



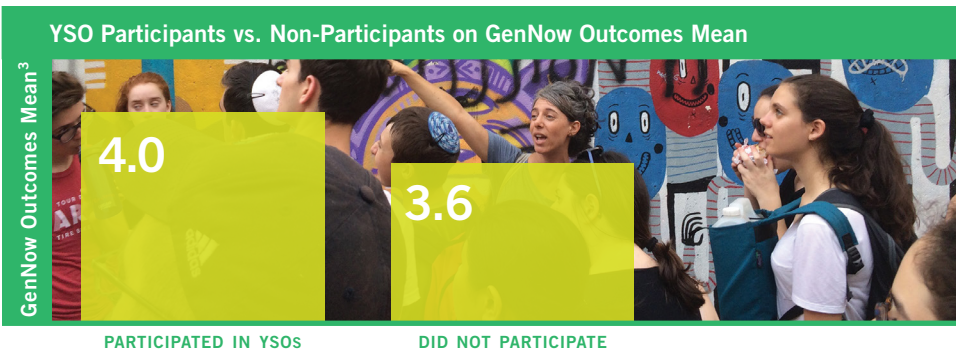
**Jewish Youth-Serving  
Organizations and Teens**



## Involvement in a Jewish Youth-Serving Organization Is Related to Positive Teen Outcomes

We found important differences between teens who reported having participated in a YSO and those who did not. After controlling for features of the teens’ backgrounds, we found that teens who had been involved with a YSO rated themselves higher on almost every outcome measured.

Regression analysis showed that participation in a Jewish YSO as a teen predicted higher scores on 11 of the 14 GenNow outcomes. We found that a teen’s engagement in a YSO predicted higher scores on attitudes related explicitly to Judaism, Jewish identity, and Jewish practice, as well as attitudes related to social-emotional development and attitudes toward volunteering and making change in the world.



Note: Difference depicted is statistically significant at  $p < .05$

### Descriptions of Family

In the survey we asked teens to describe their families. We found that almost 80% of the teens who had been engaged in a Jewish YSO selected “We are all Jewish” as the best label to describe their family. Among our survey respondents, teens who participate in a YSO are four times more likely to describe their family as all Jewish than other teens (80% versus 20%).

How Teens in YSOs Describe Their Families	
We are all Jewish	79%
Some of us are Jewish, some of us are not	20%
We are not Jewish/Not sure	1%

Note: All apparent differences are significant at  $p < .01$

Given trends in interfaith marriage among American Jewish adults over the past few decades, these numbers were surprising to us. While interfaith families may be less likely to raise their children Jewish, the 2013 Pew study of American Jews suggests that the majority of interfaith families are raising their children Jewish in some way. The reports that YSO-engaged teens gave of their own families do not reflect these expected numbers.

It is important to understand that we cannot make claims of causality. We cannot say that participation in a YSO causes teens to rate themselves higher on the survey items. We have to acknowledge that selection bias may be at work. Teens who elect to participate in Jewish YSOs may be those who already hold strongly positive attitudes about being Jewish and engaging in Jewish activities. Additionally, teens who are members of YSOs may be inclined to be more sociable or have more positive relationships in general.

<sup>3</sup> The outcomes mean is based on all scaled items on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is “Strongly Disagree” and 5 is “Strongly Agree.” While the chart shows the overall trend, the text gives a more nuanced description of the specific findings and the differences among the outcomes.

## Rich Histories of Jewish Educational Experiences

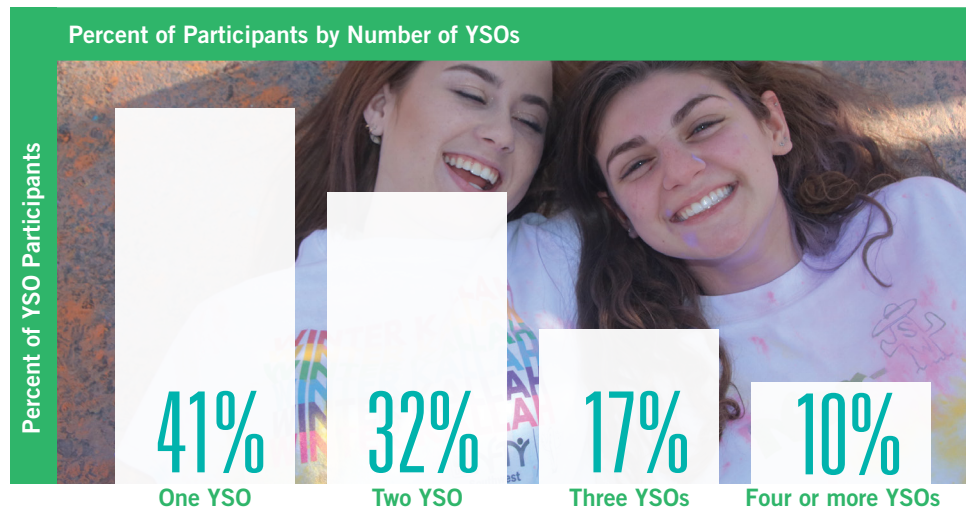
Teens who participate in Jewish youth-serving organizations often have a rich history of Jewish educational experiences. Almost all of the teens in YSOs reported having had some kind of exposure to an intentionally designed Jewish learning program, be it through day school, supplementary school, or camp. A minority of teens engaged in YSOs reported having had none of these experiences.

