

Research and policy briefing

Moving beyond COVID-19: What needs to be done to help preserve and enhance Jewish communal life?

Jonathan Boyd

March 2021

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, JPR has been conducting research in the UK and around the world to understand how the virus is impacting Jewish people and Jewish communities. This paper summarises much of the work that has been done, and points to policy initiatives that should be considered to help individuals and organisations navigate their way through the pandemic and help to revitalise Jewish life.

/ Introduction

A year into the coronavirus pandemic, there are a number of insights emerging from JPR research that ought to be high on the agenda for any UK Jewish community leaders, donors and policy makers as we look towards the future. A crisis of this nature helps to reveal some of the fissures in community structures, and the data we have gathered and analysed show some of them clearly. This briefing paper highlights a few of the challenges we can see; further research planned for 2021 will allow us to understand these and many other issues in greater detail.

/ Addressing the economic needs of households

In many respects, the UK Jewish community as a whole went into the pandemic in good economic shape – certainly, compared to almost all other ethnic and religious minorities, Jews tend to be more likely to be in one of the two highest [socioeconomic groups](#) used in national statistics. This reality has helped to shield some parts of the Jewish population from the worst economic effects of the pandemic. Nevertheless, JPR research shows that within a few months of the start of the pandemic, 7% of all Jewish households were showing [acute signs of economic stress](#), with a further 15% at notable risk. Charedi households were found to be most likely to be in these groups, but signs of economic hardship could be seen right across the denominational spectrum. Single parent families were found to be struggling at much higher rates than average, but households of all types have been affected; indeed, in numerical terms, married householders in their 40s and 50s with children are the largest group. 10% of all Jews who were employed immediately prior to the pandemic had been furloughed at some point by summer 2020 (the [equivalent proportion](#) for the UK population as a whole was at least 27%, with the accommodation, food service activities and construction sectors particularly badly hit), and about half of those who were self-employed were no longer working by then. Our estimates indicate that over 10,000 Jewish households were in acute need in summer 2020,

and that number is likely to have increased subsequently as the effects of the pandemic have deepened and extended. Whilst evidence suggests that many Jews have been able to find economic support through their own social networks, only about one in twelve of the most disadvantaged households have turned to the Jewish community for financial help. Whether one considers this a good outcome or not depends heavily on one's conception of the role of Jewish community bodies – to what extent should they provide centralised support offering financial alleviation to those in need, and to what extent should this work be decentralised, allowing local organisations, synagogues and indeed, Jewish families and individuals to fulfil this role as required? Moreover, to what extent should the role be about alleviation or prevention – i.e. providing immediate, short-term financial support, versus helping those in financial need to become self-sufficient. At the same time, to what extent should the Jewish community play a role in efforts to support the wider, non-Jewish population, bearing in mind that the scale of need that exists there? These questions all require careful thought. **JPR recommends investing in endeavours aimed at supporting Jews in acute financial need, both in terms of their immediate needs and providing assistance in getting back into work, as well as supporting Jewish community initiatives designed to provide aid to wider society, of which JW3's work is an outstanding exemplar.**

/ Maintaining the Jewish charitable sector strategically

Given the overall economic effects of the pandemic, it is reasonable to hypothesise that levels of charitable giving to Jewish community charities may decline at this time. However, whilst detailed analyses of community income have not yet been done, JPR [survey data](#) from July 2020 suggest that, at that point in time, over half of the adult Jewish population anticipated no change in the amounts they would give to charity, and the remainder was split more or less equally between those who expected to give more than previously and those who expected to give less. Moreover, the same survey data detected a shift in Jewish people's overall giving priorities in favour of Jewish charities, indicating that the Jewish charitable sector as a whole may emerge relatively unscathed from this crisis. A follow-up survey scheduled for the coming months will help to confirm or challenge this finding. That said, it is likely that there are significant differences in how the [estimated 2,300 Jewish charities](#) operating across the UK are being affected by the crisis. Some have certainly managed to maintain or even improve income levels through creative online fundraising initiatives, while others are very likely to have been left behind. However, community leaders have long called for more [mergers](#) across the Jewish charitable sector, arguing that there are too many duplicate charities operating within the community already. As the financial challenges posed by the pandemic take their toll, it may well be that some charities will need to find ways to cooperate more closely with others, so this moment may represent a valuable opportunity in this regard. However, this is conjecture; **JPR recommends a review of the structure and income of the Jewish charitable sector, not as a one-off project, but rather with a clear view towards the monitoring of Jewish charitable income on an annual basis to help inform policy debate about how best to forge ahead in the future. At the same time, establishing mechanisms to provide strategic support to charities doing valuable work but struggling to survive financially, could help build a more streamlined, efficient and cost-effective Jewish charitable sector over time.**

