewish school with very limited knowledge of Jewish religious, cultural, or linguistic content (as happens in some cases).”



“I think the most important priority for our children is ensuring they learn French. Families, like my own, have to decide to send our kids to French school and lose the benefit of a Jewish education or send our kids to Jewish school knowing we are hurting our children’s future here in Quebec.”



Parents choosing not to send their children to day school (for cost and quality reasons) express the need for wraparound choices to support raising their children Jewishly (e.g., camp, family programs, Shabbat events, Israel travel).

“The cost of Jewish day schooling is rising extremely quickly, is almost out of control, to the point of turning many families off of a Jewish education purely because of the cost of tuition.”



Challenges to Participation in Montreal Jewish Life

“Please make more of an effort ... a real concerted effort to LGBTQ+ inclusion. ... This is so critical to our children and to so many in our community who live their entire lives in hiding or are forced to leave the community to find acceptance.”



“There are people of all backgrounds and family status in Montreal, and working towards inclusivity means supporting members who have other ways of connecting with the community and their identity.”



THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD OF DIVERSITY

The diversity of Montreal’s Jewish community is perceived both as one of its most unique and special features as well as one of its greatest challenges. Statements regarding diversity were among the most common of all open-ended responses to the survey, and similar themes emerged in focus groups. These comments represent a wide range of views. On the one hand, there are comments suggesting the community needs to be more welcoming of interfaith couples; on the other, some respondents’ greatest concern is the rise of intermarriage. There are comments suggesting that the community needs to be open to critical views regarding Israel, while some respondents emphasize the threat of anti-Israel sentiment and the importance of FCJA efforts to continue defending Israel.

The survey asked about how open and welcoming respondents experience the Montreal Jewish community to be of a variety of marginalized groups. Exhibit 4 indicates the overall perception of lack of welcome for certain marginalized groups.

Exhibit 4: Percent who think Montreal Jewish organizations are not/slightly welcoming of:



Notably, the perception of the community is worse among those who identify as part of those marginalized groups. For example, the perception that the community is not welcoming of interfaith relationships is held by 58% of LGBTQ+ respondents and 45% of interfaith respondents. And the perception that the community is not welcoming of LGBTQ+ individuals jumps to 60% among LGBTQ+ identifying respondents and 47% among interfaith respondents. The perception of lack of welcome extends among these subgroups to

their view of how welcoming Montreal is to other marginalized groups. The perception of Montreal as not welcoming to People of Color jumps to 64% among LGBTQ+ identifying individuals and 46% among those in interfaith relationships.³ Additionally, many open-ended survey responses (particularly from those who do not define themselves as Orthodox) suggested that the community needs to be more welcoming of progressive Jewish ideas.

INSULARITY AND INCLUSION

Insularity: The critique that the Montreal Jewish community is not inclusive enough of people with diverse backgrounds and with diverse and divergent points of view on any number of issues may contribute to an experience of the community being insular. This perspective was particularly strong for families who chose not to send their children to Jewish day schools. Forty percent (40%) of parents who do not send their children to these schools reported that this was because the schools are too insular. Focus group participants suggested that Jewish education can be too parochial in worldview. The perspective that day schools are too insular was much stronger among individuals who identified as interfaith, secular, and LGBTQ+ (well over 50% for each of those groups).

Inclusion: Perhaps related to this insularity is the perception that the Montreal Jewish community is not inclusive, or difficult to penetrate. Particularly for those who are currently less engaged, the strength of longstanding social and family connections, alongside many shared school/camp experiences among a significant portion of the community can make newcomers and seekers feel they do not belong.

"I haven't felt like my most Jewish self anywhere for a long time. Maybe most in my home. Wherever I go I feel like an outsider, maybe because every place I go to, some people fit in that bubble, and [our family are] more like wandering Jews."



Of particular interest to FCJA were people in lower SES brackets, those with disabilities (including those who take care of others with disabilities), and those who identify as Sephardic.

- ② Among survey respondents in the low SES brackets, a third do not feel that appropriate discounts are available for people like them. The majority of those who feel this way (82%) agree that people with limited financial means feel overlooked or slighted.
- ② Among survey respondents with disabilities (chronic physical illness or ongoing psychological discomfort, or caring for a family member with disability or illness), only a small percentage (14%) do not agree that steps are being made to make programs truly accessible. Yet, the majority of these people (72%) agree that efforts to include people with disabilities are insufficient.
- ② Among Sephardic survey respondents, 25% feel that people from different ethnic backgrounds are not welcome in the community. Of those, the majority (76%) also agree that programs are overly focused on the Ashkenazi community.

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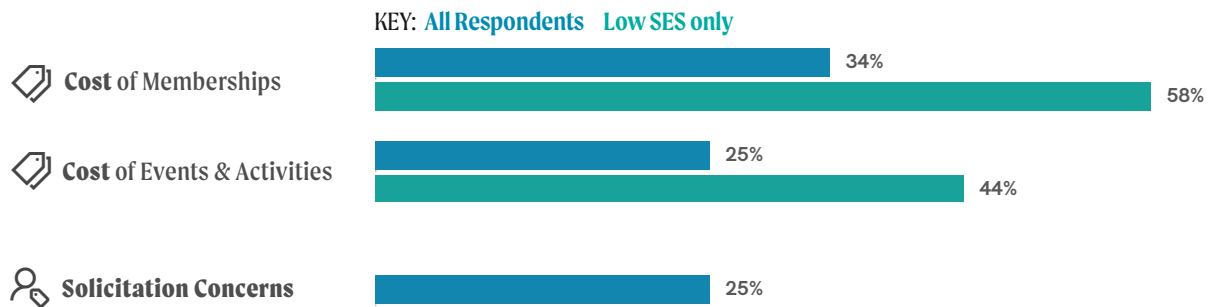
³The survey did not have sufficient responses from individuals who identified as People of Color to allow for statistical analysis as a group.

