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# COMMUNITYBAROMETER

## Executive Summary

English edition

# COMMUNITYBAROMETER

Findings from a survey of Jews in Germany —  
Summary and recommendations

January 2021

The Central Council of Jews in Germany (Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland) conducted an online survey in collaboration with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and the infas Institute for Applied Social Sciences.

The summary of the report on the findings as well as recommendations from JDC and the Zentralrat are presented in this publication.



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# FOREWORD TO THE ENGLISH EDITION



For a long time, the Jewish community<sup>1</sup> in Germany was considered to have the most dynamic growth worldwide. Yet the demographic transformation is leaving its mark on the Jewish community in Germany, too. We are now observing that the number of Community members is in decline following years of uninterrupted growth. The annual membership statistics compiled by the Central Welfare Board of the Jews in Germany (ZWST) reveals that the age distribution is clearly skewed toward older members. 48% of Community members are over 61. The year 2019 saw 245 births, but also 1,434 deaths. Nonetheless, the Jewish community remains attractive. For example, almost four times as many Jews are immigrating to Germany than emigrating.

When Jews began to immigrate from the states of the former Soviet Union, various programs and projects were developed for Jews in Germany. The goal was always to develop activities that would invite people to become active members of the Communities. After all, the Jewish Communities form the backbone of Jewry in Germany, and only vibrant Communities can come together to form a strong community.

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the beginning of Jewish immigration from the former Soviet Union, the Zentralrat and JDC joined forces and put their ears to the ground. We want to know: where does the Jewish community stand in 2020? Which activities do people enjoy and consider valuable? And where is there still a need for action? The answers to the questions pave the way to the future. We would like to collaborate with the Communities to build on them and develop strategies for the coming years. Obviously, there are no one-size-fits-all solutions. Each Community has different needs. A Community in a metropolis is faced with different challenges than one in a small town. There are regional differences as well. Yet the Community Barometer shows one thing clearly: the Communities are of immense importance to the Jews across Germany.

In this survey, we focused on members of Jewish Communities, but also on former members and individuals who have never been members of a Jewish Community. The idea was to view the Jewish community as a whole. The Community Barometer captures the atmosphere and provides information about the wishes and sensibilities of the Jews in Germany. Its purpose is to encourage people to open up and permit discussions. Leaders need to have the courage to listen closely if they want to motivate people to join them on their journey.

With this in mind, I wish you exciting insights as you read the report.



**Daniel Botmann**

Executive Director

<sup>1</sup> In this document, “Jewish Community” (with an upper-case c) refers to organized Jewish Communities and “Jewish community” (with a lower-case c) to Jewry in general.

# SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## from the JDC and the Zentralrat

Declining membership while the programs offered increased: that was reason enough for the Central Council of Jews in Germany (Zentralrat) to gather data to capture the atmosphere in the Jewish community. What is the situation of Jews in Germany? What are their relationships to Jewish institutions, especially the Jewish Communities? Do the activities offered match the needs of Jews in Germany?

Where could opportunities and potentials lie for the future development of Jewish institutions in Germany?

Against this background, the Zentralrat partnered with the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) to conduct an online survey, the Community Barometer, throughout Germany from September to December 2019. It was addressed to Community members, former Community members, and non-members. The infas Institute for Applied Social Sciences conducted the survey and provided scientific support.

The evaluation phase coincided with the beginning of the corona pandemic, which in a certain sense even exacerbated the questions studied. Some Communities proved to be more adaptable than others. The global push toward digitalization has also impacted the Communities. It can be observed even today that the pandemic will change the Jewish landscape in Germany in the longer term. The increasing acceptance of online activities opens up opportunities for the Jewish community in Germany.

It is also becoming apparent that international Jewish organizations are phasing out their work in Germany. We cannot assess at present to what extent the Jewish landscape will change. The reduced amount of donations due to the corona crisis, however, necessitates a fundamental change in promoting programs around the world, and it poses major challenges for actors in Germany as well. This development should be observed by the Jewish Communities and umbrella organizations in Germany in order to meet the needs of the Jewish community, to work on sustainable funding opportunities and structures and, as appropriate, to fill new gaps with activities of our own.

The Community Barometer reveals some central points in this regard that should be taken into account when developing strategies and measures in the future.

This summary covers the data and conclusions that the Zentralrat and JDC believe deserve particular attention and that can serve as a basis for discussion for the further content-related development of the Jewish Communities and associations.

## About the sample

The survey was conducted online and in four languages (German, Russian, English, and Hebrew). It was addressed to Jewish individuals in Germany, regardless whether they were members or former members of a local Jewish Community, or non-members.

A total of 2,716 complete answers were gathered from the respondents: 1,901 from current Community members, 193 from former Community members, and 622 from non-members. Thus, the Community Barometer is the survey with the largest number of respondents within the Jewish community since 1945.

The large number of respondents permits robust findings for all the groups observed. However, the findings are not representative in a statistical sense for all age groups, educational levels, and regions.

## Taking part in activities

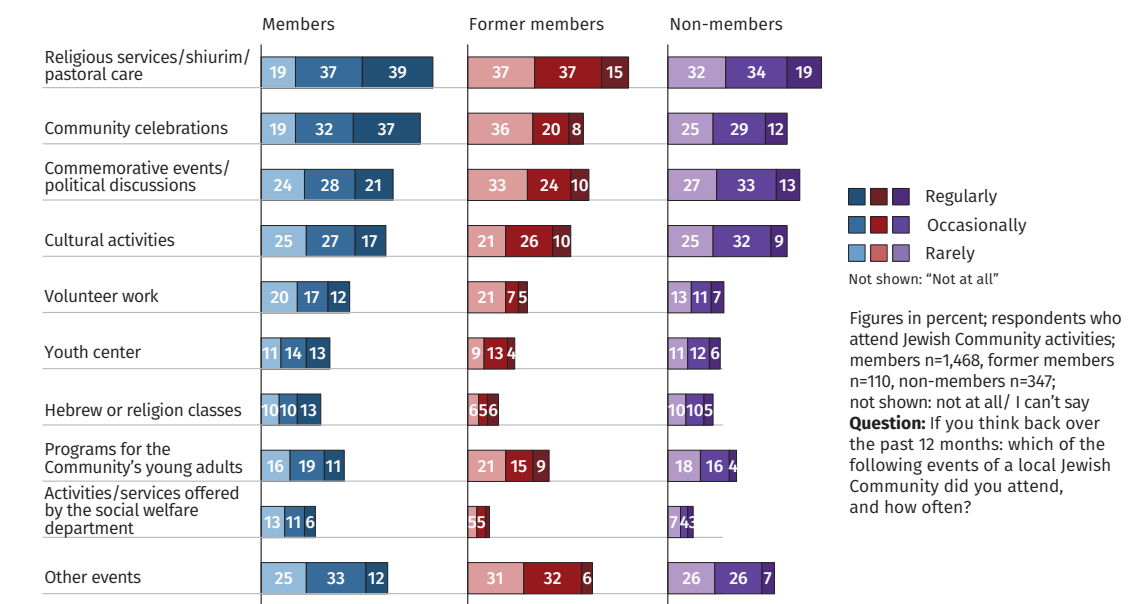
Large numbers of respondents take part in the activities offered by the Jewish Communities. This is particularly true of members (84%), but also of former members (57%) and of non-members (56%) (not shown in a figure).

