

A NEW AMERICAN ACCULTURATION STUDY

Five Years Later...

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A survey of 175 New Americans resettled in Metropolitan Detroit showed that with community help New Americans have moved into economically productive lives with Jewish identities at least as strong as those of their American-born cohorts. The New Americans seem generally to be at about the same socioeconomic level of American Jewish families forty years ago. There is every reason to assume that as the years pass that the differences between the emigres and their American-born cohorts will decrease.

Several thousand emigrants from the former Soviet Union have joined the Detroit Jewish community since 1988. The Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit has invested over \$1 million in community funds each year to help the new Americans settle in their new homes, learn English, and find employment, as well as to become acculturated to American and Jewish life.

Perceiving that during the wave of emigration in the 1970s and early 1980s there was too little emphasis on introducing New Americans to American Jewish life, the federation decided to put a greater funding emphasis on Jewish acculturation activities. In 1989, federation agencies initiated a family-to-family program, and scholarships were provided for day school and supplementary school to encourage integration into the local Jewish community.

In 1995 the New American community was surveyed to determine whether the increased funding emphasis on Jewish acculturation activities since 1989 had an impact on the new arrivals' Jewish involvement. The objectives of the survey were to measure the perceived helpfulness of Jewish resettlement services and to quantify the role of Judaism in the emigrants' lives. The survey was designed so that its findings could help service providers measure the effectiveness of existing services and plan future services. In addition, knowledge of the atti-

tudes, behaviors, and desires of New Americans would enable the federation to evaluate its current funding of resettlement programs and to maximize use of its funds to best serve the New American population.

METHODOLOGY

APB Associates, Inc., working with the Jewish Experiences for Families (J.E.F.F.) program of the Agency for Jewish Education, developed a mailing list of New American households and individuals. Constructed initially from monthly lists of new arrivals prepared by the Resettlement Service, the list was updated with the experience of returned mail, a cross-index directory, and program participant information. All New Americans were included in the J.E.F.F. mailing list, regardless of whether they attended any programs. Households arriving in 1989, 1990, and the first half of 1991 on the list were included in this survey.

The interview schedule was initially drafted by using items from previous studies in other cities and standard Detroit items that had been included on the 1989 *Jewish Population Study of Metropolitan Detroit* (1991), the Kosmin study of *The Class of 1979* (1990), and the Simon and Simon study (1982). The Kosmin and Simon and Simon studies, which were designed to

measure the adjustment of New Americans to the American Jewish community, used Jewish observances and socioeconomic standing as measurements of acclimation. A committee of professionals from the Resettlement Service, Jewish Vocational Service, J.E.F.F., and the Detroit federation met to review and critique the draft.

Field work began in early January 1995 and continued for several weeks. Telephone interviews were conducted by five interviewers: three Slavic-language students from Wayne State University who spoke Russian fluently and two non-Russian-speaking staff familiar with federation and the J.E.F.F. list. Russian speakers who were not members of the Jewish community were selected as interviewers to avoid any biases. Identical Russian and English versions of the questionnaire were available to the interviewers. Overall, 175 interviews were completed; one-quarter of these, primarily with older people, were conducted in Russian.

FINDINGS

General Household Characteristics

The respondents had a range of household patterns, including young singles, parents with children, older couples without children, older singles, and older families with adult children living in the household. The existence of this last group—older families with adult children—represents the most significant variation from American Jewish households, in which young people leave home to go to college and usually do not return to live on a permanent basis.

The respondents came from many different parts of the former Soviet Union, mostly from the major cities. The geographic diversity of the emigre population is unique to Detroit.

The group aged 35 to 49 has made the most progress in economic terms. They have median incomes of \$35,500, and 62 percent own or are buying a house. This group also had the lowest proportion of interviews conducted in Russian, indicating a

high level of English proficiency. The under-35 group is doing almost as well, but many persons in this age group are still living with their parents, rather than in their own households. The data in this study reflect only those who have moved out on their own.

Older households are most likely to have remained in an apartment, usually in the neighborhood where they were first placed by Resettlement Service (although some elderly persons are now living in nearby federation apartments).

