



JEWISH FEDERATION OF
GREATER NEW ORLEANS

A community rediscovered. A city revitalized.

**THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF
GREATER NEW ORLEANS
COMMUNITY SURVEY
2007**

**FINAL REPORT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
& KEY RECOMMENDATIONS
MAY 2008**

Frederick Weil
Department of Sociology
Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, LA 70803



Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans

**The Jewish Community of
Greater New Orleans
Community Survey
2007**

Final Report

**Executive Summary
+
Key Recommendations**

Frederick Weil
Department of Sociology
Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, LA 70803

May 2008

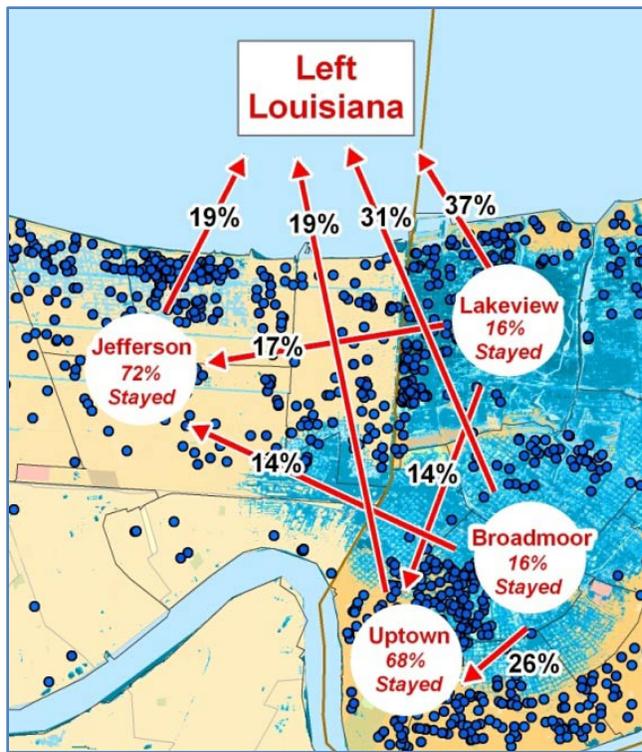
Executive Summary

The 2007 Community Survey

The 2007 Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans Community Survey¹ reveals a community that is impressively strong, just two short years since the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina, and participates actively in Jewish communal life, though not always along traditional lines.

The population, which had been shrinking over decades, dropped from about 9,500 people just before the storm to about 6,000 in May 2006, and then rose to about 7,000-8,000 in early 2008.² The current population estimate was calculated by several methods, including those based on (a) synagogue or Jewish Community Center membership, combined with rates of membership, (b) Prof. Ira Sheskin's Distinctive Jewish Names method, (c) extrapolations from Federation membership lists, combined with estimates of the percent of the community not on those lists, and (d) direct counts by the Federation. The estimates based on direct counts by the JFGNO (7,151) and the JFGNO list plus sampling experience (7,677) are in the middle of the range and may be preferred.

The New Orleans Jewish community, one of the older communities in America, also has a higher than average length of residency of community members.



Two-thirds of Greater New Orleans Jewish community members suffered at least some damage to their residence as a result of the storm and subsequent flooding – 31 percent major damage or complete destruction – yet almost 90 percent report that they are mostly or fully recovered. Indeed, they feel their recovery is more complete than that of the city or of the Jewish community in general. And community members are very satisfied with the Jewish community (74 percent positive), as they were in a survey a year earlier, even though

¹ The survey consists of 799 interviews of community members, conducted in late summer/early autumn, 2007, by telephone and internet. Sampling methods are described in the first chapter. The survey was augmented by focus groups drawn from survey respondents and conducted at the end of 2007 and beginning of 2008. Some of the findings from the focus groups are summarized in this section, below. A full description of findings is issued in a separate report.

