

Understanding the Jewish Identity and Experiences of Russian-Speaking Young Adults: A Study of the Taglit-Birthright Israel Generation

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Introduction

In the late 1960s, the government of the Soviet Union responded to increasing international pressure and began allowing its Jewish citizens to emigrate. Eventually, more than one million Jews left the Soviet Union for Israel, the United States, Germany, and other countries over the ensuing decades, with the largest numbers in 1990 and 1991 (Tolts, 2003). Although identified as Jews by the state, most of this population was raised in relative isolation from Jewish life and in an environment where free expression of Jewish identity was prohibited. Although many of those who immigrated to Israel were Zionists who desired to live in a Jewish society, those who immigrated to the United States were mostly “negatively identified Jews” (Gitelman, 1990, p. 55). They were drawn to the United States by educational and economic opportunities, the chance to escape anti-Semitism and the desire to reunite with family members who had immigrated previously. For these individuals, Jewish life was not a high priority (Orleck, 1999).

Today, the Jewish identity of young adult Jews who immigrated to North America from the former Soviet Union (FSU), or who were born to parents who did so, is a source of broad concern in the Jewish community. Increasingly, they are the focus of programs to engage them in Jewish life.^[1] There is, however, little academic literature or empirical studies on the Jewish identities of Jews from the FSU. Much of the extant research on this population in North America focuses on economic and social integration, rather than Jewish identity (Markowitz, Elias, & Nosenko-Shteyn, 2008). Although estimates of the size of the

population vary, on the low end, the NJPS 2000-01 suggests a total of 281,000 Jews and people of Jewish background who immigrated to the United States from the FSU between 1970 and 2000-01 (‘Jews from the Former Soviet Union (FSU): Reconciling Estimates from NJPS and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS)’). On the high end, Kliger (2004) believes that there are about 700,000 FSU immigrants with Jewish origins in the United States. In between these figures is an estimate by Tolts (2004), who estimates that about 300,000 of the core Jewish population^[2] that emigrated from the FSU between 1970 and 2004 settled in the United States. In addition, Tolts (2004) estimates that about 25,000 members of the core Jewish population that emigrated from the FSU between 1970 and 2004 and their children live in Canada. Whatever the exact figures, hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants from the FSU and their children currently live in North America and constitute approximately 10 percent of the American Jewish population (Saxe, Tighe, & Boxer, in press).

Previous research indicates that Russian and North American Jews understand Jewishness very differently. As a result of decades of Soviet repression, Russian Jews developed an identity based largely on mutual experiences of discrimination and pride in the secular achievements of their fellow Jews (Remennick, 2007). Whereas American Jewish identity was and remains primarily rooted in Jewish religious practices and beliefs, Soviet Jewish identity was largely national in character (Markowitz, 1993). Ritterband (1997), however, cautions that Jews in the FSU were

not ideologically secular; rather, they were unfamiliar with many of the ritual aspects of Judaism.

Jewish immigrants from the FSU carried this nationalistic pattern of Jewish identity with them to the United States and Canada. Thirty years ago, they maintained fewer formal Jewish affiliations, such as synagogue memberships, than other American Jews but had a stronger sense of Jewish belonging and pride and stronger Jewish social networks (Gitelman, 1989). Over time, life in the tolerant and open societies of North America has wrought some change in the identities of Jewish immigrants from the FSU. Markowitz (1993), Gold (1995) and Orleck (1999) all found that these immigrants have started to abandon the self-conscious and insecure aspects of their Jewish identities. What Markowitz calls their “rites of expurgation” involve wearing Jewish jewelry and speaking Yiddish, as well as performing Jewish rituals (1993, pp. 153-164). Remennick confirms that, over time, the immigrants have “drifted towards the accepted forms of American Jewish life,” such as bar and bat mitzvah celebrations, observance of the Passover seder, and Jewish organizational membership (2007, p. 197). A 2003 study of Russian-speaking Jews in the United States found that 73 percent consider their primary identity as “Jewish,” rather than “Russian” or “American” (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006, p. 142). This trend stands in contrast to the trend in Germany, where Russian-Jewish immigrants become more “Russian” over time, and Israel, where they become more “Israeli” (Markowitz et al., 2008).

What characterizes the Jewish identities of the younger generation of Russian-speaking Jews, those who were born in North America or immigrated as children? First and foremost, they receive more Jewish education in childhood than their parents did. Although a 1989 study found that only four percent of Russian Jewish immigrants received any formal Jewish education as children (Kosmin, 1990, p. 39), a 1998-2000 study of second-generation Russian Jews in New York found that about 60 percent participated in some type of Jewish educational activity as children (Zeltzer-Zubida & Kasinitz, 2005, p. 212). Like their parents, these Jews display strong cognitive Jewish identity; they are proud to be Jews and feel a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people (Kasinitz, Zeltzer-Zubida, & Simakhodskaya, 2007). Interestingly, this group of young people displays a notable split between the strength of their ethnic and religious Jewish identities, with almost universally high scores on a scale of ethnic identity, but varying scores on a scale of religious practice (Zeltzer-Zubida & Kasinitz, 2005, pp. 215-219). The typical Russian-speaking Jewish young person reports only limited engagement in Jewish religious practices (Birman, Persky, & Chan, 2010) and may even be repelled by the perceived religious messages of Jewish communal organizations (Liakhovitski, 2005). Hoffman (2001) and Basok (2002) emphasize that the Jewish identities of Russian Jewish immigrants are dynamic and flexible, carrying multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings. More research is needed in order to understand the particular aspects of Jewish identity that young Russian-speaking Jews find compelling, the

ways in which their Russian identities interact with their Jewish identities, and the modes of expression of their Jewish identities.

Taglit-Birthright Israel (Taglit), which provides 10-day educational trips to Israel for Jewish young adults ages 18 to 26, has successfully engaged Jewish young adults, in general (Saxe & Chazan, 2008) and the Russian-speaking population in particular. About ten percent of Taglit participants from North America have roots in the former Soviet Union (see below, “Participation in Taglit-Birthright Israel”). Ongoing research conducted since Taglit’s inception in 1999 has consistently shown that participants, overall, view the program as educational, fun, and meaningful; comparison with non-participants has shown that Taglit has a positive impact on participants’ attitudes toward Israel, the Jewish people, and their own Jewish identities.

The latest evaluation studies show that the impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel has remained overwhelmingly positive, even as participants are drawn from less-engaged sectors of the North American Jewish community (Saxe et al., 2008). Taglit participants continue to give extremely high ratings to the trip experience and report learning a great deal about Israel and Jewish history. Compared to non-participants, they have stronger feelings of connection to Israel, the Jewish people and Jewish history, as well as an increased desire to establish a

Jewish family. Participants are also more attuned to Israel in the news, and many express a desire to return to Israel (Saxe et al., 2008). Evidence of Taglit’s impact on participants’ engagement in Jewish communal life has been less dramatic, but positive nevertheless (Saxe & Chazan, 2008; Saxe, Sasson, Phillips, Hecht, & Wright, 2007). Given their developmental stage of life and limited Jewish experiential background and knowledge, most participants have difficulty translating their positive experience on Taglit into a meaningful connection to the Jewish community in North America (Chertok, Sasson, & Saxe, 2009).

The current study focuses on North American Russian-speaking Taglit-Birthright Israel participants and examines their characteristics and Jewish identities, as well as their reactions to Taglit-Birthright Israel and their post-program need for Jewish education and experiences. The underlying question is whether Russian-speaking participants differ from their peers in terms of their background, their experience on Taglit, and their need for follow-up programming. Using quantitative and qualitative data, the study paints a picture that will help organizations develop effective programs to engage the next generation of North American Russian-speaking Jewry.

Methodology

This report focuses on North American Taglit-Birthright Israel participants who were born in the FSU or have at least one parent born in the FSU. For comparison purposes, data on participants without FSU connections is also presented. The report integrates quantitative data and qualitative material.

Quantitative Data

The report draws on data collected from a set of surveys conducted approximately three months before and after the trips in summer '07, winter '07-'08, and summer '08. Researchers had available information about respondents' country of birth, and the surveys asked for respondents' parents' country of birth. Based on this information, survey respondents were divided into four categories: (1) applicants born in the FSU, (2) applicants with two parents born in the FSU, and (3) applicants with one parent born in the FSU—hereafter, the FSU-connected—and (4) all other applicants.

Table 1 shows the number of applicants and pre-trip survey respondents in each of these four categories. Unless otherwise noted, data presented in this report refer to participants who were survey respondents.

Surveys were administered via a web interface. All eligible applicants for a given trip were contacted for each survey, including those who participated in the program, as well as those who applied but did not go (mostly because a slot was unavailable at a time when the respondent could travel). Respondents were contacted via an email that included a unique link to the survey website. Those who did not respond were re-contacted up to three times by email. For the post-trip surveys, intensive follow-up was conducted with a representative sample of non-respondents who were called by Cohen Center staff and encouraged to complete the survey online. Response rates for the pre-trip surveys range from 56 percent to 71 percent and response rates to the post-trip surveys range from 30

Table 1. Taglit-Birthright Israel Applicants and Pre-Trip Survey Respondents: Summer '07, Winter '07-'08 and Summer '08

	Applicants			Pre-Trip Survey Respondents				
	Not Born in FSU	Born in FSU	Total	No Parents Born in FSU	One Parent Born in FSU	Two Parents Born in FSU	Born in FSU	Total
Participants	46,551	4,420	50,971	34,646	289	769	3,375	39,079
Non-Participants	25,805	2,565	28,370	11,811	102	255	1,139	13,307
Total	72,356	6,985	79,341	46,457	391	1,024	4,514	52,386

percent to 43 percent. Using demographic data available from the registration system, analyses were weighted to account for nonresponse (see Appendix A: Methodology [3]). In the report sections “The Taglit-Birthright Israel Experience” and “Impact of the Trip Experience,” most charts contain adjusted estimates from regression analysis, controlling for differences such as trip organizer, age, gender, and denomination (see Appendix B: Regression Models).

Qualitative Material

In addition to the quantitative data, this report draws on information gathered in a series of focus groups and individual interviews conducted with FSU-connected Taglit-Birthright Israel participants. In four of the focus groups, conducted in Manhattan, NY; Brooklyn, NY; Brookline, MA; and Toronto, ON in November and

December 2008, participants were asked for information about their background, including their families’ involvement in the Jewish and Russian communities; their Taglit-Birthright Israel experience; and their current involvement and interest in both Jewish and Russian activities. In the fifth focus group, conducted in Brooklyn, NY in July 2008 (part of a study of how Taglit alumni relate to programs, activities, and organizations geared toward Jewish young adults), Russian-speaking alumni provided information on their Jewish activities after Taglit. A series of 25 individual interviews conducted by phone in December 2008 and January 2009 explored all of these topics in greater detail. Throughout the report, material from the focus groups and individual interviews adds depth and insight to the quantitative findings.

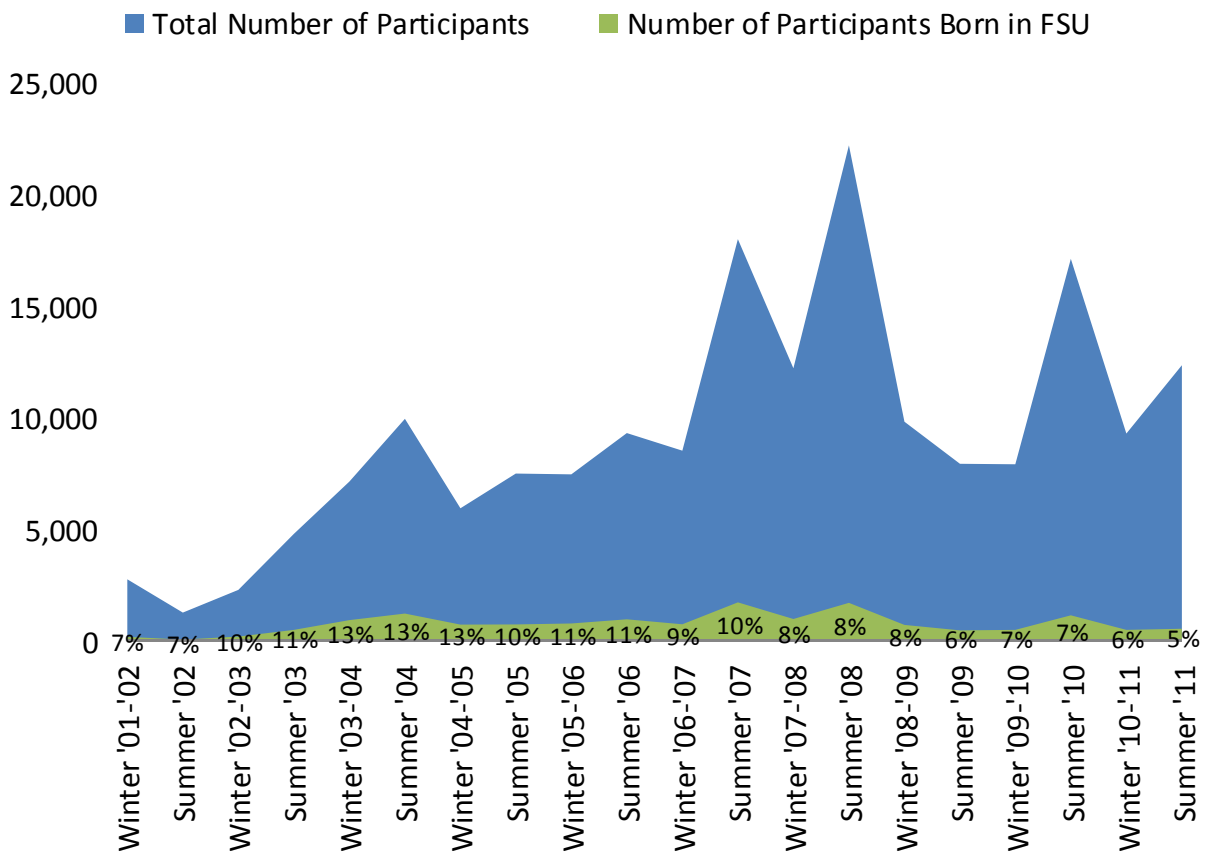
Participation in Taglit-Birthright Israel

As noted above, Taglit-Birthright Israel has engaged a large number of young adults with roots in the FSU. The total number of participants from winter '01-'02 to summer '11, encompassing the fifth through twenty-fourth cohorts, is about 185,000. Of these, about 16,000, or nine percent, were born in the FSU (Figure 1). The same percentage of qualified non-participants was born in the FSU, indicating that those born in the FSU

are accepted to the program at the same rate as all other applicants.

The next sections of the report will explore the characteristics of the FSU-connected participants; their Taglit-Birthright Israel experience; and the impact of the experience on their Jewish identity, Jewish engagement, and impressions of Israel.

Figure 1. Number of Total Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants and FSU-Born Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants, by Round



Note: Percentages show proportion of FSU-born participants in cohort.

Characteristics of Participants

Sociodemographic Characteristics

In their age and gender profile, FSU-connected participants resemble other participants. There are slightly more female participants (Figure 2), and about half of

participants are college-age (18-21 years), while the rest are ages 22 or older (Figure 3).

