

What is Judaism:

Are Europe's Jews a religious or an ancestry group?

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Introduction

This short paper draws on data gathered for the 2018 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) survey of Jewish perceptions and experiences of antisemitism.

Over 16,000 self-defined Jews participated in 12 EU countries, which, together, are home to about 80% of all Jews in Europe. Along with data about perceptions of antisemitism, the survey collected information on Jewish identity: how Jews define their Judaism, their essential Jewish values, the different modes of expression of their Jewishness, and the extent of their participation in Jewish rituals and traditions.

Here we present some key findings to help answer a central question: What is Judaism? Is it religion, ancestry, heritage, culture, parentage, ethnicity or a combination of some or all of these? And why does it matter?

The main report

More detailed analysis can be found in the JPR report, *The Jewish identities of European Jews: What, why and how?* by Professor Sergio DellaPergola and Dr Daniel Staetsky.

The key question: How do Jews define Judaism?

The question of how to gather accurate data about minorities cannot be answered without fully understanding how ethnic and religious groups define themselves. For example, in the UK, there has been an ongoing debate about whether to classify Jews as a religious or an ethnic group. While in theory, both would be appropriate, the decision taken in the national census to date has been to classify Jews under the rubric of religion. But is this right?

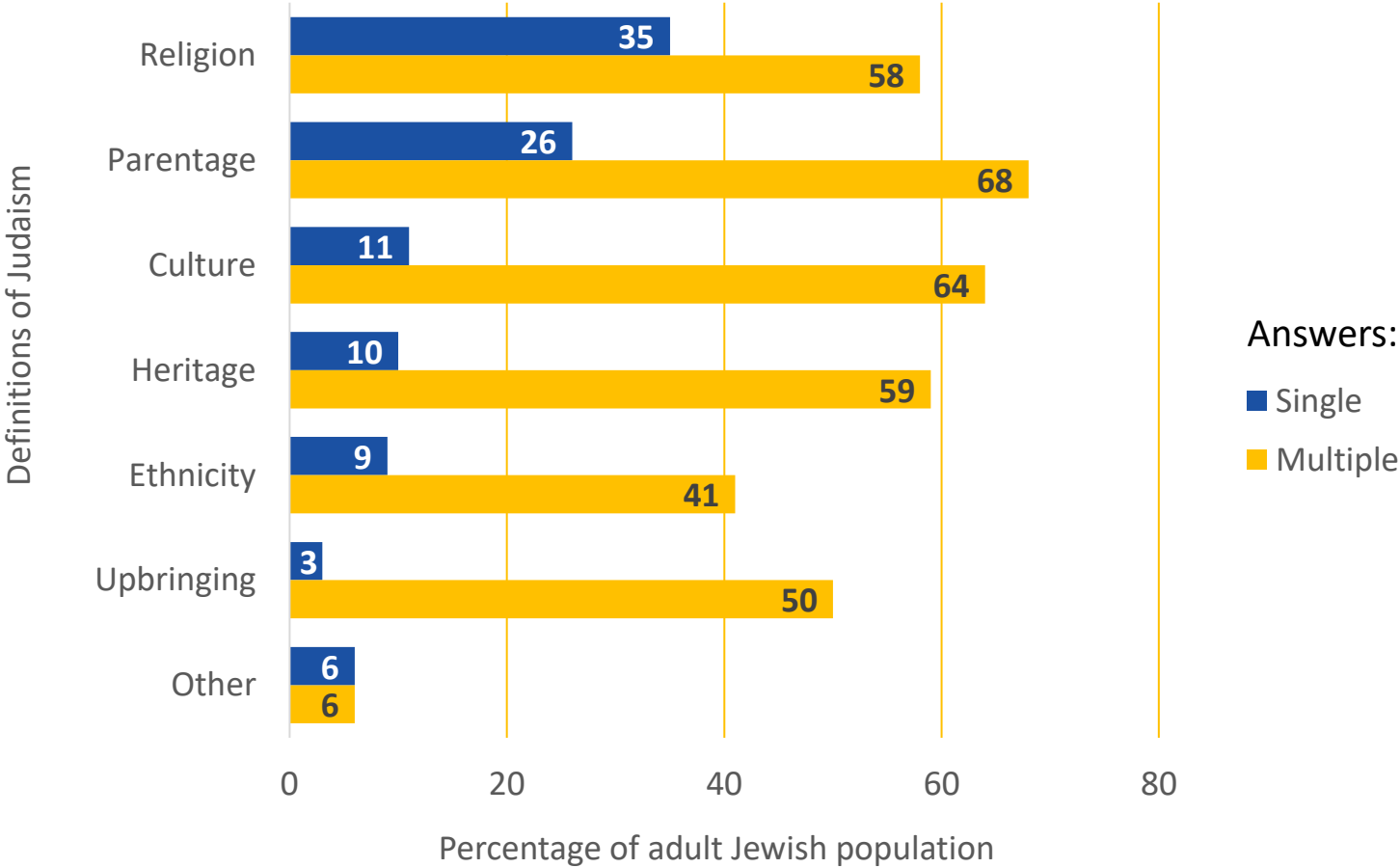
Jews are one of the longest established groups in Europe; their presence goes back over 2000 years. Yet questions about how to understand and research Jewish life are raised endlessly. Some Jews define themselves as a religious group, based on faith, belief or practice. Others define the group based on common ancestry or origin, captured by terms such as nation or ethnicity. Still others see Judaism as a culture, or simply as the link with their parents and ancestors. Discourse about these questions is shaped not only by knowledgeable community leaders and commentators, but also by external observers whose knowledge about Jews and Judaism is sometimes more limited.

