



Advocating for attitudes, policies and programs that engage interfaith families in Jewish life and community

Review and Analysis of the Interfaith Marriage Data in the Pew Research Center's Jewish Americans in 2020 Report

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Rates of Interfaith Marriage

There is a continuing very high rate of interfaith marriage: 72% of non-Orthodox Jews who married between 2010 and 2020 intermarried (p. 93) (compared to 61% of all Jews (p. 94)); 42% of all married Jews (p. 93) and 47% of all married non-Orthodox Jews (p. 39) are intermarried. The high rate will continue because 82% of married Jews who are the children of intermarried parents are intermarried themselves (p. 98) (compared to 34% of children of two Jewish parents (p. 40)). This trend is apace with increased religious intermarriage in the United States (p. 95) and increased diversity in marriages of young adults – 21% of those who married between 2010 and 2020 have a spouse of a different race or ethnicity (p. 96).

The report explicitly states that its intermarriage rates are those of Jewish *individuals* who are intermarried, not the percentage of *couples* who are intermarried, and that “a couples intermarriage rate is always higher, because two Jews who are married to each other count as one couple, while two Jews who are intermarried count as two couples” (p. 94). Applying simple math, a 72% individual rate suggests an 84% couples rate: if there are 100 Jews and 72 intermarry, 72 intermarried couples are formed; the other 28 Jews marry each other, forming 14 inmarried couples, for a total of 86 couples; 72 intermarried of 82 total equals 84%. However, Alan Cooperman, Pew’s Director of Religion Research, has said that this kind of math can’t be applied to a survey dataset. Suffice it to say that close to or more than three-quarters of the new Jewish households being formed are interfaith households.

Jewish Identity and Childraising in Interfaith Families

Because of differences in the ways the surveys were conducted, the Pew Research Center cautions against finding trends in comparing results from the 2013 and 2020 surveys (pp. 11-12). But on the crucial question of how children in interfaith families are raised, the percentage raised with some Judaism is now 69%, compared to 61% in 2013. Moreover, only 12% of interfaith families now say they are raising their children partly Jewish and something else, compared to 25% in 2013. (The report also says that out of 2,400,000 children living in Jewish households, 200,000, or 8%, are being raised both Jewish by religion and in another religion (p. 51)).

% of intermarrieds who say they are raising their children:	2013 (p. 67)	2020 (p. 102)
• Jewish by religion	20% (cf. 96% of inmarrieds)	28% (cf. 93% of inmarrieds)
• Jewish but not by religion	16%	29%
• Partly Jewish by religion	25%	12%
Sub-total with some Judaism	61%	69%
• Not Jewish	37%	30%

On the issue of identity retention, the report says that 68% of those raised Jewish or who had at least one Jewish parent now identify as Jewish; 32% do not. The highest retention is among those raised Jewish by religion: 90% identify as Jewish, 10% do not. Of those raised Jewish not by religion, still 76% identify as Jewish, 24% do not. Even among those not raised exclusively Jewish but who had at least one Jewish parent, 29% identify as Jewish; 71% do not, with 46% identifying as Christian (p. 42). Of adults who identify as Jewish and had at least one Jewish parent, 10% were not raised Jewish and 5% were raised in another religion and Jewish not by religion (p. 104). Of adults who identify as Jewish and had at least one Jewish parent and who are intermarried, 12% were not raised Jewish and 8% were raised in another religion and Jewish not by religion (p. 104).

Identity retention is of particular interest concerning the children of intermarried parents. Of the youngest Jewish adults, ages 18-29, 46% have one Jewish parent (p. 107) (the 2013 report data, as analyzed by Ted Sasson, indicated that 48% of Jews born after 1980 had one Jewish parent). Of those raised Jewish with two Jewish parents, 91% identify as Jewish; of those raised Jewish with one Jewish parent, 40% identify as Jewish, 60% do not (p. 43). However, there is a continuing trend for more younger than older children of intermarried parents to identify as Jews: 21% of children of intermarried parents who are 50 or older identify as Jews, compared to 47% of those who are 18-49 (p. 43). The 2013 report said that 59% of those 18-29 identified as Jews, but because the 2020 report doesn't provide data for the 18-29 age group, the results can't be compared. The report does state that the pattern found in the 2013 survey continues (pp. 43-44):

“[A]mong people who have just one Jewish parent, younger cohorts are more likely than those ages 50 and older to be Jewish as adults, suggesting that the share of intermarried Jewish parents who pass on their Jewish identity to their children may have increased over time. Or, put somewhat differently, the share of the offspring of intermarriages who choose to be Jewish in adulthood seems to be rising.”