### Respondents by Jewish Educational Experiences as Children

	Did not Participate in YSO %	Participated in YSO(s) %	Total Respondents %
<b>Only Supplementary School</b>	17%	12%	12%
<b>Only Camp</b>	7%	3%	3%
<b>Only Day School</b>	4%	2%	3%
<b>Supplementary School + Camp</b>	21%	36%	35%
<b>Day School + Camp</b>	20%	20%	20%
<b>Day School + Supplementary School</b>	4%	3%	3%
<b>Day School + Supplementary School + Camp</b>	12%	21%	20%
<b>None</b>	16%	3%	4%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%

## Teens Get More From More Youth-Serving Organizations

Overall, we found that more than 50% of teens involved in a YSO are engaged with more than one.



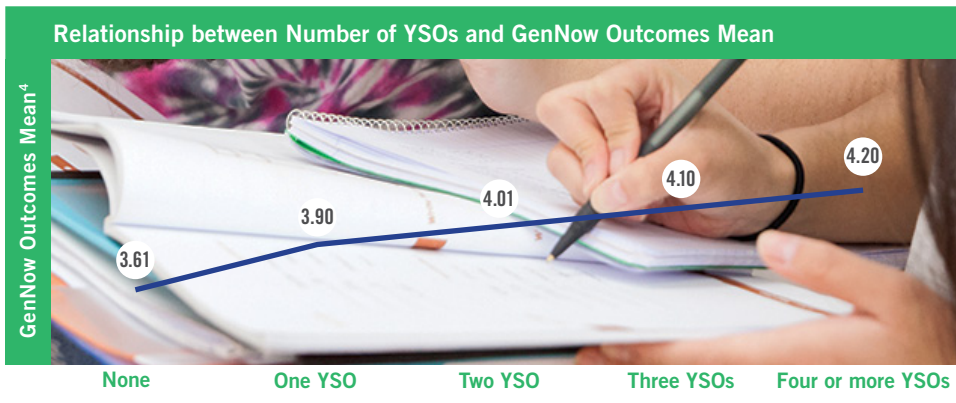
While some teens were “loyalists,” attending the programming of only one YSO, most teens in our survey demonstrated comfort moving from program to program, often participating in the offerings of organizations with different emphases and visions for contemporary Jewish life. Some teens were comfortable crossing denominational lines as well.

This more omnivorous approach to Jewish engagement has also been observed among Jewish college students who move among Hillel, Chabad, and other campus organizations (Rosen et al., 2016). Younger American Jews are comfortable seeking Jewish meanings and friendships from multiple sources and often do not carry the same sense of obligation to one group or brand that older generations may hold.

This trend is important to understand not only because it reflects preferences for how today’s teens want to participate in Jewish programs, but also because we saw a relationship between engagement in multiple YSOs and how teens rated themselves on the survey questions. One of

the strongest and most consistent predictors of higher scores was whether a teen reported that he or she was involved in more than one YSO. Participating in multiple YSOs predicted higher scores on 12 out of 14 of the GenNow outcomes.

This finding suggests that engaging with multiple organizations is not simply a preference teens have; it may be a positive development in their thriving as Jewish teens. Exposure to different perspectives and agendas seems to enhance teens' experiences of their Jewish activities.



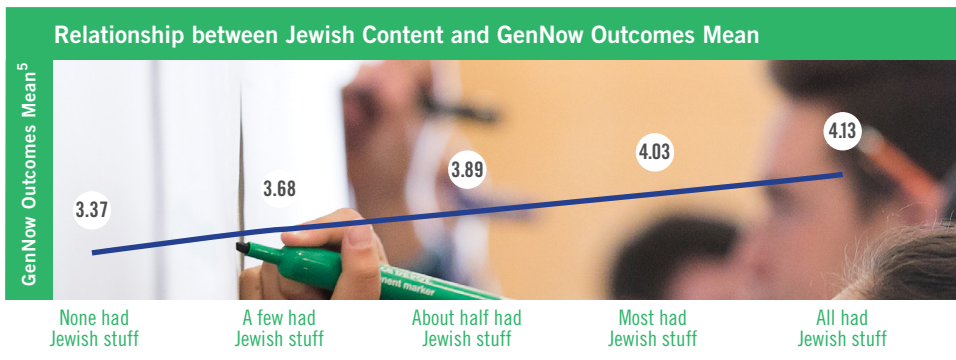
Note: The relationship between GenNow outcomes mean and the number of YSOs is significant at  $p < .05$



