

# CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGES OF THE NATIONAL JEWISH POPULATION SURVEY

## The Role of Jewish Family Service Agencies

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*The findings of the NJPS highlight the need to address the special concerns of several population groups—the elderly, the intermarried, “nontraditional populations,” and children. Jewish family service agencies should use the NJPS findings as a knowledge base upon which to plan future services to these groups.*

**T**he 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) has alerted all of us in the Jewish community to a variety of issues, some of which Jewish family service (JFS) agencies have been aware of for a number of years. It has touched upon a number of questions and concerns that we in the professional community must address if we are to be helpful and responsive to the people we serve. In this article, I discuss services to several population groups and the NJPS findings that need to be considered as we plan for the future. These groups include the elderly, the intermarried, non-traditional populations, and children.

### SERVICES TO THE AGING POPULATION

The NJPS findings support earlier studies that indicated that the Jewish community is older than other ethnic groups in the United States because we have fewer children to lower the average age. Because we have fewer children, there will be fewer people to finance needed community services in the future. Therefore since the elderly will be called upon increasingly to pay for aging services themselves, those services should focus on what older adults tell us they want.

Older adults of the 1990s differ in many ways from the elderly of past generations. “New” older adults are predominantly American born and are better educated than their parents. They will live longer

than their parents and will be healthier. These older adults will be less likely to utilize institutional care than their parents and will be much more likely to want services in their own homes for as long as possible.

Today's older adults are knowledgeable and sophisticated consumers who are used to comparison shopping and to getting as much for the dollar as possible in both goods or services. They are not going to be satisfied with the notion of “Jewish services for the sake of Jewish services.” These people will expect Jewish services to be quality services, offered in a sensitive, caring, and nonbureaucratic atmosphere.

The Jewish community has a good deal to offer to these consumers. Historically, our services have been of the highest quality. JFS agencies have a long and distinguished history of offering quality office-based and in-home supportive services, including case management, friendly visiting, telephone reassurance, kosher Meals-on-Wheels, home-maker/health aide services, nursing services, quick response monitoring systems, and other devices and services designed to help people live in their own homes with care and dignity for as long as possible.

### SERVICES TO INTERMARRIED FAMILIES

The provision of services to intermarried families is probably the most controversial and widely debated service issue of today.

It is not the role of JFS agencies to enter into the debate over whether this population is deserving of service. Our agencies have traditionally been an entry point into the Jewish community for any number of people who otherwise feel alienated. Our agencies have been a place where people could receive help, regardless of their formal affiliation or lack of affiliation. As such, we have worked with intermarried families for many years. We have historically offered, and continue to offer, a neutral, nonideological approach to Judaism, based on caring, concern, and professional values and practices.

However, our agency professional staffs have skills in conflict resolution that can be very useful in the current debate over service to the intermarried. These skills can help individuals, families, groups, and communities deal with their ambivalences, questions, and doubts and resolve them in healthy and constructive ways. JFS staff can facilitate the formulation of plans and approaches to the intermarried population. It is our belief that the more open doors in the community, the better. JFS agencies offer a set of neutral, professional doors that are supportive and welcoming. We are conflict resolution specialists.

#### SERVICES TO NONTRADITIONAL POPULATIONS

The NJPS findings highlight the variety of groups within the Jewish community that have historically been served by the JFS agencies. These groups continue to exist and to be in need of our services; we must make sure that our services will continue to be available to them. According to the NJPS, 12.1% of the respondents do not identify with any of the four major branches of Judaism. These people will look for nontraditional means of entry into the Jewish community, since they do not see the more traditional entry points as being appropriate for them. Systems can be created to help them find a point of identification with the community, to introduce them to congregational life if they so

choose, and to help them participate fully in all aspects of Jewish life.

#### SERVICES TO THE ADOPTION COMMUNITY

The population of individuals who are touched by adoption is a large and growing one. As we become aware of the needs of these people, we need to create services where none currently exist and to expand upon existing services in other cases. It is one thing to adopt a child from another racial or from a mixed race background; ensuring that the child remains part of the Jewish community after Bar or Bat Mitzvah may be more difficult. The Jewish community can grow in size in a variety of ways, and adoption is certainly one of them, but only if the members of the community are prepared to accept these adoptees as they enter into adulthood.

The number of couples searching for children to adopt is growing. The marketplace is now filled with individuals and agencies offering to provide potential adoptive parents with assistance in locating their own adoptable children. A number of these individuals and agencies, however, are unconcerned with ethical practice and often offer services that, in reality, are little more than baby-selling. They are preying on vulnerable individuals.

In general, expectant mothers do not look to social service agencies when deciding to relinquish their children today. Instead, if they do choose to relinquish their infants, they seek out adoptive parents in the marketplace. Birth mothers read the personal ads in their local newspapers for parents interested in adopting children. In many instances, birth mothers want to be involved in selecting the new parents for their child. They are interested in open adoption and often expect to be a full partner in the adoption process.

Our agencies must be prepared to help potential adoptive parents by offering them assistance in connecting with the birth mother in an ethical, caring way. We can develop informational programs

that discuss the life-long issues in adoption, describe open adoption as it is practiced today, and help potential adoptive parents as they enter into the thicket that is adoptive practice today. We must educate parents about the Jewish issues in adoption and help them prepare for the adoption in the most Jewishly sensitive and appropriate way possible. We must also be prepared to assist by sponsoring chapters of "Stars of David," the excellent support and self-help group for Jewish adoptive parents. Our agencies must also provide back-up, consolation, and concern to adoptive parents as they confront the trauma of infertility, the complexities of adoption today, and potential difficulties in parenting an adoptive child.