The report states that among those who were raised Jewish or had at least one Jewish parent, 95% of those who are inmarried identify as Jewish, compared to 56% of those who are intermarried (pp. 43-44). It states:

“[T]his does not necessarily mean that marrying a non-Jewish spouse pulls people away from their Jewish identity. The causal arrow could just as easily point in the other direction: People whose Jewish identity is relatively weak may consider it less important to marry a Jewish spouse.”

The 2020 survey asked new questions about the importance of passing on Jewish identity; only 11% of intermarrieds, compared to 59% of inmarrieds, said it was very important that their grandchildren be Jewish (p. 103). It also asked a new question whether “continuing family traditions” was an essential part of what being Jewish means; 37% of intermarrieds said it was, compared to 70% of inmarrieds (p. 65).

The 2020 survey reports on parentage: 62% of intermarrieds had two Jewish parents, compared to 88% of inmarrieds. Related to the issue of patrilineal descent, 14% of intermarrieds had Jewish fathers, while 19% had Jewish mothers; 23% of all Jews ages 18-29 have Jewish fathers, while 22% have Jewish mothers (p. 107). There are a large number of young patrilineal Jews.

Religious and Cultural Engagement

The report notes that “in general, Jews are far less religious than American adults as a whole” (p. 22). Only 28% of intermarrieds say that religion is very or somewhat important to them, compared to 66% of inmarrieds (p. 59). Being Jewish is more about ancestry and culture to intermarrieds and less about religion (p. 63).

On measures of traditional religious observance, there is a continued pattern of less participation by intermarrieds as compared to inmarrieds: 5% attended services at least monthly in the last year compared to 36% of inmarrieds (p. 80) (2013 figures were 9% and 41% (p. 72)); 45% held or attended a Seder in the last year compared to 86% (p. 72) (2013 figures were 54% and 91% (p. 77)); 33% fasted for all or part of the last Yom Kippur compared to 64% (p. 72) (2013 figures were 34% and 75% (p. 77)). Thirteen percent of intermarrieds live in households where someone is a synagogue member, compared to 60% of inmarrieds (p. 82) (2013 figures were 14% and 59% (p. 60)).

The report asks new questions about twelve Jewish practices and customs that it describes as “cultural” as opposed to religious engagement, different ways people express Jewishness: “many engage with Judaism in some way, whether through holidays, food choices, cultural connections or life milestones” (p. 70). The report does not provide detailed comparisons between inmarrieds and intermarrieds on all of these measures. It does say that 25% of intermarrieds “mark Shabbat in a personally meaningful way” often or sometimes, compared to 56% of inmarrieds (p. 73). It also says that 74% of intermarrieds own a menorah, compared to 96% of inmarrieds, and 40% own a Seder plate, compared to 80% of inmarrieds (p. 78).

One measure described as “cultural” appears to be particularly significant and points to the centrality of celebrating Jewish holidays: 61% of intermarrieds “share Jewish culture/holidays with non-Jewish friends,” close to the 66% of inmarrieds who do so (p. 75). The report says that 79% of all Jews don’t attend services at least monthly; of those, 55% (which represents 44% of all Jews) say they express their Jewishness in different ways (p. 83); of those, 74% (p. 26) (which represents 32% of all Jews) say they share Jewish culture/holidays with non-Jewish friends.

The 2020 report asked new questions about why people did not go to services. One reason, “don’t think I know enough to participate,” was given by 24% of intermarrieds, compared to

14% of intermarriers, according to Pew Research Center data shared with the Center. Feeling not knowledgeable or competent may be an obstacle for interfaith couples' engagement not only with regard to religious services, but more generally.

Welcoming and Belonging

The 2013 report famously found that 89% of intermarriers were proud to be Jewish but only 59% said they had a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people (p. 52). The 2020 report did not ask the "proud to be Jewish" question and the published report does not include data on sense of belonging among intermarriers. However, according to Pew Research Center data shared with the Center, only 27% of intermarriers feel a sense of belonging to the Jewish people "a great deal," compared to 72% of intermarriers; 51% of intermarriers feel a sense of belonging "some," compared to 23% of intermarriers. The report also includes that only 12% of intermarriers say that being part of a Jewish community is an essential part of what being Jewish means to them, compared to 51% of intermarriers (p. 66).