In other words, Jewish Community life is not limited to members. The high numbers of attendees, including non-members, indicate that the Communities are open spaces frequented by people with varying ties to organized Jewish life.

On closer examination, however, it is striking that this concerns only a limited number of activities. Religious activities are most popular.

Other activities, such as cultural and political events and other Community celebrations, are attended specifically by Community members. Former members and non-members find such events less attractive (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1** Frequency of attending a local Community's events



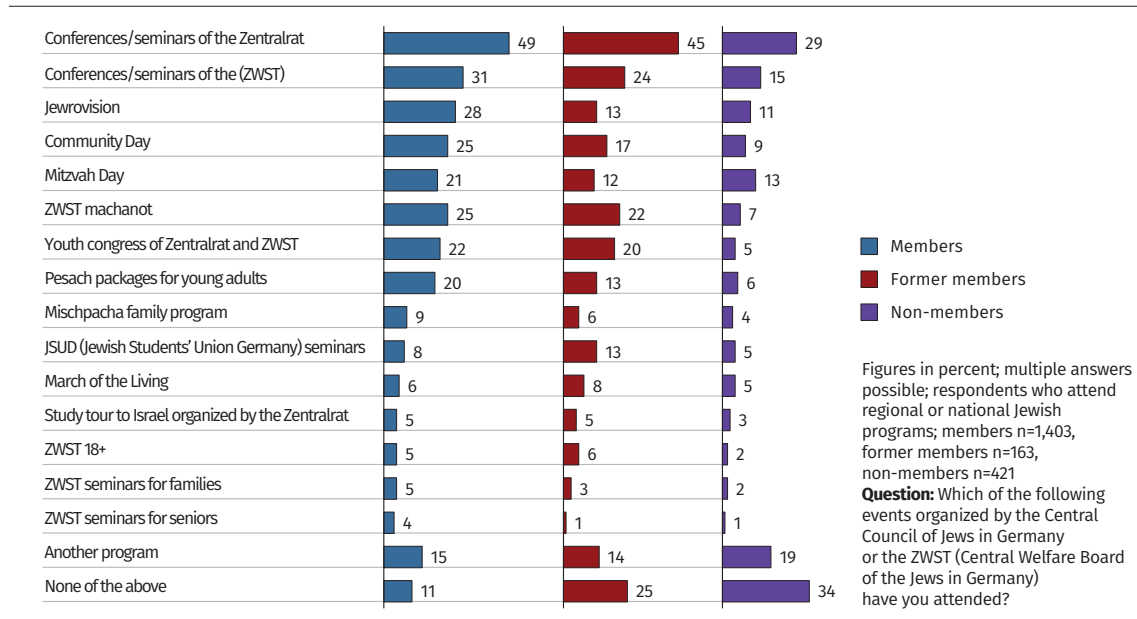
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When considering the numbers of attendees, one should take into account that some activities such as the youth center, Hebrew and religion classes (if available at all), or activities/services offered by the social welfare department are taken up by particular age groups, i.e. by smaller numbers. We know from the Communities' day-to-day routines that there is especially high demand for social welfare activities/services—and it has increased even more due to the corona crisis.

A large majority of the members and former members (more than 80% of each of these groups) has taken part in Jewish programs at the national level, such those organized by the Zentralrat, the ZWST, and others. These figures are somewhat lower among non-members. Especially the younger members (under 30) are interested in regional and national events (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2 National Jewish events organized by the Zentralrat and the ZWST that respondents have attended**

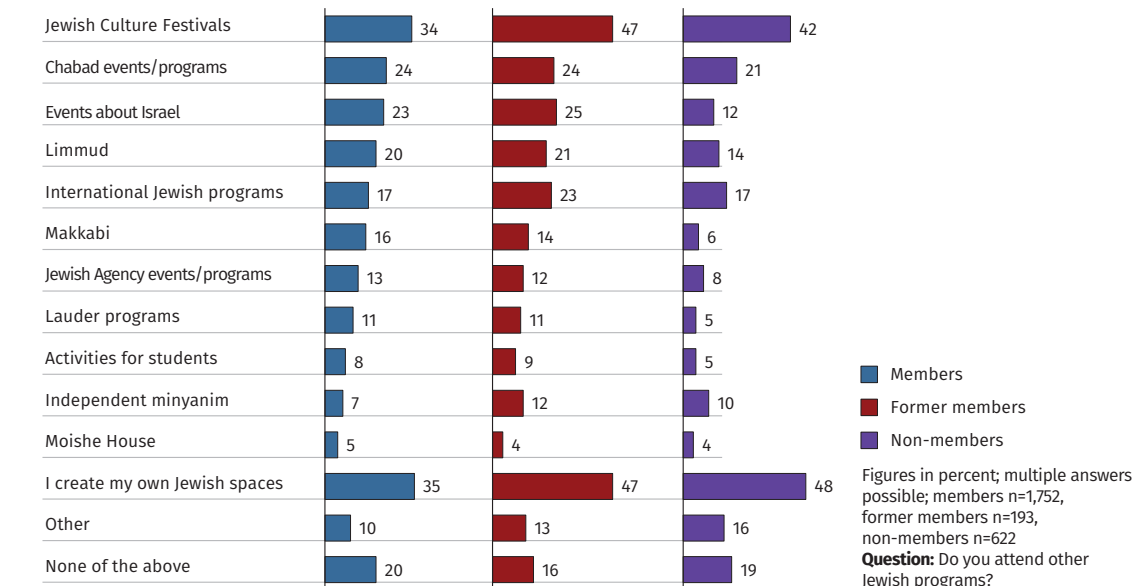


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Beyond events organized by the Zentralrat and the ZWST, participating in Jewish cultural and film festivals and creating Jewish spaces of their own are the two most important activities for the three groups (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3 Participation in other Jewish programs**



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» Members, former members, and non-members have a strong interest in connecting with other Jews, with Judaism, and with the Community: locally, but also regionally and nationally, as well as through social media.