## Jewish Content Lifts All Boats

We asked teens engaged in YSOs whether the Jewish activities they participated in had any components they would call “Jewish stuff.” One of the most fascinating findings from our survey was the positive relationship between teens’ report of “Jewish stuff” in their activities and all of the 14 GenNow outcomes. This includes the more obvious outcomes we might expect to be related to Jewish content in activities, such as outcomes related to Jewish learning or to knowing about Israel. Intriguingly, Jewish content in activities predicted higher scores on even those less obviously related outcomes: those related to social-emotional development, such as establishing strong friendships; and those related to universal outcomes, such as being inspired and empowered to make a positive difference in the world.

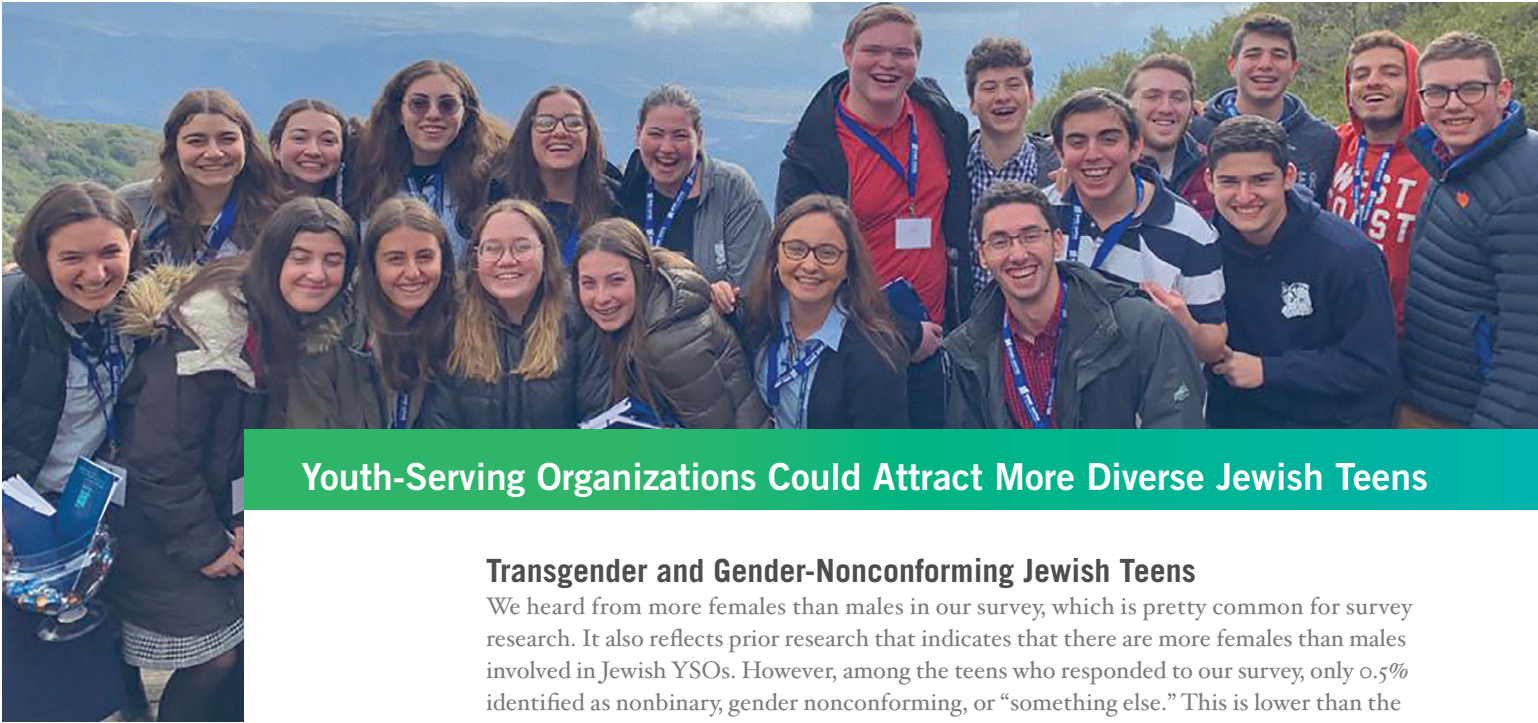
This finding can be seen as exciting news for Jewish educators. These data suggest that there is a positive relationship between Jewish content and many of the outcomes we want to help our teens develop. It means there is some positive relationship between Jewish content and making friends, between Jewish content and feeling good about yourself, between Jewish content and feeling equipped to make change in the world.