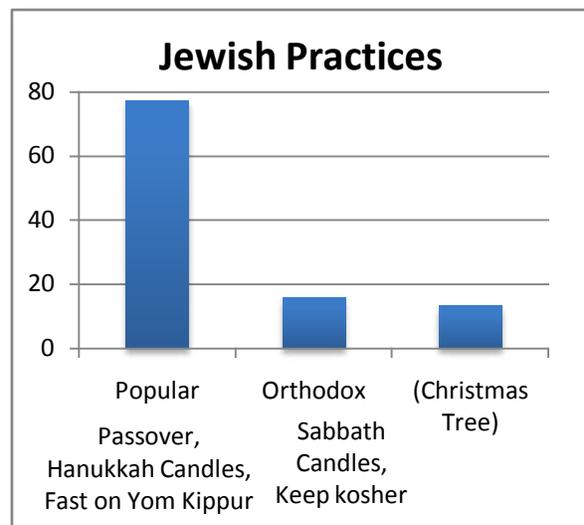
² The May 2006 estimate was made by the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans. No systematic data was available between July 2005 and May 2006.

they are highly critical of the local economy and infrastructure, the school system, and especially, local political leadership. They are also very worried about crime and the possibility of another hurricane. Yet, while the Jewish community lost many members after the storm, almost no one still in Greater New Orleans is thinking of moving away. The picture of the community in 2007 is one of strength and determination in the face of challenges.

Migration understandably increased after the storm, not only out of the area, but also within Greater New Orleans. Residents of the most heavily flooded areas, who sustained the greatest damage, moved out of the flooded areas, and other community members have not moved into them. This was perhaps most important for the Orthodox community of Lakeview, which has not yet consolidated in another neighborhood. Yet moves within the region have not led to major shifts in balance among the major population centers, nor to substantially increased suburbanization. The Uptown community largely held its majority as against the second-largest, and suburban, Metairie community; and the suburban North Shore of Lake Pontchartrain grew only slightly. Post-storm moves mostly reinforced pre-storm communities sizes, rather than shifting the balance among them.

The demographic profile of the Greater New Orleans Jewish community is strong, but there are some causes for concern. The community is very highly educated – almost half hold a graduate degree, including many law, medical, business, and doctoral degrees – and has high levels of income, especially by local standards. (Of the sixty percent of respondents willing to state their income, the mean is \$180,000, as calculated from mid-points of ranges.³) Seventy percent of respondents are employed, and another twenty percent are retired; only four percent are unemployed. Sixty percent of adult community members are married – twenty percent in interfaith households – and another twenty percent live alone, in single-person households. Seventy percent of households include children aged 17 and younger, and another forty percent of respondents have adult children who have established their own households.

Probably the greatest demographic challenge is the aging of the Greater New Orleans Jewish community. The average age of respondents and second adults in local Jewish households is 57, if the survey is not adjusted for sampling bias. (Like most surveys, this one probably under-samples younger community members, who are more difficult to contact to interview.) Louisiana has for decades been losing its younger citizens to places with

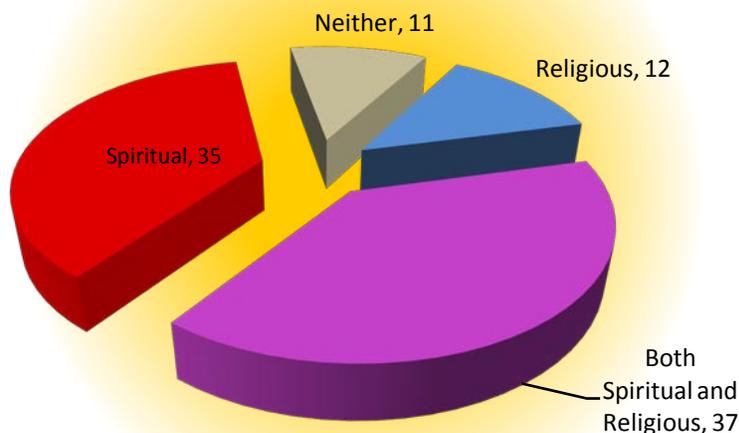


³ This figure may overestimate true income levels, as explained in Chapter 12, (a) because 40% of respondents declined to state their income and (b) because means from mid-points produces a high estimate.

more dynamic economies, and this has long been a concern in the Greater New Orleans Jewish community. Thus, even if our age estimates are not precise, the greatest demographic concern remains attracting and retaining young families with children. By the same token, providing for an aging population in a city whose storm recovery remains shaky is an issue that bears watching.