## Satisfaction and participation in the Community

All those who have participated in the various activities offered by the Communities in the past twelve months show high degrees of satisfaction, regardless whether they are members or not. However, those individuals who feel a religious connection are among the most satisfied. Jews who define themselves in cultural terms are the least satisfied (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4** Satisfaction with Community events in the past 12 months

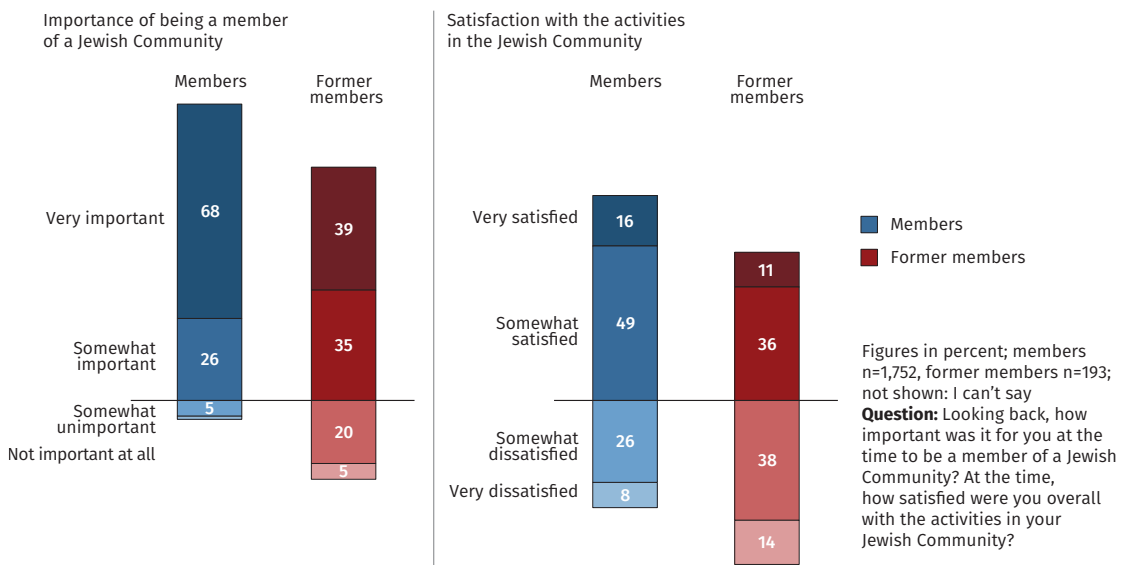


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Members and former members are or were less satisfied with the activities offered by the Community overall. One in three members are somewhat or even very dissatisfied. More than half of the former members consider the range of activities offered by their Communities to be poor (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5** Importance of being a member of a Jewish Community



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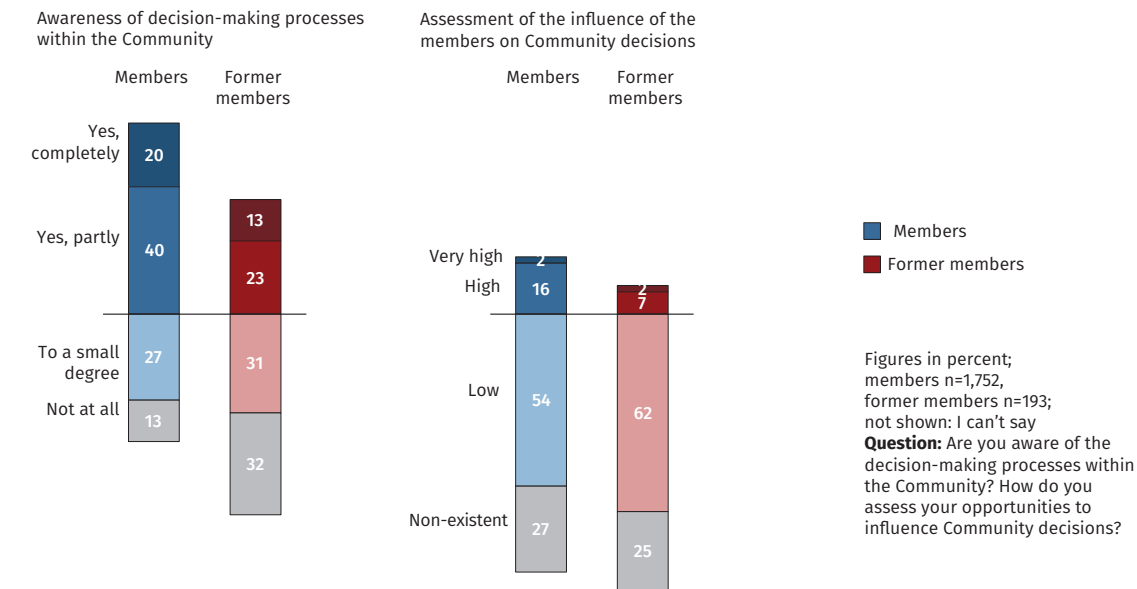
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We should take particular note of the answers concerning respondents' awareness of decision-making processes within the Community and how they assess the influence of the members on Community decisions. Members consider the decision-making processes to be significantly



more transparent than former members do, only a third of whom feel they are informed. Yet—despite their awareness of decision-making processes—only 18% of members are convinced that they can influence Community decisions. More than half the members perceive their opportunities for influencing decisions to be low, and 27% consider them to be non-existent. The share of former members who believe they can influence decisions is even lower (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6 Participation in the Community**

