

SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES' PARTICIPATION IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

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Single-parent Jewish families have lower rates of synagogue membership, contribute less to Jewish charities, and are less likely to be involved in volunteer activities than two-parent households. In addition, their children are less likely to receive a Jewish education than the children of two-parent families. When participation in the Jewish community requires money or time, economic constraints faced by single-parent families may affect their decision to become involved.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One of the most important goals of the Jewish community in the United States in the 1990s is to sustain itself through the upbringing of Jewish children. Increasingly, parents require the support of the broader Jewish community to raise their children in the Jewish faith. Indeed the support of a broader community is not strictly a Jewish concern. Coleman (1993, p. 1) argues that

As the strength of the family has declined and many of its functions have moved outside the household, child rearing has moved increasingly out of the household as well. Constructed social organization, in the form of the school and the day care center, have taken over many components of child rearing. Thus, these child-rearing institutions are not merely a supplement to the family, as they once were, but are primary child-rearing institutions.

Following his thesis regarding the disintegration of the family, Coleman argues for designing educational institutions to maximize the child's value to society. From the Jewish community's point of view, such institutions are valuable for maintaining its survival. However, such Jewish institutions

as schools, synagogues, and Jewish Community Centers have traditionally served primarily two-parent families. As single-parent families and other nontraditional households have become common, the Jewish community faces the challenge of reaching out to the children in such families and helping parents nurture their children's Jewish faith.

This research explores the impact of different home settings on the participation and involvement of households with children in the Jewish community. In particular, this article compares single-parent households to those where children live with both parents. Children are compared on whether they go to a private or a public school and to a Jewish or a non-Jewish school. The article also examines whether the children have received any Jewish education and to what extent. Family participation in the Jewish community is also tested through membership in synagogues, voluntarism, and philanthropic behavior.

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS; Kosmin et al., 1991) revealed that 12% of the Jewish households with children have a single parent. In 40% of the single-parent households, there are other adults present, either family or non-family. Seventy-eight percent of Jewish households consist of children who live with their mother and father and no other

This research is based partly on the forthcoming monograph, *The Jewish Child*, by Ariela Keysar, Barry Kosmin, and Jeffrey Scheckner, SUNY Press.

adults. A small fraction (7%) of the households consist of children living with both parents and other adults, either relatives or non-relatives. Less than 2% of the households with children are defined as non-normative; that is, in which the parent is unmarried and lives with his or her partner (Figure 1).

Among white American children¹ overall, the percentage who live with two parents is very similar to that of Jewish children (79%). However, the single-parent family is more common nationwide: 19% compared with 12% among households with Jewish children. In both Jewish and white American families, most of the children live only with their mother, rather than only with their father. According to the U.S. Census, less than 2% of the children in 1990 did not live with their parents, but rather with relatives or non-relatives. In the Jewish community as well, these types of households are rather rare.

Age of Children and Marital Status of Parents

Among families with older children we find a shift away from the traditional pattern of both parents living with their children. The NJPS shows that children over age 10 are more likely to live with a single parent, usually their mother. We can attribute this trend to demographic factors, primarily to the increased incidence of divorce as children get older. In addition, for those single-parent families with young children, other adult household members can provide a family network or other child care arrangement to assist the single parent with child rearing.

Looking at the distribution of children within the single-parent category according to the marital status of the single parent, we find that most of the children live with either a divorced or a separated parent. Like

their counterparts nationwide, only a small portion of Jewish children under age 18 who are in single-parent households live with a widowed parent or a parent who is still married with an absent spouse. In order to make a valid comparison to the national data, Table 1 uses weighted figures of the NJPS. The comparison reveals a lower percentage of divorced Jewish single parents, but a higher percentage of separated parents. Yet, overall the proportion of divorced and separated single parents is roughly the same in the two populations.