In response to various public developments – whether an antisemitic incident, a military crisis in Israel, a census or a survey of a Jewish population in any given country, or an announcement by the American president – Jewish leaders and public intellectuals make their views known. Their perspectives are often presented and perceived as a reflection of what Jews think and feel collectively. But in reality, the only way to know what Jews think and feel about the best ways to define the Jewish collective is to ask them directly.

The policy issue

Are Jews a religious group, akin to Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs or Buddhists? Or an ethnic group, akin to Whites, Blacks or Asians? Or a national or cultural group, such as the Chinese, Hungarians, Russians or Italians? This is not a purely academic issue; it has important echoes in public perceptions, as well as policy implications. Authentic answers from within the Jewish population help to understand who Jews are, what matters to them, and how to constructively respond to the challenges they face.

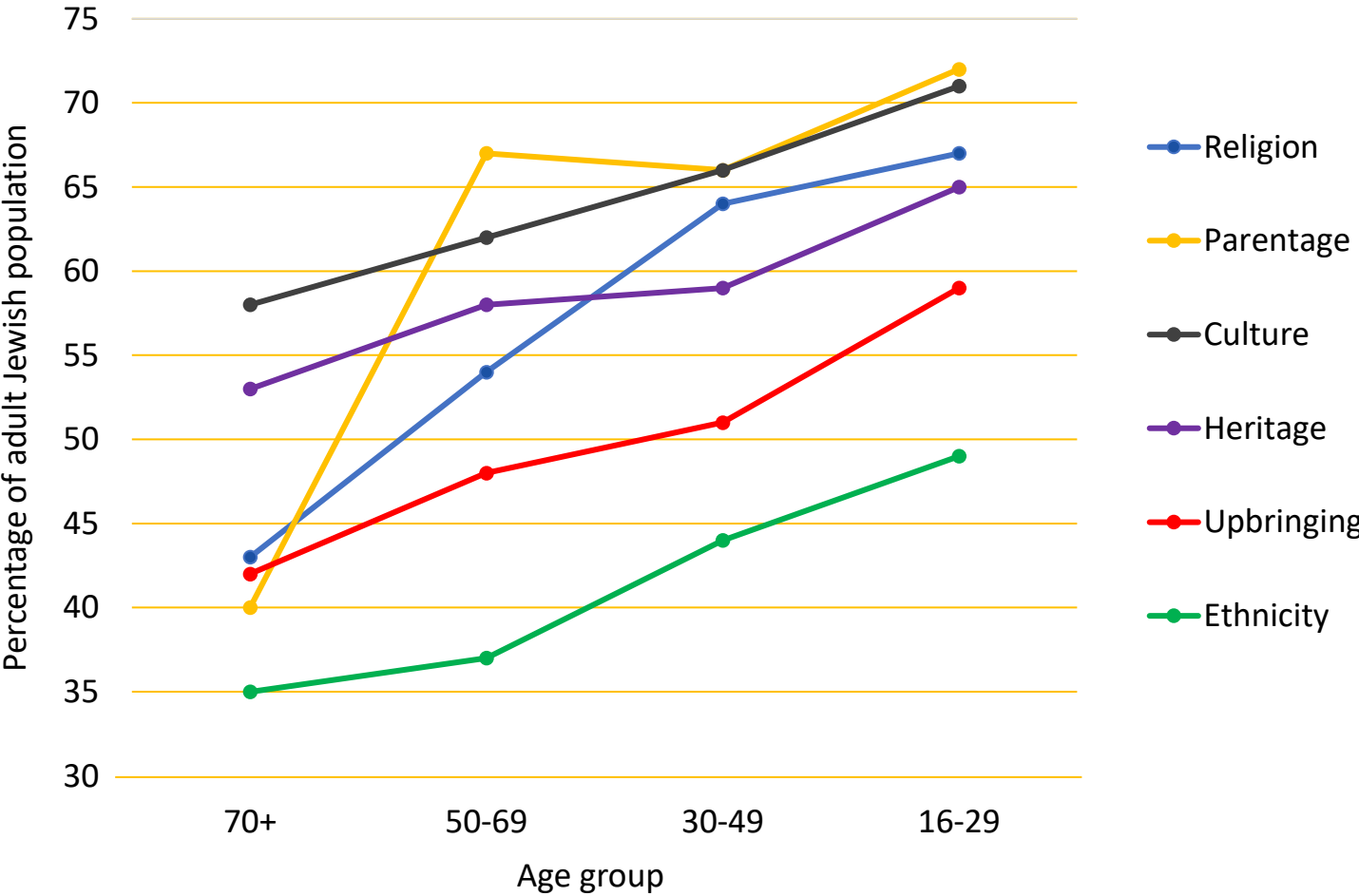
Judaism is multi-dimensional and should be understood in all its complexity



Key insights

Judaism can be defined in multiple ways as a broad defining framework of personal and group identity. Some regard it as a religion; others as part of their ancestry – their upbringing, parentage or ethnicity. Still others regard it as their culture or heritage. 24% of European Jewish respondents choose just one option (single, in blue), while 76% choose two or more (multiple, in orange). Most European Jews define Judaism as both their religion and their ancestry. It is more than one thing, and most Jews see no contradiction in that.