The Greater New Orleans Jewish community is highly engaged in communal and religious life, but not necessarily in traditional or orthodox ways. Over sixty percent of respondents are Reform Jews, 15 percent Conservative, and 4 percent Orthodox; while an additional ten percent call themselves “just Jewish.” And only a third go to religious services more than a few times a year. Yet three-quarters are synagogue members. Similarly, while nearly three quarters participate in a Passover Seder and light Hanukkah candles every year; only about ten percent keep kosher homes or always light Sabbath candles on Friday nights. Nor have community members assimilated religiously: only 9 percent regularly have a Christmas tree, including the interfaith households (where the percentage is, of course, higher). About three-quarters talk about religion informally with friends and read Jewish books, newspapers or magazines once or twice a month or more. Strong majorities also enjoy Jewish music, volunteer to help the disadvantaged or engage in social justice, or Tikkun Olam, and visit Jewish-themed websites, at least from time to time. By contrast, very few attend adult religion classes, and almost no one visits Jewish dating websites: the few who do are young and single.

Religion and Spirituality

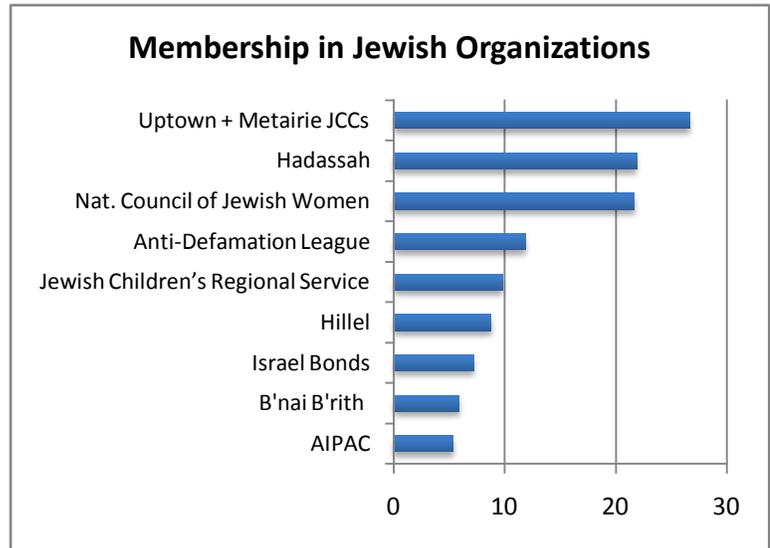


The picture of beliefs that emerges is similar: strongly engaged, but not highly traditional or orthodox. Only 12 percent characterize themselves solely as “religious,” while three-quarters call themselves either “spiritual” or “both spiritual and religious.” Large majorities of community members say being Jewish involves leading an ethical and moral life, feeling part of the Jewish people, remembering the Holocaust, caring about Israel, understanding Jewish history, making the world a better place, believing in God, and

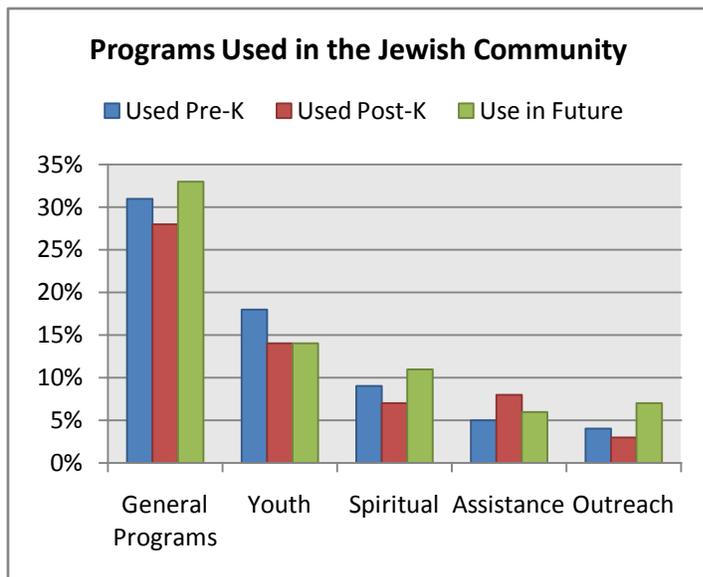
learning about Jewish culture (in that order of importance). But only a third said attending synagogue was very important for being Jewish, and only 11 percent said keeping kosher is necessary to be Jewish.