/ Supporting local synagogue communities

Synagogues remain the main mechanism fuelling Jewish life – the most recent data from 2016 show that [56% of all Jewish households](#), and 71% of all individual Jews in the UK, belong to one (note that a JPR study planned for later this year will provide updated figures). These institutions function not only as a locus for religious life, but also as valuable cultural and educational venues, and important providers of social care and welfare to the sick, isolated, vulnerable and bereaved. The main source of

income for most synagogues comes from membership fees, but the [proportion of members paying full fees](#) has declined from 83% before the pandemic to 76% by summer 2020, pointing to a clear loss of income from this source. Whilst some savings will have been made to offset this – e.g. through lower energy costs due to buildings being closed and administrative staff being furloughed – other sources of income, such as venue hire, will also have been detrimentally affected. A fuller assessment still needs to be carried out, but it is very likely that many synagogues will be trying to rebuild Jewish communal life in the coming years with fewer financial resources, pointing to a reduced professional capacity and an increased reliance on volunteers. Moreover, in thinking more generally about the needs of this sector, it is also important to bear in mind the psychological strain the pandemic may have incurred on synagogue leaders, and on rabbis in particular. While our data on mental health do not identify rabbis or synagogue leaders specifically, it is clear that beyond any personal losses they may have experienced, many have lost beloved congregants, friends and colleagues, and have had to work very hard to help families through extremely challenging health and bereavement processes. Many synagogues have lost stalwart members; often elders of communities whose support has been steadfast over many years. Furthermore, JPR has also suggested that [the habit of attending](#) synagogue services in person will have been broken for many over the course of the pandemic, and it cannot be assumed that attendance levels will simply bounce back to pre-pandemic levels once life returns to some semblance of normality. Thus, the challenge of maintaining and enhancing synagogue life is far from straightforward, and a great deal of effort will be needed to ensure that these key institutions continue to thrive. **Given the centrality of synagogues to British Jewish life, JPR is calling for a more detailed assessment of the effects of the pandemic on the synagogue sector – particularly in terms of financing – and for funds to be made available to help communities to bounce back in the post-pandemic period.**

/ Plugging the Jewish education funding gap in Jewish schools

The most recent published data about school places (2017/18) show that [34,547 Jewish children study in UK Jewish primary and secondary schools](#), and given that this number has been climbing continually since the 1950s, it is likely to be even higher now. A JPR report scheduled for publication later this year will provide the latest figures. Proportionally, it has climbed too, from [20% of all Jewish children in the 1970s to 63% today](#). Part of this change is due to the growth of the charedi population, where attendance rates in Jewish schools are more or less 100%, but even outside this sector, rates have climbed from [25% in the mid-1990s to 43% today](#). Almost nine in ten mainstream (non-charedi) Jewish schools are state funded (compared to 17% in the charedi school sector), but despite receiving government funding, the schools are nonetheless reliant on voluntary contributions from parents to cover the costs of Jewish educational classes and programming. JPR evidence demonstrates that the proportion of parents paying the full recommended [voluntary contribution fell from 66% pre-pandemic to 56% by summer 2020](#), and whilst many other parents indicated a willingness to pay part of the suggested contribution, it is evident that income from this source has declined. If the economic effects of the pandemic become more acute, we can reasonably assume that the shortfall will increase further. As with synagogues, a more detailed assessment of the economic effects of the pandemic on Jewish schools is needed, but there is no question that schools are already struggling to maintain the Jewish educational infrastructure that existed before the pandemic. Furthermore, Jewish schools may also have an important role in supporting students through any mental health challenges they have experienced during the pandemic. JPR research has shown that [young people have suffered](#) more than their elders in this regard, so the demands for support from schools may well increase in this area. **JPR research points to the need for more detailed assessments, followed by extra financial support for Jewish education and other associated services in Jewish schools, to plug the gap created by any loss of income due to the effects of the pandemic.**