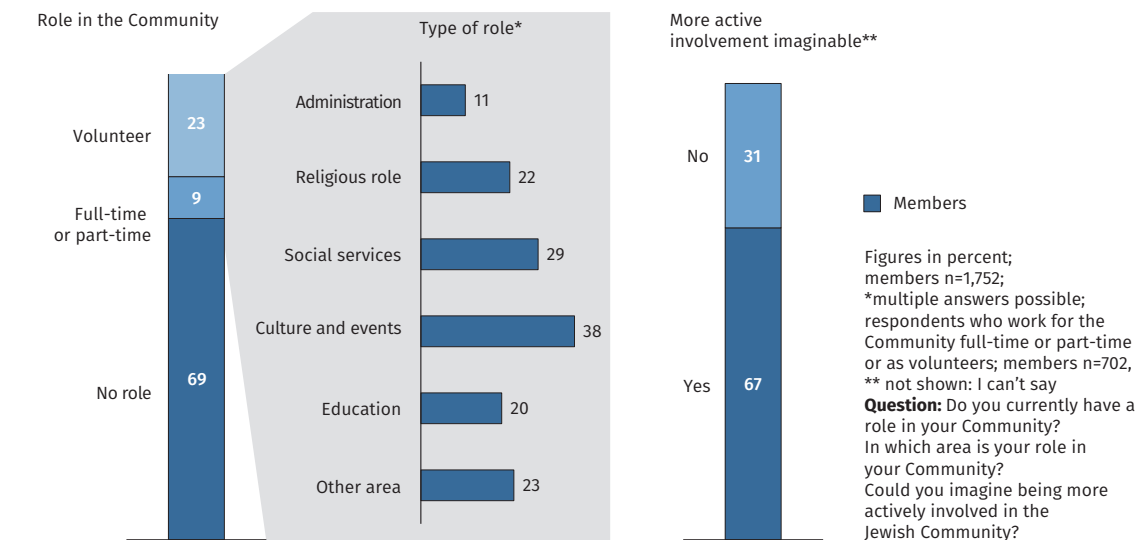


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One encouraging finding is that 67% of the surveyed members could imagine being more actively involved in the Community. This is a hidden potential for Community life. The Communities could take this up and provide points of contact for them (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7 Role in the Community**



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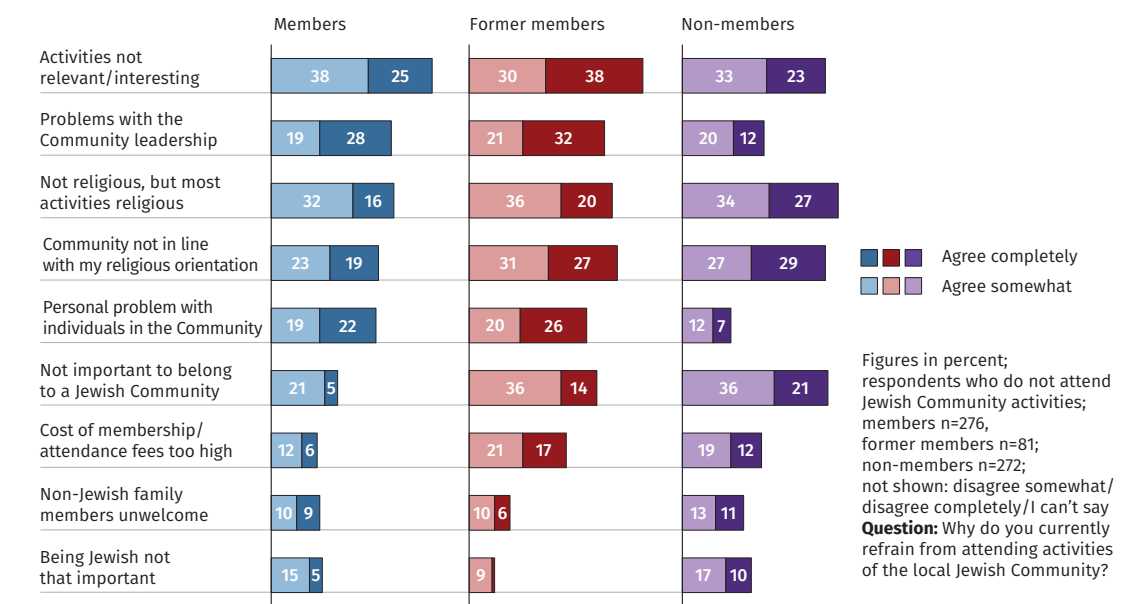
» It is in the interest of the Communities to get members more involved. People are willing to get personally involved, and they are interested in participation.

## Reasons not to participate in Community activities

The study also examined why people refrain from attending Community activities. Those who had indicated that they did not attend Community activities at all were asked about their reasons. The analysis shows that—despite individual differences between the groups—the respondents assessed some of the reasons very similarly.

One of the main reasons is that the activities do not match their personal interests; another is that they feel the Community’s religious orientation is not fitting. Non-members are more likely to be non-religious and therefore not interested in religious activities. Excessive membership fees are an obstacle for 38% of the former members. 57% of non-members believe it is not important to them to belong to a Jewish Community, a significantly higher share than among the members. Roughly half of the members and former members reported differences with the Community leadership, which is one reason for them not to attend events. The question about the costs of Community membership, the question about the potentially lacking acceptance of non-Jewish family members, and the fact that people feel their own Judaism is not so important seem less determinative compared with other reasons (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8** Reasons for not attending Community events

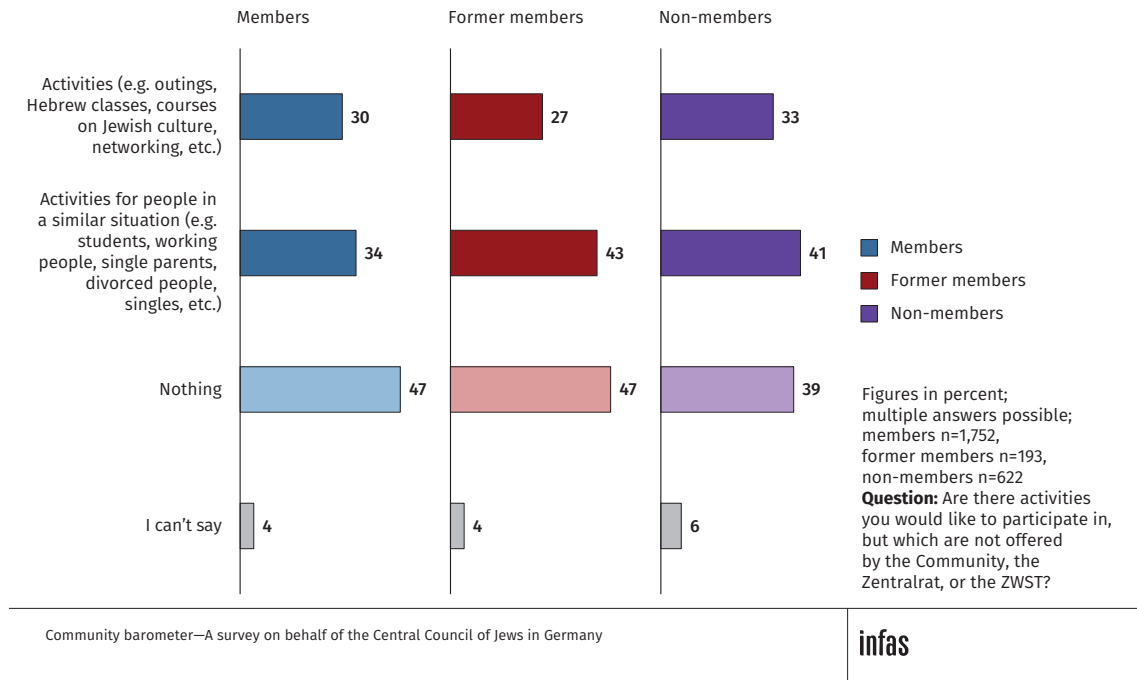


» Members, former members, and non-members would like to see openness and pluralism welcomed and put in practice more intentionally.

