

The coronavirus papers 1.1

Renew our days as of old: Will we go back to Jewish activities and events?

September 2020

The coronavirus papers comprise a series of reports based on a national survey of Jews across the UK conducted by JPR in July 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The studies look at the effects of the virus on Jewish people's health, jobs, finances, relationships and Jewish lives, and aim to provide Jewish organisations with the data they need to navigate their way through the pandemic, and to help reinvigorate Jewish life in its aftermath.

1 / Introduction

This is the first in a series of short papers investigating how the coronavirus pandemic affected Jews across the UK during the four months from when the coronavirus outbreak began and the period when the data for this study were gathered in mid- to late July. Each of these papers explores a different question, variously touching on the themes of health, socioeconomics, community income, Jewish life, caring and support. This report considers how comfortable Jews feel about attending in-person Jewish community activities and events in the context of shifting restrictions on people's movements. By examining this question, we hope to help community leaders at all levels to think about how to engage constructively both with people who feel ready to return and those who do not.

Basic details about the methods used in the survey can be found at the end of this paper as well as in a longer methodological paper which will shortly be available on the JPR website.

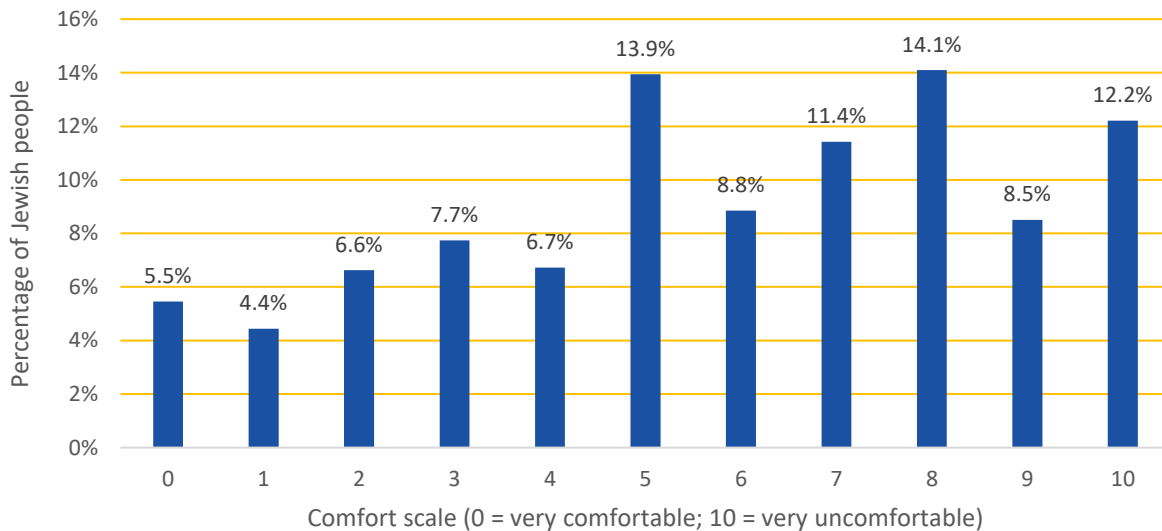
2 / The comfort scale

At the time of the survey, the various restrictions that had been put in place when the government first instituted a nationwide lockdown in March 2020 were starting to be lifted, and pubs, restaurants, cinemas, hairdressers and theme parks reopened, with social distancing rules. Places of worship were able to reopen too, albeit with strict rules about maximum numbers, service duration, singing, food and the sharing of ritual objects. As a result, Jewish organisations were just beginning to open up after several months of closures, or were at least considering whether, how and when to do so.¹

¹ At the time of publication, this situation was starting to change. Rising cases were beginning to prompt tighter measures across the UK, and whilst synagogues were largely unaffected, the possibility of a second lockdown was rising.

With this in mind, we invited respondents to tell us how comfortable they felt at the time about attending in-person Jewish community activities and events, asking them to situate themselves on a scale from 0 – 10, where 0 was very comfortable and 10 was very uncomfortable. The results for the whole sample can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Distribution of responses based on how comfortable or uncomfortable respondents felt regarding attending in-person Jewish community activities (n=6,984)



Question: Overall, how comfortable do you feel about attending in-person Jewish community activities and events as the restrictions put in place due to the coronavirus outbreak are eased, where zero is ‘Very comfortable’ and 10 is ‘Very uncomfortable’?

As can be seen, there is a clear leaning towards the uncomfortable end of the scale. Indeed, close to half of the population (46%) scored themselves between 7 and 10, compared to just under a quarter (24%) at the other end between 0 and 3. Whilst this is just a snapshot in time and attitudes may have shifted somewhat in the interim (follow-up studies will investigate this), it is clear that many Jews felt relatively uncomfortable about returning to Jewish life at the time the data were gathered (July 2020).

However, it is also clear that Jews situate themselves at every point along the scale, so, despite the clear collective leaning towards discomfort, a considerable minority feels reasonably comfortable about attending in-person activities and events. Indeed, **the mean (average) score on the scale for the Jewish population as a whole is 5.82** – slightly above the mid-point.² To understand which parts of the Jewish population are more likely to feel comfortable or uncomfortable about returning to in-person Jewish community activities, throughout the remainder of the report we look at how this mean score – the average level of comfort – varies for different groups.

3 / Who feels comfortable or uncomfortable?