/ Saving the community's informal educational infrastructure

As mentioned above, our COVID-19 research clearly demonstrates that the pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on the [mental health of young people](#). Indeed, the younger people are, the more likely they are to report mental distress during the pandemic, and to say their mental health has deteriorated. This is not unique to the Jewish population; as has been reported in the [national media](#), this pattern has been [found across the population as a whole](#). The [reasons](#) for this are clear: factors include disrupted social lives, an ongoing sense of stagnation, uncertainty about the future, poorer job opportunities and increased economic stress. Supporting mental health services, both within and beyond the Jewish community, to manage increased demand, is the most obvious way to offer help. However, particularly with regard to less acute cases, the Jewish community has long helped to combat such tendencies indirectly by providing a wide range of activities for young people through its youth movements and organisations: summer and winter camps, Israel and Europe tours, leadership training schemes and a wide range of social activities. Most of these activities have been curbed over the past year. Particularly importantly, many summer camps were called off, or had to be scaled down, and [Israel summer tours were cancelled completely](#). The structural implications of this are potentially very serious, especially if activities in summer 2021 are similarly curtailed. Israel tours, in particular, help to create a new cadre of youth movement leaders every year, who go on to run youth movement activities in subsequent years. However, the youth movement leadership life cycle is short – typically no more than about five years – so two consecutive years without feeding the leadership pool will inevitably affect both the quality and quantity of community youth activities going forward. Furthermore, beyond this structural issue, one also has to take into consideration the implications of missing out on the educational components of Israel summer tours – one of the most important opportunities young people have to engage seriously with the role of Israel in their Jewish identities has been missed, with all the knock-on implications that has for the future. Many former youth movement leaders have typically continued to make valuable contributions to the Jewish community in adulthood, taking up positions of responsibility either as lay or professional leaders. **Whilst much work is currently being done to address this issue, JPR stresses the need for immediate endeavours to ensure that summer activities can take place in 2021, and that the current leadership of youth movements is supported in every possible way to run safe and engaging activities for the optimal number of young people. Part of this will involve providing subsidies for participants where required – among the groups most likely to have suffered economically during the pandemic, as demonstrated by our research, are [married householders in their 40s and 50s with children](#).**

/ Protecting lives

British Jews died in disproportionate numbers during the first wave of the virus from March to May 2020. In London, in the first wave of the pandemic, mortality rates among Jews were [twice as high as normal](#) for that time of year, compared to 1.7 times among the general population of the city. In Manchester, the equivalent rates were even more pronounced: 2.7 for Jews; 1.5 for the population of Manchester generally. International comparisons show that mortality rates among Jews in the UK were among the highest in the world amongst Jewish communities anywhere at that time. Research drawing on [Office for National Statistics data](#) and JPR's own national survey of Jews in July 2020 clearly point to some of the [underlying reasons](#) for this: higher than average rates of international travel among Jews in the months leading up to lockdown (a factor which was found in a [recent study](#) to be particularly significant in terms of mortality), and very high levels of 'sociability', both in terms of regular mixing (for example, for daily or weekly communal prayer), and participation in ad hoc communal gatherings (JPR data demonstrate that 40% of the Jewish population took part in Purim events, *b'nai mitzvah* celebrations, weddings or fundraising dinners in the two months prior to lockdown). In short, the evidence suggests that the British Jewish population contracted the virus early, and due to its small size and close-knit nature, spread it rapidly among themselves. All

denominations were affected at that time – in terms of deaths, no part of the community was spared. It is now clear that we will be living with COVID-19 for a long time – even with a widespread vaccination programme, outbreaks will continue to occur and different variants will emerge. **JPR has recommended the formal establishment of a cross-communal [standing panel of epidemiologists and public health practitioners](#) to work with researchers and government to advise the Jewish community on public health matters going forward.**