FSU-connected participants are more likely than other participants to have a primary

Figure 2. Gender of Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants, by FSU Connection

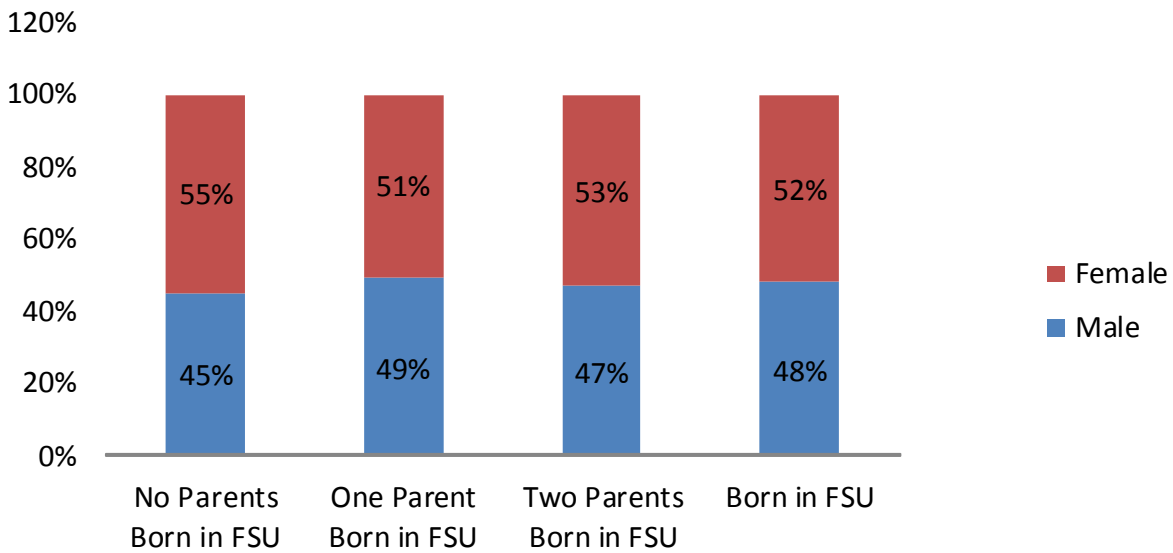
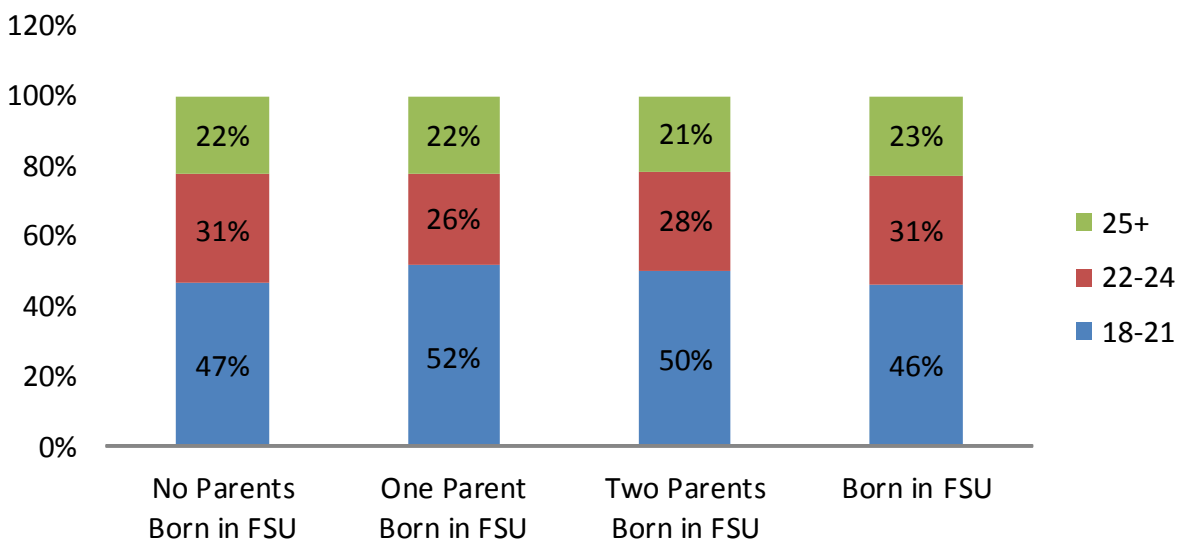


Figure 3. Mean Age of Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants, by FSU Connection



address in an area with a large Jewish community, such as New York or Toronto (Figure 4).

Jewish Background

Parents

The Jewish background of FSU-connected participants differs in several crucial ways from the Jewish background of other Taglit-Birthright Israel participants. Typical of immigrant groups and reflecting this population's strong Jewish social ties, fewer FSU-connected participants come from intermarried households (Figure 5). At the same time, parents of FSU-connected participants exhibit weaker Jewish

communal affiliation. They are less likely to be members of or donate to a synagogue, Jewish Federation, or other Jewish organization. Interestingly, these same parents are equally likely to be members of or donate to a Jewish Community Center (JCC) (Figure 6).

Individual interviews and focus groups reveal two reasons why JCCs are attractive to the parents of FSU-connected participants. First, some JCCs offer activities geared toward Russian-speaking Jews. Many Canadian participants report that their parents were involved in the Jewish Russian Community Centre of Ontario, which serves Russian-speaking Jews exclusively. JCCs in

Figure 4. Size of Local Jewish Community of Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants, by FSU Connection

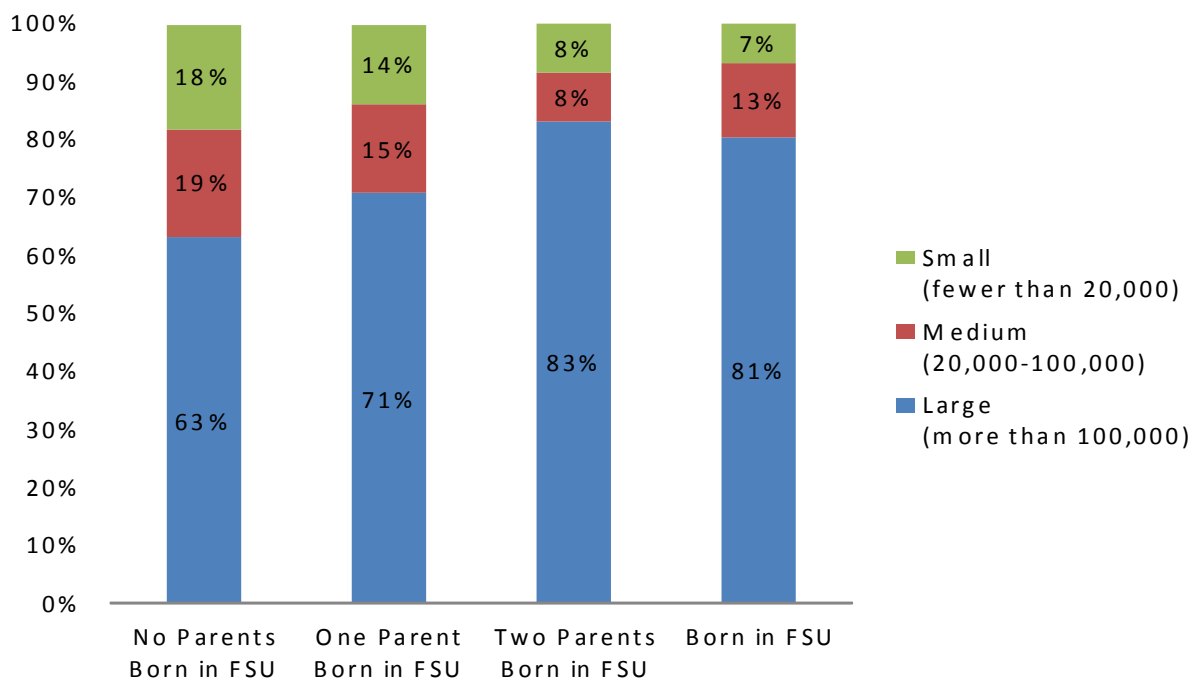
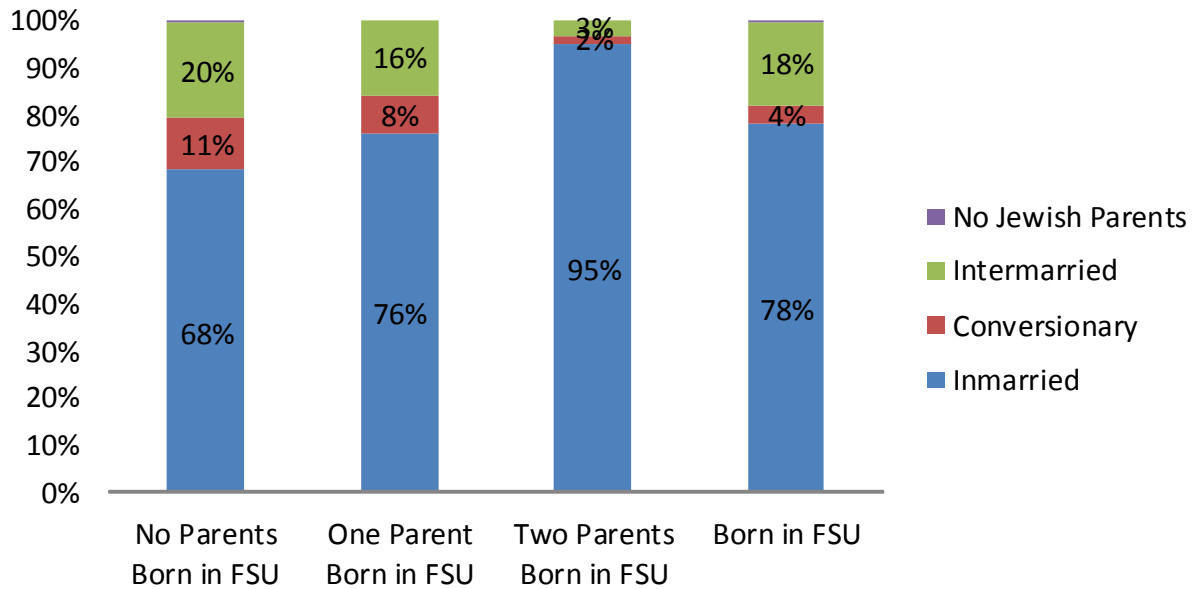
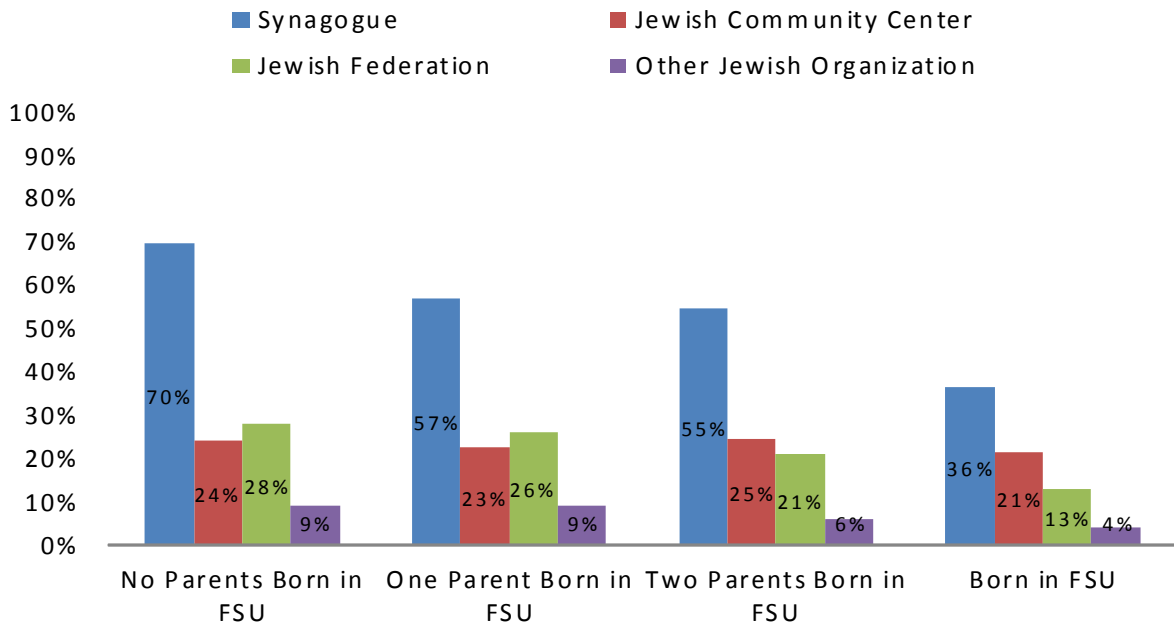


Figure 5. Parental Marriage Type of Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants, by FSU Connection



Note: Less than 1 percent of respondents had two non-Jewish parents.

Figure 6. Parents of Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants Members of or Donate to Jewish Organizations, by FSU Connection



the New York area also offer programs for Russian speakers.

It was like a little Russian program that we had over here. It's now the JCC of the Five Towns, which is in Nassau County. They had a little Russian—they called it a Russian tea club, and basically you just bring your kids there. It was a place for Russian immigrants to interact. (Individual interview, New York area)

Second, JCCs are often a source of support for Russian-Jewish immigrants after their arrival in the United States or Canada. Many participants say that a desire for assistance was the gateway for their parents' involvement in JCCs and other local Jewish organizations.

There's a Russian Jewish Community Center, and I guess they did go there. I guess in the beginning...when they had questions or something, I guess they'd go to the Community Center, the Jewish Community Center. (Individual interview, Toronto area)

When we came here, we were involved right away because my mom applied for religious asylum, and she had to work with HIAS organization[4]...So in order for—we had to prove that we had Jewish ancestry—so my mom and I went to a local synagogue and met the rabbi there

and obviously spoke to the rabbi. And he invited us to come join the congregation for Friday night services. And you know, since we really didn't know anybody, that's how we really got involved and started going, got involved with them. (Individual interview, New York area)

Nevertheless, the data show that parents born in the FSU are generally less involved with synagogues, federations, and other Jewish organizations than other parents.

Denomination Raised

Reflecting the non-religious orientation of many FSU Jewish households, FSU-connected participants are far less likely than other participants to have been raised with a denominational affiliation (Table 2 and Table 3). In the United States, 81 percent of those born in the FSU were raised “Just Jewish,” compared to only 22 percent of non-FSU-connected participants. In Canada, the comparable figures are 84 percent and 36 percent. All FSU-connected participants are less likely than other participants to have been raised in Reform, Reconstructionist, or Conservative households, and those born in the FSU or with two parents born in the FSU are also less likely to have been raised in Orthodox households. Interestingly, in both the United States and Canada, those with one parent born in the FSU are more likely to have been raised Orthodox than other participants. Perhaps these parents are more likely to have met in a Jewish context and, therefore,

Table 2. Denomination Raised of American Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants by FSU Connection

Denomination	No Parents Born in FSU	One Parent Born in FSU	Two Parents Born in FSU	Born in FSU
Just Jewish	22%	39%	59%	81%
Reform/ Reconstructionist	41%	23%	21%	9%
Conservative	30%	25%	12%	6%
Orthodox	4%	10%	4%	2%
Other	4%	3%	3%	3%

Table 3. Denomination Raised of Canadian Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants by FSU Connection

Denomination	No Parents Born in FSU	One Parent Born in FSU	Two Parents Born in FSU	Born in FSU
Just Jewish	36%	54%	63%	84%
Reform/Reconstructionist	22%	11%	14%	8%
Conservative	32%	28%	20%	5%
Orthodox	5%	6%	2%	2%
Other	4%	2%	2%	1%

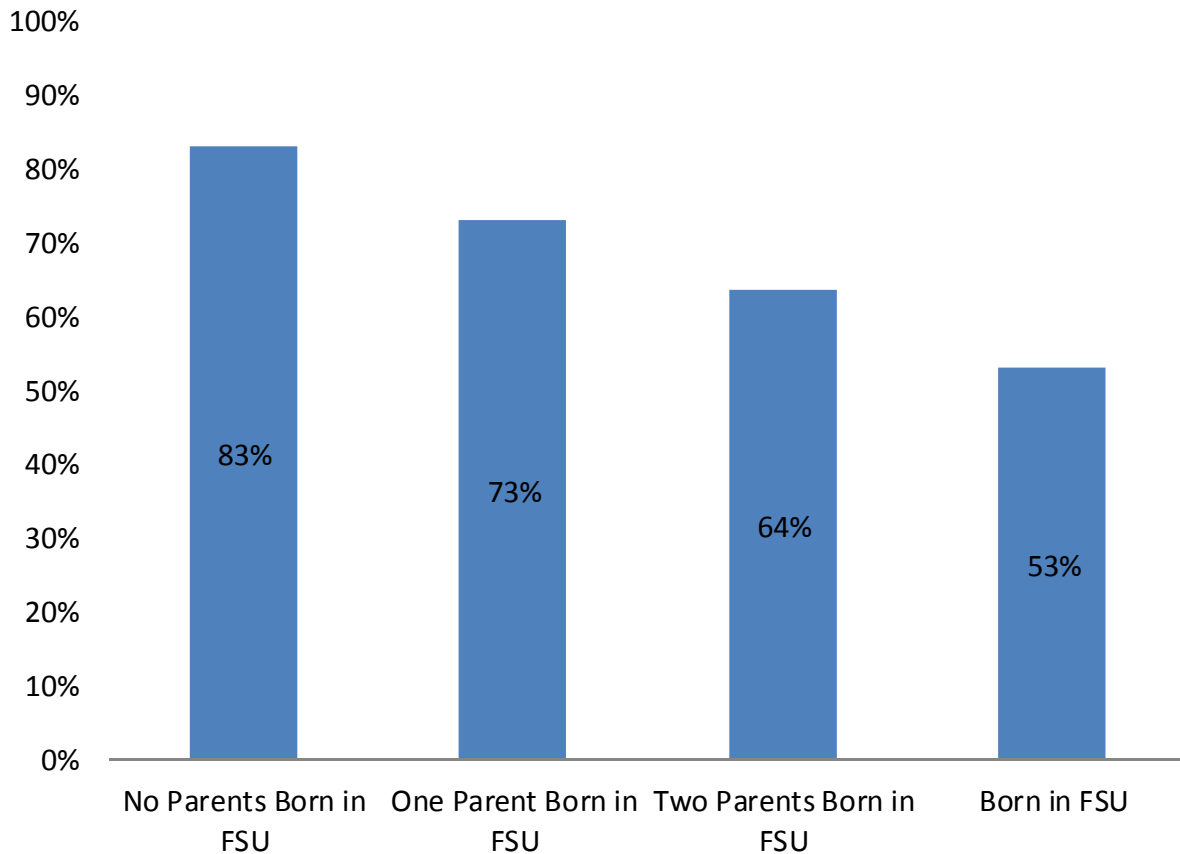
more likely to be Jewishly committed.