As might be expected, given that older people are at greater risk from COVID-19, Figure 2 shows that there is a relationship between one’s age and how comfortable or uncomfortable people feel about returning to Jewish community events. (Note that here, and in the charts that follow, we have focused on part of the scale, from mean scores of 4 to 7, so that the differences between groups are easier to

² The standard deviation of the mean is 2.9.

discern). We see a rise in the sixties, increasing further in the seventies: people in older age groups tend to be more uncomfortable than those in their thirties, forties and fifties. However, there are indications that two age bands are exceptions to the rule: first, the oldest age band (85+) feels marginally *more* comfortable than average, and second, those in their late teens and early twenties feel rather less so. Regarding the most elderly, there appears to be a point at which levels of discomfort drop substantially, perhaps because at this late stage in life, some become rather more philosophical about taking risks or simply tend to go out less frequently than they used to. Regarding the young, it is worth noting that levels of discomfort are high among the youngest bands (age 16-24, and particularly those in education), but they appear to decline after this. As discussed later in this report, as well as in another paper in this series, young people are found to exhibit quite high levels of anxiety in general, and the discomfort they feel about returning to in-person Jewish activities and events is likely to be related to this.

Figure 2. Average levels of comfort about attending in-person Jewish community activities and events by age band (Red line = mean score for population as a whole; n=6,984)

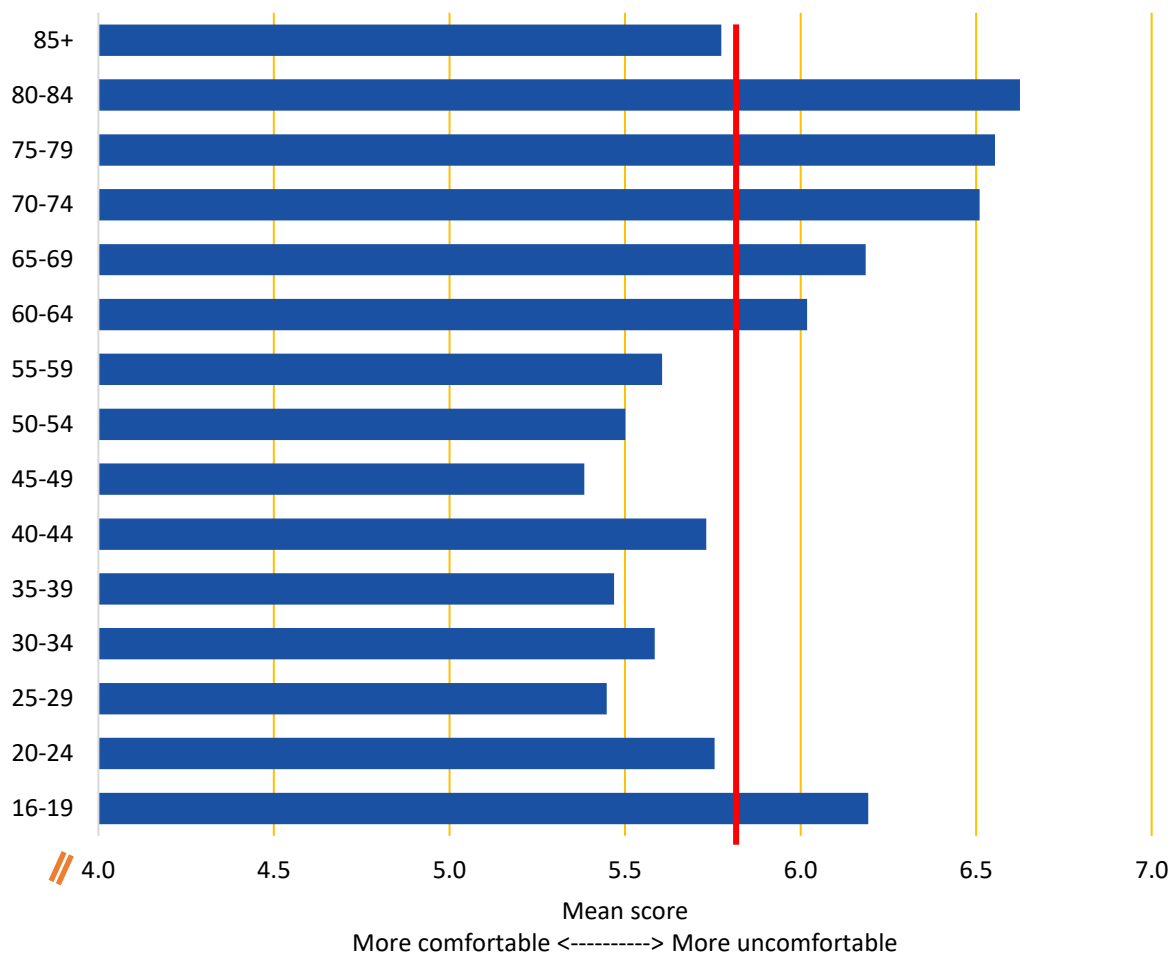
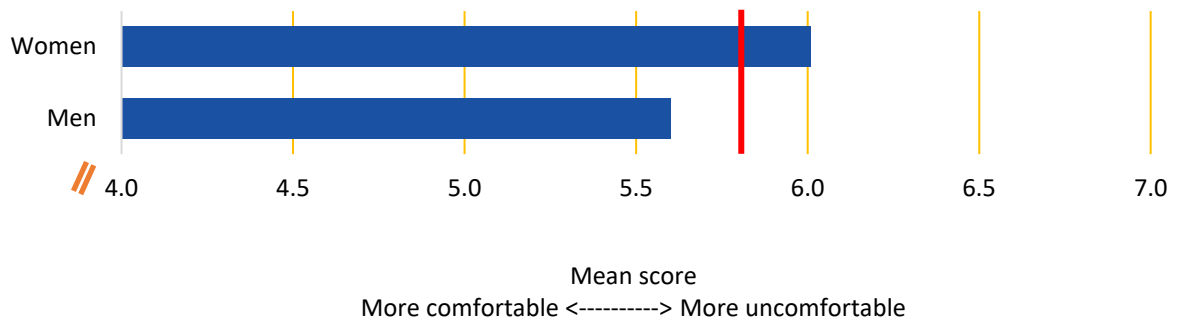