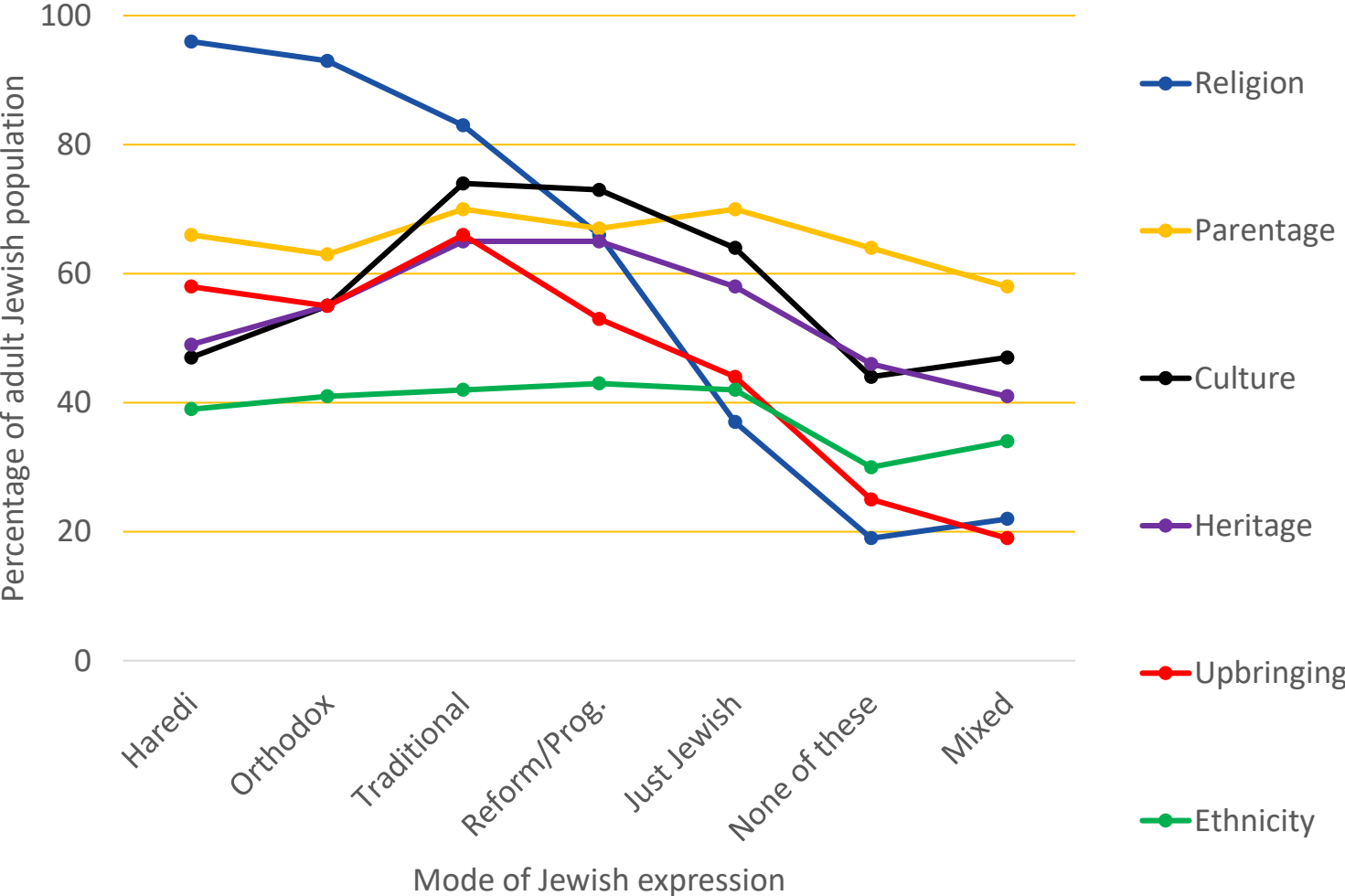
Younger Jews are more likely to define Judaism in multiple ways



Key insights

Judaism is multi-dimensional for all age groups across Europe, but particularly so for younger Jews. Religion and parentage are much stronger bases of identity for younger than for older Jews. Older Jews are more likely to define Judaism as a culture and heritage. Ethnicity is the least mentioned definition for all age groups, whereas culture is among the most mentioned.