Household Composition and Per Capita Income

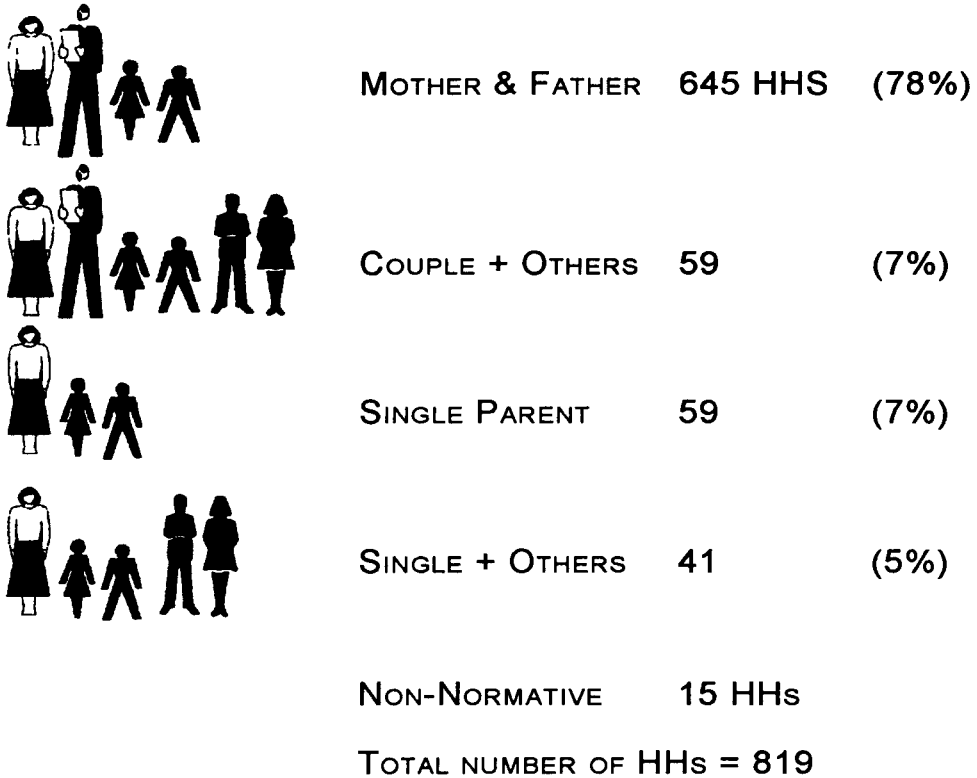
For contemporary American children, household composition is generally associated with economic well-being. The 1990 U.S. Census indicated that more and more children are living in households below the poverty line. Most of these children belong to single-parent families.

The poverty level for a family of four established by the U.S. Bureau of the Census in 1989 was \$12,675 a year. Indeed, the 1990 Census data show that although the average annual income for families with children in two-parent households was \$50,000, in single-mother households the average annual income dropped below \$20,000. In single-father households, income level was higher — approximately \$27,000. Yet, single-father households are not as common as single-mother families.

Involvement in Jewish life and community requires money. Joining a synagogue or a JCC; sending the children to Hebrew school, to study in a Jewish day school, or to Jewish summer camp or Jewish youth camp; and even celebrating a Bar/Bat Mitzvah all cost money, sometimes a lot of money. Therefore, children living in households with higher per capita income will not only have more options to enrich their lives but will also have the possibility to develop, bond, and connect with their Jewish heritage and thus to be more involved with the Jewish community.

¹I chose the comparison to white children nationwide to avoid complications due to the relationship between household composition and race in American society.

FIGURE 1: CHILD HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION



Like others, Jewish children living in a household with two parents are better off economically. The per capita income in households with children who live with both a father and mother was \$17,280 in 1990, compared to only \$12,680 for households with only one parent. The small number of households with both parents and others (relatives or non-relatives) have a somehow lower per capita income of \$13,630; again, that is higher than the \$11,970 per-capita income in single-parent households with other members. Overall, the average per capita income in households containing Jewish children under age 18 was \$16,395 in 1990.

Private versus Public Schooling for Children

The decision-making process of parents regarding the type of schooling that their chil-

dren should receive can be quite complex and depends on many factors. Choosing between a private and public school involves both availability and feasibility considerations. The availability of private schools, either Jewish or secular, varies by place of residency. Not every city or town provides Jewish day care or a day school. Furthermore, many areas do not have a selection of schools of different Jewish denominations. Those who live in more rural places have even fewer possibilities and choices of schools. Economic feasibility depends on the household income and the costs of sending the children to private school. Moreover, there is also an element of desirability; some parents are strong believers in the value of public education. Those who insist on sending their children to public schools often supplement their religious identity by sending them to afternoon Hebrew school.