School Enrollment and Labor Force Characteristics of Adults

The higher economic performance of younger households is attributable to the fact that persons in this age group are more likely to be employed (Table 1). The unemployment rate—the proportion of people who seek work and have been unable to find it—is very low for those under age 49.

The picture for older people is quite different. The unemployment rate is much higher—26 percent for those between the ages of 50 and 64 and 76 percent for the small group of those 65 and older who wish to work. Although specifically stated by only a few respondents, it seems clear that language is a major barrier to employment.

Most of the employed persons living in households where income exceeds \$40,000 per year have professional, managerial, or technical positions. The median income for households with engineers and computer programmers/specialists exceeds \$50,000. Skilled blue-collar workers are found primarily in households making \$20,000 to \$40,000. Household income, of course, depends on the number of workers in the family and on whether they work full- or part-time.

Problems Since Coming to the United States

Respondents were asked a series of questions about the degree of adjustment difficulty they experienced during the first year

Table 1. School Enrollment and Labor Force Characteristics

	<u>All Adults</u>	<u>Under 35</u>	<u>35 to 49</u>	<u>50 to 64</u>	<u>65 or older</u>
Currently enrolled in school	19%	53%	3%	—%	—%
Labor Force Status					
Working now	67%	69%	91%	57%	7%
Unemployed	9	4	4	20	22
Student	8	26	2	—	—
Too old/retired	13	—	—	17	69
Full-time parent	1	—	1	2	—
Language problems	1	1	1	2	2
Illness	1	—	2	3	—
Unemployment rate	12%	6%	4%	26%	76%

		<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
Labor Force Status			
Working now	67%	75%	60%
Unemployed	9	6	11
Student	8	7	8
Too old/retired	13	10	16
Full-time parent	1	—	2
Language problems	1	—	2
Illness	1	2	1
Unemployment rate	12%	7%	16%
Occupation of employed			
Professional/managerial	29%	29%	29%
Technical	27	27	28
Clerical/sales	14	11	18
Blue collar skilled	12	18	5
Blue collar non-skilled	9	12	5
Services	9	3	15
Jobs held before this one			
None	33%	31%	36%
One	28	27	30
Two	20	17	23
Three	14	18	8
Four or more	5	7	3

or two after their arrival (Table 2). The most serious problem area was learning English. For younger respondents, however, finding a job was an even more important issue, and making enough money was equally important. The fourth item of serious concern, missing friends and family back in the Soviet Union, was a problem for more than half the respondents. This contrasted with Kosmin's study (1990), which found that missing friends was the second

highest concern after learning English. Missing friends and family is experienced more acutely by younger respondents than those aged 50 and older, perhaps because older persons are more likely to have emigrated together with their children.

It is worthwhile to note that, overall, older persons report fewer problems than those who are younger. Several factors may explain this finding. Since older persons are more likely to have arrived with

younger family members or have been received by them as anchor families, they have a built-in support system that does not exist for younger people arriving on their own. They may also have received services designed especially for elderly persons (whether emigrants or not), such as a place to live in Jewish federation apartments or other senior apartment complexes, which have made their resettlement process easier. Finally, older persons are under less pressure to find work, learn English, obtain American driver licenses, and buy a car. They have no young children and thus are not concerned with schooling and child care issues. Therefore, it is not surprising that persons in the older age groups report fewer problems.

Experience with Jewish Communal Agencies

The Detroit federation funds a variety of programs designed to assist New Americans with resettlement, finding a job, and other concerns faced by new emigrants. Respondents were asked about their experience with several agencies providing these services, including the Resettlement Service,

Jewish Vocational Service (JVS), Hebrew Free Loan Association (HFLA), and the Jewish Experiences for Families (J.E.F.F.) program of the Agency for Jewish Education.

Of the various service providers and programs listed in the questionnaire, Hebrew Free Loan Association scored highest. Almost everyone who has used their services reported that the agency was "very helpful." Ranking second was the Resettlement Service. Jewish Vocational Service received lower ratings, perhaps because they are found to be helpful only if they succeed in matching the respondent with a good job. About one in seven respondents had returned to JVS over the past year for additional services, with younger people somewhat more likely to return.