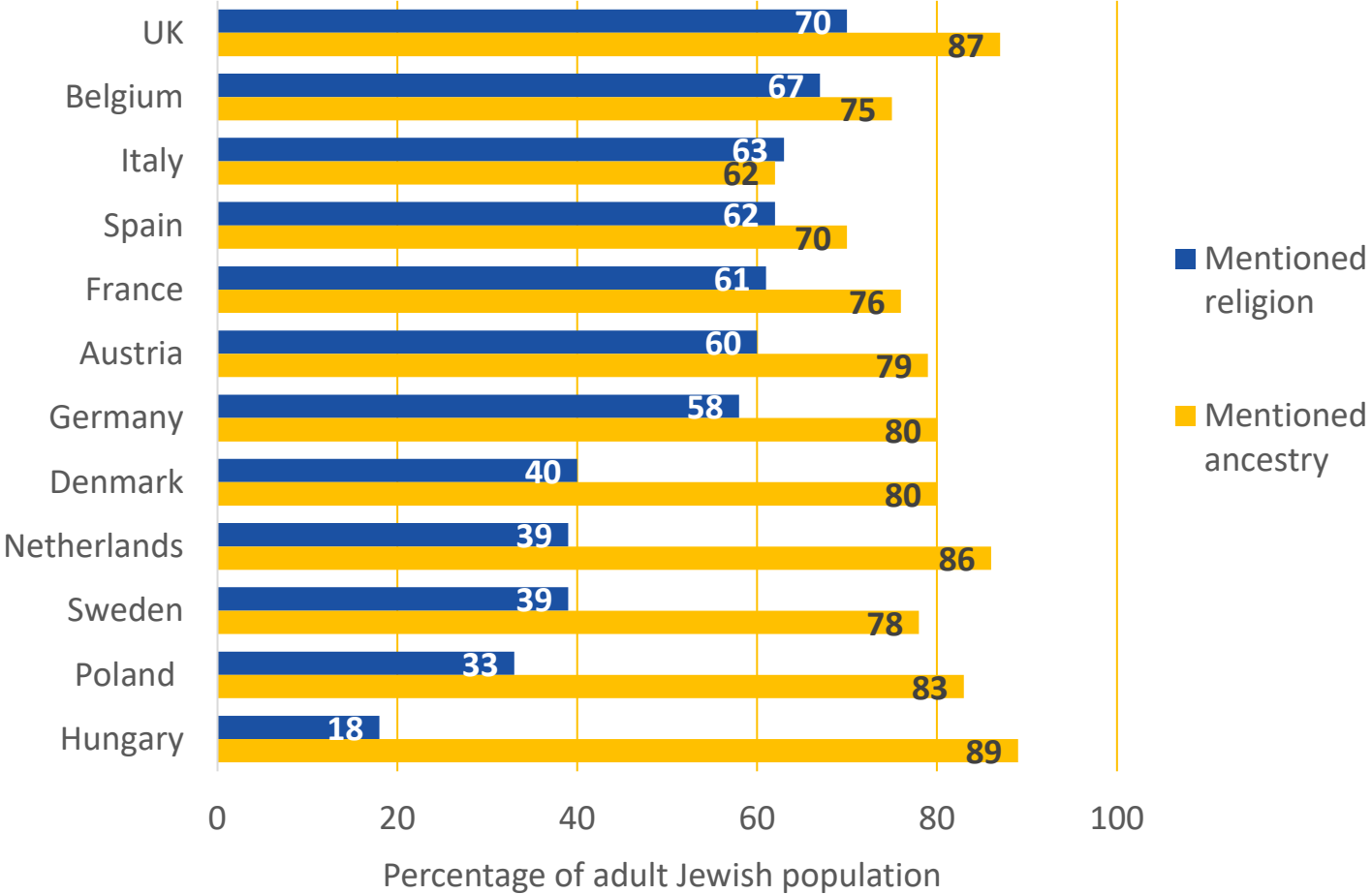
The most observant define Judaism primarily as religion; the least, as parentage, culture and heritage



Key insights

Regardless of their chosen mode of Jewish expression, Jews define Judaism in multi-dimensional ways. The choice of religion as a defining principle is the most popular among the most traditionally observant (defined here as Haredi, Orthodox and Traditional), and the least popular for the 'Just Jewish' and 'Mixed' (i.e. people who are Jewish and another religion). By contrast, all groups consider parentage as an important aspect of their Jewishness about equally.