#### **SERVICES TO STEPFAMILIES**

The NJPS points out that 350,000 children in the total population have stepparents, and 265,000 remarried parents have children under the age of 18. Clearly, stepfamilies are different from "traditional" families, and they are a key target population for the Jewish community.

The extra stresses and strains put on a family as it attempts to merge people with different family histories into a cohesive group make the already difficult job of parenting one of immense complexity. Families use their shared history as a buffer when difficult times arise. Their commitment to a family community and to shared family values helps them weather difficult times as they deal with adolescence and the separation and individuation of family members. Stepfamilies do not have this common history or these common values. Therefore, when difficult times arise, they have no common basis on which to fall back. As the number of stepfamilies grows larger, we will have to be prepared to deal with increasingly complex family systems.

#### **SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES**

Single-parent families face a variety of stresses. Even the "mere" logistical dilemma created by the need to transport children

from one family unit to another for holidays and custodial visitation puts extra stress on an already stressed situation. The increased financial burden of child support payments imposes added stress. Finally, in the most common custodial arrangement, the children reside with their mother while the father retains the bulk of the income. This arrangement creates difficulties in the mother's ability to participate in Jewish communal life. In addition to needing to work to support her family, she must arrange for day care, provide transportation to and from Hebrew School and JCC activities, and give all the familial services that it took two to provide in the past. She often has little time or energy left to participate in the life of the Jewish community. Traditional Judaism looks on a single-parent family as an incomplete one, adding discomfort to the already lengthy list of difficulties.

Our communal institutions must create ways to involve these parents in Jewish communal life and to assist them as they undertake an extremely complex and demanding set of tasks. Many single parents, when they were part of a couple, were committed to and involved in Jewish communal life. Because of a change in life circumstances, their lives have become much more complex. The community can assist them by providing financial help, by modifying institutional practices, and, in general, by reaching out to them.

#### **SERVICES TO PEOPLE WITH LOW INCOME**

The NJPS supports the popular view, that in general, Jews are relatively well off financially. Only 14% of multi-person, all-Jewish households have low incomes. We can be proud of our affluence. However, this circumstance also helps push those in financial need—often the elderly and the single parent—even further to the periphery of Jewish communal life. When the additional costs of living Jewishly are factored in, it becomes even more clear that those with low incomes are being pushed out of Jewish communal life.

Many in the Jewish community perceive the JFS agency as one that only serves the poor. In reality, the agency serves the social service needs of the entire Jewish community, which in some areas includes poor people. JFS agencies must educate the community to our role and to the importance of meeting social service needs in the broader Jewish community context.

Just as we are an affluent community, so are we a very well-educated group, with over half of our population having attended college, and over 35% possessing a college degree or higher. Yet, what of the 47% of our population with no college education in their background? Very often they do not feel part of a community that is so well educated. These two groups—the single parent and the less-educated, along with other marginal groups—often find their way to the door of the JFS agency. We are an access point into the Jewish community, and, for some, the first step in their re-entry to Jewish practice and participation. Our agencies need to sharpen their skills in recognizing such an approach and to be prepared to offer alternatives to counseling to those approaching us. If we are to keep these more marginal people committed to Judaism, we must meet them where they are—at the door of the JFS agency. If our goal is to increase the number of people participating in Jewish communal life, we need to invest time, energy, and financial resources in educating the caseworkers about the needs of these people, providing supports for them to participate in Jewish life, and offering a variety of steps aiming toward their full participation in communal life.

Clearly, the number of “traditional” Jewish families is diminishing. Only 14% of the Jewish population lives in a family composed of a mother and father who are both Jewish, living with a child or children. The most common type of family unit is the Jewish person living alone. Most of these single adults are either elderly women or single, never-married women. The elderly women are in need of our supportive services, as discussed above. Single women, a

growing group in the Jewish population, are in need of services from the Jewish community as well. They report tremendous difficulty meeting appropriate Jewish men. A number of agencies have begun to embark on programs designed to create Jewish couples. The organized Jewish community needs to value this process of enabling Jewish men to meet Jewish women and to fund it.

### SERVICES TO CHILDREN

The truly underserved, underacknowledged, and undersupported population in the Jewish community is that made up of Jewish children. Almost 18% of children live in a stepfamily arrangement, over 3% are adopted, and there is an undetermined number of Jewish children in the foster care system, residential treatment, and private psychiatric facilities. Yet, the communal resources devoted to services to children have been shrinking in recent years. The number of agencies devoted to the care of Jewish children has decreased. In many cases, those agencies that state they serve both children and families actually serve children only in the context of the family. They do not see children individually.

As Dr. Robert Bloom, executive of the Jewish Children's Bureau of Chicago put it so clearly, “By even the most conservative estimates, 20% of the families we serve are incompetent to care for their children and will remain so no matter what services are tendered to the family” (Bloom, 1991). Rather than looking at these children as part of our community and recognizing the need for Jewish communal agencies to intervene if they are to remain part of us, we opt to allow the public welfare system to deal with them. We, in effect, write them off the Jewish community population rolls.

### CONCLUSION

The NJPS has identified those groups in our community that need service and so has provided a solid base of knowledge upon which we can build in planning for

the future. It is vital that we heed its findings. JFS agencies are prepared to bear their share of the challenge and burden as we look toward the future.

#### REFERENCES

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