/ Addressing charedi/mainstream community relations

The issue of non-compliance with government guidelines in parts of the charedi community has made [headline national news](#). Yet empirical work paints a rather more complex picture: mortality data generated by JPR indicate that, compared with other denominational groups, the charedi community does not appear to have experienced a significantly disproportionate number of deaths relative to other Jews during the first wave, and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) data demonstrate that [charedi mortality rates dropped dramatically](#) during the first lockdown, which could not have occurred without high levels of compliance. On the other hand, those LSHTM data also show [extremely high infection rates](#) among charedi Jews in Stamford Hill, and it is likely that the main reason these have not translated into much higher mortality rates is because of the younger [age profile of the charedi population](#) – it has a median age of 15 years, compared to the mainstream community's 44 years. Yet, at least part of the reason for high infection rates among charedim has nothing to do with non-compliance; it is related to [large household sizes](#), overcrowding, population density and, in some instances, deprivation and low levels of secular education within the charedi sector, as well as the high levels of sociability which are common in both charedi and wider Jewish circles. Still, [newspaper reports](#) about cases of charedi non-compliance, not simply in the UK, but in [Israel](#) too, indicate that [tensions surrounding this issue](#) are rising rapidly. Beyond the immediate concerns about the spread of the virus, the friction highlights an issue JPR has been raising for many years – a compositional shift is occurring within the UK Jewish community, whereby the charedi population is becoming an increasingly large proportion of the whole. Charedi Jews currently comprise about 20% of the UK Jewish population, but our projections demonstrate that within a decade, [half of all Jews born in Britain will be born into charedi homes](#). As this shift occurs, we can anticipate that the community will experience further conflicts (as indeed it has already in at least two areas – [cultural life](#) and [education](#)), and the scope for more acute tensions and polarisation along the lines already seen in both Israel and the UK is clear. JPR analysis from 2015 looking at [age dependency ratios](#) in charedi populations pointed to the possibility of the types of civil unrest that have been seen recently in Israel, and we should not rule out the prospect of similar problems occurring in the UK. Whilst constructive efforts are being made to address some of the challenges facing charedi Jews, particularly in the areas of education and employment, levels of frustration and anger are rising in both the [charedi](#) and [mainstream](#) Jewish sectors. **JPR stresses that the underlying causes of these tensions should be addressed urgently, and work designed to improve intracommunal relations and understanding is gaining rapidly in importance. Structures need to be established to look seriously at the issues, and to establish better means of cooperation between these parts of the Jewish community.**

/ Developing new means of learning and creating community

One of the most extraordinary aspects of the pandemic has involved the shift from in-person activities to online ones. Lockdowns have compelled everyone to utilise technology to maintain connections – professional, social, educational, cultural and religious. For many more traditional Jewish communities, this has been complicated by halachic restrictions on Shabbat and chagim – typically the most important times for communities to convene. However, in general, all have had to adapt to the new reality, a process which has been easier and more straightforward for some than others. Internet

access is now almost universal across the UK Jewish population – preparatory data gathered in advance of the multi-national study of the perceptions and experiences of antisemitism amongst Jews which JPR conducted for the [European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights \(FRA\)](#) in 2018 demonstrate this. However, unpublished data from JPR’s July 2020 survey indicate that the religious and cultural sectors have suffered much more from the shift online than the educational one – participation rates in religious services dropped by an estimated 23% over the first five months of the pandemic, and by 27% in cultural activities. By contrast, participation in adult educational programmes and events appears to have increased slightly as they moved online. Further work needs to be done in this area to explore how these figures have changed over time – it will be included in the forthcoming JPR survey – but in theory at least, new technology offers many interesting and innovative ways of engaging in Jewish communal life, whilst also posing many challenges. On the one hand, it opens up the possibility of increased access to outstanding Jewish content provided by any Jewish organisation worldwide; on the other, in enabling such a wide range of opportunities, it potentially diminishes the value of the small, local community experience. Moving Jewish life online also potentially shifts it away from being something communities create together, towards something Jews simply consume. **JPR recommends close monitoring of these trends, alongside the creation of opportunities for cross-communal discussion of sociological and statistical analysis in this area, to further the community’s best interests and make the most of the many new opportunities that exist.**