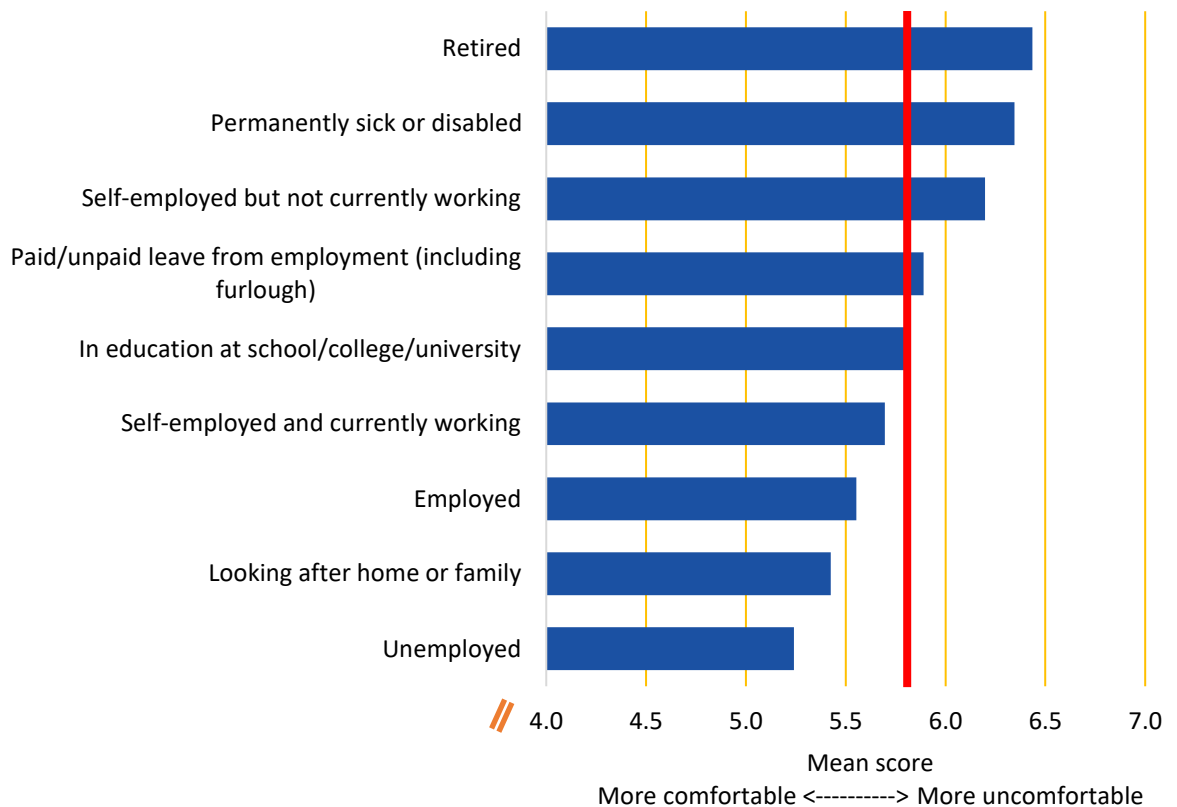
Figure 3 shows differences by gender and, on average, women are found to be more uncomfortable than men about attending in-person activities and events. The difference is small, but statistically significant, although some of this effect can be explained by other factors such as differences in men and women’s health and wellbeing.

Figure 3. Average levels of comfort about attending in-person Jewish community activities and events by sex (Red line = mean score for population as a whole; n=6,972)



The age factor can also be seen to some extent in Figure 4, which examines the data through the lens of employment status. Retired respondents are most likely to lean towards feeling uncomfortable, whereas the employed (i.e. of working age) score below the mean. Echoing what we saw earlier about younger people having slightly raised levels of concern, those in education score exactly on the mean (5.8), expressing more discomfort than those who are working, looking after the home or family, or unemployed.

Figure 4. Average levels of comfort about attending in-person Jewish community activities and events by employment status (Red line = mean score for population as a whole; n=6,984)

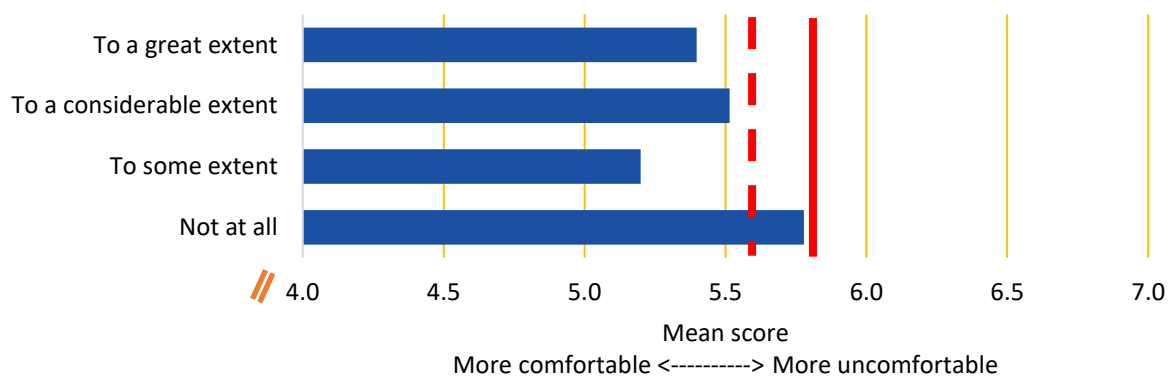


Question: Which of these would you say best describes your current situation? Please select one option. [Responses as listed on chart].

An additional factor here may relate to people’s recent experience of work – it is worth noting that those who are employed, or self-employed and currently working, on average express less concern about returning to community activities and events than the Jewish population average, whereas those who have been recently furloughed, are on paid or unpaid leave or are self-employed but not currently working, all score above the mean. It may be that negative experiences affecting working status or income adversely impact people’s confidence in general, including confidence to be in Jewish spaces. On the other hand, Jewish people who are unemployed – a status expected to increase in prevalence in the coming months due to the imminent termination of the furlough scheme – feel more comfortable about returning, and further work is required to understand why that might be.