## What needs exist above and beyond the activities currently offered by Communities and national institutions?

Just under half of the members and former members and just under 40% of the non-members do not see a need overall for additional activities. The remaining respondents in all three groups would prefer to see additional activities for people in a similar life situation (see Figure 9).

Figure 9 Activities not offered by the Jewish Communities



The analysis of the open responses reveals that there is a broad spectrum of the most varied needs as well as expectations of what the Communities should offer and what they fail to offer. A common denominator seems to be the need for more Jewish education for various ages and target groups. This is particularly true of non-members, who are also interested in trustful contacts to rabbis.

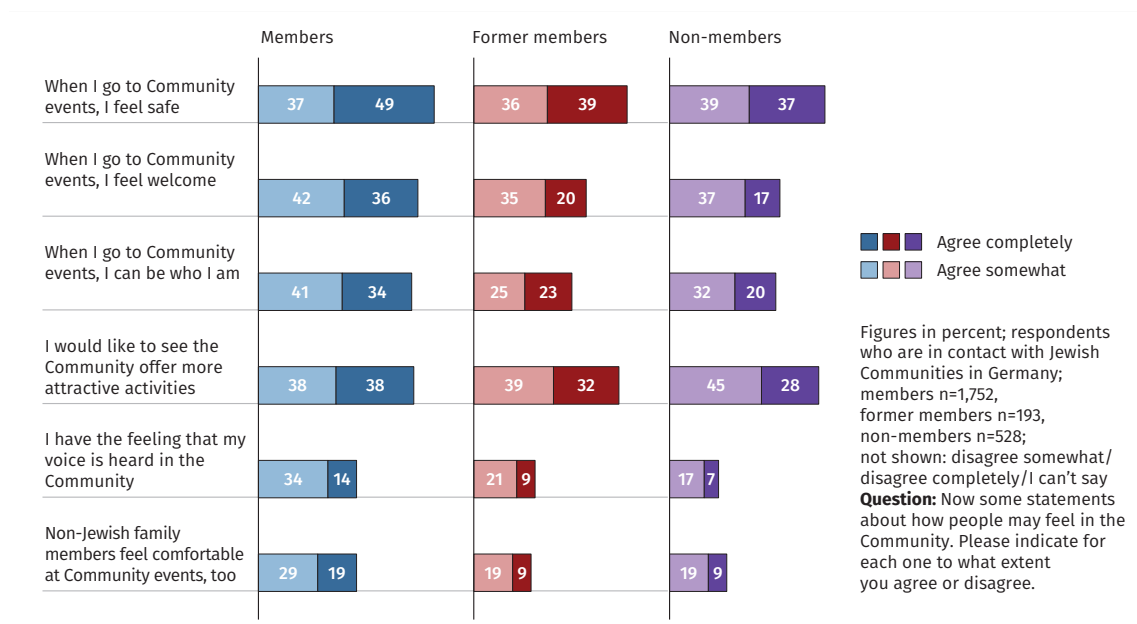
» People aren't necessarily looking for more: many respondents felt that the type of activity is less important than the opportunity to meet like-minded people or having a place where individuals can feel that they belong and can establish meaningful relationships.

## How people feel in the Community

When analyzing respondents' subjective feelings about the Community, a number of aspects stand out: firstly, the prevailing consensus among the three groups that they feel safe in the Communities. Secondly, the strong agreement among the groups about the need for Communities to offer more appealing activities.

There was less agreement between the various groups about other matters. Feeling welcome in the Community is more widespread among Community members (78%), but is also relatively strong among former members (55%) and non-members (54%). Most members feel that that they can be who they are in the Community; former members and non-members agree to a lesser degree (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10 Feeling comfortable in the Community**



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There is less consensus about the question whether non-Jewish family members feel comfortable in the Community. About half of the Community members agree with the statement. Former members and non-members are less satisfied by the way the Communities deal with non-Jewish family members, with just 28% agreeing with the statement (see Figure 10).

This is consistent with the finding from the question to the members about how they feel about belonging on a scale from 1 (I do not feel I belong) to 10 (I feel I belong). The mean value here is 6.7, which raises the question whether the glass is half full or half empty (not shown in a figure).

» Half of the former members and non-members surveyed and just under 22% of the members do not feel welcome in the Community. If Communities seek to reach these people and win them over, then more open-minded behavior on the part of Community representatives and staff is just one aspect. Openness for the diversity of Jewish life (various streams, but above all lifestyles) appears even more important.

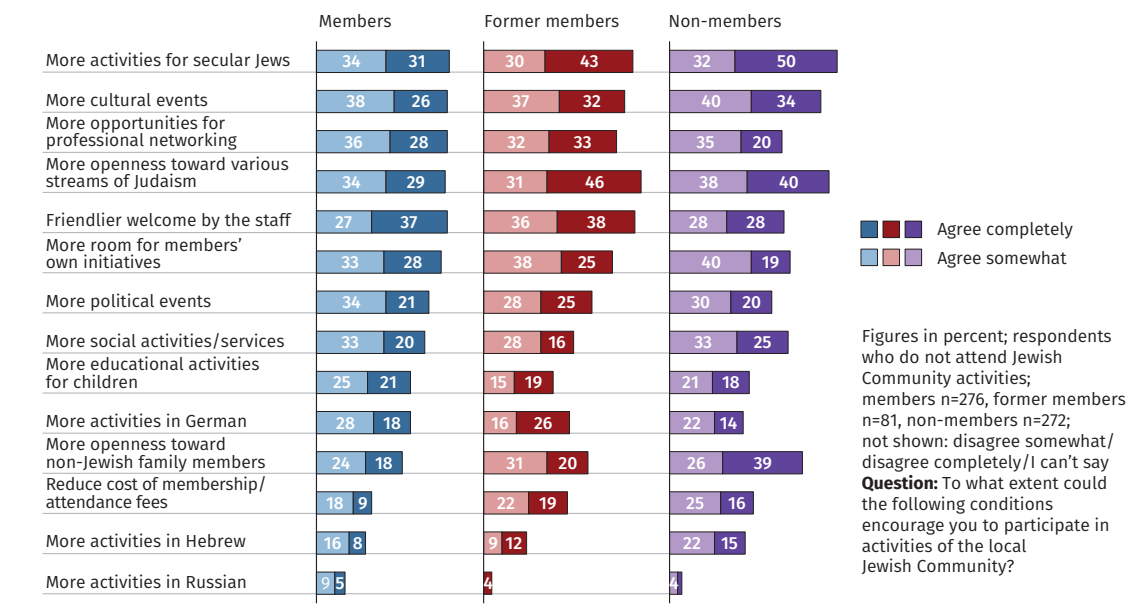
## Aspects that could motivate people to participate