Table 1. Children Living with One Parent by Age of Child and Marital Status of Parent

Marital Status of Parent	Age of Child				Total	
	0-4	5-9	10-14	15-17	NJPS* Average	National* Average
Married spouse absent	6.3%	6.4%	7.7%	5.0%	6.6%	3.8%
Never married	35.4%	16.4%	16.3%	31.2%	23.1%	19.2%
Divorced	33.0%	32.9%	33.5%	42.3%	34.8%	49.1%
Separated	19.2%	35.3%	37.1%	7.3%	27.6%	20.1%
Widowed	6.1%	9.1%	5.2%	14.2%	8.0%	7.8%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

*NJPS weighted data.

^bU.S. white population, Bureau of the Census, 1990.

Table 2 shows that the type of schooling children receive is also associated with household composition. This follows from our previous argument that household income correlates highly with household composition. This may well be because parents with higher incomes can afford to send their children to a more expensive school. Indeed, children who live with both parents are more likely to study in private schools. Children who live with both parents and no other people are more likely to go to Jewish private schools than children in any other household situation. Almost 37% of those children receive private education; 15% of them go to Jewish schools and the remaining 22% go to non-Jewish private schools. We need to be cautious with the small number of children in non-normative families. In keeping with their relatively high income level, we find a rather high proportion of children from non-normative households receiving private education.

Single parents are the least likely to send their children to private schools. Thus, 83% of the Jewish children who live with only one parent receive public education, compared to only 63% of children who live with two parents. It is likely that economic constraints are the main consideration of single parents with regard to this parental decision. Despite the somewhat lower per capita income in single-parent families, the

type of schooling is quite similar to that of children who live in households with two parents and other members.

Further research and multivariate analysis are needed to test the hypothesis of a linkage among household composition, family income, and religious schooling. It is possible, of course, that religious schooling may be related more directly to religiosity of parents than their income. In addition, religious families are more likely to have two parents living at home. An analysis that controls for religious denomination and income level of the household can further guide us on the relative effect of household composition on the religious upbringing of the children.

Jewish Education of the Children

Overall, less than a third of the 1,482 children in our subsample have received any Jewish education. Children in two-parent families who live only with their parents are more likely to have received Jewish education (33%) than single-parent families (24%). The proportion of children in non-normative families who receive Jewish education exceeds the overall average. Although it is in keeping with the non-normative families' high income level, we need to be cautious because of the small number of children in these families.

Table 2. *Schooling of Children by Household Composition*

Household Composition	Schooling					
	Public		Jewish-Private		Non-Jewish Private	
Couple	63.4%	(600*)	15.1%	(143)	21.5%	(203)
Couple + Other	80.7%	(71)	6.8%	(6)	12.5%	(11)
Single + Other	81.3%	(109)	5.2%	(7)	13.4%	(18)
Non-Normative	75.0%	(15)	15.0%	(3)	10.0%	(2)
Total # of Children	66.9%	(795)	13.4%	(159)	19.7%	(234)

*Number of children in parentheses.

Household Composition and Jewish Characteristics of the Family

Household Denomination

The NJPS enables us to examine the relationship of household composition to many Jewish characteristics of families with children. Seventeen percent of secular households consist of a single parent, compared to only 4.7% of the Orthodox households. Single parenthood is also relatively frequent among Reform households and those that include other religions. Households containing a mix of Jewish and non-Jewish adults have the highest proportion of couples who share their homes with other related or unrelated adults (Table 3).

Synagogue Membership

Synagogue membership is another indicator of the Jewish character of the household. It is interesting to see how it correlates with the household structure of the family, bearing in mind that synagogue membership has an economic component, as well as being a marker of Jewish commitment.

Overall, only one-fourth of single-parent households are synagogue members, as compared to 37% of two-parent households with no other adults present. There are no differences in affiliation levels within the single-parent group. Single-parent households consisting of children and other members and those households consisting of only a single parent and children behave similarly with regard to synagogue membership.

Voluntarism and Philanthropy

Voluntarism and Jewish philanthropy are other aspects of involvement in the Jewish community. Philanthropic behavior has an obvious economic component. Voluntarism does not require money, but it may be associated with income in that time can be viewed as money.