One might also postulate that the risks people have of contracting the virus at work might have a bearing on their attitudes towards risk from attending in-person Jewish activities and events. Whilst many people have been working from home and largely engaging with others online, a good proportion have continued to travel to work throughout lockdown and interact directly with colleagues and others. Interestingly, when asked about the extent to which respondents’ jobs increase the risk of them contracting coronavirus, it is those who say ‘not at all’ who are most uncomfortable about attending Jewish activities and events. Whilst the relationship is not smooth, all of those reporting some risk at work, whether to ‘some extent’ or to ‘a great extent,’ report feeling rather more comfortable (Figure 5) about attending event in person. It may be that some exposure to risk builds confidence; if individuals become used to in-person interaction with others at work, attending in-person Jewish activities and events may feel less uncomfortable. At the same time, note that the overall mean score for all these individuals in different in-work groups (dotted red line: 5.6), is lower than the overall mean score for the Jewish population as a whole (red line: 5.8); i.e. people in work are more comfortable about attending in-person events than the Jewish population as a whole.

Figure 5. Average levels of comfort about attending in-person Jewish community activities and events by different levels of risk of contracting coronavirus at work (Solid red line = mean score for population as a whole; dotted red line – mean score for working population; n=3,177)



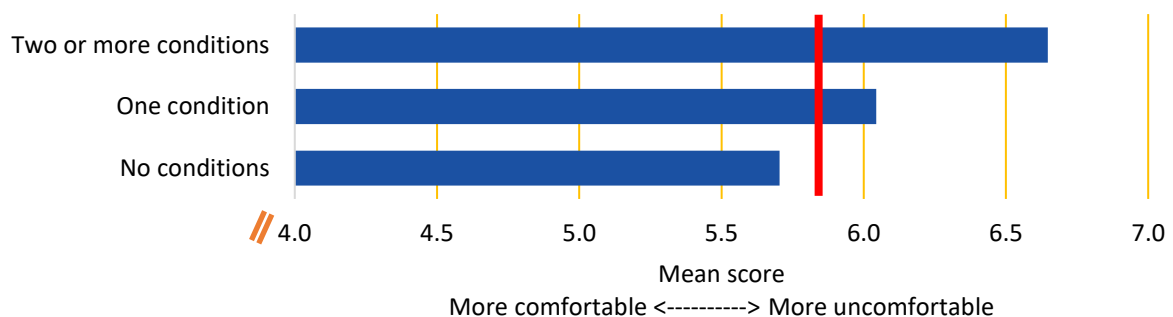
Question: To what extent does your job currently increase the risk of you contracting coronavirus, for example, by bringing you into close contact with many people on a regular basis? [Not at all; To some extent; To a considerable extent; To a great extent].

4 / Physical and mental health

The survey investigated the effects of the pandemic on people’s physical health, and future reports will explore those results in more detail. However, it is unsurprising to see that people with underlying health conditions that render them more susceptible to COVID-19’s effects are more likely to feel uncomfortable about returning to Jewish services or events than those without such conditions.

Specifically, we invited respondents to tell us whether they had any of the following conditions: angina or a long-term heart condition; asthma or a long-term chest condition; an autoimmune disease (e.g. MS, lupus); cancer; diabetes; or ‘any other long-term condition that makes you particularly susceptible.’ As Figure 6 shows, those without any of these conditions had a mean score of 5.7 (below the population average of 5.8), whereas those with one condition scored just over 6.0. Those with two or more scored higher still (6.6). Clearly and as we would expect, on average, those at greater physical risk from the virus feel less comfortable about attending community events. Furthermore, of all the conditions we investigated, having cancer is likely to add significantly to someone’s discomfort about returning, even after taking account of a host of characteristics such as the person’s age, gender, economic status and other aspects of physical and mental wellbeing.

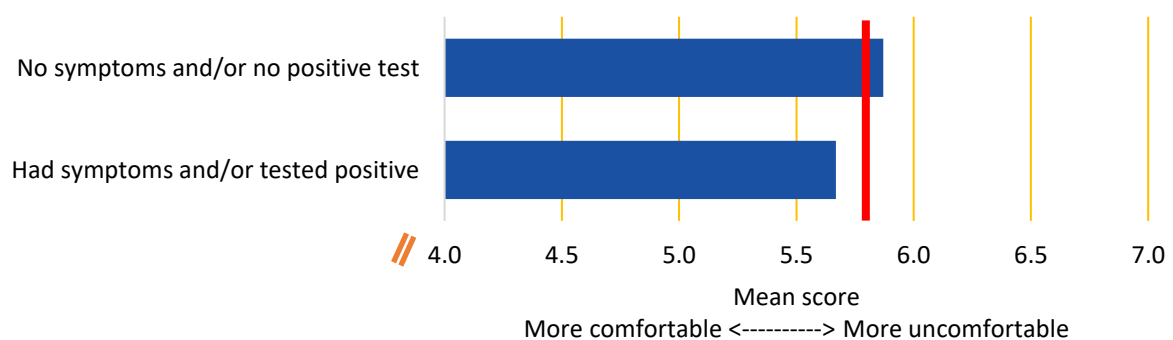
Figure 6. Average levels of comfort about attending in-person Jewish community activities and events by underlying health conditions (Red line = mean score for population as a whole; n=6,984)



Question: Do you currently have a long-term condition(s) that makes you particularly susceptible to serious effects from coronavirus? Please select all that apply. [Angina or long-term heart condition; Asthma or long-term chest condition; Autoimmune disease (e.g. MS, lupus); Cancer; Diabetes; Other long-term condition that makes you particularly susceptible; None of these.]

In contrast, whilst the difference is very small, those who have had symptoms and/or tested positive for COVID-19 appear to be slightly *more* comfortable about attending community events than those who have not (Figure 7). The results are almost identical if we include household members too – i.e. those who live with someone who has/has not had symptoms and/or tested positive (not shown graphically). This may be because people who have contracted the virus feel they have built up some immunity to it (as is the case with respiratory disease generally, although scientific advice discourages this view with regard to COVID-19 on the basis that so little is known).