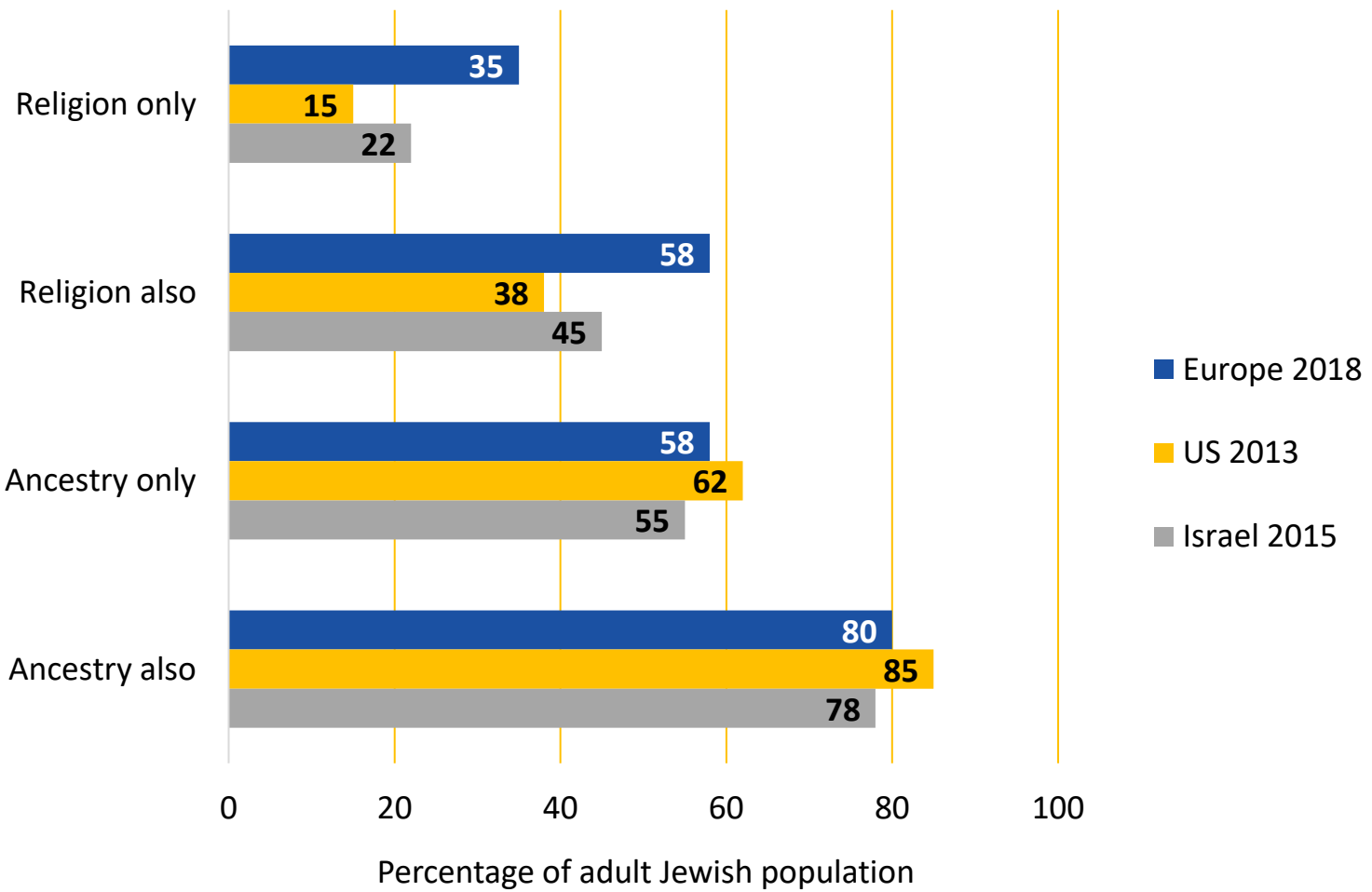
Jews in different European countries define Judaism differently from one another



Key insights

Judaism is defined differently by Jews across Europe. In Western and Southern Europe it is commonly understood as both religion and ancestry (obtained as the sum of those who mentioned parentage, upbringing and/or ethnicity). Ancestry clearly dominates over religion in Northern and Eastern Europe. Government agencies and private survey companies need to bear this in mind when determining how to gather data about Jews on administrative forms or survey questionnaires.

Ancestry is a prevailing choice for defining Judaism everywhere, but religion is mentioned more in Europe



Key insights

The pattern of identity displayed by European Jews is not unique: both religion and ancestry serve as bases for Jewish identity in the US and in Israel. With respect to ancestry, European, American and Israeli Jews are very similar. However, religion is a comparatively more frequent choice for defining Judaism among European Jews than elsewhere. Together, the Jews represented in this chart account for the identity patterns of over 90% of the world's Jewish population.

How should Jews be defined in research?

This paper does not seek to prescribe a specific solution to data collection efforts, but rather attempts to set the scene for informed discussion. European Jews define Judaism as both a religion and a collective based on common origin, or ethnicity and ancestry. This cuts across different age groups, modes of expression of personal Jewishness and countries. Defining Judaism as a religion is more common in the UK and Mediterranean Europe, while an ethnic/ancestry-based definition is more common in Eastern and Northern Europe.