Jewish Education

Although FSU immigrants who were raised in the United States received more Jewish

education than their parents, FSU-connected participants still exhibit a weaker background in Jewish education than other participants. They are less likely to have received any formal Jewish education when considering both full-time and part-time school (Figure 7). A higher percentage of

Figure 7. Percentage of Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants Who Received Any Formal Jewish Education, by FSU Connection



FSU-connected participants, however, received at least some full-time Jewish day school education (Figure 8). This is likely due to the scholarships offered to children of Russian-Jewish immigrants in many communities.

In focus groups, some participants who were born in the FSU mentioned that they attended Jewish day schools for only a brief period of time after their arrival in the United States or

Canada. Survey data show that FSU-born participants who received any full-time Jewish education received an average of 4.2 years, almost three years less than participants without FSU connections who received full-time Jewish day school education (Figure 9). FSU-connected participants were also less likely to have received the informal Jewish education provided by Jewish summer camps (Figure 10).

Figure 8. Most Intensive Type of Formal Jewish Education Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants Received, by FSU Connection

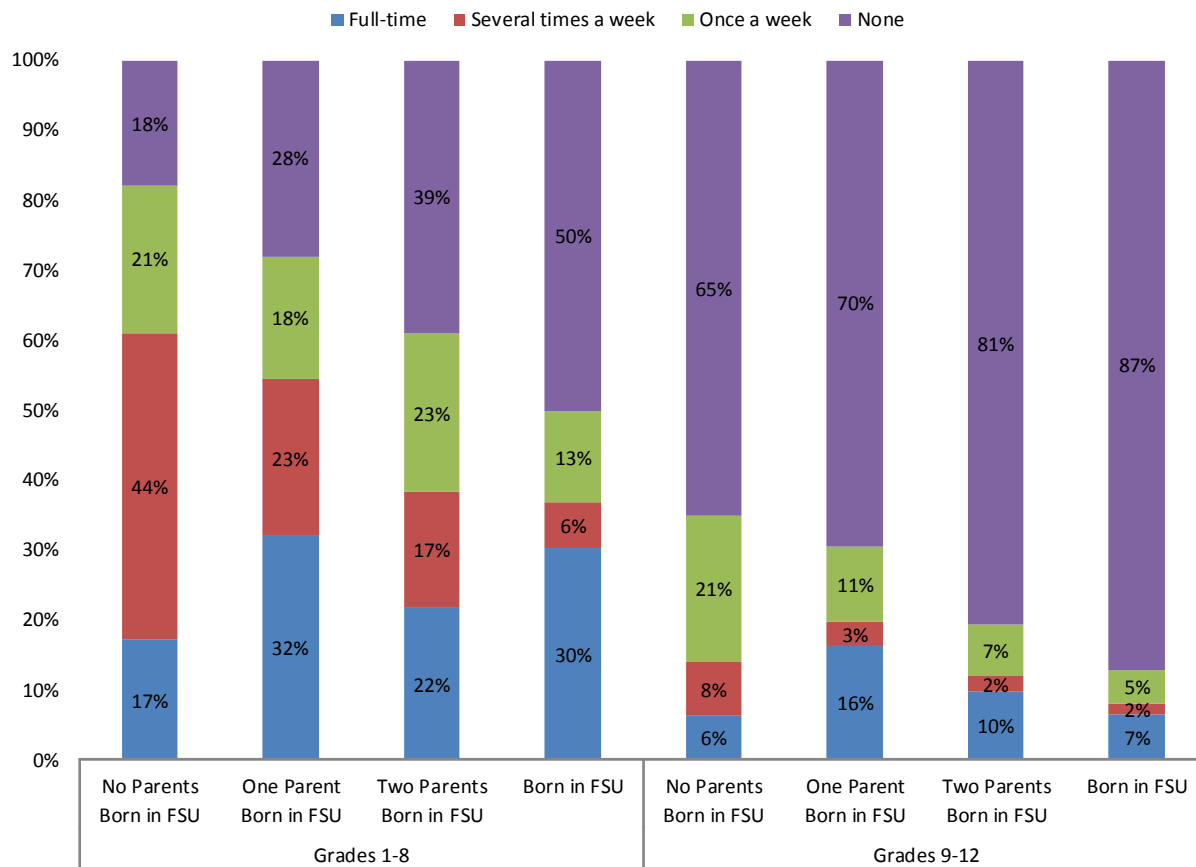


Figure 9. Mean Years of Full-Time Jewish Education among Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants Receiving Any Years Full-Time Jewish Education, by FSU Connection

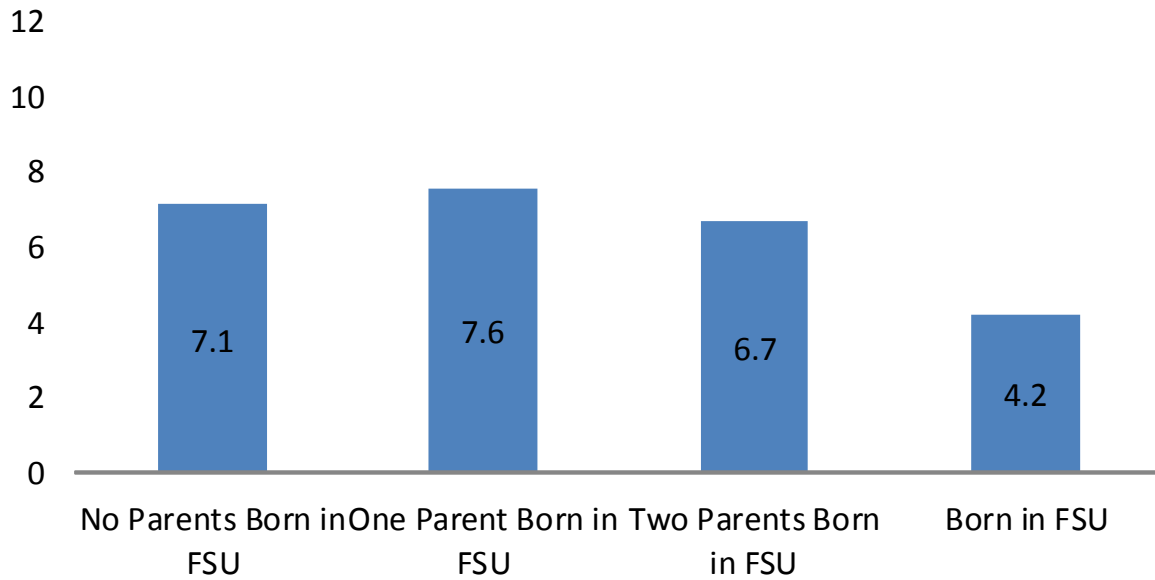
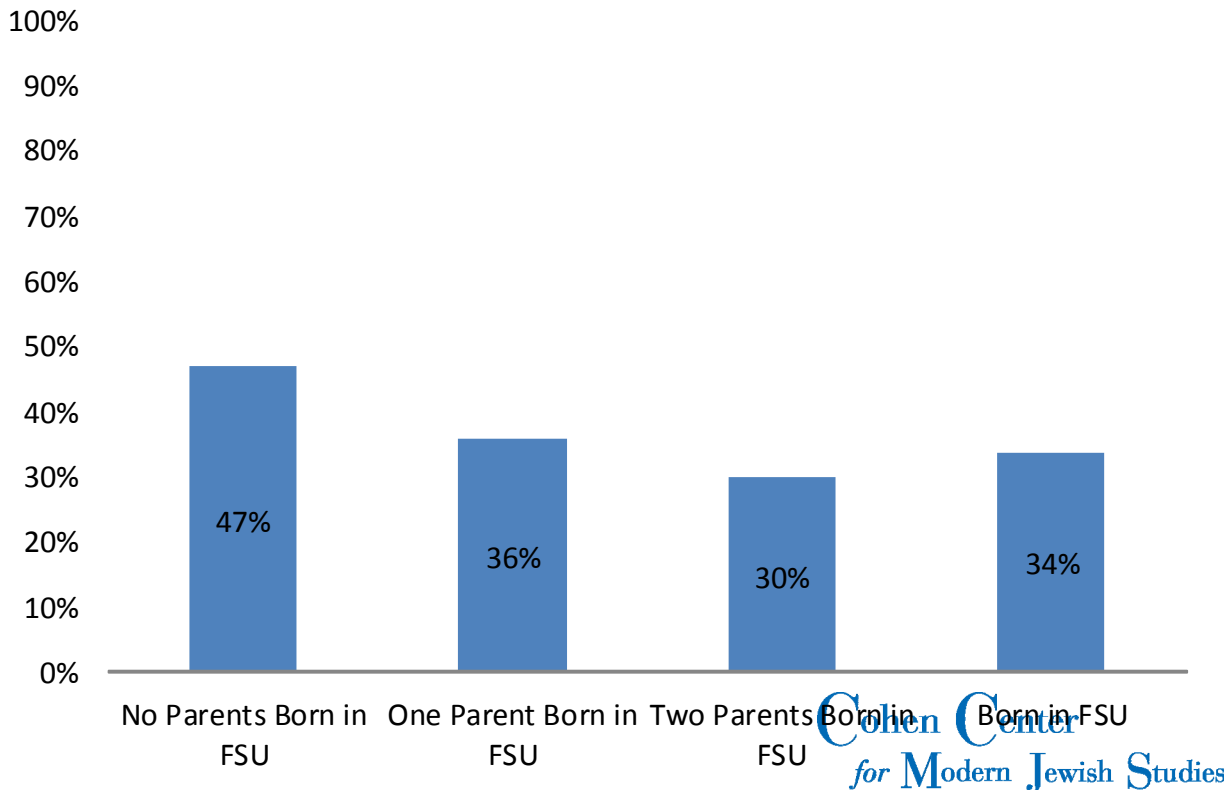


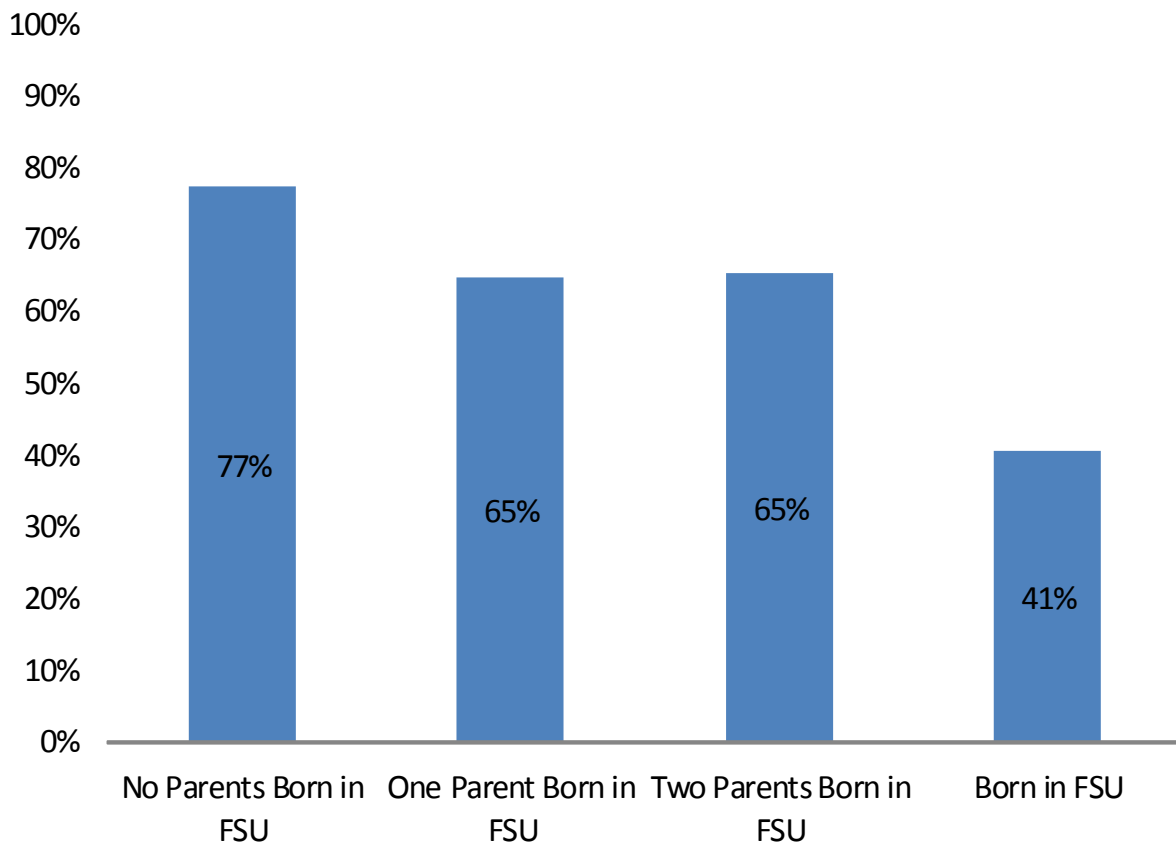
Figure 10. Percentage of Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants Who Attended Jewish Overnight Camp, by FSU Connection



Furthermore, although bar and bat mitzvah celebrations are increasing among FSU immigrant communities, FSU-connected participants are less likely than other participants to have had them (Figure 11). Two participants reported in individual interviews that they had bar or bat mitzvah celebrations while on Taglit, and both said that the experience made up for something they had missed when they were adolescents. It suggests the importance that FSU-connected participants attribute to bar and bat mitzvah as a rite of Jewish childhood.

It really meant a lot, because it was something that I kind of always regretted not going through. I mean, a part of me was really proud of myself for having gone through Hebrew school when I wasn't at the same age as the students in Hebrew school, because, you know, I started Hebrew school when I was twelve because I came to this country when I was eleven... But by the time, you know, it was the time to have the bat mitzvah, I was so busy with my other world, and almost kind of like, I was almost kind of like embarrassed to

Figure 11. Percentage of Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants Who Had a Bar or Bat Mitzvah Celebration, by FSU Connection



go through it at that age...So it was something that I always kind of regretted not doing. And I always said to myself, oh, one of these days I'll have a big party, and I'll just do it. But it's not something that you kind of start up easily. So I was really happy to find out that it wasn't going to be such a big process, that it was just something that I can do and go through, and that it'll be easy but meaningful still, because I was in Israel. So it was a really, really meaningful thing for me to go through. (Individual interview, New York area)

The lack of Jewish education during childhood bears on FSU-connected participants' comfort with Jewishness as young adults, according to focus group participants.

I didn't grow up around that and it makes me feel a little awkward and weird. As much as I would love to explore my Judaism, it's sort of like really awkward to put a foot in at twenty-five and be like, 'I can't even read that. You'll have to help me.' Like I don't know what's going on. (Focus group, Brooklyn, NY)

Jewish education by itself is not, however, sufficient to ensure comfort in the Jewish community. FSU-connected participants do not have the same experiences of home-based Jewish ritual as many of their North American Jewish peers, and this gap puts them at a disadvantage.

I've gone to Hebrew school, I have the education, the Jewish background to back it up. It's still more of being raised that way, a comfort thing of actually living through it and being observant versus knowing about it or understanding. Do know what I mean? It's just a matter of feeling, whether you're raised with it, how comfortable you are with it, doing it, and knowing what to do and things like that. (Focus group, Brooklyn, NY)

It appears ritual practice while growing up is important in building Jewish literacy and a feeling of belonging.