Jewish education and socialization has been and remains important for community members. Eighty percent of adults went to Hebrew or Sunday School growing up, and forty to fifty percent went to a Jewish overnight camp and regularly participated in Jewish youth groups. Community members are passing these practices on to their own children: half of those with children, send them to Jewish camps, and seventy percent send their children to Jewish preschools and Jewish youth groups.

Jewish community engagement is very strong in other ways, too – as is civic engagement in the general community. Like synagogue membership, membership in Jewish organizations and participation in Jewish community programs are very high. Two thirds of survey respondents belong to at least one Jewish organization. The most popular are the Jewish Community Centers (a quarter belong to one of the two JCCs), and Hadassah and the National Council of Jewish Women (22 percent each). About half of community members also do volunteer work for a Jewish organization in the course of a year (slightly more than half also volunteered for a non-Jewish organization); and over sixty percent made an annual donation to both the Jewish Federation and to another Jewish organization or cause (an additional 80 percent donated to a non-Jewish charity or cause). Community members are also very familiar and strongly approving of the major local Jewish institutions, including the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans, the two Jewish



Community Centers, the Jewish Family Service, Hillel, the Jewish Endowment Foundation, and the Jewish Children's Regional Service. The New Orleans Jewish Day School receives good support, though not as high, and while some people are aware of the financial assistance available from the Jewish community, very few know it by its formal name, the Hebrew Free Loan Association.



Community members also participate enthusiastically in programs sponsored by the Jewish community. Forty to fifty

percent go to cultural offerings (speakers, films, music) and community gatherings and festivals (besides religious services). And a fourth or fifth take part in Tikkun Olam or social justice activities (including aid to the needy and post-hurricane recovery), and religious education for children/youth and adults. Finally, half or more community members read and like local and regional Jewish media: the Jewish Federation's website and weekly email newsletter, and the Deep South Jewish Voice bi-monthly newspaper.

Thus, the 2007 Jewish Federation Community Survey of Greater New Orleans gives us a picture of a strong, active, self-confident Jewish community, though not a traditional or orthodox one. The community remains challenged to gain new members after the losses following Hurricane Katrina, especially younger members with families. The Federation is putting strong emphasis on this issue. Yet, because the decline is long-term and regional, far pre-dating the storm and extending beyond the Jewish community, the challenge is a serious one.

Focus Group Research

Dr. Brenda E. Brasher of the Sociology Department at Tulane University convened focus groups following the 2007 JFGNO Community Demographic Survey. People were invited to participate who had completed the Survey, and who satisfied certain characteristics, in order to better understand why they answered questions in particular manners. Each focus group represented a significant social location – Insiders, Parents, Young adults under 30, Newcomers, Singles, people in Interfaith families, and the Unaffiliated. Definitions of the group “types” are given in Appendix C; and the number of participants in each focus group is shown in the following table.

Groups and Numbers of Participants	
Insiders	13
Parents	7
Young adults (under 30)	5
Newcomers	9
Singles	4
Interfaith	7
Unaffiliated	8

Each gathering was held in the Uptown Jewish Community Center, and lasted two hours. All discussions were tape-recorded, a total of 14 hours of discussion. Dr. Brasher's full report of the findings from the focus groups will be issued separately. She summarizes key findings as follows.

- Synagogues are key sources of information for the Greater New Orleans Jewish Community. Most participants took soundings of the Jewish community's strength and well being from synagogues.