Given the differences in income levels of single-parent households and two-parent households, one would expect philanthropic behavior to differ as well according to household composition. In fact, 44% of couples with children contributed to Jewish charities in 1989 compared to 36% of the single-parent households (Figure 2). The gap in households' contribution to Jewish federations or UJA is larger: 26% among couples and only 13% among single parents.

Even though voluntarism does not require outlays of money, we still find similar differences between single-parent households and two-parent households: only 14% of the single parents volunteered for a Jewish organization during 1989-90 compared to 21% of the two-parent families. This might be related to the greater burden of child rearing on single parents and the lack of sufficient time and suitable child care that would allow them to engage in volunteer activities.

DISCUSSION

It is hard to assess the relative importance of factors that influence family participation

Table 3. Household Composition by Household Denomination

Denomination	Couple (%)	Couple + Others (%)	Single + Others (%)	Non-Normative (%)	Total # of Households
Orthodox	88.4	4.7	4.7	2.3	43
Conservative	80.2	5.2	13.4	1.2	172
Reform	79.2	7.7	11.3	1.8	221
Secular	73.0	8.1	17.1	1.8	111
Christian	80.5	8.0	10.3	1.1	87
Mixed J/NJ	80.0	11.7	5.0	3.3	60
Other Religion	76.0	6.4	15.2	2.4	125
Total # of Households	645	59	100	15	819

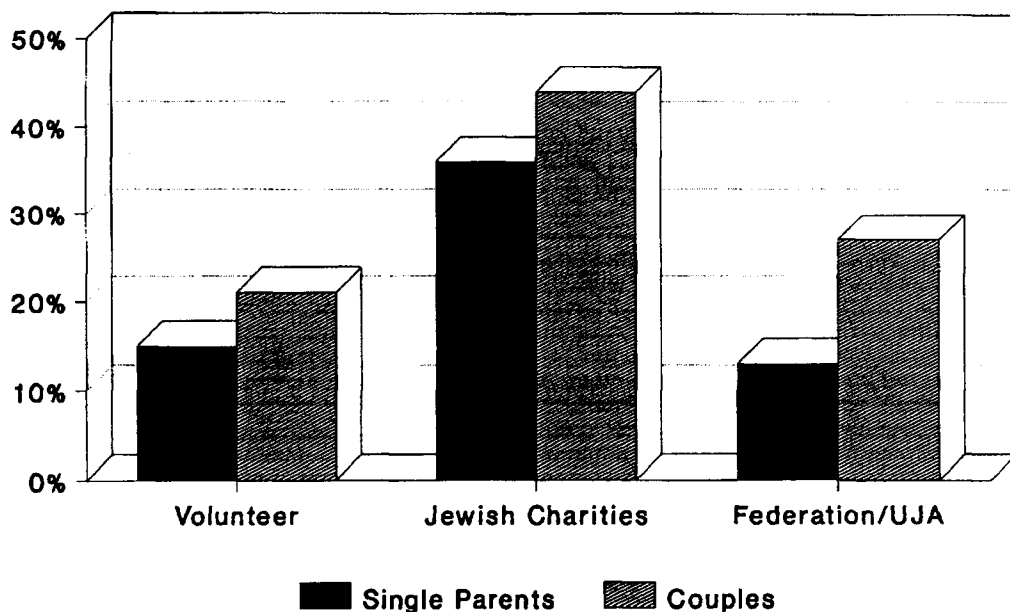
in Jewish community activities. Availability and desirability of the services are certainly important. However, this article shows that, when participation requires money or time, economic considerations and constraints may alter the decision-making process regarding behavior and involvement.

Single-parent households have the lowest rate of synagogue membership. Children of single parents are less likely to receive Jew-

ish education or to study in a Jewish school. Single-parent Jewish families are also more likely to be secular households. They contribute less to Jewish charities and are least likely to be involved in volunteer activities.

One possible explanation for the lower level of involvement is that single-parent families in the United States as a whole have lower income levels than two-parent families. This is also true in Jewish families.

FIGURE 2: VOLUNTARISM AND PHILANTHROPY IN JEWISH ORGANIZATIONS



The greater involvement of single parents in Jewish activities will require better understanding and awareness of their special needs and difficulties. If the Jewish community wishes to include this growing segment of Jewish households with children, it needs to provide them with programs that appeal to their lifestyle, yet are affordable. The community will have to reach out to those children and welcome them to the various Jewish institutions and activities even when they cannot pay for

them.

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