High School Ritual Practice

How do FSU-connected participants' levels of Jewish ritual observance when in high school compare to other participants' levels of Jewish ritual observance? A summary scale of level of Jewish ritual observance in high school was created from four items:

1. Family celebrated Hanukkah when in high school
2. Family held or attended a seder when in high school
3. Family usually or always lit Shabbat candles when in high school
4. Family kept kosher when in high school

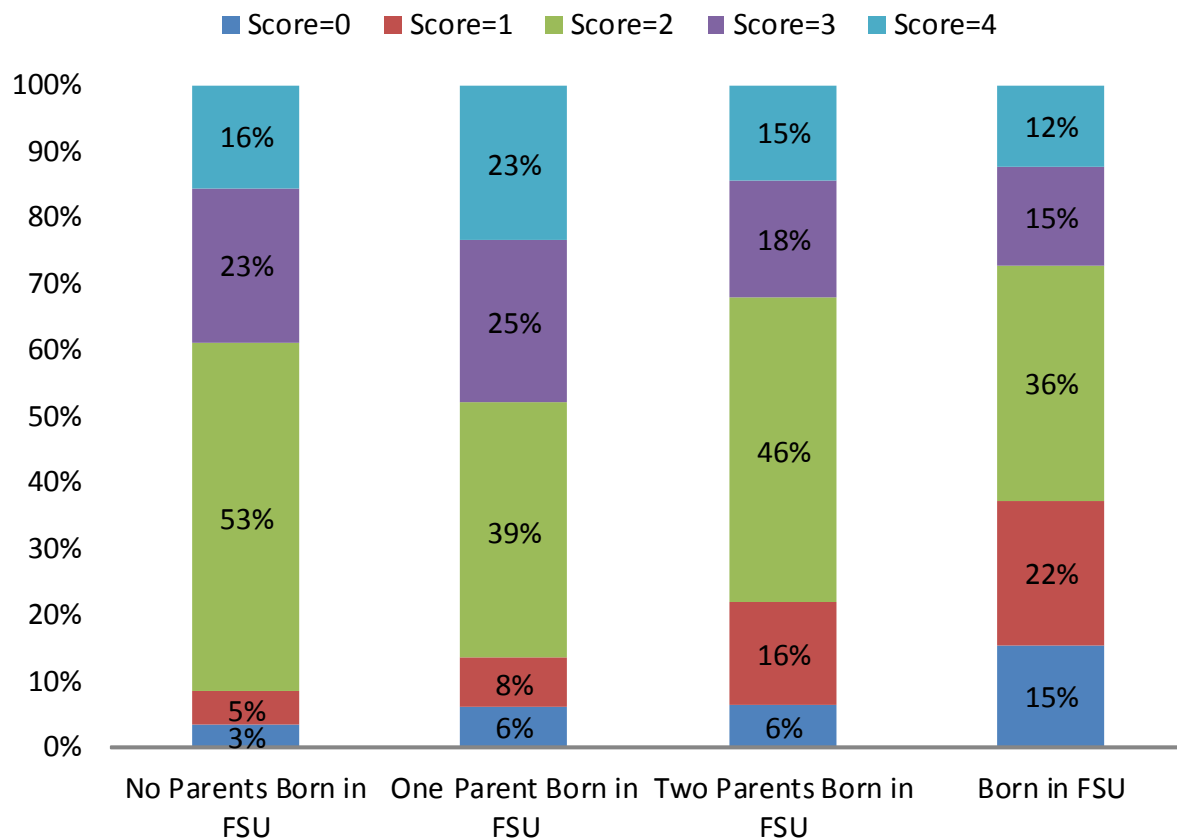
The families of FSU participants who were born in the FSU or had two parents born in the FSU scored lower on the index of high school ritual practice than the families of

non-FSU-connected participants. However, participants with only one parent born in the FSU scored higher on the index (Figure 12). Overall, despite the fact that Russian-speaking immigrants are taking on more “American” ways of being Jewish and giving their children more Jewish education than they themselves received, FSU-connected Taglit participants have weaker Jewish educational backgrounds than their U.S. or Canadian peers.

Russian Background

In assessing the childhood experiences of FSU-connected participants, one must examine both Jewish and Russian influences. Focus groups and individual interviews reveal information about participants’ involvement in the Russian community during their youth. Most of the activities mentioned relate to Russian culture and language, such as Russian theater groups, Ukrainian folk dancing, Russian art

Figure 12. High School Ritual Practice Scale Score of Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants by FSU Connection



camp, and Russian language tutoring. One participant who grew up in the Boston area remembers:

I don't know if anyone has heard of this woman Nina Goldmakher from Newton...She has this group where you meet once a week and read all the classics. And you read like War and Peace and Anna Karenina and put on plays and you do poetry recitals. I went to this for I think nine years straight; it was kind of crazy. It was a really big part of my life in middle school and high school. (Focus group, Brookline, MA)

Anecdotes like these illustrate the dual identity with which many FSU-connected participants were raised. As children, they identified with both the Russian and Jewish cultures, and they participated in activities relating to both cultures.

Interestingly, some participants attribute their parents' lack of involvement in the Jewish community to the anti-Semitism their families experienced in the FSU. Because Jewish activities were prohibited by the Soviet government, many parents never developed an interest in Jewish ritual or organized Jewish life.

When my grandparents were raised, and my parents, the whole country was very anti-Semitic, so they just weren't brought up in a Jewish background. They didn't know

anything about it. (Individual interview, Boston area)

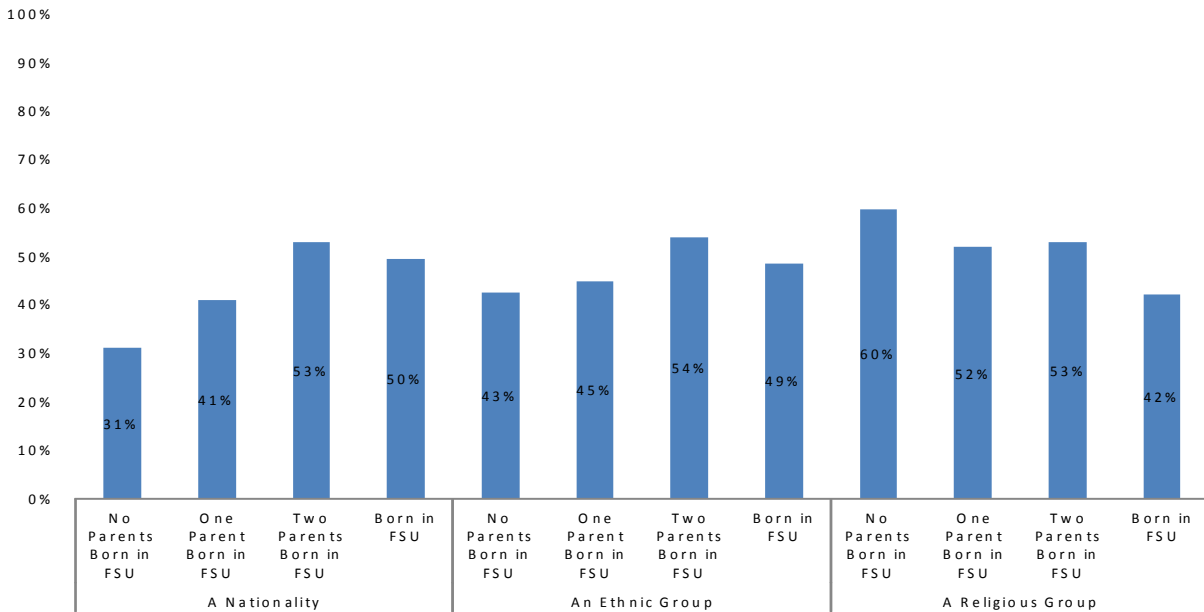
My family didn't raise me that way, because their family was persecuted for their religious beliefs. We never kept it in the house. (Focus group, Brooklyn, NY)

The next section will explore how this unique Russian-Jewish background impacted the current Jewish identity and engagement of FSU-connected participants.

Current Jewish Identity and Engagement

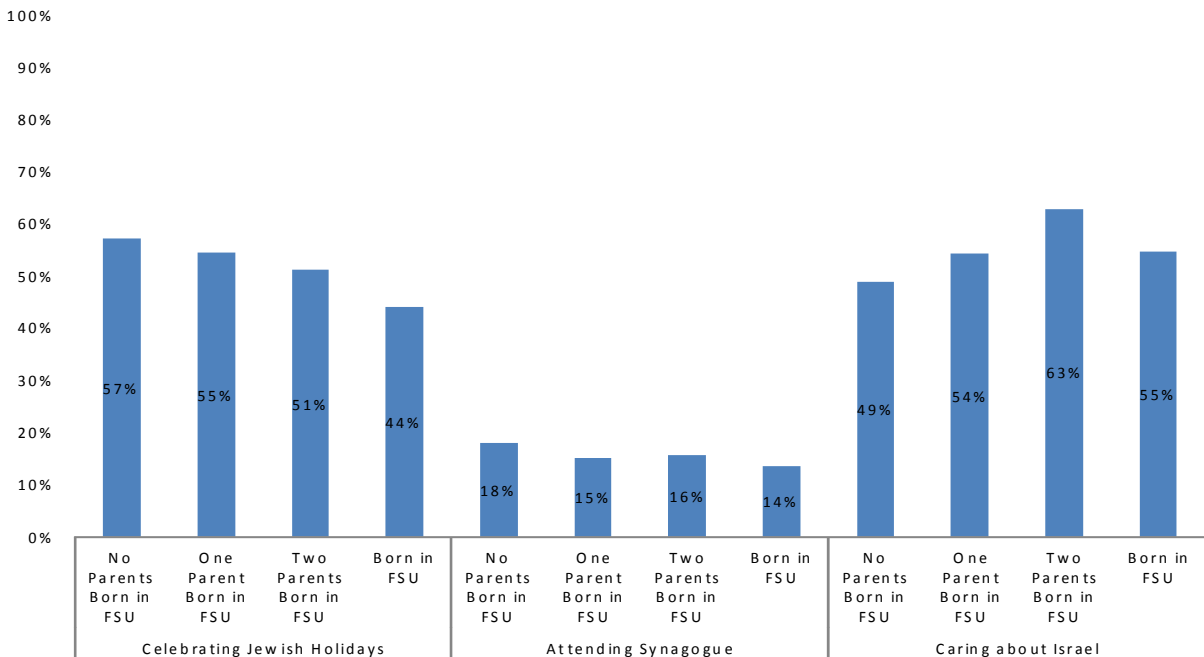
FSU-connected Taglit-Birthright Israel participants understand being Jewish differently than other North American participants do. Before their trip, the FSU-connected are more likely to say that being Jewish means being part of a nationality or ethnic group and less likely to say that it means being part of a religious group (Figure 13). In addition, FSU-connected participants are more likely to say that being Jewish involves caring about Israel and less likely to say that it involves celebrating Jewish holidays or attending synagogue (Figure 14). These responses reveal that participants with FSU connections have a more national and less religious conception of Jewishness than other participants. Similarly, before their Taglit-Birthright Israel trip, FSU-connected participants feel more connected to Israel and Jewish history than do other participants (Figure 15).

Figure 13. Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants: Being Jewish “Very Much” Means Being Part of a Nationality, an Ethnic Group, a Religious Group by FSU Connection



Note: This chart refers to summer '07 and winter '07-'08 cohorts only.

Figure 14. Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants: Being Jewish “Very Much” Involves Celebrating Jewish Holidays, Attending Synagogue, Caring About Israel by FSU Connection



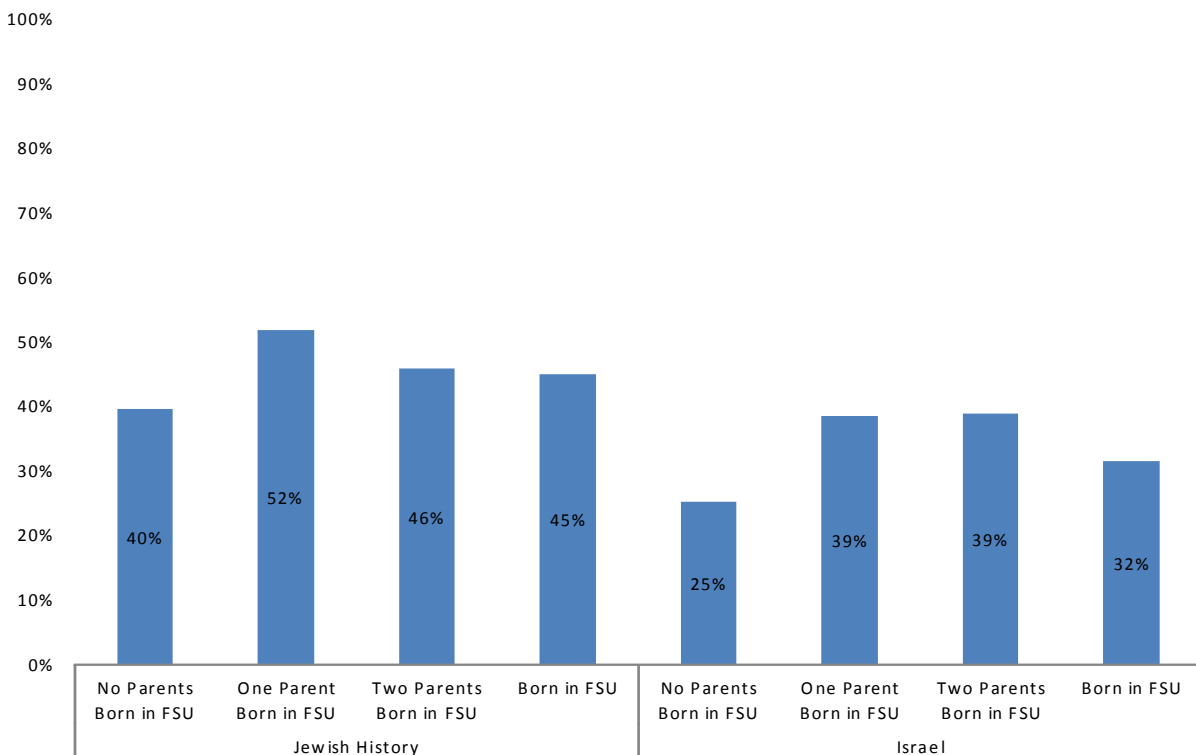
One participant sums up his historical, national conception of Jewishness:

There's a big burden, an obligation on our shoulders to take what's happened to many of our ancestors, kind of cultivate those ideas and take advantage of all the opportunities and to supersede all the bigotry and all that stuff that our parents and grandparents had to go through and really give back to the Jewish community and Israel, which is where our motherland is. (Individual interview, Toronto area)

Another participant explains that she finds it difficult to become involved in Jewish activities because she does not identify with the religious aspects of Jewishness:

The religious aspects of Judaism have always frightened me as well because I really don't believe in religion. I don't believe in God. That's just where I've always been. And I would be interested in Jewish activities, but because I have these feelings about these separate...portions of what it's like to be Jewish, and I haven't found a way to integrate them into this kind of Jewish identity that I

Figure 15: Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants: Feel “Very Much” Connected to Jewish History, Israel by FSU Connection

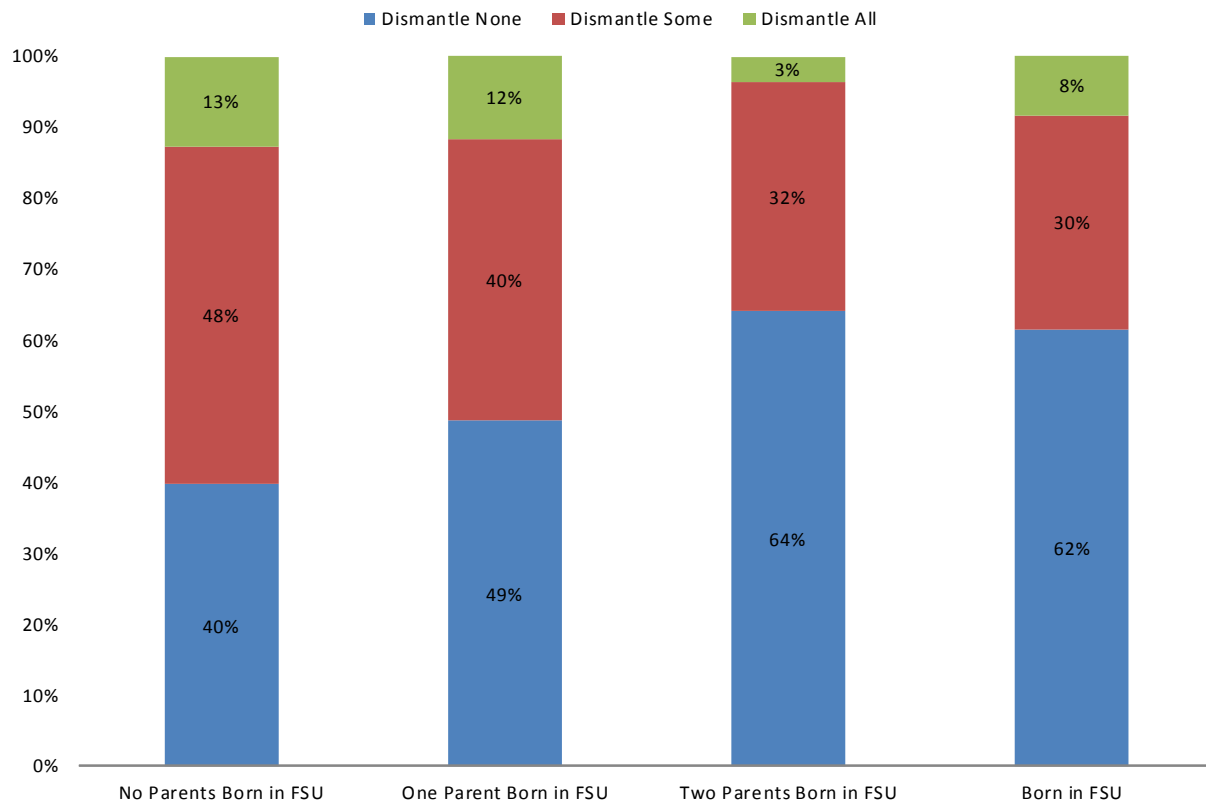


think you guys—the whole purpose of this whole survey is, I haven't been able to do that in my life yet, so I get nervous about Jewish activities. (Individual interview, New York area)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their more nationalistic Jewish identities and stronger feelings of connection to Israel, FSU-connected participants had more hawkish views on Israeli politics than other participants. When asked whether, in the framework of a permanent peace with the

Palestinians, Israel should be willing to dismantle all, some, or none of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, the FSU-connected were much more likely to say “none” and less likely to say “all” (Figure 16). In fact, FSU-connected participants also have more conservative political views than other participants in general. Sixty-one percent of non-FSU-connected participants define themselves as liberal or very liberal, while only 37 percent of participants with two parents born in the FSU define themselves that way, along with 40 percent

Figure 16: West Bank Settlement Position of Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants by FSU Connection



Note: Excludes those who responded “Don’t know.”