The 2020 report asked new questions about why people did not go to services. Given that Jews are generally not religious, it's regrettable that that question was not asked about other ways people engage Jewishly. Responses included 23% who said "I don't know enough to participate"; 11% who said "I feel pressured to do more or give more"; 7% who said "I don't feel welcome"; and 4% who said "people treat me like I don't really belong" (p. 83). Separate figures for reasons given by intermarriers and intermarriers are not included in the published report, except that of intermarriers, 8% say they don't feel welcome (p. 85). According to Pew Research Center data shared with the Center, of intermarriers, 10% gave the "I feel pressured" answer, and 4% the "treated like I don't belong" answer.

The published 2020 report does not include data on Jewish friends, another measure relevant to feelings of belonging, but according to Pew Research Center data shared with the Center, 7% of intermarriers say that "all/most" of their close friends are Jewish, compared to 52% of intermarriers; 55% of intermarriers and 39% of intermarriers say "some," so that in total 62% of intermarriers compared to 92% of intermarriers say that "all/most" and "some" of their close friends are Jewish.

Caring about or feeling connected with Israel is a traditional measure of Jewish belonging. The report states that 31% of intermarriers say that caring about Israel is an essential part of what being Jewish means to them, compared to 57% of intermarriers (p. 66). It also states that 46% of intermarriers say that they have a lot or some in common with Jews in Israel, compared to 78% of intermarriers (p. 116). The published report does not say how many intermarriers feel emotional attachment to Israel, or travel to Israel (which the report shows is linked to attachment) (p. 139), or feel responsible to help Jews in need (p. 113). According to Pew Research Center data shared with the Center, however, 44% of intermarriers compared to 73% of intermarriers feel very or somewhat emotionally attached to Israel; 33% of intermarriers compared to 61% of intermarriers have been to Israel once or more; and 17% of intermarriers compared to 41% of intermarriers say they feel responsible "a great deal" to help Jews in need around the world.

Changing Attitudes About Interfaith Marriage

Data in the report suggests two ways that attitudes about intermarriage are changing. First, support for rabbis officiating at weddings of interfaith couples is high, with 64% of all Jews in favor, 53% of Conservative Jews, and 80% of intermarried Jews (p. 99) Second, only 22% of all Jews say it is very important that their grandchildren marry Jews; 44% of inmarrieds say that is important, compared to 1% of intermarrieds (p. 103).

Religious Movements

Of Conservative Jews, 25% are intermarried, compared to 42% of Reform (p. 98). In addition, 30% of those raised Conservative now identify as Reform (p. 44) and 23% of those who identify as Reform were raised Conservative (p.105). Only 41% of those raised Conservative still identify as Conservative (p. 44). Many people think that the Conservative movement has lost membership because of its relatively less welcoming policies with respect to interfaith marriage.

Other Data

Some other items of interest:

- 79% of Jews of no religion are intermarried; 21% are inmarried (p. 94)
- Intermarrieds as compared to inmarrieds get more meaning and fulfillment from spending time with their pets (50% compared to 31%), and from spending time in the outdoors (61% compared to 49%) (p. 69)
- Intermarrieds don't go to Chabad as much as inmarrieds (16% to 47%) (p. 79)
- Fewer intermarrieds than inmarrieds often or sometimes engage in political action as an expression of their Jewishness (22% to 37%) (p. 76).
- Nine percent of intermarrieds compared to 3% of inmarrieds identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual (p. 195)
- Data in the report may suggest that 5% of those who identify as Jewish are converts, although it's not clear whether a formal conversion was involved – 5% of adults who currently identify as Jewish were not raised Jewish and did not have a Jewish parent (p. 104)
- Among Jews ages 25-34, one quarter have been on a Birthright Israel trip (p. 47)
- Of those raised Orthodox, only 67% still identify as Orthodox, 33% do not; of those raised Reform, 66% still identify as Reform (p. 44).

Diversity

Data on diversity in the Jewish community includes:

- 8% of all Jews, and 15% of those ages 18-29, are other than White (non-Hispanic) (p. 11), and 17% of all Jews live in households where someone is other than White (non-Hispanic) (p. 37)
- 11% of all married Jews have a different race/ethnicity than their spouse (p. 96)
- 11% of Jews living in households with a non-White person cite not feeling welcome as a reason they don't go to services, compared to 6% of White people (p. 85)
- Of all Jews, 88% identify as straight, 4% as gay or lesbian, 5% as bisexual, and 1% as something else; of those under 30, 75% identify as straight (p. 195)

- 2% of all married Jews and 3% of those who married between 2010-2020 have a same-sex spouse (p. 97)