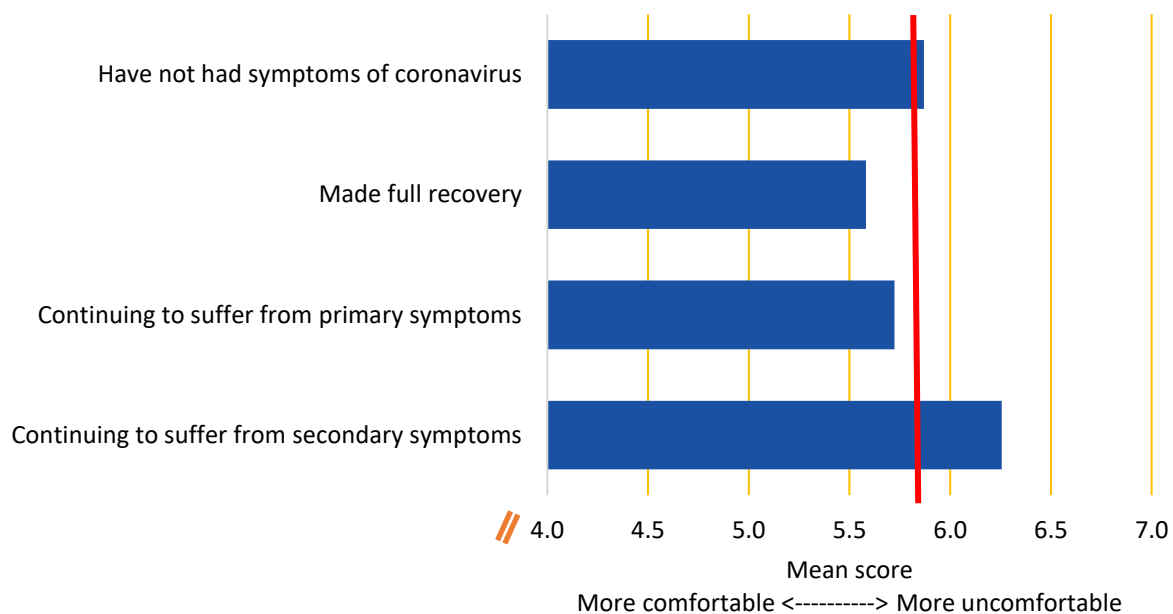
Figure 7. Levels of comfort about attending in-person Jewish community activities and events by having had symptoms of, and/or testing positive for COVID-19 (Red line = mean score for population as a whole; n=6,984)



Question: Have you experienced symptoms that could be caused by coronavirus? [Yes; No].
Question: Have you ever tested positive for coronavirus? [Yes; No].

Interestingly, those who have been hospitalised for COVID-19 and recovered also appear to feel more comfortable than average about returning to in-person community activities and events, although due to the low number of such cases in our sample, this finding is indicative only. The finding illustrated in Figure 8 is more robust: those continuing to suffer from secondary symptoms, whether previously hospitalised or not, are noticeably less comfortable than those who have made a full recovery. However, again we see the interesting distinction between those who have had coronavirus and recovered, and those who have not had it at all – the latter group tend to feel more uncomfortable about returning than the former (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Levels of comfort about attending in-person Jewish community activities and events by experience of having had coronavirus and whether symptoms have persisted (Red line = mean score for population as a whole; n=6,984)

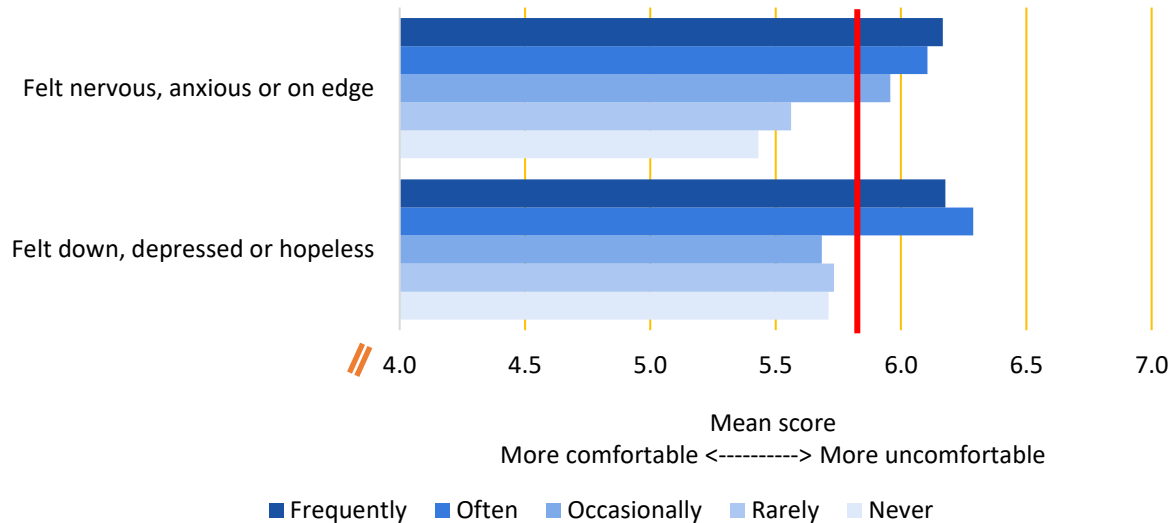


Questions: Have you experienced symptoms that could be caused by coronavirus? [Yes; No]; Have you made a full recovery from the primary symptoms of your diagnosed or suspected coronavirus infection? Please select one option. [I have made a full recovery; I continue to suffer from primary symptoms (e.g. high temperature, cough, loss of smell/taste, shortness of breath); I have recovered from the primary symptoms but continue to experience persistent health problems that I did not experience prior to contracting coronavirus].