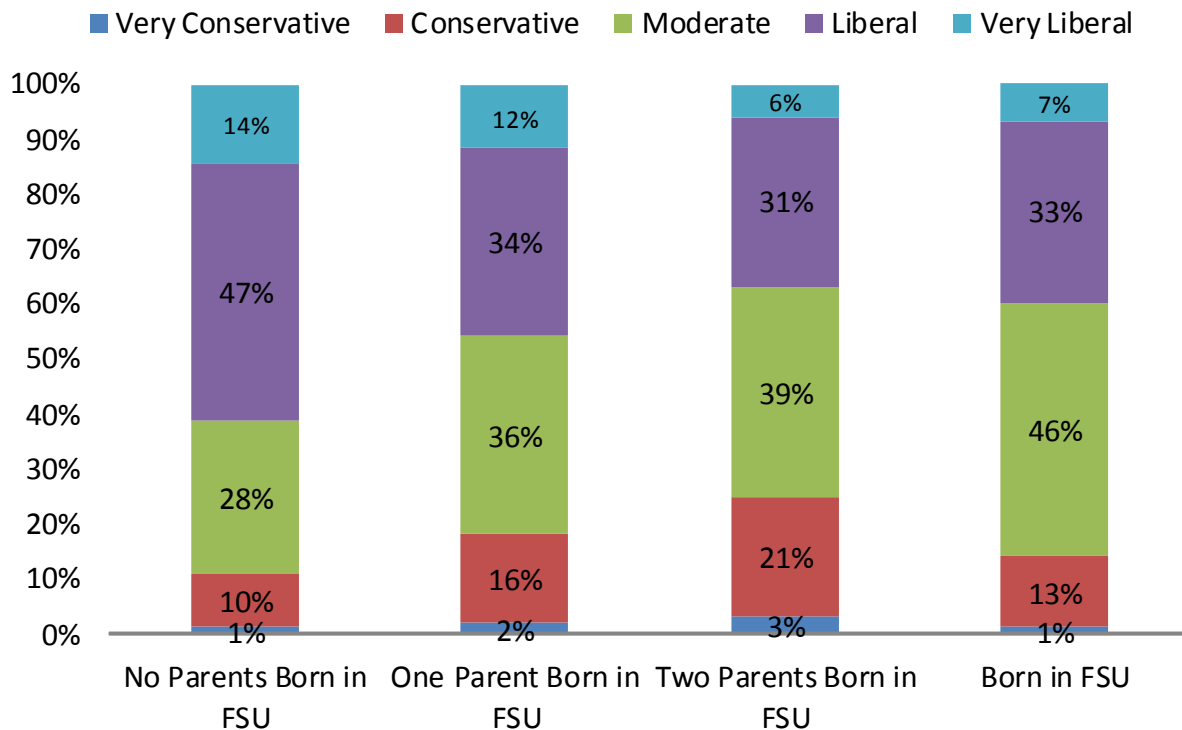
of those born in the FSU and 46 percent of those with one parent born in the FSU (Figure 17).

One focus group participant born in the FSU explained how his political views influenced his interaction with the Jewish community on his college campus:

I was six when I came, so I grew up here, but my family does not agree with plan for peace, things like that. That was actually another reason why a lot of people at Berkeley went to Chabad is that Hillel there was very much pro-Israel, pro-peace,

whereas Chabad was pro-Jewish, don't risk Jewish lives. In terms of discussions at the dinner table, you just felt more comfortable. It was actually going away from diversity, because you had all the Iranian and the Russian background people had it with that consensus. You had a steady flow away from the Hillel for that exact reason, because when it would creep into the services and such, I just didn't feel comfortable with that. And at Chabad I felt like it could be discussed, but in [Hillel] services it was just kind of out. (Focus group, San Francisco)

Figure 17: Political Views of Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants by FSU Connection

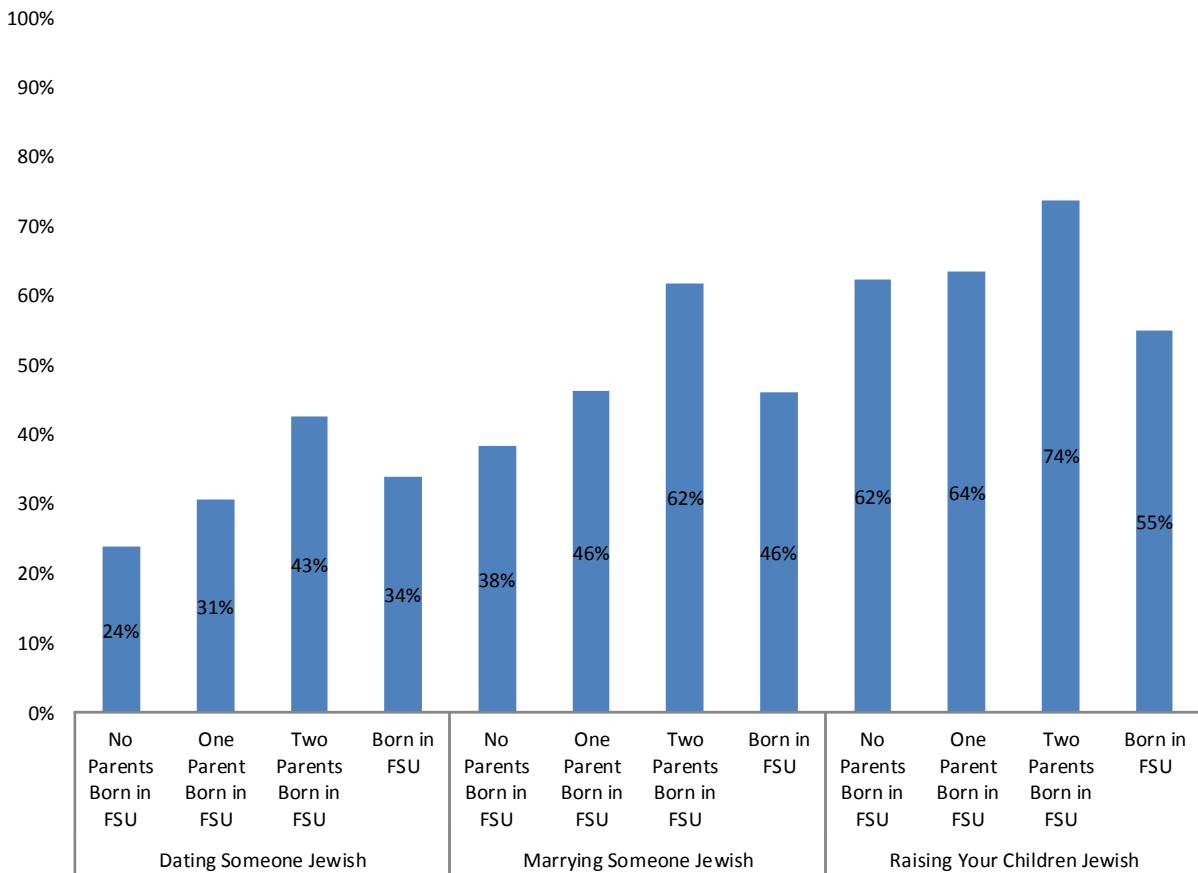


A higher percentage of FSU-connected participants than non-FSU-connected participants believe that dating and marrying someone Jewish is very important. For all participants, the percentage saying that raising children Jewish is very important is higher than the percentage saying that marrying someone Jewish is very important. That number, in turn, is higher than the

percentage saying that dating someone Jewish is very important. However, those born in the FSU are less likely than non-FSU-connected participants to say that raising children Jewish is very important (Figure 18).

In both the United States and Canada, FSU-connected participants are far more likely to

Figure 18: Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants: Dating Someone Jewish, Marrying Someone Jewish, Raising Children Jewish Is “Very Important” by FSU Connection



identify as “Just Jewish” and less likely to identify as Reform, Reconstructionist, or Conservative than other participants. However, in the United States, those with parents born in the FSU are slightly more

likely to identify as Orthodox (Table 4 and Table 5). This correlates with findings about Jewish ritual practice in high school.

Table 4: Current Denomination of American Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants by FSU Connection

Denomination	No Parents Born in FSU	One Parent Born in FSU	Two Parents Born in FSU	Born in FSU
Just Jewish	37%	49%	59%	77%
Reform / Reconstructionist	35%	19%	21%	12%
Conservative	22%	21%	12%	7%
Orthodox	3%	7%	4%	2%
Other	3%	4%	4%	3%

Table 5: Current Denomination of Canadian Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants by FSU Connection

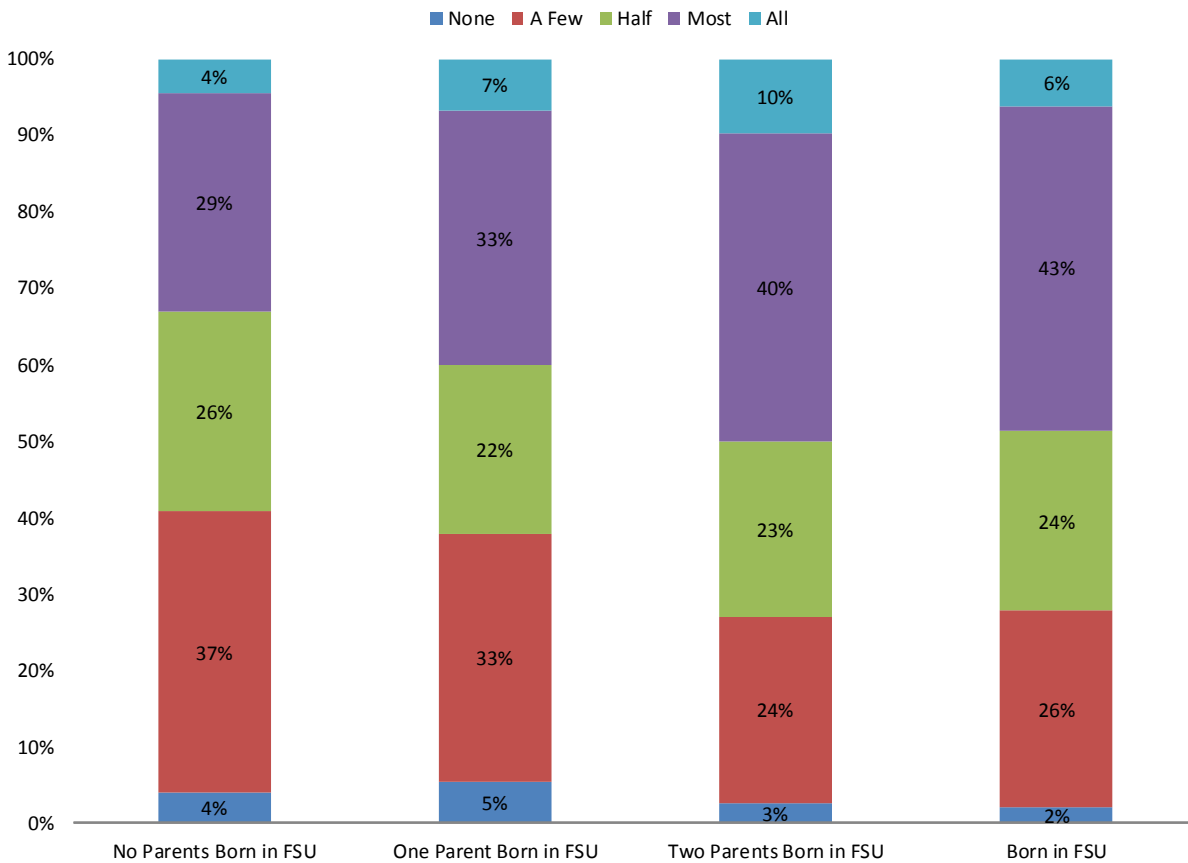
Denomination	No Parents Born in FSU	One Parent Born in FSU	Two Parents Born in FSU	Born in FSU
Just Jewish	47%	61%	67%	80%
Reform / Reconstructionist	19%	11%	13%	9%
Conservative	26%	24%	17%	7%
Orthodox	4%	3%	2%	2%
Other	4%	1%	2%	2%

Jewish Social Networks

The FSU-connected have stronger Jewish social networks than other participants. Half of those born in the FSU or with two parents born in the FSU report that most or all of

their close friends are Jewish. Only one-third of other participants report having such heavily Jewish social circles (Figure 19). In addition, FSU-connected Taglit-Birthright Israel participants are more than twice as likely as other participants to have family

Figure 19: Close Friends of Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants Who are Jewish by FSU Connection



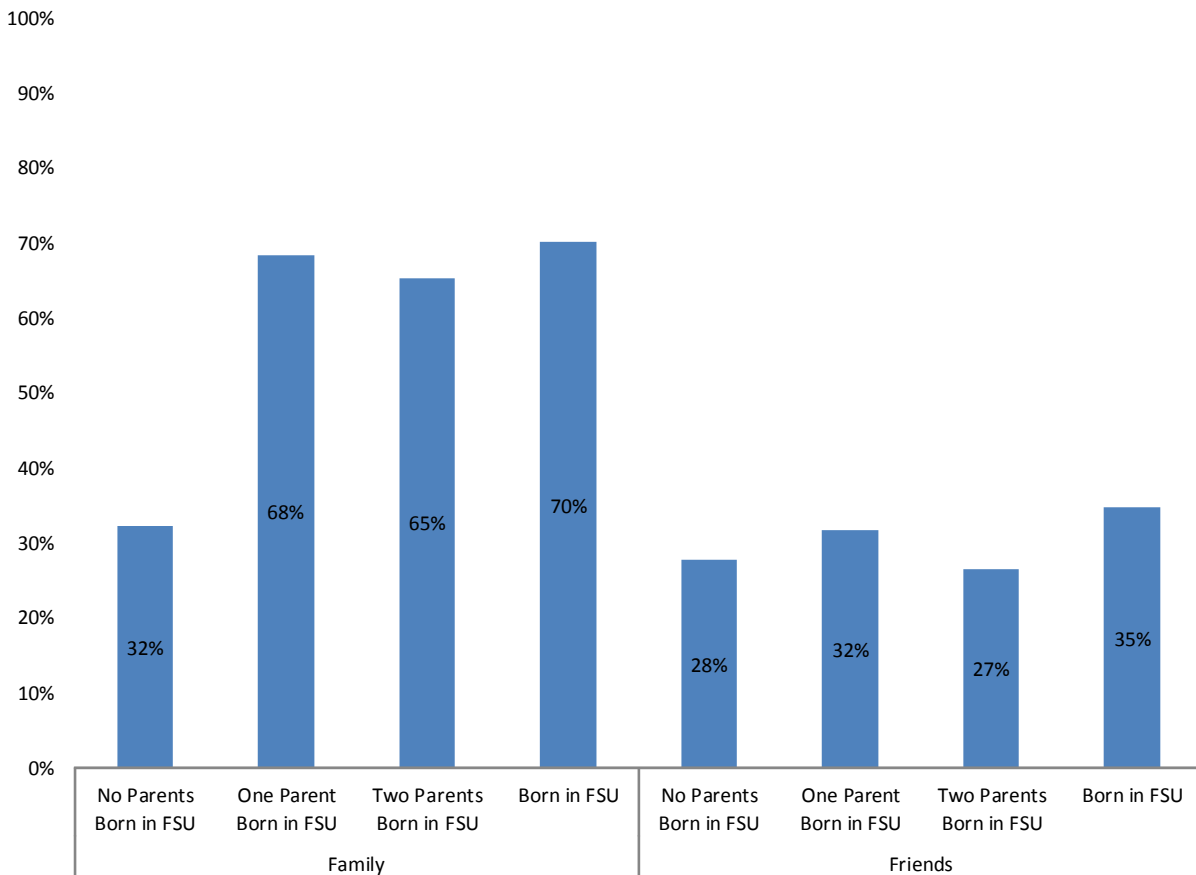
Note: This chart refers to winter '07-'08 and summer '08 cohorts only.

living in Israel (Figure 20). In individual interviews and focus groups, about two-thirds of the participants who have mostly Jewish friends said that almost all of those friends were Russian Jews. Even those who have a more diverse social circle usually have a least a few Russian-Jewish friends.