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION: TIME AND MONEY

Sixty-four percent (64%) of participants indicated that they experience barriers to participation in Jewish life. Particularly salient challenges relate to financial concerns.

Time is an important barrier to participation in Jewish life, particularly for younger people and families with children (49%). Related to this are concerns about cost. Program and membership fees are a deterrent as is a concern about being solicited for funds when attending events (especially for lower income groups).

Exhibit 5: Barriers to Participation (% excluding those who don't find it difficult to participate)



Housing Costs and Implications for Centralized Community Offerings

Many focus group participants discussed the challenges of finding affordable housing in Jewish neighborhoods. While some prioritize Jewish neighborhoods for religious reasons, choosing to live within these areas adds additional financial strain on top of other major financial commitments like day school and kosher food. Others are choosing to move further away and therefore find traveling to Jewish neighborhoods (where programs and activities tend to take place) more burdensome.

Middle-Income Squeeze

Focus groups revealed increasing financial strain on middle income families who do not necessarily receive financial aid or who feel uncomfortable or embarrassed applying for financial aid.



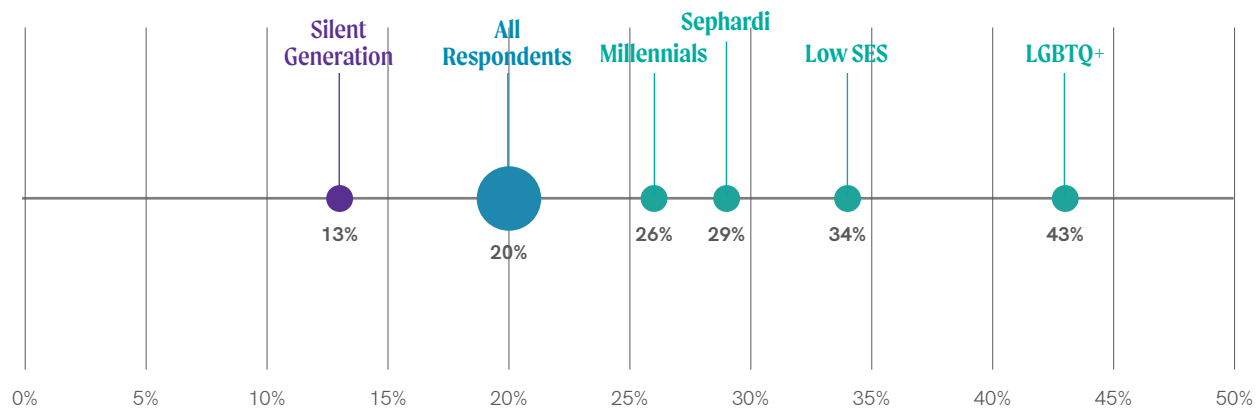
"I think for many generations, there were expectations that the children will do better... than their parents. ... And I think the state of the world right now doesn't necessarily bode that well. We can't be assured of that for our children."



ANTISEMITISM AND SECURITY

Twenty percent (20%) of survey respondents indicated that they have experienced some form of antisemitism in the past 12 months (with higher percentages in certain subgroups as noted in Exhibit 6). Still, focus group participants spoke about rising and “tacit” antisemitism they experience. Some students on campus described how engaging in Israel advocacy can feel dangerous, and some young professionals shared stories of tacit antisemitism they experience in the workplace, especially for anglophone Jews. LGBTQ+ individuals spoke about the unique challenge of choosing between their Jewish identity and their LGBTQ+ identities particularly around support of Israel. Still, other participants did not share a sense of insecurity. They feel at home and comfortable, and accommodated as Jews in Quebec. On a related note, 54% of survey respondents rated the community’s security efforts as good or excellent.

Exhibit 6: Experiencing Antisemitism (% experienced in past 12 months)



“I’m actually so incredibly grateful to be living in Canada now and I’m thrilled that I’m not in the States, and I feel safe and I feel secure. ... I know a lot of people will disagree with me, but I think that we’re in the best place that we can be right now. But we still have that that anti-Semitic anti-Anglo xenophobic leadership ... in the back of our minds.”



“[I] am afraid that between the [percent] of mixed marriages and the mounting antisemitism, the future looks bleak.”



Summary of Findings

This study reveals important patterns about community members' interests and desires around Jewish engagement and education as well as some of the common challenges and barriers to their participation.

- ⊕ The Montreal Jewish community cares deeply about providing support to its most vulnerable populations (rather than relying on government or secular organizations to provide that support) and is generally very satisfied with the services the community provides. This is a unique characteristic of the community and speaks to its connectedness and interconnectedness.
- ⊕ Cultural programming tends to be of highest interest to all, but important nuances exist across a variety of subgroups that highlight the diversity of the community.
- ⊕ Interest levels are highest across all types of activities among those who feel most connected to the community.
- ⊕ A significant portion of the study sample are interested in becoming more engaged than they currently are in Jewish communal life, yet 64% of respondents experience some form of barrier to participation (cost in particular).
- ⊕ The community's diversity is both a blessing and a challenge. Fostering cultures of inclusion and belonging across such diversity might be the gateway to greater feelings of connection and ultimately engagement and participation.



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