Crucially, the survey also explored the impact of the pandemic on respondents’ mental health, and again, this issue will be explored in greater detail in a separate paper. However, in this context, we find an association between those showing at least some signs of psychological distress and the comfort levels they feel about attending in-person community activities and events. To investigate this, we asked respondents whether they had felt a number of different emotions over the previous two weeks, including feeling nervous, anxious or on edge; and down, depressed or hopeless. As Figure 9 shows, those who have recently (in the two weeks prior to the survey) felt these emotions frequently or often are more uncomfortable about attending community events than those who have rarely or never felt such feelings over the same time period. The relationship is particularly compelling with regard to feeling nervous, anxious or on edge – the more frequently people have felt these, the more uncomfortable they are. It is similar with regard to feeling down, depressed or hopeless. Whilst examinations of mental health issues certainly require sensitivity and nuance at the individual level, from a communal perspective it seems that a higher level of psychological distress is associated with

a higher propensity to feel some discomfort about attending community events and activities in-person.

Figure 9. Levels of comfort about attending in-person Jewish community activities and events by extent to which different types of psychological distress have been experienced (n=6,984)



Question: Over the last two weeks, have you generally: Felt nervous, anxious or on edge; Felt down, depressed or hopeless? [Never; Rarely; Occasionally; Often; Frequently].

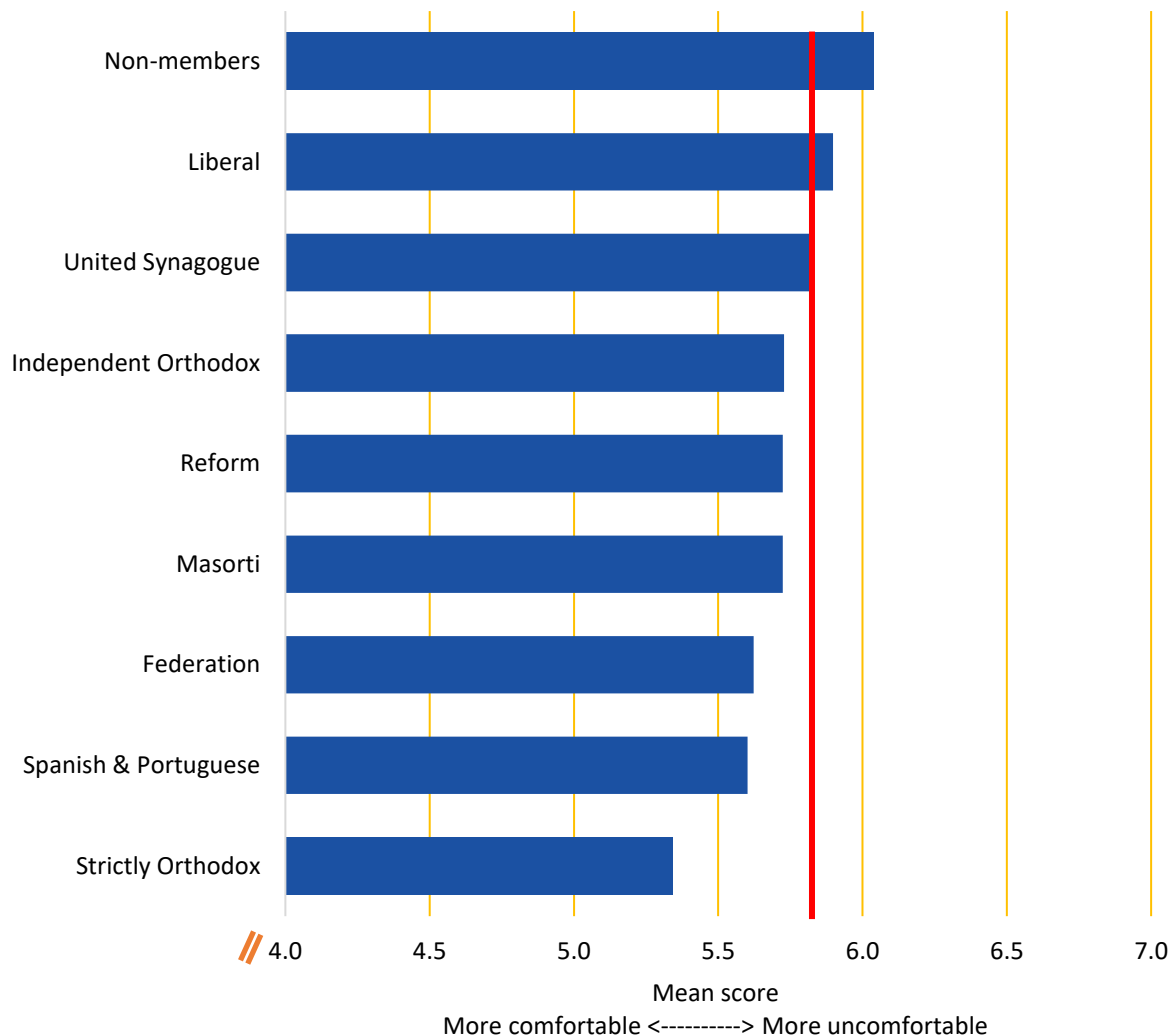
5 / Religiosity and denominational distinctions

Examining the data by denomination yields interesting results. Focusing first on the top and bottom bars of Figure 10, the analysis shows that the Strictly Orthodox are most comfortable about attending community events, whereas people who are not members of any synagogue appear most uncomfortable. What we may be picking up here, as well as differences in comfort or discomfort, are relative differences in the desire to return.