What I will say is my closest friends are Russian Jews. And when I first started hanging out in the Russian

community it didn't really matter one way or the other, and not that it matters today, but I think that just based on similarities that we have, inherent similarities and possibly some things in our background and just things that we lean towards and maybe our goals and the fact that we have a little bit of a stronger stride—I'm not trying to dis[respect]

Figure 20: Percentage of Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants with Family and Friends in Israel, by FSU Status



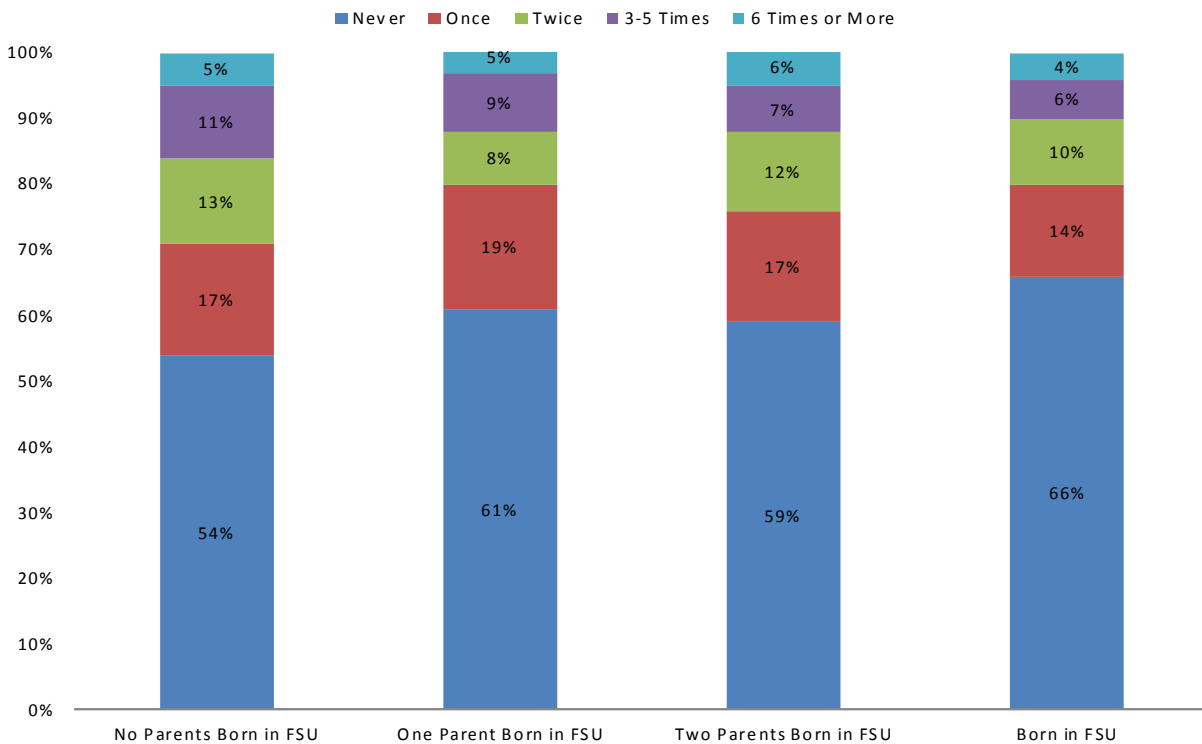
anyone—but I think, I mean we discuss this all the time, I think it sort of led that way that the vast majority of my closest friends are Russian Jews, and I still have quite a few Russians but they’re sort of like my second- and third-tier friends. (Focus group, Brookline, MA)

In other words, shared cultural traits make many participants with Russian-Jewish background feel more comfortable socializing with each other.

Jewish Engagement

One measure of participants’ engagement in the Jewish community is their participation in activities sponsored by Jewish organizations such as synagogues or, for undergraduate students, Hillel. FSU-connected participants are less likely to participate in activities sponsored by a synagogue; 34 percent of participants born in the FSU participated in synagogue activities in the three months preceding the pretrip survey, compared to 46 percent of non-FSU-connected participants (Figure 21). The same pattern is evident in Hillel participation: 36 percent of undergraduate

Figure 21: Birthright Participants' Participation in Activities Sponsored by a Synagogue (Last Three Months) by FSU Connection

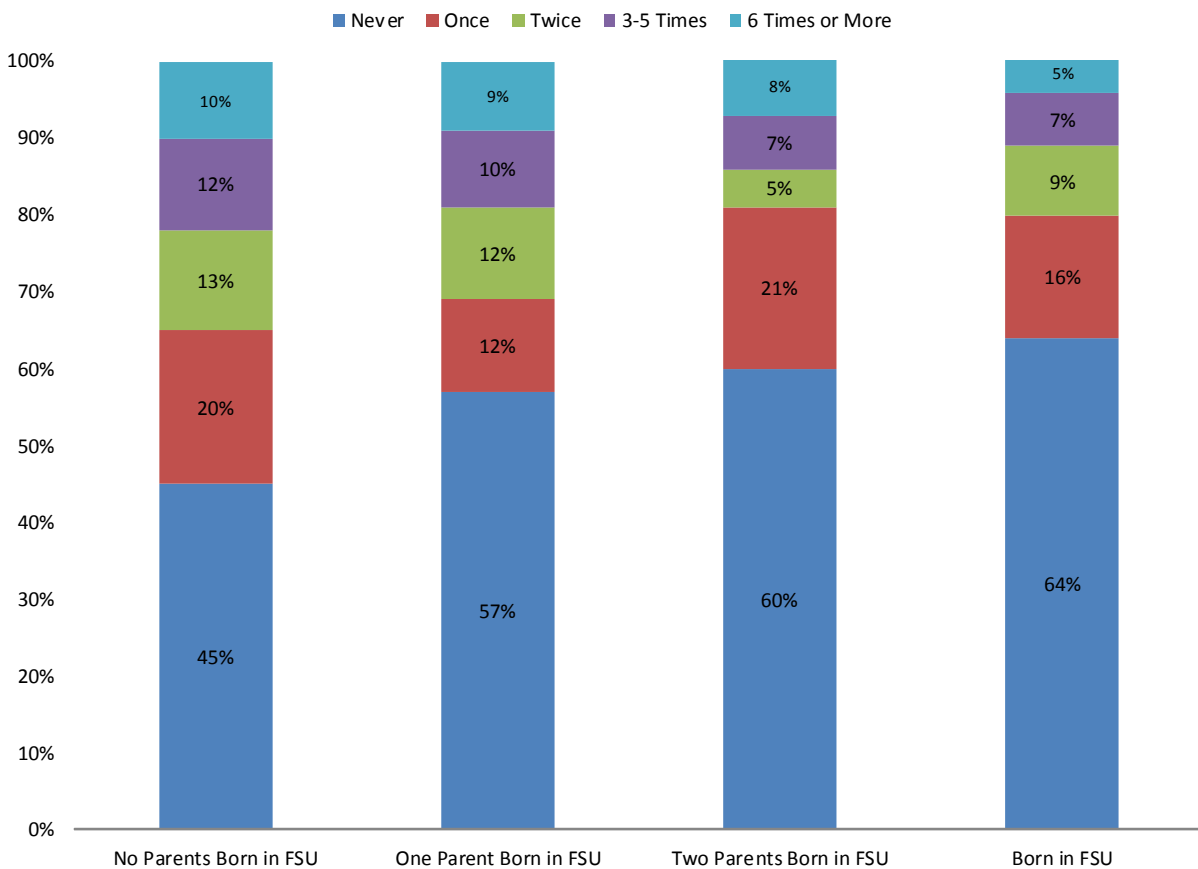


Note: This chart refers to winter '07-'08 and summer '08 cohorts only.

participants born in the FSU participated, compared to 55 percent of undergraduate non-FSU-connected participants (Figure 22). [5]

Another measure of Jewish engagement is ritual practice. To summarize level of current Jewish ritual practice, a scale (0-3) was created from three items:

Figure 22: Undergraduate Birthright Participants' Participation in Activities Sponsored by Hillel (Last Three Months) by FSU Connection



Note. This chart refers to undergraduate participants, winter '07-'08 and summer '08 only.

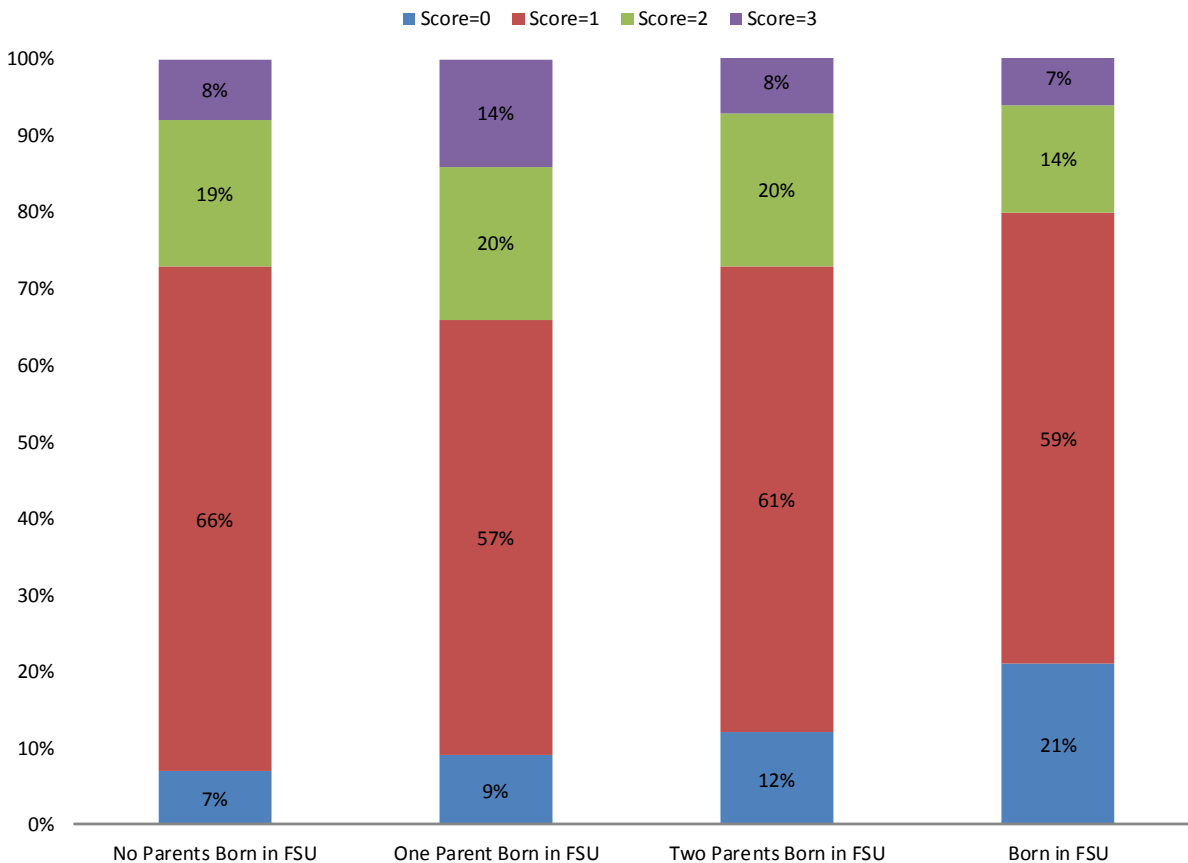
1. Lit/participated in lighting Shabbat candles in the past three months
2. Participated in the lighting of Hanukkah candles last Hanukkah
3. Keeps kosher at home

FSU-connected participants score lower on the index than other participants. Among those born in the FSU, 21 percent score a 0 on the index, which is three times the percentage of those without FSU-

connections that score a 0 (Figure 23). These figures support the finding described above, that the FSU-connected are less likely than other Americans or Canadians to view the religious elements of Jewishness as important.

A third measure of engagement relates to Israel. FSU-connected participants were more likely than other participants to actively seek news about Israel: 34 percent

Figure 23: Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants' Current Ritual Practice Score by FSU Connection



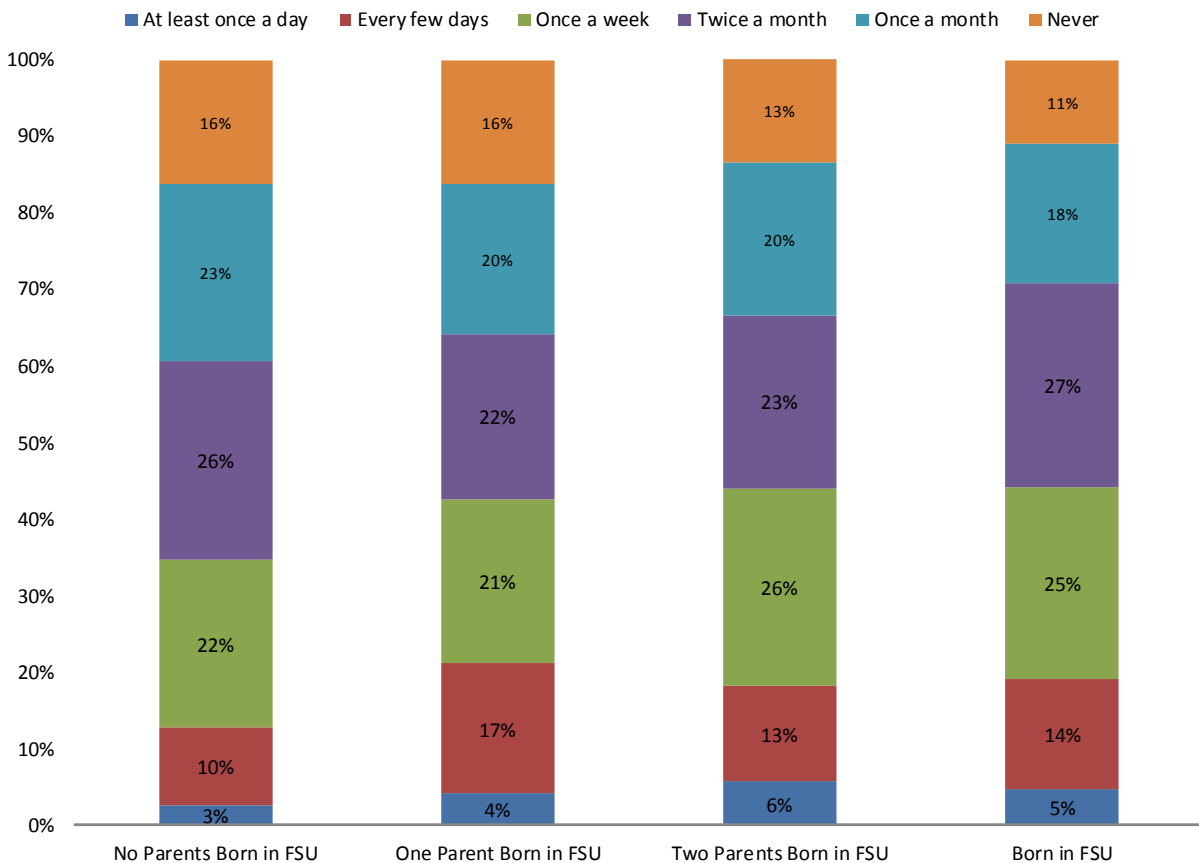
Note. This chart refers to summer '07 and winter '07-'08 cohorts only.

of the non-FSU-connected sought news once a week or more, compared to 43 percent of those with one parent born in the FSU, 44 percent of those with two parents born in the FSU, and 44 percent of those born in the FSU (Figure 24).