/ Upgrading the data collection agenda

The national survey of the Jewish population conducted by JPR in July 2020 has provided key data to support Jewish organisations across the country, and the findings have been shared widely with community leaders with the support of the Jewish Leadership Council. The survey also enabled JPR to take the first steps in building its [new UK Jewish population panel](#), a research mechanism designed to gather attitudinal data more efficiently and cost-effectively than ever before in order to support Jewish community planning. JPR expedited its plans with this initiative in light of the pandemic to maximise the long-term value of the COVID data gathering exercise, but the panel needs proper investment to achieve its potential. At the same time, the pandemic has taken a considerable financial toll on community research. The Board of Deputies, which, until 2018, provided funding to JPR to help pay for the continued gathering and analysing of fundamental community statistics, had already withdrawn its investments in this area before the pandemic struck due to lack of funds; additional financial challenges prompted by the pandemic render a full reversal of this position unlikely. The implications of this are potentially dire: whilst JPR is doing its utmost to maintain this work, ***no communal funding at all is currently being invested in measuring the most basic statistics required to understand UK Jewish population trends***: births, deaths, marriages, divorces, synagogue affiliation levels and Jewish school enrolment counts. Rather like the data generated by government statistics agencies at the national level, these types of communal data are the foundation stones of all research on Jews in the UK; without them, any attempt to understand a wide range of issues is severely curtailed, including the demand for Jewish school places, projections of elderly care needs, patterns of Jewish identity, fertility and mortality rates and intermarriage. Moreover, just as funding has dried up, the pandemic has served to highlight the importance of adding further research activities to this core work in the areas of **economics, employment, health and crime (antisemitism)**. Most notably, there is a demand for the ongoing monitoring of the income received by charities, synagogues and schools, as well as a range of key socioeconomic trends. Some of this work can be undertaken through detailed examination of existing government datasets and closer collaboration with bodies such as the Office for National Statistics, and some requires the gathering of administrative data from a range of Jewish community bodies. Whilst we are doing our best to continue this work in the absence of any funding, **JPR is stressing an urgent need for investment in enhanced data gathering and analytical work to monitor key trends on an ongoing basis, and for support of its development of the UK Jewish population panel.**

/ Conclusion

This paper does not contain an exhaustive list of communal priorities at this time. In particular, it does not sufficiently explore the area of elderly care, any changes in the welfare needs of those with physical or learning disabilities, or whether the pandemic has prompted any changes in how Jews are perceived by wider society. This is not an oversight; it is rather simply because the data in these areas have either not yet been collected or fully analysed. Our research work is limited by the resources we have available to us. Nevertheless, this paper is designed to point to various initiatives – in the realms of research, policy and action – that ought to be considered by community leaders, donors and policy makers at this particularly volatile time. **Beyond the many challenges posed by the pandemic, the disruption also represents an opportunity for the community, and research and policy development work should guide us as we work not only to preserve community organisations, but help them thrive. Today, JPR is at the forefront of this effort. We invite readers to engage with the material in this paper, and welcome feedback in order to help amend, fine-tune or hone the recommendations accordingly.**

/ Acknowledgments

JPR's work is primarily funded by a small number of trusts and foundations that recognise the essential value of ongoing professional statistical work designed to ensure that Jewish communities have the data they need to make thoughtful policy decisions and interventions. We are particularly indebted to Pears Foundation for its support of JPR's work over many years, to the Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv Europe and the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation for their multi-year investments in our programme, and to key core funders, including the Lewis Family Charitable Trust, the Charles Wolfson Charitable Trust, the Eranda Rothschild Foundation, the Kirsh Foundation and the Bloom Foundation. In addition, we are extremely grateful to the Genesis Philanthropy Group, Elizabeth and Ashley Mitchell and the Jewish Leadership Council for their specific investments in our work on COVID-19 over the past year. These organisations, together with a number of highly-valued and visionary individual donors, help to maintain the most fundamental Jewish research infrastructure operating across Europe today, ensuring that community leaders, in the UK and across Europe, have the data they need to make informed policy decision.