Key factors that would motivate both members on the one hand and former members and non-members on the other to attend Community activities include a stronger orientation toward secular topics and cultural events, professional networking, religious openness toward different streams of Judaism, and space for people to actively involve themselves. The latter is desired by 59 to 63% of all age groups.

Among these content-related aspects, a key desire is for a friendlier welcome by the Community staff, as a soft factor relating to how people deal with one another.

Accordingly, greater openness toward various streams of Judaism is an important task for the future, especially from the perspective of former members and non-members. Non-members also mentioned greater openness toward non-Jewish family members most often. The membership fee or attendance fees did not seem to be a key argument against Community membership, neither for members nor for the other two groups. Instead, the respondents tended to criticize the lack of activities in German, significantly ahead of a lack of activities in Hebrew or Russian (see Figure 11).

**Figure 11 Aspects that would encourage non-participants to attend activities of the local Community**



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The desire for more room for members' own initiatives shows clearly that all groups are interested in active participation and in the Community as "the" Jewish space. Moreover, there are increasing numbers of Israelis as well as Jews from North and South America and other countries besides German-speaking Jews in the major cities. Here, too, the institutions could listen more closely and organize activities to reach these people.

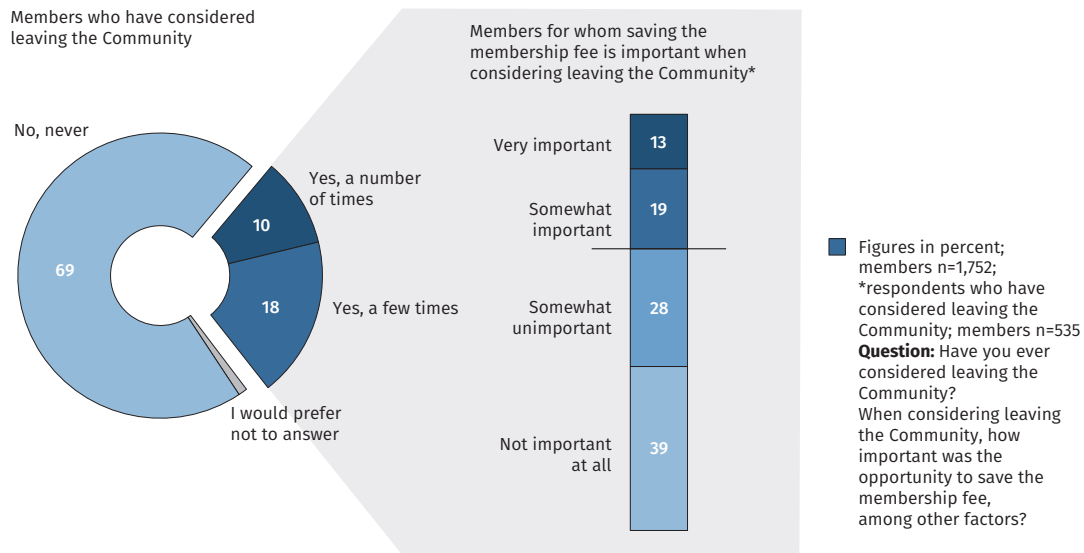
A strategic question for Communities arises here. Should they focus on those who are participating already, or are they interested in including other Jewish target groups and creating spaces in the Community as an umbrella for all Jews?

» The diversity of different life situations and Jewish lifestyles is substantial. It appears that Communities should strive to be more accepting of cultural differences (background, Jewish self-understanding), to take account of them, and to strike a balance between them. Jews want to be seen and heard.

## Reasons for considering leaving the Community

Somewhat more than two-thirds of members are firmly connected to the Community and have never considered leaving it. 18% of members have thought about it a few times, and one in ten has done so a number of times. Yet only one-third of the latter group stated that saving the membership fee was an important factor (see Figure 12).

**Figure 12** Members who have considered leaving the Community



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The analysis revealed the following aspects to be the main reasons: lack of transparency or dissatisfaction with the Community leadership, lack of openness toward other Jewish lifeworlds, lack of relevant activities, and the perception of not feeling comfortable in the Community or not being integrated into Community life. It is also alarming that of the respondents who indicated that they considered leaving the Community, about 60% live in a major city and are between 18 and 49 years old. That is the time for important professional, familial, and societal decisions. When people have children, they often reevaluate their connections to traditions and the community (not shown in a figure).

There are major differences between the three groups surveyed with respect to their attitudes toward the cost of membership. Most members perceive it to be appropriate, former members and non-members tend to consider it to be high. Taking into account whether the respondents are working or retired, however, puts this finding into perspective: in all three groups of respondents, above-average numbers of pensioners consider the cost of membership to be appropriate or even rather low, whereas above-average numbers of working people consider it unreasonably high: 33% of working members, 72% of former members, and 37% of non-members stated that the costs of membership were rather high or very high (not shown in a figure).

This assessment is supported by the answers given by members to the open-ended question what they believed were the reasons why Jewish friends and acquaintances did not join the Community. The most frequent reason given was the cost of membership; other aspects were mentioned far less often (not shown in a figure). The question as to the relative importance of the cost of membership must be analyzed in more depth on the basis of the available data, however.

» The fact that about a quarter of the members has already considered leaving the Community is alarming. The institutions should respond above all by offering more opportunities to have a say.”

## Opportunities for recruiting new members and bringing back former members

The membership statistics of the Central Welfare Board of the Jews in Germany (ZWST) indicate that 2006 was the year with the highest number of registered Community members to date: 107,794. Since then, figures have been declining across Germany, to 94,771 in 2019. That year, there were 245 births, but 1,434 deaths; 146 Community members emigrated, and 372 decided to leave their Community. The total number of losses—2,726—cannot be offset by the 1,586 new members. New members include Jews coming from countries of the former Soviet Union and other countries as well as people who converted to Judaism.