Russian Identity

Interviews and focus groups also delved into the Russian identity of FSU-connected participants. Consistent with previous research on this population, the vast majority of participants feel more Jewish than

Figure 24: Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants' Frequency of Seeking News about Israel by FSU Connection



Note. This chart refers to summer '07 and winter '07-'08 cohorts only.

Russian. Some participants explicitly connect this to experiences of ethnic segregation or anti-Semitism in the FSU.

Maybe part of the reason is that back in Russia we also weren't considered Russians by Russia itself. I mean, in your passport, where it says 'Nationality,' it would say 'Jewish,' as opposed to 'Russian.' So a lot of people's identity, they consider themselves being Jewish but not so much being Russian. (Focus group, Toronto)

I would say I definitely feel more Jewish than I do Russian, just because my parents didn't run away from being Jewish, they ran away from being in the former Soviet Union. So it's not exactly a happy place for most my family. I know they don't have these lovely, warm, fuzzy, stories about it. And I talked to them about going back, because I've thought about going to visit for the first time because I've still never been there, and they're like, 'Have a good time, because we ain't going!' (Focus group, Manhattan)

At the same time, many FSU-connected participants feel separate from other American or Canadian Jews.

I don't feel like I am Russian enough to be a part of a Russian community. But at the same time I don't identify that much with the Canadian Jews, because I have a Soviet upbringing.

So I think we are an exclusive niche. We are a separate group. (Focus group, Toronto)

The background of these Taglit-Birthright Israel participants has given them a unique, hyphenated Russian-Jewish identity that must be addressed by successful programs.

The Taglit-Birthright Israel Experience

Trip Organizer and Bus

Taglit-Birthright Israel serves many North American young adults with roots in the FSU, but do these FSU-connected participants experience the trip differently than other participants do? Trips are conducted by nearly twenty different tour organizers who adhere to the detailed guidelines developed and monitored by Taglit-Birthright Israel. In terms of trip providers, all participants show similar preferences, with one exception (Table 6). One-quarter of participants who were born

in the FSU and 11 percent of those with two parents born in the FSU went on Taglit-Birthright Israel trips with Ezra World Youth Movement, a worldwide educational movement run by the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jewish community. In the United States, Ezra works primarily with Russian-speaking Jewish youth, and its Taglit-Birthright Israel trips are designed for Russian-speakers.

Some FSU-connected participants travel on buses that are composed primarily of other FSU-connected participants. In summer '07,

Table 6: Taglit-Birthright Israel Trip Organizer by FSU Connection

Trip Organizer	No Parents Born in FSU	One Parent Born in FSU	Two Parents Born in FSU	Born in FSU
Oranim	32%	36%	39%	27%
Israel Outdoors	19%	16%	11%	10%
Hillel	13%	8%	6%	8%
Mayanot	8%	6%	8%	8%
Canada Israel Experience	7%	14%	6%	4%
Shorashim	4%	4%	5%	5%
Ezra	0%	1%	11%	25%
Other	17%	15%	15%	12%

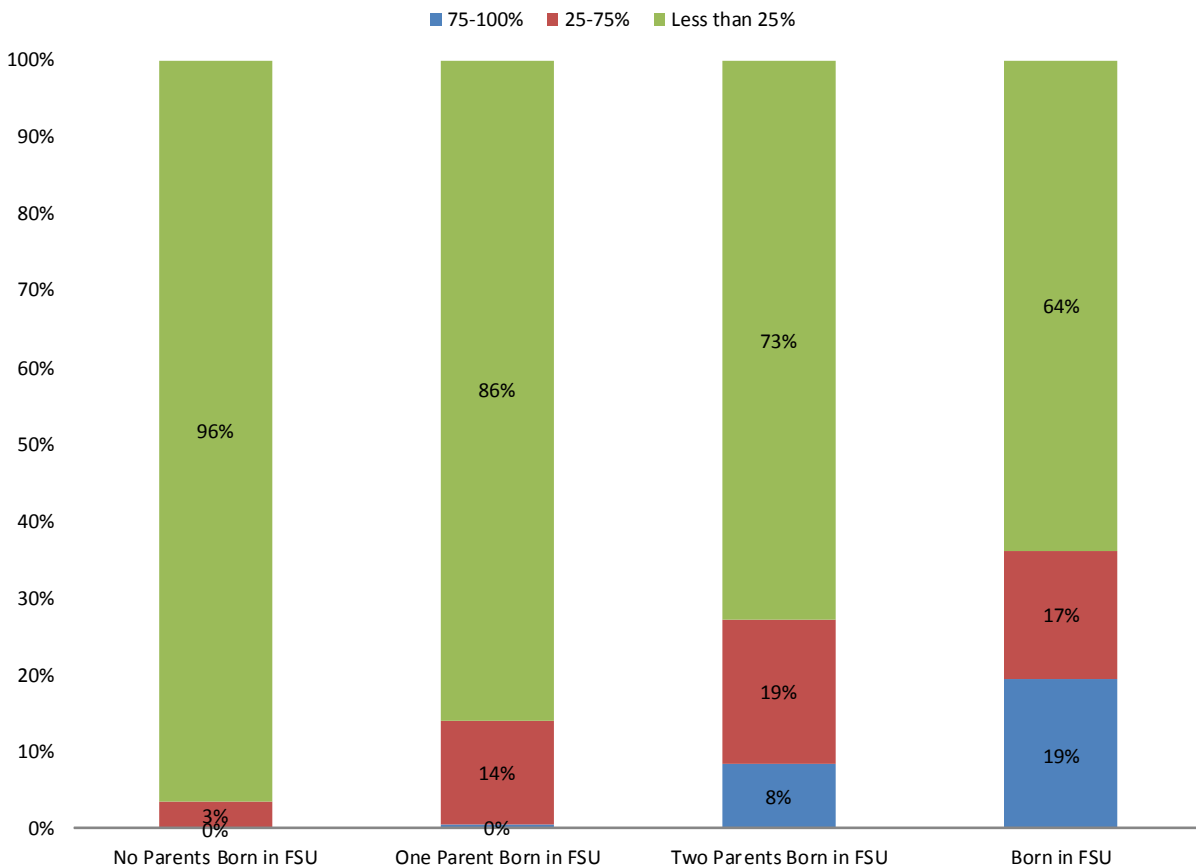
Note. Columns may not add to 100% due to rounding error.

winter '07-'08, and summer '08, there were 21 buses on which at least 75 percent of participants were FSU-connected. One of the buses was run by Oranim, three were run by Shorashim, and 17 were run by Ezra. Nineteen percent of participants who were born in the FSU and eight percent of participants who had two parents born in the FSU were on one of these buses (Figure 25).

Guide, Community, Mifgash and Educational Program

To measure the quality of the Taglit program, scales were constructed for four dimensions of the trip experience: the quality of the bus community, the performance of the tour guide, the quality of the *mifgash* (encounter) with the Israeli peers, and the learning environment. In general, participants gave high ratings to all

Figure 25: Percentage of FSU-Connected Participants on Bus by FSU Connection

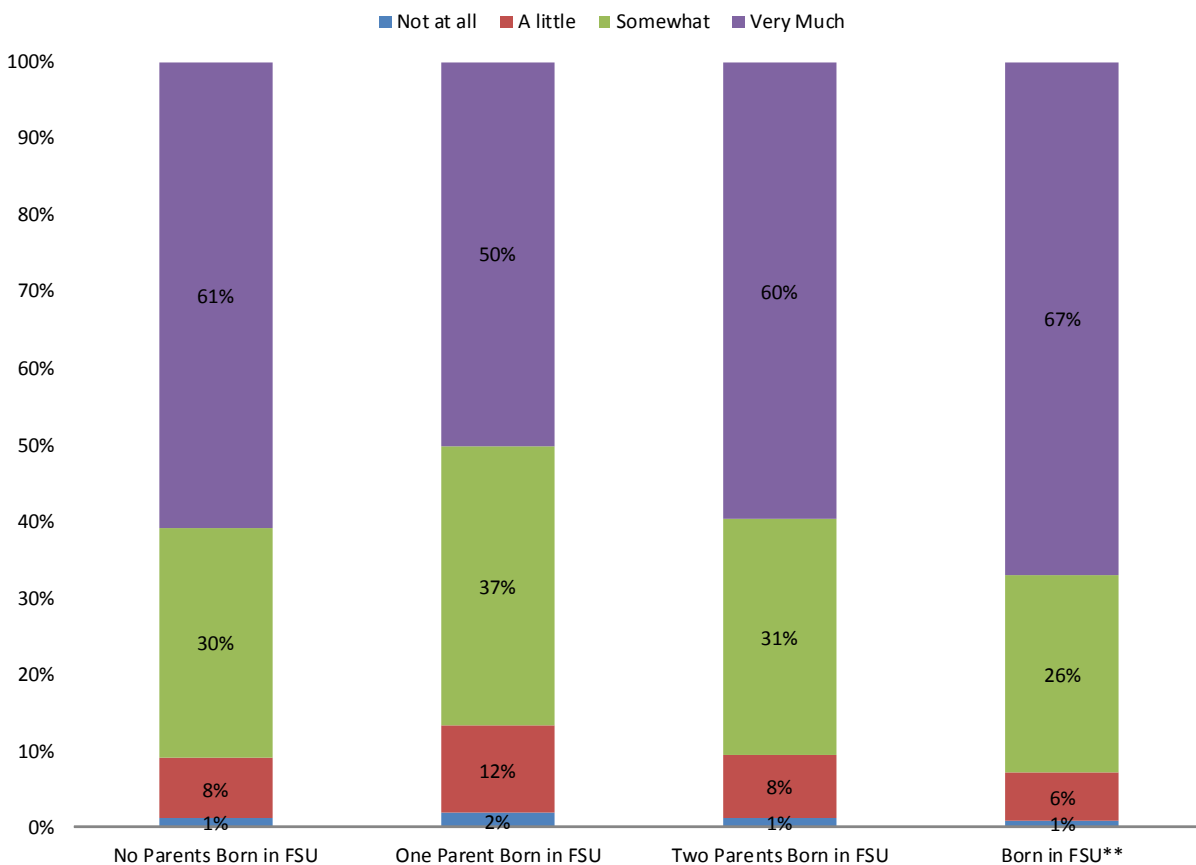


dimensions (more than 3 on a 1-4 scale). After applying statistical controls to account for differences in participants' ages, genders, trip organizers, and denominations, there were no substantive differences between the ratings of the FSU-connected participants and other participants (see Tables B5-B8 in Appendix B: Regression Models). Taglit has created a high-quality product that is generally well-regarded by all participants.

Meaning of the Trip

Participants born in the FSU are more likely than non-FSU-connected participants to say that the Taglit-Birthright Israel trip felt very much like a fun vacation (Figure 26) and less likely to say that the trip felt very much like a religious pilgrimage (Figure 27). This finding makes sense in light of the fact that FSU-connected participants are less likely to

Figure 26: Trip Felt Like a Fun Vacation by FSU Connection



Note: * $p = .05$ ** $p = .01$ *** $p = .001$ —Significance in reference to those with no parents born in FSU. Adjusted estimates from regression analysis. See Table B2 in Appendix B: Regression Models.

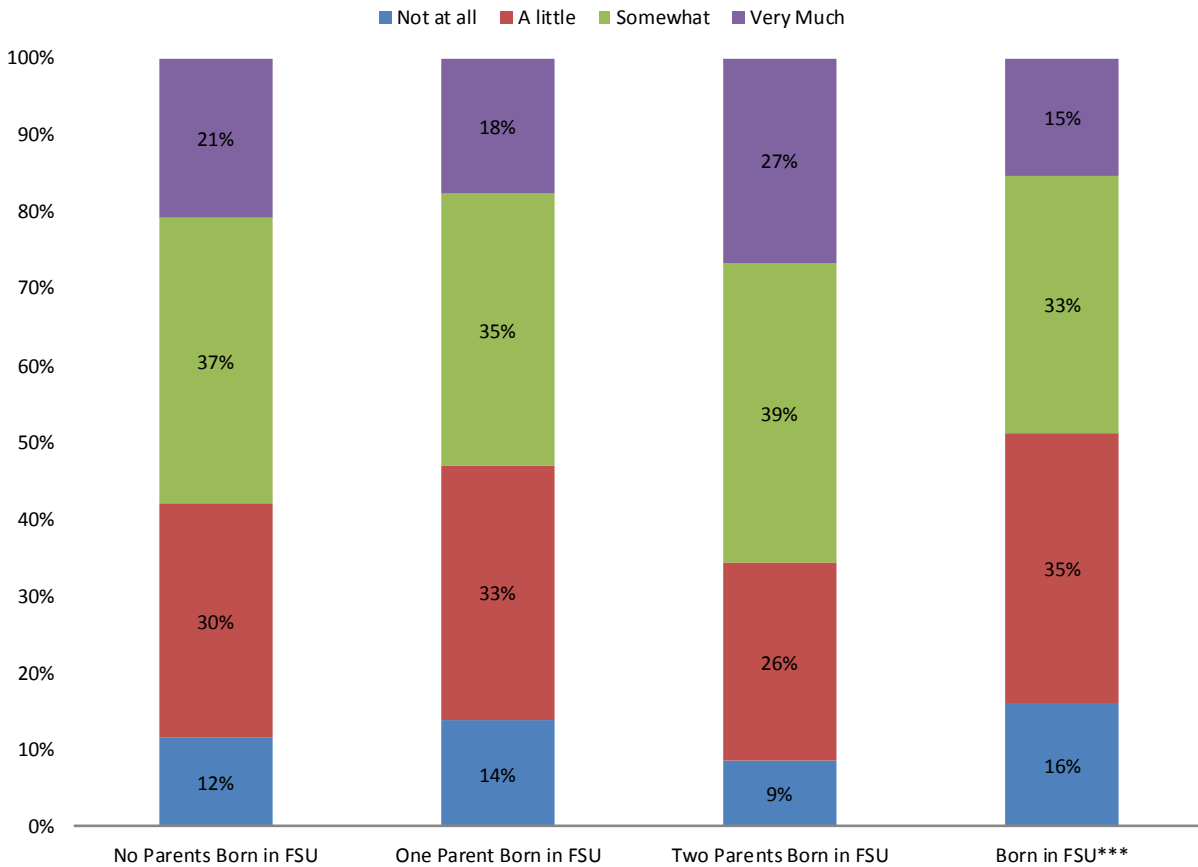
conceive of Jewishness in religious terms (see page 20).

Similarly, when FSU-connected participants speak about the specific elements of the trip that moved them, they focus on cultural and

secular elements. Yad Vashem and Independence Hall, which tell Israel's secular narrative, were highlights for many.

I didn't really feel as much a spiritual connection as I did more of a cultural connection. To me, the

Figure 27: Trip Felt Like a Religious Pilgrimage by FSU Connection



Note: *p= .05 **p =.01 ***p =001—Significance in reference to those with no parents born in FSU. Adjusted estimates from regression analysis. See Table B2 in Appendix B: Regression Models.

most moving part by far was the Yad Vashem museum. That's really the part that set out to me more. Being in that museum and taking in that experience was much more meaningful than, for instance, going to the Kotel or swimming in the Dead Sea or anything like that. (Focus group, Brookline, MA)

This might sound weird, but I wasn't really amazed or crying when I got to the Kotel. That didn't mean as much to me as going to the Independence Hall in Tel Aviv. I actually cried there, because watching and listening to the Ben Gurion speech and standing up and watching the flag and imagining that you're there—to me, that meant more. (Focus group, Brookline, MA)

The other element of the trip that stands out in the minds of FSU-connected participants is the physical beauty of the land of Israel, together with the Zionist ideal of making the desert bloom.