Respondents took English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in a variety of locations. Satisfaction levels were mixed. Overall, about half the respondents found them to be very helpful. Respondents in the middle age groups were more satisfied than those in the oldest and youngest groups, which may be because the classes are pitched to an initial level of English compe-

Table 2. Problems since Coming to the United States

	Level of Problem				Mean Score	
	<u>Big</u>	<u>Little</u>	<u>Not</u>	<u>Everyone</u>	<u>Age < 50</u>	<u>Age 50+</u>
Learning English	59%	24	17	1.4	1.4	1.5
Finding a job	54%	21	25	1.3	1.5	.9
Making enough money	50%	24	26	1.2	1.4	.8
Missing friend and family back in the Soviet Union	41%	25	34	1.1	1.2	.8
Finding a good place to live	9%	24	67	.4	.4	.4
Making new friends	26%	26	47	.8	.9	.6
Getting help with child care*	14%	13	73	.4	.4	n.a.
Finding the right place for children to go to school*	12%	15	73	.4	.4	n.a.
Dealing with elderly parents	9%	12	79	.3	.4	.1
Feeling like an outsider in the Jewish community	4%	15	81	.2	.2	.3

*Includes only households with one or more children 17 or younger.

tency that is most typically found in persons of those ages.

About two-thirds of the responding families, mostly in the younger age groups, have participated in the Family-to-Family program. As we would expect, participation is highest among couples with children and lowest for single persons and couples without children. Helpfulness scores were generally good, although some respondents were clearly dissatisfied, especially in the youngest age group. About two-thirds of the 35- to 49-year-old families are still visiting the American families with whom they were matched.

The respondents were also asked if they have sponsored relatives to come to Detroit and if they are interested in taking the citizenship test at the Resettlement Service. These are both measures of comfort and assimilation into their new environment. Over half have sponsored relatives. Almost everyone has either already taken the citizenship test or is interested in taking it, and most of those who did not respond "yes" to this question were elderly.

Perception and Assimilation Issues

Respondents were given five descriptive terms—Russian, Soviet Jews, New Americans, American Jews, and Jewish—and then asked how they perceive themselves and how American Jews would describe them (Table 3). Almost all respondents (90 percent) described themselves as Jewish. Less than half, however, described themselves as Russian or as American Jews. Yet, most believe that the American Jewish community sees them as Russian, and this is the only term in which self-identification ranks lower than perceived identification by others. Kosmin (1990) supports this "dissonance between how they see themselves and how they think the American Jewish community sees them."

There are some interesting differences by age in the choice of terms. Younger people are much more likely than older respondents to identify themselves as Russian and

as Soviet Jews. They are also more likely to think that American Jews use those terms to describe them. The term New American is less resonant with both the youngest and oldest age groups than it is with those in the middle. The youngest group is also significantly less likely to report that American Jews would refer to them as Jewish.

Most respondents still maintain their primary friendships with other Soviet-born Jews; only one-quarter say that half or more of their friends are American born. Members of the 35–49 age group have made the highest number of visits to an American home; these families are most likely to have been involved in the Family-to-Family program. Seniors, age 65 and older, also score fairly high, probably because they either accompany their children on visits or because they live in apartment buildings that include both New American and American residents, such as federation apartments or other local senior citizen apartment buildings.

Jewish Practices, Involvement, and Identification

Respondents were asked if they *usually*, *sometimes*, or *never* practice or take part in a variety of Jewish activities and observances. Lighting Chanukah candles and having or attending a Passover seder received the highest scores. Almost every household in the survey usually engaged in these activities, with participation by those aged 50 and older slightly higher than that of younger ones. In contrast, Kosmin (1990) and Simon and Simon (1982) found that Yom Kippur fasting was the most observed practice. At the other end of the scale, keeping separate dishes for meat and milk is practiced only in about one-quarter of the Detroit households.