We have learned from the experience with various outreach programs of the Zentralrat (e.g. Mischpacha, Pesach packages, Community Day (a conference for Jewish Communities)) that there is a need for more effective communication concerning registration as a Community member. For example, we find time and again that parents do not register their children when they are born because they believe they are registered automatically. In many Communities, a person’s membership ends when they move away—but people are not aware of this fact. That is why they do not register with the Community in their new city. In some cases, registered children must apply for membership when they turn 18 because their membership as minors is terminated when they reach legal age.

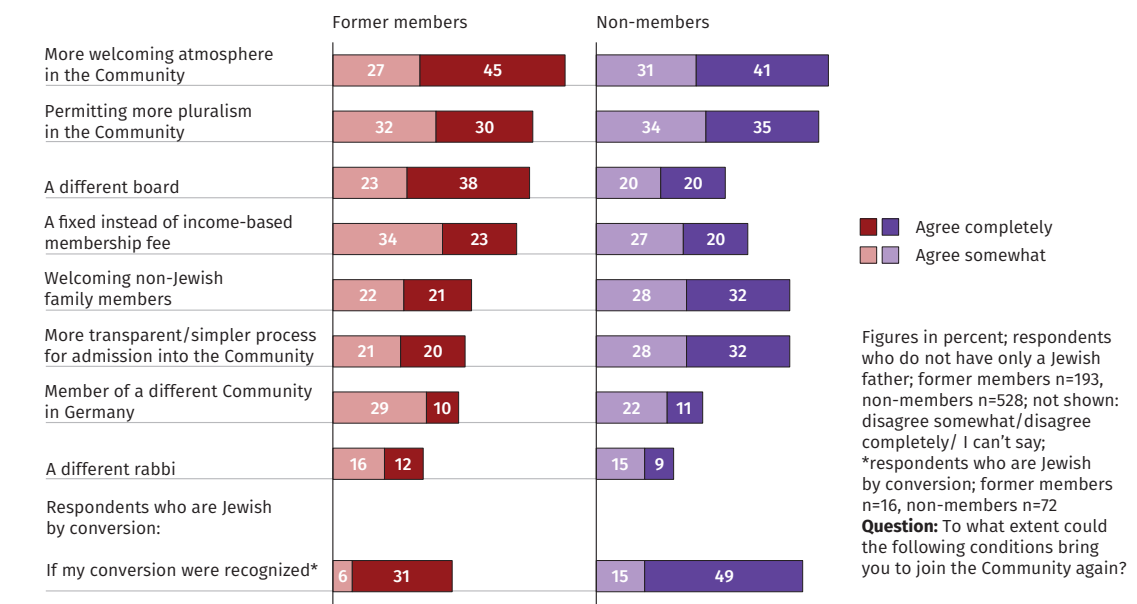
The survey revealed that there certainly is potential for growth among former members and non-members. Roughly 40% of former members and 37% of non-members gave a basically positive answer to the question whether they could imagine rejoining or joining the Jewish Community (see Figure 13).

**Figure 13** Joining/rejoining the Community imaginable?



However, the respondents mentioned a number of conditions. Former members and non-members mention most often that the Community should be more welcoming and should permit more diversity. In addition, it is particularly important to non-members that non-Jewish family members feel welcome as well and that the process of being admitted into the Community is more transparent and simpler (see Figure 14).

**Figure 14 Conditions for joining/rejoining the Community**



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The fact that membership in a Jewish Community is important to many Jews in Germany is both an encouraging finding of the survey and an opportunity. When asked how important membership in a Jewish Community is or was for them, just 5% of the members and former members said it was somewhat unimportant, whereas 68% said it was very important. Of the former members, 39% said it was very important and 35% somewhat important (see Figure 5 above).

» Most Jews in Germany believe that being a member of a Jewish Community is important. But not unconditionally. They would like to see transparent and straightforward processes for admission into the Community, and they would like to feel welcome.

## Jewish identity and Jewish self-understanding

Even if the survey is not representative in the statistical sense, it does permit statements about different degrees of Jewish identity and religiosity. In-depth analysis of the survey data on this topic is planned as well. The orientation of the members is more traditional (37%) and liberal (27%), that of former members and non-members is more strongly liberal and cultural. The share of the Orthodox stream is greater among the members (15%) than among the other groups.

This information is complemented by the data gathered about respondents' self-image as a Jew: observant, traditional, spiritual, or secular. Asked about their personal assessment of their Jewish identification and practice, 11% responded they were observant, 34% traditional, 13% spiritual, and 42% secular. In all three groups, the share of those considering themselves observant was comparatively the greatest among adherents of the Orthodox stream. Among those who identify with the liberal stream or define themselves through Jewish culture, large segments consider themselves secular (see Figure 15).



Figure 15 Self-image as a Jew according to stream of Judaism



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49% of the members indicated that Judaism had become much more important in their lives. For 22%, it had become somewhat more important, and for 23%, this had not changed over the years. Judaism had lost importance for just 7% (not shown in a figure). Respondents could give multiple answers to the question about important factors in identity development. The Community children’s and youth centers, summer camps, students’ associations, and coming together to commemorate the Shoah were mentioned by roughly one-quarter of members each. The top factors mentioned were family (65%) and trips to Israel (64%). Trips to other countries, e.g. the US, were mentioned by just 14% (not shown in a figure).