Relating to Jews as a religious group, an ancestry/ethnicity-based group, or indeed both, is correct in many research contexts (censuses, surveys and administrative sources). No approach is fundamentally wrong. However, there are national traditions of categorising Jews to which Jews have accommodated themselves. For example, in the UK, Jews were identified as a religious group when the government started collecting data on religion in the 2001 national census, but not as an ethnic group. That did not change the fact that many Jews in the UK also saw themselves as an ethnic group, although the question about religion worked particularly well in that context.

Key insights

Judaism is simultaneously a religion, an ethnicity, and a culture. It holds elements of belief and practice, as well as ancestral bonds, and these can exist together or separately. It is entirely possible, and indeed common, to be completely secular, and yet a strongly identified Jew.

Best research practices

The correct way to handle data collection on Jews is to allow them to identify *both* as a religious group *and* as an ancestral/ethnic group in separate places in censuses, surveys and administrative data, and then combine the responses to these two questions at analysis stage, as has been done in the Canadian census for many years.

However, changes in established methods of data collection are riddled with risk and may not be advisable even when the purpose of a change is to correct an earlier error – for example, allowing Jews to identify as both a religious and an ancestral/ethnic groups in cases where a different practice existed previously. Changes may result in difficulties when comparing one set of data with another over time, and feelings of disorientation or offence among individual Jews facing an unfamiliar format of self-identification.

Determining how to define Jews should take into account the dual religious and ancestral nature of Judaism but should also bear in mind pre-existing national traditions of labelling, and the relative value of following existing traditions versus modifying them.

Key insights

It is important to be sensitive to different country and regional preferences and traditions to maximise the value and accuracy of any data gathered.

The success of data collection for research purposes is measured by its relevance and wide usability.

About the survey

The data in this report come from the 2018 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) survey on discrimination and hate crime against Jews in the EU. Fieldwork was conducted online by Ipsos and JPR in May and June 2018. The expertise in Jewish demography and social statistics necessary for the survey distribution was provided by JPR, as well as the data calibration, liaison and engagement work with Jewish communities, survey marketing work and advice on questionnaire development.

To be eligible to participate in the survey, respondents were required to self-identify as Jewish, and confirm that they were aged 16 or above, and lived in an EU Member State covered by the survey (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom). The online questionnaire was available in 13 languages. The final dataset contains 16,359 responses. The largest samples were obtained from the UK (4,728) and France (3,864), the two countries with the largest Jewish populations in Europe. Samples of over 1,000 respondents were obtained in Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden. Elsewhere, they were in the range of 400-800. The total sample contains about 2% of the total number of Jews in the countries covered by the survey – a very high proportion. In some countries (e.g. Poland and Denmark) about 9% of all Jews took part; in others (e.g. France, Hungary and Germany), about 1% did – still considered high by existing standards in the survey industry.

Key facts

The data in this report come from the 2018 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) survey on discrimination and hate crime against Jews in the European Union, which was undertaken for FRA by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research and Ipsos.

The survey was the largest ever conducted among European Jews, and has played a key role in understanding and combating antisemitism in Europe.

About the sample

The data were gathered by targeting the membership and subscriber lists of a carefully and broadly-selected cross section of Jewish organisations across Europe, and the subsequent referral of the survey by the first wave of respondents to their Jewish relatives, friends, acquaintances and colleagues. This generated a convenience sample, the representativeness of which was assessed by comparing the distributions of selected sociodemographic variables in the sample with external sources (e.g. census data, surveys and community statistics), including geography, gender, age and communal affiliation. After initial assessment and comparison with the benchmarks, weights were created and applied in order to redress the sample for over- or under-representation of certain subgroups among Jews.

The question on which this paper is based

The data in this paper are based primarily on respondents' answers to the question: 'People identify as Jewish in different ways. On what basis would you say you are Jewish?': (1) by religion; (2) by ethnicity; (3) by parentage; (4) by heritage; (5) by culture; (6) by upbringing; (7) by something else.

Key facts

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