

Jewish Boston returns to the city



KAYANA SZYMCAK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Rabbi Elaine Zecher, Olivia Gordon, 13, and Cantor Roy Einhorn sang at Temple Israel of Boston.

By [Lisa Wangsness](#) | GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 16, 2016

Boston's Jewish population is becoming more urban, and less suburban. Intermarriage — once feared as an existential threat to the Jewish community — may actually be fueling its growth. Traditional synagogue membership is declining, but independent congregations and other alternative groups are on the rise .

A survey of the region's Jewish community, commissioned by Combined Jewish Philanthropies and conducted by Brandeis University researchers once every 10 years, describes a community — and a younger generation in particular — that is

far less likely to claim denominational and institutional allegiances. Yet the vast majority retain connections to Jewish spirituality, community, and culture in a variety of ways: joining Jewish book clubs, attending Passover seders, or volunteering for Jewish community service groups.

Identifying with a particular movement within Judaism, such as Reform or Conservative, “means less and less to the next generation,” said Barry Shrage, president of Combined Jewish Philanthropies. “They care about experiences of meaning, joy, and excellence, and they don’t much care about the labels.”

The study found about 250,000 Jewish adults and children in Greater Boston, or almost 7 percent of the total population. Excluding the North Shore — which wasn’t part of the last survey — the Jewish population has grown by nearly 5 percent since 2005, even as the number of non-Hispanic whites shrank by about 3 percent over the same period.

The geographic distribution of Jews in Greater Boston has long tracked the path of immigrant communities across the country — moving, as Jews assimilated and prospered, from the inner city to the suburbs and beyond.

But the new data reveal a changing geographic distribution in the Jewish community : For the last two decades, about half of the area’s Jews have lived in the suburbs. That number has begun to shrink in more recent years, led by 18- to 34-year-old Jews who prefer life in Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville. The proportion of the Jewish community living in the heavily Jewish neighborhoods of Brighton, Brookline, and Newton has remained constant at about 30 percent.

Gil Preuss, executive vice president of Combined Jewish Philanthropies, attributed the growth to several factors: Boston's attraction to young professionals, an increase in the Israeli population, and perhaps for some who were here a decade ago but didn't identify as Jews, a growing sense of belonging in a diverse Jewish community.

“For the past 20 to 25 years, we have worked very hard . . . to create a more welcome and open community for interfaith households, for LGBTQ households, for people with disabilities,” he said.

But Professor Jonathan Sarna, a historian of American Judaism at Brandeis, said he thought the growth must be partly attributable to the large number of interfaith families with at least one Jewish parent who consistently choose to raise their kids exclusively Jewish: about 57 percent, roughly the same as in 2005. The trend, he noted, comports with national statistics.

In families with two parents who are Jewish, children were less likely to attend religious school than they were 10 years ago. But interfaith families are more likely to send their kids to school.

On Monday evening, 16-year-old Petra Huang sang an after-dinner blessing with a large group of teens at “The Tent,” a Jewish learning community for teens at Temple Israel, Boston's largest Reform synagogue, that offers classes in Jewish contemporary art, social justice, and even yoga and Judaism. Her mother grew up Catholic but converted to Judaism when Huang was in first grade; her father is not religious. Prayer is important to her — “I don't believe in God, it's more like putting something out there into the atmosphere” — and so is the close-knit community she has developed.

“If I do have kids, I definitely do want to raise them in a synagogue,” she said. “It's something to give to someone to hang onto in a time of need. And I feel like I belong to this community.”

Mirroring national trends that show declining allegiance to religious institutions and denominations, synagogue membership has fallen off. Just one-fourth of Jews in Greater Boston are dues-paying members of brick-and-mortar synagogues. And while 74 percent of Jews a decade ago identified as affiliated with the Conservative or Reform movements, just 44 percent do today. Sarna called it an “astonishing drop.”

Many synagogues closed or merged in the last decade, he noted, with synagogue membership dropping amid the 2008 recession. Sarna said the numbers suggest “a lot of those people didn’t come back.”

The survey doesn’t fully capture the complexity on the ground, though. In Wellesley, Temple Beth Elohim has grown from about 500 families to more than 1,200 over the past 15 years. Rabbi Joel Sisenwine has noted “an incredible burst of energy” among families with young children and interfaith families; above all, he said, they are looking for connection and meaning.

“We say that each time you leave the synagogue, we hope you leave it as a better person than when you entered,” he said.



ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Ari Filler and Petra Huang, both 16, listened to Rabbi Matt Soffer at The Tent school at Temple Israel of Boston.

Some Jews are choosing different forms of affiliation than in the past. Almost 1 in 5 of households that belong to a Jewish congregation now affiliate with synagogue alternatives, such as an independent congregation (havurah), prayer group (minyan), or Chabad (the Hasidic movement known for its outreach).

The Boston Workmen's Circle, a Brookline organization that grew out of the labor movement in New York the early 20th century, offers Shabbat and holiday services, Jewish cultural education, and organizes for social justice; it has seen its membership rise from 380 members last year to 435 this year.

Among the new members is Haley Kossek, 25, a labor organizer who lives in Jamaica Plain. She regularly attends Friday night Shabbos services at members' homes that feature conversations about Jewish heritage and social justice. Her heroines are the Yiddish-speaking women who led labor unions in the early 20th century.

“Workmen’s Circle offers me a place to be able to act in the history of my Jewish heritage, in honor of those heroines,” she said.

These groups seem to be especially vibrant in cities.

The new life is evident at Temple Israel’s Riverway Project, a community of people in their 20s and 30s that combines socializing, learning, and spirituality. It is bursting at the seams, with 300 people attending its monthly Shabbat dinners.

“I happen to be pretty optimistic about young adults’ spiritual vitality,” said Rabbi Matt Soffer of Temple Israel.

Religion of children

■ EXCLUSIVELY JEWISH ■ JEWISH AND ANOTHER RELIGION ■ NO RELIGION

Children of two Jewish parents



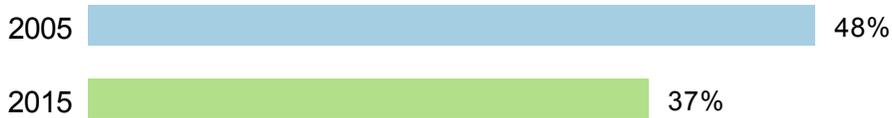
Children of interfaith parents



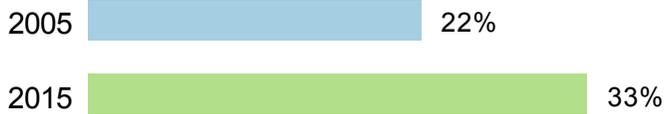
Because of rounding, not all figures will add up to 100 percent.

Geographic distribution changes

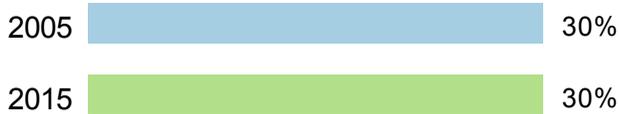
Lived in the suburbs*



Lived in Cambridge, Somerville, or Central Boston



Lived in Brighton, Brookline, or Newton



*Does not include Jews living in the North Shore

SOURCE: 2015 Greater Boston Jewish Community Study

PATRICK GARVIN/GLOBE STAFF