- *Parents* expressed the most sadness about the community today. They keenly felt the loss of programs. Their children were less involved with Jewish social networks than they had been [reflecting a national trend.]
- Participants in all groups were quite interested in social service projects [city wide, not just Jewish] and Jewish-community-wide social events.
- *Newcomers* tended to be young, urban, professionals. They see the Greater New Orleans Jewish Community in a very positive light. Some come from smaller or less friendly communities. Not all were aware of the programs offered to them. Their time constraints are serious.
- *Newcomers* displayed adept social skills. They networked amongst each other before, during and after the focus group session.
- *Under 30's* were the least sure about their long term prospects in New Orleans. Career prospects represented the largest concern.
- *Inter-marrieds* came from some of the oldest New Orleanian Jewish families, and claimed that any stigma associated with being intermarried was gone.
- *Inter-marrieds* claimed that they learned more about being Jewish after their marriage than before.
- *Insiders* articulated the keenest awareness of changes in the Jewish community. Their view, while astute, differs from those in other social locations. Insiders also tended to be from a higher socio-economic class.
- *Singles* were the only group that claimed there was some stigma attached to their social location, though this was more the case for older singles than younger ones.
- *Young people* felt that synagogue services were geared for older adults, and not especially interesting to them.
- *Younger people* (under 30s) are interested in marrying other Jews, and sometimes they synagogue hop to try to meet each other.
- *Parents* expressed a need for a city-wide Jewish youth gathering/event/group for "Jewish kids." There were mixed feelings over whether the events should/should not include other kids.
- *Parents* were concerned that given the limited number of children, and how active their children are, they are not meeting/socially with other Jewish kids today. Programming drops off after early years.
- *Unaffiliateds* did not like being referred to as such. In general, they knew a great deal about what was going on in the community. They described the Greater New Orleans Jewish Community as smaller, and claimed that Katrina had frightened the elderly.
- *Unaffiliateds* claimed to have a synagogue affiliation even if they did not belong.

Key Recommendations

1. Probably the greatest need is to increase population size. Most communities in Greater New Orleans lost population after Hurricane Katrina, but for the Jewish community, the issue is not simply regaining numbers, but retaining a critical mass, sufficient to support a well-rounded, viable community, capable of sustaining a wide range and depth of Jewish life. Increasing population involves especially:
 - a. Retaining people who might leave;
 - b. Attracting younger people who are enterprising and pioneering, who seek business and professional opportunities in the rebuilding process, who seek a smaller, friendly community with an exciting culture, and who have a sense of Jewish social justice or Tikkun Olam;
 - c. Encouraging evacuees to return (though an earlier survey in 2006 indicated that few plan to move back);
 - d. Encouraging people with existing New Orleans ties to move here;
 - e. Making it easier for families with children in school to come or remain.
 - f. Existing programs for newcomers have worked very well and been well received. These have provided both monetary and social/communal benefits – extending warm welcomes. Emphasis should remain on these efforts, and they should be expanded where possible.
2. Keep Community Programs active. They are already strong and should be kept so.
 - a. This is especially true of General Programs that appeal to everyone, and programs for young people that appeal to all families with young people in them.
 - b. Specialty programs should be encouraged roughly according to usage, demand, and perceived importance, as measured in the survey.
3. Hurricane recovery assistance is not needed by most community members, but it should continue to be extended to those who do need it.
 - a. Financial assistance cannot cover all needs, because total costs are extremely high.
 - b. Counseling and employment assistance should be offered: demand and cost are both modest.
 - c. Assistance specifically for seniors should continue, but large numbers of seniors are already relatively secure financially; so need should be taken into account here.
4. Although the population size has declined, efforts should be made to retain major Jewish institutions. Familiarity with and approval of virtually all major Jewish institutions is high. It would be more difficult to rebuild them if efforts to increase population succeed – especially to re-acquire properties if sold – than to retain them over a period of time after the hurricane. Also, if they are closed, this would

discourage potential community members from moving to Greater New Orleans, and population loss would become self-reinforcing.