For example, the findings for the Strictly Orthodox likely reflect a strong desire, even compulsion, to meet in-person: for the most Orthodox, convening for religious services is a *halachic* (Jewish legal) obligation, so any curbing of it is experienced as particularly problematic. Jewish communal activities and events are also completely central to the lives of Strictly Orthodox Jews, so the higher levels of comfort they feel probably reflect higher levels of desire or need to return. Conversely, non-members generally feel far less such obligation to return and, of all groups examined, tend to be the least engaged in Jewish life. Thus, the relatively high average levels of discomfort they feel about attending Jewish activities almost certainly reflect the notion that such activities simply matter less to them.

Of course, all other denominations of Judaism also place emphasis on praying and being together, and the mean scores for these groups are very similar, ranging from 5.6 to 5.9, which cluster closely around the mean (of 5.82). While we may speculate, the small differences between these denominational groups should be interpreted with caution. Indeed, when we simplify the analysis to create two clusters (one for the Federation, S&P, United Synagogue and independent Orthodox, and a second for Liberal, Masorti and Reform), we find that both have identical mean scores (5.77), just under, but very close to the mean score for the population as a whole. However, fundamentally, it is clear that all of these groups are less likely than the Strictly Orthodox, but more likely than non-synagogue members, to feel comfortable about attending in-person Jewish activities and events.

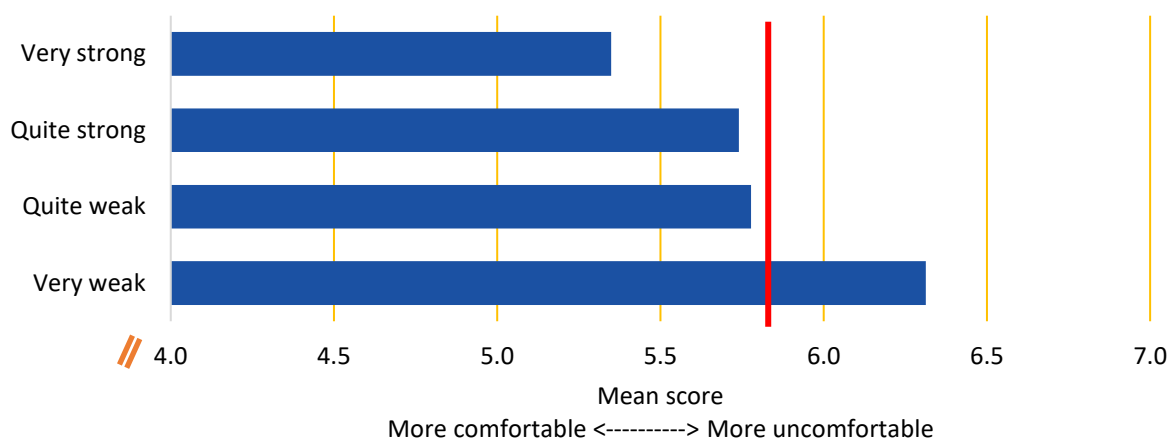
Figure 10. Levels of comfort about attending in-person Jewish community activities and events by denominational grouping (n=6,928)



Question: Which, if any, of the following types of synagogue are you currently a member of? If you belong to more than one synagogue, please select the one you typically attend most frequently. Please select one option. [None – I do not belong to a synagogue; Strictly Orthodox (e.g. Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations); Central Orthodox – United Synagogue; Central Orthodox – Federation of Synagogues; Central Orthodox – Other independent; S&P Sephardi Community; Masorti Judaism; Reform Judaism; Liberal Judaism; Other synagogue (write in)].

These differences can partly be explained by people’s levels of religiosity, as can be seen in Figure 11. As a general rule, the more orthodox tend to report stronger degrees of religiosity than the non-orthodox, but the picture is not simple – members of progressive denominations sometimes report strong religiosity, and members of orthodox denominations sometimes report weak religiosity. As Figure 10 shows, the stronger the degree of religiosity, the more comfortable people tend to feel about returning to in-person Jewish community activities and events. Those who describe their religiosity as ‘very strong’ feel noticeably more comfortable than those who describe it as ‘very weak,’ with those in the other two categories (quite strong/quite weak) situated in the middle. Again, in general, levels of religiosity tend to echo levels of communal engagement and need or desire to gather in prayer groups, so the degree of comfort one feels about returning to in-person Jewish activities and events is not just an reflection of confidence about the levels of risk about contracting coronavirus, but is also about the desire or need to participate.

Figure 11. Levels of comfort about attending in-person Jewish community activities and events by strength of religiosity (n=6,984)



6 / Summary and conclusions

With the onset of a second wave of coronavirus ever more apparent, the issue of how comfortable people feel about returning to in-person Jewish activities and events may feel moot. However, even if the coming months bring new restrictions or lockdowns, the question of how the community will recover its confidence to return to Jewish spaces (in the absence of an effective vaccine) remains critical.

These findings show that Jews vary in terms of how comfortable or uncomfortable they feel about returning to in-person Jewish activities and events, positioning themselves at all points along the scale. But it is important to note that on average, there is a leaning towards uncomfortable – indeed, on the scale of 0-10 (where 0 = very comfortable and 10 = very uncomfortable), the mean is 5.8. More strikingly, almost half (46%) score between 7 and 10. Even though some have begun to return, it is important to consider that many will not, at least for the time being.

When we examine who is most likely to feel such discomfort, we can identify several groups. Older people feature strongly, as perhaps surprisingly, given the relatively weak health risk COVID-19 presents to them, do the youngest groups, particularly those in their late teens and early twenties. Women are more likely to feel uncomfortable than men. Those with underlying conditions perhaps inevitably feel more uncomfortable than average, with their greater awareness of their risk of harm. At the same time, those who have contracted the virus and recovered tend to feel rather more comfortable than those who have not had it, unless they are experiencing continuing secondary symptoms. As well as those who are retired, people who have suffered job losses, have been furloughed, or are self-employed but not working feel rather more uncomfortable than those who are in employment. Religiosity matters too: those with stronger degrees of religiosity feel more comfortable about returning than others, and members of all denominations, but particularly the Strictly Orthodox, are more inclined to return, on average, than members of none. And although the relationship is complex, there is clearly an association between feeling uncomfortable about returning to Jewish spaces and experiencing more general psychological distress.