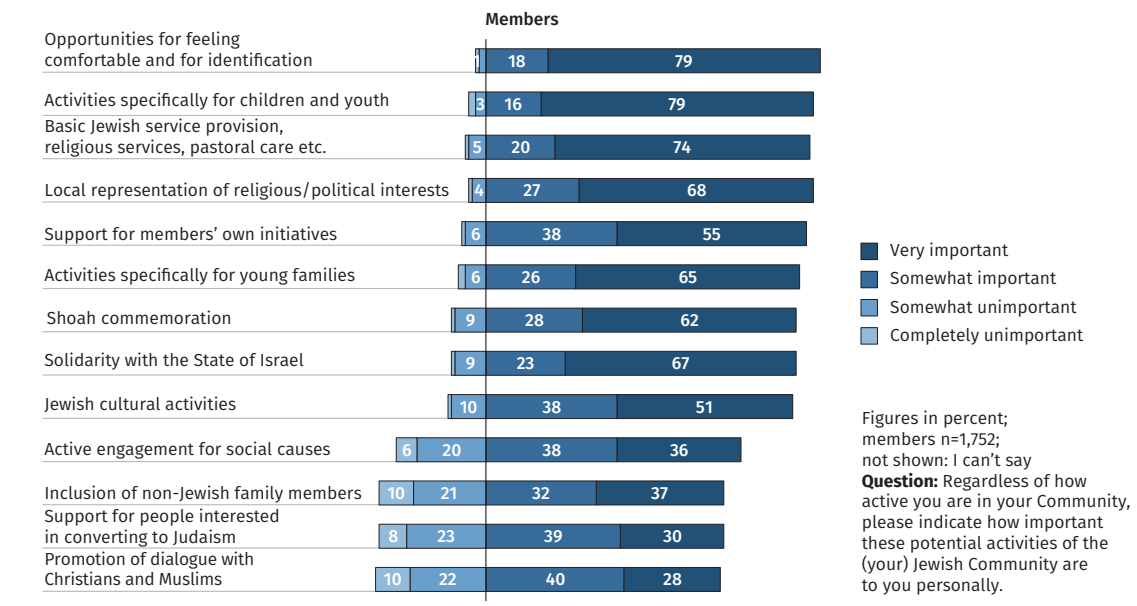
A separate analysis concerning the set of issues relating to Israel is planned, so we present only a brief sketch of the findings here. 10% of Community members have never visited the State of Israel. 83% consider the State of Israel to be a decisive factor for the continued existence of Jewish life in Europe. 73% agree, either somewhat or completely, with the statement that Jews must support Israel. 85% believe that the Communities should enable their members to exchange views about Israel and Israeli politics (not shown in a figure).

» Besides securing the Jewish infrastructure needed to practice the religion, Communities are also needed as potential spaces for discourses for Jews of different backgrounds.

## Tasks of a Jewish Community

Community members were asked what they believed were the main tasks of a Jewish Community. They were presented with a number of different aspects. A place for feeling comfortable and for identification were selected most often. Activities for children and youths were in second place; a place for basic Jewish service provision, i.e., religious services and pastoral care, ranked third (see Figure 16).

**Figure 16 Importance of Community activities from the members' perspectives**



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The totality of expectations of a Jewish Community is largely determined by the respondent's stream of Judaism. For example, basic Jewish service provision is very important to 91% of the Orthodox respondents, but only for 50% of the culturally oriented ones. The reverse is true of cultural activities (not shown in a figure).

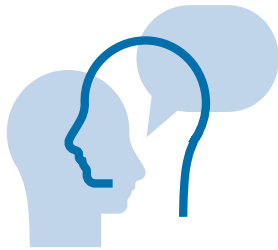
» Despite differences in degree, the groups do agree largely about what they desire and expect of the Jewish Community. They all agree that they would like to feel "at home" in the Community.

## Recommendations

There is consensus that the Community must ensure basic Jewish service provision. Whom the Community focuses on in addition to that is a strategic question; each Community needs to find its own individual position, depending on its environment and its internal circumstances.

This is the question about the apparent dilemma between “outreach” and “inreach”: outreach is the attempt to reach Jews not yet connected to the Community; inreach is about those who already fully identify with Judaism and participate in Jewish Community life. Both options have advantages and disadvantages. People can be drawn in, but also lost.

Roughly speaking, the people surveyed for the Community Barometer expressed a desire for a more highly developed welcoming culture. This serves as the basis for deriving seven recommendations:



### Listening

Taking note of the diversity and seeking more exchange. Many Communities currently orient their work toward those members who attend Community events and at best think about target groups in terms of age—they do not address the totality of the members.



### Belonging

Connection to a Community is important to Jews in Germany. That is a major plus. People want to feel at home in “their” Community. For this to be the case, they need the opportunity for active involvement and space for initiatives of their own.



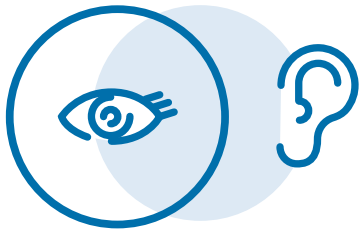
### Relationships

The Communities are “the” Jewish spaces. The overwhelming majority of Jews feel safe there. Activities and formats are needed where they can meet like-minded people or where individuals feel they belong and can establish meaningful connections.



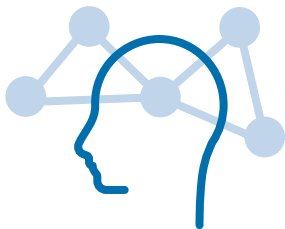
## Jewish education

The respondents want more Jewish educational activities—which meet the needs of different target groups. Jewish identity is not static; instead, it is often a process. Jews want to learn—they need to be met where they are on their Jewish journey, at their own pace and without predefined goals.



## Transparency

Members, former members, and non-members demand more transparency concerning the decision-making processes within the Communities. Members do not want their role to be limited to being the objects of bureaucratic administration.



## Network thinking

For small and medium-sized Communities, the question as to which target groups to focus on is particularly virulent. They cannot serve everyone. That is why it seems reasonable to seek solutions not only at the local level, but increasingly also at the regional and national level in order to connect Jews and get them excited about getting involved. It is also important to maintain local contacts with Jewish clubs, organizations, students' associations, and informal groups and to build bridges and form alliances.



## Visions for the future

Every Community should imagine how it wants to develop strategically and should ask itself what its future will look like in five, ten, twenty years. This is a question for all Communities of all sizes. That is why it is advisable to join forces and think strategically at the regional level and to set in motion potential processes of development. The Community Barometer can serve as a basis for discussion here.

The survey and evaluation were conducted by the Central Council of Jews in Germany in cooperation with JDC and infas.



The **Central Council of Jews in Germany** is the umbrella organization of the Jewish community, uniting 23 associations of the Länder and more than 100 Jewish Communities with approximately 100,000 members. It represents their political and societal interests. In addition, it offers a comprehensive range of services for the Communities and their members.

[www.zentralratderjuden.de](http://www.zentralratderjuden.de)



The **JDC-International Centre for Community Development (JDC-ICCD)** is the independent European research and evaluation unit of the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). The JDC is the leading Jewish humanitarian organization worldwide. In the one hundred years of its existence, the role of the JDC has been transformed numerous times, depending on the needs of the Jewish Communities.

[www.jdc-iccd.org](http://www.jdc-iccd.org)

## infas

The **infas Institute for Applied Social Sciences** in Bonn is a private and independent social research institute that researches and advises companies as well as the scientific and political communities. Its range of services includes customized national and international studies.

[www.infas.de](http://www.infas.de)



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