Most Jewish practices are somewhat more likely to be observed in older households than in younger ones. An exception is contributing to the Allied Jewish Campaign, where senior citizen participation is lower than that of households in the middle

Table 3. Perception/Assimilation Issues

<u>Descriptive Terms</u>	<u>Age of Respondent</u>				
	<u>All Respondents</u>	<u>Under 35</u>	<u>35 to 49</u>	<u>50 to 64</u>	<u>65 or older</u>
Russian					
Self	44	69	47	22	31
American Jews	75	75	84	62	59
Soviet Jew					
Self	57	66	61	47	47
American Jews	35	55	38	38	25
New American					
Self	65	52	69	74	61
American Jews	52	50	59	50	38
American Jews					
Self	44	41	43	52	42
American Jews	32	32	21	52	26
Jewish					
Self	90	86	89	91	94
American Jews	72	55	75	68	84
Proportion of friends who are American born:					
Almost all	8	4	9	5	11
About half	18	21	16	27	14
Less than half	74	75	74	68	75
Proportion of children's friends who are Jewish*					
Almost all	69	74	69		
About half	17	5	20		
Less than half	14	21	11		
Average number of visits to an American home in the past year	9.9	7.0	12.5	6.4	8.3

*Includes households with children only.

age groups (who are more likely to have earned income). These responses are consistent with the pattern shown for native Jewish families in the 1989 *Jewish Population Study of Metropolitan Detroit*.

On a list of items measuring Jewish involvement (Table 4) almost one-third of respondents reported that someone in their household has visited Israel. The major reason for this high response is the interest in visiting relatives. When an emigrant has primary relatives in Israel—parents, siblings, and/or children—making the trip is of high priority for the family.

One byproduct of Israel visits is an increased level of Jewish observance among those families who have made the trip. Households who have visited Israel have higher rates of lighting Shabbat candles, attending services on the High Holidays, participating in the Walk for Israel, and fasting on Yom Kippur than those who have not visited Israel. There is no significant difference, however, in the levels of Chanukah candle lighting, participation in a seder, keeping separate dishes, or contributing to the Allied Jewish Campaign.

The rate of affiliation is higher for the

middle-age groups, who are most likely to be able to afford dues (even at a reduced level) and who are more likely to have children at the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* preparation stage. The youngest members are primarily affiliated with Reform temples, the group aged 35–49 is spread across congregations of every denomination, and the older members are most likely to belong to Orthodox synagogues, such as Friends of Refugees of Eastern Europe (F.R.E.E.). There is some correlation between income levels and synagogue/temple membership, but the relationship is weak, with only 41 percent of those earning \$50,000 or more reporting that they pay dues.

Jewish Community Center membership is quite high, because most families were given three years of free membership and may believe that they continue to be "members" because they receive mailings from the Center. Attendance at Russian cultural

events is very high; clearly these programs are important to the New American group. About half of those who have attended the Russian events have also participated in J.E.F.F. programs.

The final indicator of Jewish involvement is reading Detroit's *Jewish News*. Readership levels are higher for younger respondents, whose English skills are more developed. The 1989 Detroit population study and other research have shown that households whose adult residents did not grow up in Detroit are much less likely to subscribe to and read the paper than are native Detroiters. Certainly, this New American group fits that category.

The survey included several questions addressed specifically to children's activities. About three out of five families with children (58 percent) have sent their children to one of Detroit's three Jewish day schools at some time. About one-third of

Table 4. Jewish Involvement

	All Respondents	Age of Respondents			
		Under 35	35 to 49	50 to 64	65 or older
Someone in household has visited Israel	32	31	28	39	38
Have paid dues to a synagogue or temple	32	28	35	44	22
Have joined Jewish Community Center	61	52	71	61	49
Belong to a Jewish organization other than synagogue, temple, or JCC	16	7	15	18	22
Have participated in Jewish classes or studies for adults	18	3	15	35	24
Have attended Russian cultural events	76	83	77	82	68
Have attended J.E.F.F. programs	49	41	49	52	52
Have used the J.E.F.F. Russian language Holiday Guide	53	45	54	57	57
Number of last four issues of Jewish News read					
None	47	45	36	61	65
One to three	32	31	42	22	16
All four	21	24	22	17	19
Mean score	1.5	1.6	1.7	1.1	1.1

the children are currently enrolled in one of these schools; most of the rest attend public school. If children do not attend day school, they are likely to be receiving some form of supplementary Jewish education. Over three-fourths of children aged 9 through 17 have either had a *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, or are preparing for one.