5. The Greater New Orleans Jewish community contains many older and elderly members. Programs should be encouraged to serve them. However:
 - a. Only a relatively small proportion of older community members have financial needs, and the Jewish community should continue to help address them.
 - b. As in other sectors of American society, younger community members often have greater financial needs.
 - c. Some sunbelt areas, like Florida, North Carolina, and the greater Southwest, have been successful in attracting well-to-do Jewish retirees. It is not clear that Greater New Orleans can successfully compete in attracting these people. Directing recruitment efforts more toward younger people is more likely to increase population.
6. Programs for children and young people generally receive high levels of endorsement. These should continue to be encouraged and supported.
 - a. Evidence is mixed about how much economic means affects participation in children's education or programs. Still, it is clear that participation puts greater financial burdens on less affluent families. Thus, assistance for children of lower income families remains important.
 - b. The focus groups also suggest that parents feel a lack of programming for their older minor children, and that this leads to reduced opportunities for tweens and teens to socialize and form bonds with other Jewish children. The Jewish community should try to build up such programs.
7. Beth Israel, the Orthodox synagogue, was destroyed in the storm and flooding, and had to be abandoned. Resettlement patterns indicate that they have not so far coalesced around particular neighborhoods. Although the synagogue structure was insured, the Orthodox community should also continue to be supported in non-monetary ways, as they re-establish their communal institutions.
8. The Greater New Orleans Jewish community is overwhelmingly Reform and non-traditional. Even among the greater Orthodox community, Chabads seem to be the younger, growing sector. The New Orleans Reform community shares many of the strengths and challenges that exist in most "modern" American Jewish communities.
 - a. Popular Jewish practices like Passover Seders and lighting Hanukkah candles should be encouraged and built on.
 - b. General programs that explore Jewish culture and history should be encouraged and built on.
 - c. Social justice and Tikkun Olam activities are popular and should be encouraged and built on.

- d. "Spiritualism," either separately or in conjunction with religiosity, is endorsed by a very large majority of community members. This should be taken into account and built on.
 - e. Jewish education and socialization remain important for community members and should be encouraged and built on.
 - f. Twenty percent of community members – and higher percentages of younger people – are in interfaith relationships. The challenges presented by intermarriage are by no means unique to New Orleans, but must be addressed by the New Orleans community. In particular, non-Jewish partners should be made welcome, so that Jewish partners are not driven away and their children are not estranged from the Jewish community.
9. Synagogue membership in Greater New Orleans is very high by national standards, but synagogue attendance is low, as is true in most American communities. Thus, synagogue participation is not a uniquely New Orleans issue, nor are there probably uniquely New Orleans answers. The Greater New Orleans community should consider ideas that are being considered everywhere: increasing the range of activities to attract some members, while continuing activities that satisfy participating members.
10. Participation in Jewish community programs, activities, organizations, and institutions is also very high. Every effort should be made to continue doing what is successful here.
11. Participation in the general community is also high. Both participation by individual community members and community-wide interaction with other communities should be encouraged and built on.
- a. No special efforts are needed to encourage individual participation. Yet by the same token, individual participation should not be discouraged, because it generally does not come at the expense of participation in the Jewish community. Rather, people who participate highly in the general community also participate highly in the Jewish community; while those who do not participate in the Jewish community also do not participate strongly in the general community. Jewish "assimilation" in Greater New Orleans has hit a sweet spot in this regard.
 - b. Intergroup activities and community relations should be developed. Individual participation is good and can help, but the organized community should partner with other communities where appropriate.
 - c. Hurricane recovery presents many opportunities not only for individual social engagement in the general community, or Tikkun Olam, but also for building and strengthening ties to other communities that are recovering. The survey indicates much interest and desire to engage in this sort of activity, and it should be individually and communally encouraged.



JEWISH FEDERATION OF GREATER NEW ORLEANS

A community rediscovered. A city revitalized.

**The Jewish Community of
Greater New Orleans
Community Survey
Final Report 2007
Federation President**

Michael Wasserman

Executive Director

Michael J. Weil

Editorial Office

3747 West Esplanade Ave.

Metairie, LA 70002

(504) 780-5614

Federation website

www.jewishnola.com

The Jewish Federation
of Greater New Orleans
P.O. Box 6050
Metairie, LA 70009-6050

NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
JEWISH FEDERATION OF
GREATER NEW ORLEANS