Whilst each of these findings stands on its own merits, they are interrelated, or can be partially explained by additional factors. In concluding, we focus on the characteristics which advanced

statistical modelling suggests are particularly important, and we consider the implications for the community.

Even when we take account of many other characteristics of our respondents, age remains a strong predictor of feelings of discomfort, particularly people over 60, and particularly those who are retired. Given that older people are most susceptible to the worst effects of COVID-19, this is not surprising, but it ought to give community leaders pause for thought as they consider how best to include those who are unlikely to participate in in-person activities and events whilst there remains a risk of contracting the disease. The UK Jewish population has an above average age profile, and older people contribute to Jewish life in many important ways, so they are a key part of the community. Including them, wherever possible, is arguably more important than ever. Specific, bespoke, creative and meaningful initiatives are needed, not least because online provision is unlikely to meet the needs of all older people.

Similarly, and even less surprisingly, having underlying health conditions – most notably cancer – is a strong predictor of discomfort about returning. Given the inevitable fragility this demographic feels in general, the added risk of contracting coronavirus only exacerbates their feelings of discomfort about in-person activities. Again, the questions of inclusion and support loom large.

Employment status is another important factor, independent of all other considerations. It is striking to see that having been made redundant or been furloughed, and particularly being self-employed but not currently working, are strong predictors of discomfort. Perhaps because these groups may be struggling with loss of income and, in some cases, dealing with long-term damage to their business, they may be feeling less confident in general, which may, in turn, translate into discomfort about returning to Jewish spaces. Interestingly, however, the unemployed feel rather more comfortable than average – at this stage we can only hypothesise why this might be; being out of work is becoming more common, so perhaps they feel less like outliers in a community that generally has a very strong socioeconomic profile, or perhaps they are particularly keen to return to a social network that may help them move forward.

Being in education is also a strong predictor; indeed, upon closer examination, it is this that is more significant than simply being young (aged 16-24), although clearly, they are closely related. This may be partly because these age bands tend to have lower levels of interest than older people in attending communal activities or events, but it may also be related to the above average levels of psychological distress they tend to feel. Whilst everyone is facing a considerable deal of uncertainty at present, perhaps it affects young people in particular – the lack of clarity about exams, the indecision about university places, the struggle to afford to live independently, and the challenges of the job market are inevitably stressful for many. Importantly, from a Jewish community perspective, this demographic is central to the running of our informal youth provision – youth movement activities, summer camps, Israel tours – which has been substantially diminished by the pandemic. A second compromised summer in 2021 could be very damaging, and community leaders ought to be urgently working out how to ensure that Jewish life continues for this demographic in a meaningful form, come what may.

The findings about denomination and religiosity are also important. We should avoid the temptation to pour over whether or not there are differences between mainstream denominations and how these can be interpreted; the more important finding is that those who are not members, and those who express lower levels of religiosity, are certainly less comfortable, or less inclined to return. The community faces an enormous challenge if those who are less than fully engaged fail to return over time, and those who already felt marginal disengage further. Finding ways to keep them connected should surely be a priority. The findings about higher levels of comfort among the strictly Orthodox

also point to the need for extra judicious measures about social distancing within those communities – the pulls to convene are particularly strong there, and need to be addressed respectfully and robustly to safeguard health.

More generally, signs of psychological distress among anyone of any age are clearly associated with how comfortable or uncomfortable they feel about re-entering Jewish spaces. Perhaps unsurprisingly, anxiety, nervousness and edginess in general explain discomfort, but so does feeling down, depressed or hopeless. Indeed, it is mental health and wellbeing that seem to explain the difference in the finding between men and women – women tend to report feeling such emotions often or frequently rather more than men. Whether there is a causal relationship is unclear – perhaps poor mental health deters people from returning to community events, or perhaps absence from community events leads to poor mental health. In practice, the relationship between these and other factors is likely to be complex. Nevertheless, the conundrum facing the Jewish community here is particularly challenging: those suffering in these ways are less likely than average to attend in-person events, raising a pressing question about how to ensure they are receiving the community support they need. Online solutions are certainly part of the answer – another report in this series will investigate this – but they are almost certainly insufficient alone.

In the final analysis, Jewish communal life has long depended upon in-person interaction – being together, physically, to celebrate, mourn, pray, learn, socialise and connect. The inability to do these things in person, over time, is potentially very damaging to Jewish communal life. Whilst technological solutions have a very important role to play, the task of planning for an uncertain future ought to be a key focus, and understanding the many feelings that exist about going back into Jewish spaces is an essential part of that process. This paper is designed to inform that discussion.

/ Methodological note

These results are based on an online survey of Jewish people aged 16 and over living in the UK. A total of 6,984 individuals who took part are included in this analysis. They responded variously to emails and e-newsletters sent out by a wide range of Jewish communal organisations and synagogues, or to messaging through social media, word of mouth, or referrals from other survey participants. Five £100 shopping vouchers were offered as an incentive.

The questionnaire was developed by JPR, drawing on a range of existing surveys including some newly created to respond to COVID-19. It was programmed in-house using Conformat software and formed part of a wider panel recruitment process. Except for a handful of individuals who requested telephone interviews, the survey was completed online, by computer or smartphone, from 9-31 July, including a short piloting process. The median time taken to complete the survey was 25 minutes.

The survey data were cleaned and weighted to adjust for the age, sex, religious affiliation/denomination and geographical profile of the Jewish community in the UK based on Census 2011 data. Statistical analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS Version 26, and the text in this report focuses wherever possible on findings which are statistically significant. A more detailed methodological report will be available at www.jpr.org.uk.

/ Acknowledgments

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We also thank the many people across the UK who gave up their time to complete the COVID-19 survey and to support our research. We know their time is precious, so we are particularly grateful to them for sharing their thoughts and experiences.

/ 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.

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