The community's camping programs are utilized by many families. Over half have sent children to a Jewish-sponsored overnight camp (most likely one sponsored by the Fresh Air Society), and over three-quarters have utilized the Jewish Community Center's day camp program. This seems to constitute nearly universal participation among families with children of the appropriate age for each type of camp.

Finally, respondents were asked a series of questions about their Jewish identity (Table 5). Most (76 percent) said that being Jewish is a very important part of their lives. Their experiences here in the Detroit Jewish community have strengthened Jewish identity for most, and especially for older respondents. The majority of respondents indicated that being Jewish means being a member of a cultural group. These findings are consistent with those of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, which found that cultural and ethnic Jewish identification were considerably broader than religious identification.

DISCUSSION

This study clearly indicated that the efforts undertaken by the Jewish federation and its agencies have been successful in integrating New Americans into the community. New Americans are generally pleased with the agencies that helped them resettle in our community, and they are Jewishly involved.

The study also demonstrates the value of a Family-to-Family program in building relationships between New Americans and American Jewish families. The program officially ended within three years of its onset because of the lack of volunteers. There are plans to reactivate the program using syna-

gogues and organizations to recruit new families. Many of the young New American families interviewed in the study have moved to Northwest Detroit suburbs. Synagogues in that area are being encouraged to include the New Americans in their outreach efforts.

J.E.F.F.'s focus is now being shifted from the more recent arrivals who are primarily older, to young families who were resettled two or more years ago. The goal is to integrate them into existing J.E.F.F. family programming. New Americans are being asked to serve on the J.E.F.F. programming committee and to take an active role in planning programs.

Jewish Family Service has begun an intensive citizenship preparation program for emigres resettled five or more years ago. The program has enabled the agency to reconnect with many of the New Americans included in this survey. Recognizing the strong Jewish identity of these individuals, the agency is developing volunteer opportunities for them to become more active in the community.

CONCLUSIONS

Resettlement efforts and expenditures in the Detroit Jewish community have been successful. Most respondents have, with community help, moved into economically productive lives with Jewish identities at least as strong as those of their American-born cohorts. They seem generally to be at about the socioeconomic level of American Jewish families forty years ago. There is every reason to assume that as the years pass and today's young emigrant children grow to adulthood, the differences between these families and their longer-term American cohorts will decrease.

It is important to remember that there is self-selection in the group of respondents included in this survey. First, and perhaps most important, *we were able to find them*, to identify their current addresses and phone numbers, to reach them by telephone, and to obtain their cooperation in respond-

Table 5. *The Meaning of Being Jewish*

	Age of Respondent				
	All Respondents	Under 35	35 to 49	50 to 64	65 or older
Being Jewish, for R*, is:					
Not at all important	6	3	5	4	11
Somewhat important	18	28	20	22	5
Very important	76	69	75	74	84
Since coming to the U.S., R's Jewish identity has:					
Increased	77	68	73	78	95
Stayed about the same	19	25	26	9	5
Decreased	4	7	1	13	—
Being a Jew in America means being a member of a:					
Religious group	43	31	39	61	51
Cultural group	71	69	74	65	69
Nationality	57	48	61	57	54

*"R" indicates "respondent."

ing to the interview. What about those we could not find? Are they less successful? Less adjusted to American life? We do not know. It is also possible that less successful emigrants were less likely to respond to the interview, either because of language difficulty or because refusing the interview was a way of expressing their dissatisfaction with the Jewish community.

These facts, however, should not detract from the real success stories of these respondents and of the Jewish community's role in making that possible. Basic resettlement services, ESL classes, vocational counseling, access to free loans, the Family-to-Family program, and J.E.F.F.'s other acculturation programming have all contributed to this result. Combined with the high ability and motivational levels of the new arrivals, which help them use these services

well, the results meet the community's expectations: self-sufficient, upwardly mobile, Jewishly committed individuals and families who enrich our *Klal Yisrael* in metropolitan Detroit.

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