Note: The relationship between GenNow outcomes mean and the Jewish content in activities is significant at  $p < .05$

This association also raises a lot of questions for strategy and pedagogy. What exactly constitutes Jewish stuff for teens? Is it lighting a menorah at a Chanukah party, referring to a service project as “Tikkun Olam,” or studying classical Jewish text from a source sheet? Does the kind of stuff matter? Does the amount of stuff matter? Does the quality of the stuff matter? And is “Jewish stuff” a deterrent for teens who don’t attend YSO activities? We just don’t know.

<sup>4,5</sup> The outcomes mean is based on all scaled items on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is “Strongly Disagree” and 5 is “Strongly Agree.” While the chart shows the overall trend, the text gives a more nuanced description of the specific findings and the differences among the outcomes.



## Youth-Serving Organizations Could Attract More Diverse Jewish Teens

### Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Jewish Teens

We heard from more females than males in our survey, which is pretty common for survey research. It also reflects prior research that indicates that there are more females than males involved in Jewish YSOs. However, among the teens who responded to our survey, only 0.5% identified as nonbinary, gender nonconforming, or “something else.” This is lower than the close to 3% of the general teen population that research suggests identify as transgender or gender nonconforming. YSOs thus seemingly have an opportunity to more deeply engage transgender and gender-nonconforming Jewish teens (for chart showing gender breakdown of respondents, see Methodological Appendix).

### Teens From Interfaith Families

Teens who participate in Jewish programs as children and continue to participate in Jewish programming as teens overwhelmingly (81%) describe their families as “we are all Jewish.”

By way of contrast, teens who had never participated in the kinds of Jewish educational programs we asked about on the survey were much less likely to describe their families as “we are all Jewish” (28%). Among teens who reported that they had participated in Jewish education as children and stopped doing so as teens, 57% described their families as “we are all Jewish.”

The reports of family makeup from respondents *not engaged as teens* (no matter their history of participation as children) would seem to be a much closer match to what Pew suggests we might find in the overall American Jewish population.

Why is there such a discrepancy between the families of teens who participate in high school and the families of teens who do not participate in high school?

Why do proportionally fewer teens from interfaith families seem to elect to participate as teens? Possible answers include: they are not welcome, they are not interested, or they had negative experiences in Jewish programs as a child.



How Teens Describe Their Families by Patterns of Involvement			
Always Involved	Involved only as teens	Involved only prior to high school	Never involved
81%	43%	57%	28%
say that all family members are Jewish	say that all family members are Jewish	say that all family members are Jewish	say that all family members are Jewish



Different YSOs were founded to meet the needs of different communities and have their own criteria for membership. They also have different attitudes toward and beliefs about including teens from interfaith families into their programs. We heard from teens in both the survey and the interviews that many from interfaith backgrounds are sensitive to the fact that they don't always meet others' criteria for Jewishness.

**Survey Respondent:** *I think I'm Jewish. I've had my Bat Mitzvah and I go to synagogue. And it hurts when other people say I'm not [Jewish]. But my mother isn't and never converted so [some people] wouldn't see me as Jewish.*

Do Jewish teens from interfaith families seek different points of entry to the Jewish community than other Jewish teens? Are the optimal pipelines for interfaith teens not in place?

Some teens raised in interfaith families simply consider themselves Jewish, without any equivocation. Many in our survey described themselves as Jewish-and-something-else. In our interviews, Jewish-and-something-else teens shared that they don't want to be asked to choose one part of themselves over another. Some spoke about how they believed their lives were enriched by having a diverse background and insight into other religious and cultural traditions and perspectives.

**Elizabeth was raised Jewish and Christian:** *When I was younger, I don't know how I got this idea in my head, but it's almost funny to me but I had this idea that I was like, "Okay, I have to pick [one religion or the other] on my wedding day". . . then I found out that wasn't true and that you can just, I guess, pick when you want to. . . I can honestly see myself just being both and practicing both and doing both traditions, not stopping that.*

**Elizabeth would be interested in going to Jewish YSO activities, but it seems to her that it's hard to begin in high school:** *[Teens in Jewish youth groups are] super tight-knit and it's not really something that you can just walk into. I have some friends who are part of Jewish youth groups and things like that and it looks really fun. I've just kind of never considered doing it. I guess subconsciously I'm just like, "That's their thing and they all know each other and love each other."*