But what was most interesting for me was the geography, like the diversity of landscape in Israel. Because I knew it was a small country, but I didn't realize there would be so many diverse landscapes. And I guess with Israeli agriculture, and watering techniques, it's really flourished. So that was pretty amazing for me. (Individual interview, Toronto area)

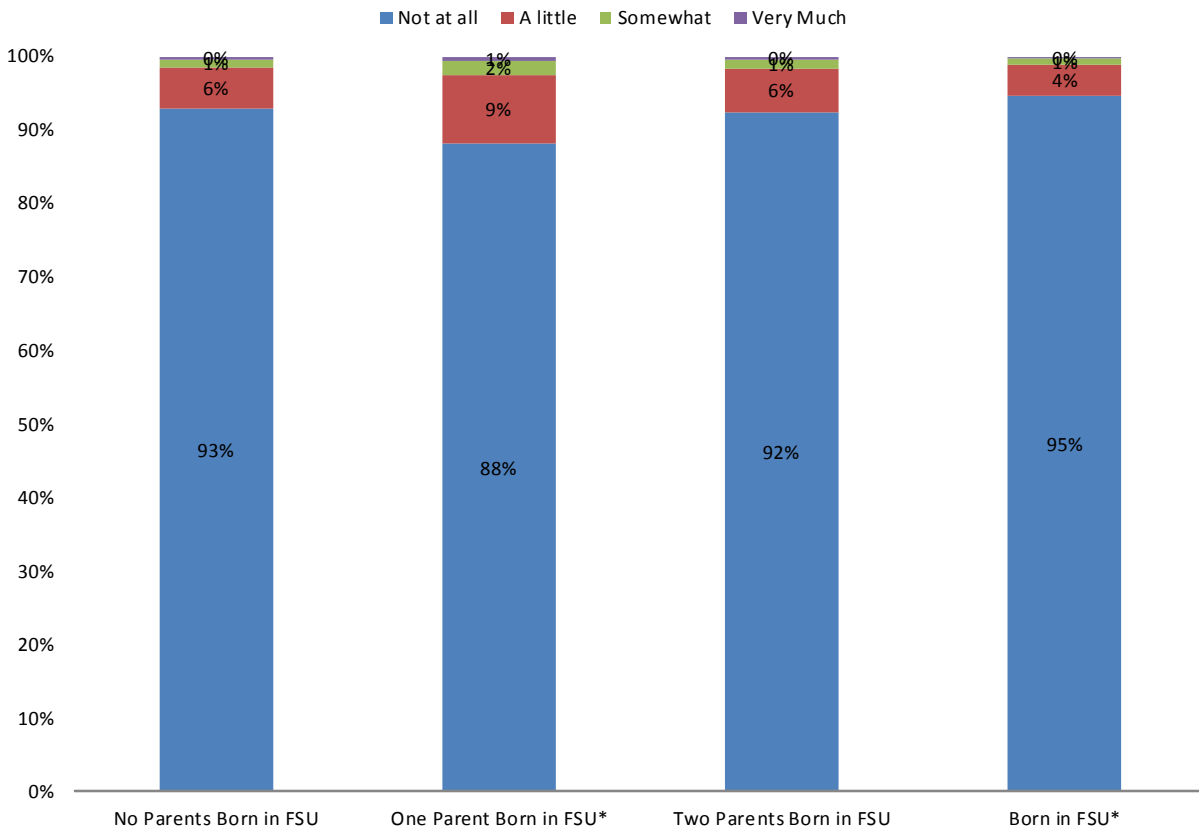
A few FSU-connected participants inadvertently found themselves on trips with religious participants, and they were surprised and put off by that. One participant who travelled with Mayanot (a tour organizer with ties to the Chabad-Lubavitch movement), says:

When I came to the airport I was in complete and awful horror, because everyone had like long skirts and the guys all had the kippas and I was just like, you know. We had six girls in our group and 26 guys that would pray every morning and every night. We had a Chabad rabbi leading the group...I think the most awkward part of it was the whole coming in touch with the really, really religious side, because in Brooklyn living here all these years I never really came in contact with it. And I had like a breakdown there. It was really, really bad. (Focus group, Brooklyn, NY)

Here, too, evidence indicates that religiously-based programs do not appeal to most FSU-connected participants.

The vast majority of participants, both with and without FSU connections, reject the idea that the Taglit-Birthright Israel trip was a disappointment (Figure 28).

Figure 28: Trip Felt Like a Disappointment by FSU Connection



Note: * $p = .05$ ** $p = .01$ *** $p = .001$ —Significance in reference to those with no parents born in FSU. Less than 1 percent of respondents said the trip felt “very much” like a disappointment. Adjusted estimates from regression analysis. See Table B3 in Appendix B: Regression Models.

Impact of the Trip

Jewish Identity

Does Taglit-Birthright Israel have a differential impact on the Jewish identity of the FSU-connected? After controlling for pre-trip differences, analysis revealed very few significant, substantive differences between FSU-connected participants and other participants on outcome measures. In general, the program affects FSU-connected participants in the same way that it affects non-FSU-connected participants. The few indications of differential impact on Jewish identity can be found under “Differential Impact of the Trip Experience on Jewish Identity” in Appendix B: Regression Models.

Jewish Engagement

Taglit has no significant differential impact on engagement in activities sponsored by synagogues, Jewish Community Centers or other Jewish organizations or, for undergraduates, engagement in activities sponsored by Hillel or Chabad. In addition, very little significant differential impact was found on ritual practice or frequency or checking news about Israel. The few indications of differential impact on Jewish engagement can be found under “Differential Impact of the Trip Experience on Jewish Engagement” in Appendix B: Regression Models.

Interviews and focus groups reveal that Taglit inspired some FSU-connected

participants with weaker Jewish literacy to learn more about Judaism, often by planning a return trip to Israel.

*All of us here are Russians, so we understand. My parents—I was not raised in a Jewish household. Not by choice, it’s just, my parents weren’t allowed, you know. So when I went in 2005, it was sort of weird, because I felt like everyone on the trip knew the prayers and knew the songs. And I was mouthing—I was so horrified and mortified—I was mouthing the ABCs because I didn’t want to look like the one a***** who didn’t know anything, you know? And I was in tears all the time, because everyone, it seemed like, knew the basic ABCs in Hebrew... When I was at the wall, and I was like mumbling under my breath—I didn’t realize that I was saying it out loud—I was like, ‘I’m so sorry. I’ll learn Hebrew. I’ll come back.’ And my friend touched me on the shoulder. She’s like, ‘Um, I think He understands all languages. You don’t have to promise anything. I think you’re okay.’ And so, you know, I came back and I booked myself a trip almost immediately. (Focus group, Brooklyn, NY)*

Each day, we were rushing through things and everything was going over my head and I realized how much I didn’t know and how much I wanted to learn. But there wasn’t enough time, so I actually did the same thing the following summer. I booked

myself a three-week trip with a group. I was like 'I have to go back. There are so many things I want to do. There are so many things I didn't get to do.' It really opened my eyes to how great it was and how much I wanted to go back. (Focus group, Brooklyn, NY)

Although not *more* effective for FSU-connected participants than other participants, Taglit is a successful catalyst for future Jewish involvement.

Impressions of Israel

For all participants, Taglit increases the likelihood that they will think of Israel as a possible future home. For non-FSU-connected participants, however, participating in a trip nearly doubles the likelihood that they will strongly agree with the statement, "I think about Israel as a possible future home." For participants born in the FSU, the trip increases the likelihood that they will strongly agree with that statement by just 40 percent (Figure 29).

Taglit does not have a differential effect on FSU-connected participants' other impressions of Israel.

Interviews and focus groups reveal some of the specific impressions with which FSU-connected participants left Israel. First, some people were pleasantly surprised by the fact

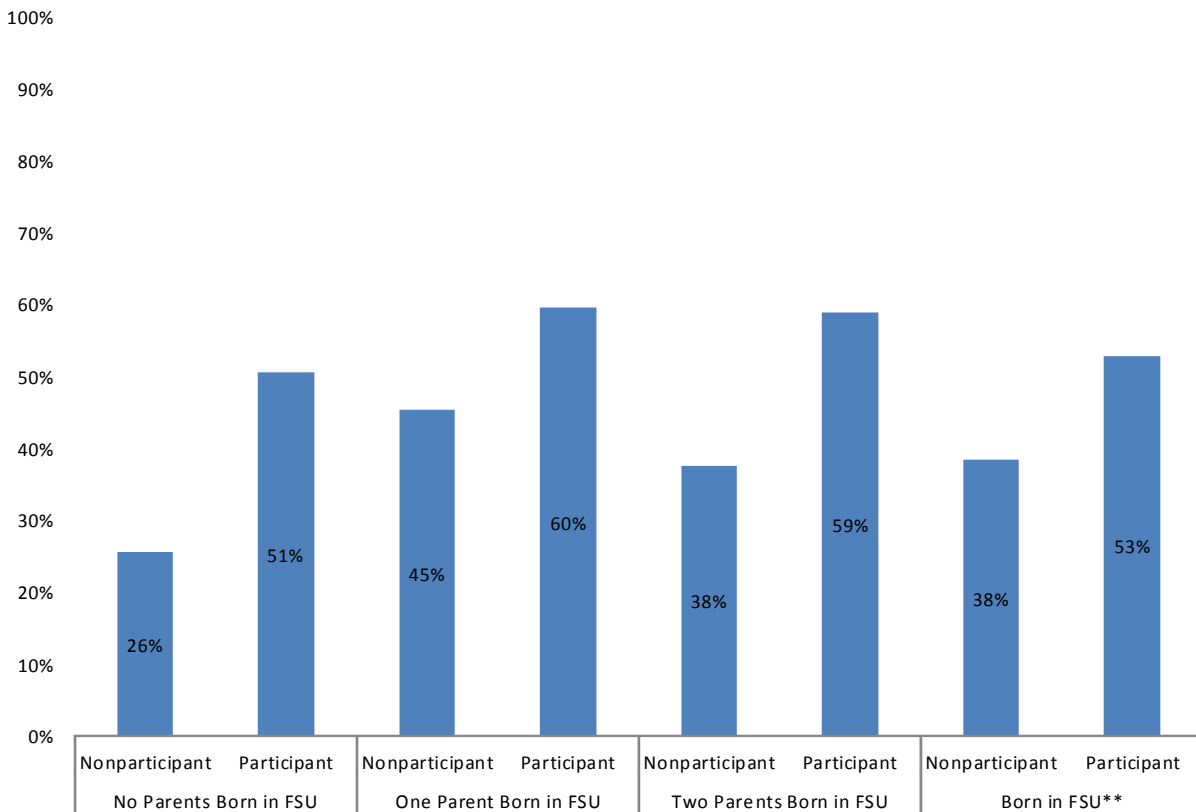
that they were able to speak Russian to Israelis during the trip, for example in restaurants or stores. Second, many FSU-connected participants were struck by warmth and hospitality of Israelis.

When we had Shabbat at this kibbutz and everybody walks by and says 'Shabbat Shalom.' I've never had that before. I've never had that feeling where you're part of an extended family and one big group and it's just—that was completely new to me. (Focus group, Manhattan)

In Israel it was just all surprising how welcoming people are. I was there for three months, and I was with people that I already knew. I have family there but I just stayed with some friends. And everybody is like, 'Oh, like we are going to feed you.' Like, God forbid you go back to Canada and tell people you starved here. And it's just like, people really take care of you. (Focus group, Toronto)

Like other participants, the FSU-connected come back from their Taglit-Birthright Israel trip with largely positive impressions of Israel and a desire to connect more deeply with the country.

Figure 29: Taglit-Birthright Israel Participants Versus Non-Participants: Strongly Agree that “I Think About Israel as a Possible Future Home” by FSU Connection



Note: * $p = .05$ ** $p = .01$ *** $p = .001$ —Significance in reference to those with no parents born in FSU. Adjusted estimates from regression analysis. See Table B4 in Appendix B: Regression Models.

Conclusions: Engaging the FSU-Connected

A new generation of Russian-American Jews is now coming into adulthood. Their parents immigrated from the FSU when they were young children or, increasingly, they were born in the United States. Unlike their parents, most have grown up in a culture that fully accepts Jews and where they have never had to deal with anti-Semitism. Also unlike their parents, they have had more opportunity to be exposed to Jewish education and to engage in religious practice. The present study focused on a large sample of young adult Russian-American Jews who applied to Taglit-Birthright Israel. The study makes clear that while these young adults speak Russian and carry with them the culture of their parents, they have become very much like other American Jews.

Specifically, this study found that Taglit-Birthright Israel participants with roots in the FSU generally have weaker Jewish backgrounds than other North American participants. Although they are more likely to come from inmarried households, their parents are less involved in organized Jewish life, and the participants are less likely to have observed Jewish rituals or received a Jewish education while growing up. Compared to other participants, the FSU-connected have a more national and less religious conception of Jewishness. They are more likely to value dating and marrying other Jews, and they have stronger Jewish social networks. However, they are less likely to engage in synagogue or Hillel activities, or in Jewish ritual practice. Because there were almost no substantive pre-trip differences between Taglit participants and nonparticipant applicants

(Saxe et al., 2008, p. 9), these findings are generalizable to the population of contemporary Russian-speaking Jewish young adults in the United States.

What is clear from the present study is that Taglit has effectively engaged those with FSU connections. This population gives the program the same high ratings as other participants. FSU-connected participants attributed less significance to the religious aspects of the trip experience, but overall, Taglit affects them in much the same way as it affects other participants. Many come back to the United States and Canada motivated to learn more about Israel and Judaism.

One open question is how the experience of Taglit prepares participants for post-trip engagement with the Jewish community. What are the needs of this group and how does the Russian identity of these program alumni translate into their interest in being engaged with the Jewish community. Focus groups and individual interviews provide valuable information on the types of activities and programs that are attractive to FSU-connected participants. When asked how they spend their free time, participants report participating in the following types of activities:

- Cultural activities, such as concerts, theater, ballet, opera, art exhibitions, and art museums.
- Sporting events, such as soccer, volleyball, hockey, tennis, boxing, hiking, and yoga, as both spectators and participants.
- Travel, within North America and

- elsewhere in the world.
- Restaurants and the bar scene.

In addition to their interest in mainstream cultural events, FSU-connected participants report a high level of interest in Russian culture. Even those who do not participate in “organized” events or consider themselves part of the Russian community are interested in programs relating to Russian film, music—both popular and classical—literature, food, theater, and art. Interestingly, most participants prefer events that target Russian Jews to events that target all Russian speakers. However, only a handful of participants in the New York area report participating in organizations specifically targeting young Russian Jews. It is unclear whether other participants are unaware of these groups or if some other factor limits their participation.

When asked what types of Jewish activities interest them, participants almost universally mention social, cultural, and educational activities, rather than religious activities. Events such as Jewish or Israeli film festivals, Jewish culinary classes, Jewish salsa dancing, and concerts by Israeli musicians generate enthusiasm. Participants are also interested in Jewish travel opportunities, including return trips to Israel and trips to see Jewish historical sites or Jewish communities in other places in the world. A few participants in the New York area participate in Manhattan JCC or MJE

[6] events like culinary classes or hiking groups. When asked specifically what they would like the Jewish community to offer them, most participants indicate a desire for more social events, informal ways to “hang out” and meet people in their demographic group. One promising avenue for programming might be a cultural activity, such as a lecture or concert, combined with a more informal “after party” at which people could socialize. Even participants who are otherwise uninterested in the Jewish community indicate that they are interested in attending Israel-centered activities, such as Hebrew language classes, concerts by Israeli musicians, or lectures on Israeli history and politics.

This research sheds light on a population that is undergoing rapid change and is not well understood. North American Taglit-Birthright Israel participants who were born in the FSU, or whose parents were born in the FSU, are both unique and similar to their non-Russian-speaking Jewish peers. As Taglit-Birthright Israel evolves, it will need to track the changing needs of this population and determine how to integrate or keep separate those with origins in the FSU. Both Taglit itself and post-trip programs may need to speak to the nationalist, rather than religious, orientation of these participants and engage their unique Russian-Jewish cultural and linguistic heritage.

Notes

1. Organizations focusing on young, Russian-speaking Jews in the United States include the Genesis Philanthropy Group (www.gpg.org); Russian American Jewish Experience (www.rajeusa.com); RJeneration (www.rjeneration.org); and the American Association of Jews from Former USSR (www.aajfu.us), which incorporated “R-J” Russian-Jewish Heritage & Community Development Group in 2010.
2. The “core” Jewish population refers to those, who, when asked, identify themselves as Jews, and minors who are identified as Jews by their parents.
3. Further explanation of the methodology can be found in *Understanding the Jewish Identity and Experiences of Russian - Speaking Young Adults: A Study of the Taglit - Birthright Israel Generation*, Technical Appendices A, B, C, D.
<http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/researchareas/taglit-publications.html>
4. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.
5. No substantial difference were found in responses to other items in the battery: Chabad, local Jewish Federation, and other Jewish organization.
6. Manhattan Jewish Experience, www.jewishexperience.org.

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