In addition, we also thank the many people who shared or helped us to access various administrative data held by Jewish bodies around the world, and to the thousands of Jews in the UK who gave up their time to complete our COVID-19 survey and to support our research. We know their time is precious, so we are particularly grateful to them for their assistance.

/ About the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR)

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) is a London-based research organisation, consultancy and think-tank. It aims to advance the prospects of Jewish communities in the United Kingdom and across Europe by conducting research and informing policy development in dialogue with those best placed to positively influence Jewish life. Web: www.jpr.org.uk.

/ Research team working on COVID-19

Dr Jonathan Boyd is Executive Director of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research and a former Jerusalem Fellow at the Mandel Institute in Israel. A specialist in contemporary Jewry with expertise in the study of Jews in the UK and across Europe, he is a Board member of the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry, and a columnist for the Jewish Chronicle. The author of this paper, he holds a doctorate in education from the University of Nottingham, and an MA and BA in Jewish history from University College London.

Professor Sergio DellaPergola is Professor Emeritus and former Chairman of the Hebrew University's Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, and Chairman of JPR's European Jewish Demography Unit. A specialist in the demography of world Jewry, he has published or edited sixty books and monographs and over 300 papers on international Jewish demography, identification and antisemitism. He holds an MA in Political Sciences from the University of Pavia, and a PhD in Social Sciences and Contemporary Jewry from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Dr David Graham is a Senior Research Fellow at JPR, Honorary Associate at the Department of Hebrew, Biblical and Jewish Studies, University of Sydney, and Honorary Research Associate at the University of Cape Town. A geographer by training and expert in the study of Jews in the UK, Australia and South Africa, his skills encompass statistical analysis, survey design, census analysis and geographic information system mapping. He has published widely for academic and general interest audiences and holds a DPhil from the University of Oxford.

Carli Lessof is a Senior Research Fellow at JPR with responsibility for JPR's community statistics programme, online research panel, and monitoring and evaluation. She has an MA in Applied Social Research from Manchester University and is completing her PhD with the National Centre for Research Methods at Southampton University. Over her career, she has developed and delivered a range of complex, longitudinal surveys at NatCen Social Research and Kantar Public, and carried out research and evaluation in Government (DWP, NAO) and academia (LSE, University of Essex).

Ari Paltiel is a demographer and lecturer at the Braun School of Health and Community Medicine at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. An expert in sociodemographic research and mortality statistics, he worked at the Central Bureau of Statistics in Israel for over thirty-five years, where he held several senior positions, including Head of the Demography Branch and Director of the Statistical Quality Management Department. Not a permanent member of the JPR team, he co-authored our global study of Jewish mortality from COVID-19.

Dr Daniel Staetsky is a Senior Research Fellow at JPR, and Director of our European Jewish Demography Unit. His expertise spans the disciplines of demography, applied statistics and history, and he is a former researcher and analyst at the Central Bureau of Statistics in Israel and at RAND Europe. He holds an MA in demography from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a PhD in social statistics from the University of Southampton. He specialises in Jewish, European and Middle Eastern demography.

© Institute for Jewish Policy Research 2021

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any means, now known or hereinafter invented, including photocopying and recording or in any information storage or retrieval system, without the permission in writing of the publisher.

Published by Institute for Jewish Policy Research
ORT House
126 Albert Street
London NW1 7NE, UK

+44 (0)20 7424 9265
jpr@jpr.org.uk
www.jpr.org.uk

Registered Charity No. 252626