

# Screenener

Jewish identity is complicated and can be defined in different ways. The Screenener question, which filtered students into or out of the Jewish survey, is one way to define identity. The Screenener asked respondents: **Do you identify as Jewish in any of the following ways?** Respondents could answer:

- No, I don't identify as Jewish
- Jewish from a cultural perspective
- Jewish from a spiritual perspective
- Jewish from an ethnic or family heritage perspective
- Jewish from a religious perspective
- Jewish in another way [textbox]

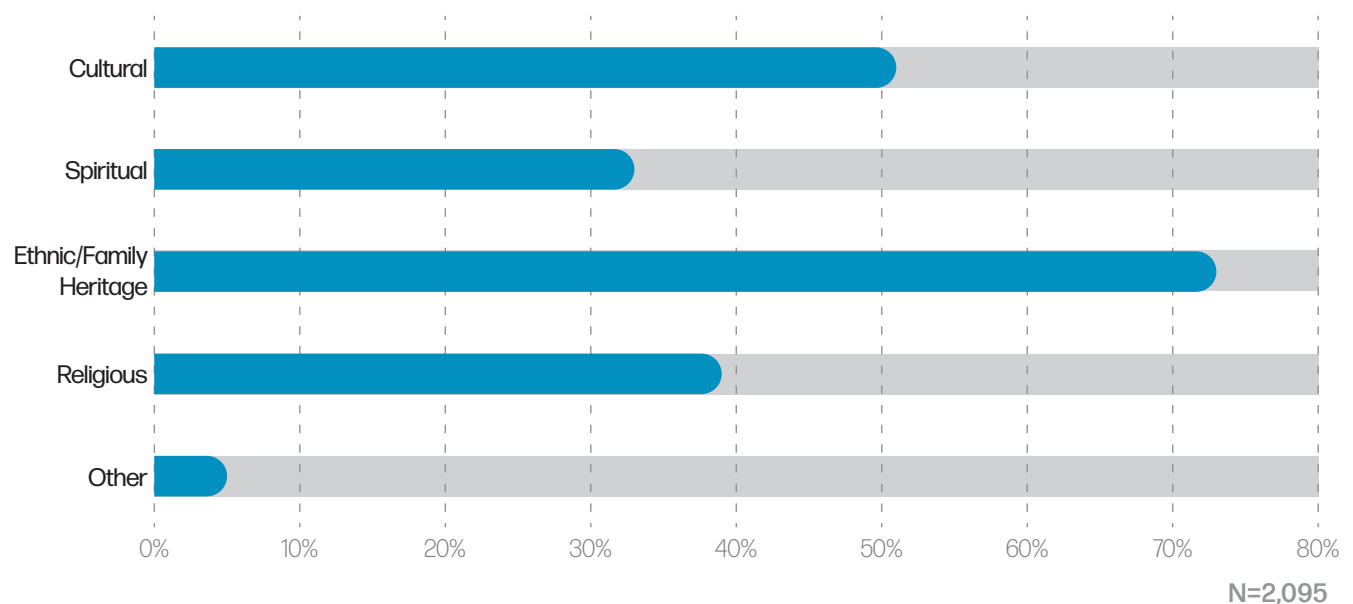
Of those who identified as Jewish at all (N=2,095), the most common form of identity is ethnic/family heritage (73%), followed by cultural (51%), religious (39%), and spiritual (33%). Respondents could select more than one category. Only a small number of respondents (N=66) chose the "other" category while not selecting

any other choice. These individuals offered a range of Jewish connections, such as that they have solidarity with Jewish people, are in the process of conversion, or have a romantic partner who is Jewish. I exclude these respondents from the Jewish sample.

Of all 2,095 Jewish-identifying respondents, about half (53%) checked only one identity, which was typically ethnic/family heritage. Just 381 (18%) selected that they are culturally AND spiritually AND ethnically AND religiously Jewish. As the table (next page) shows, most of those who identify as religiously Jewish also identify as ethnically, culturally, and spiritually Jewish. Similarly, of respondents who identify as spiritually Jewish, most also select the other categories. However, of those who report being ethnically Jewish, only a third identify as spiritually or religiously Jewish.

As part of its demographic battery of questions (asked separately from the present study), College Pulse asks respondents, "What is your present religion, if any?" Of those who identified as one or more of ethnically, culturally, spiritually, or religiously Jewish in the Screenener, about half, 53%, identify their *religion* as Jewish in this separate religion question.<sup>12</sup> About 13% percent identify as agnostic or atheist, 11% identify as nothing, 6% as other, and the remaining 17% identify as

## Do you identify as Jewish in any of the following ways?



Then Percent ID as...

If ID as...	ETHNIC	CULTURAL	SPIRITUAL	RELIGIOUS	COUNT
...Ethnic	X	54	32	38	1,521
...Cultural	77	X	47	53	1,061
...Spiritual	70	72	X	62	697
...Religious	72	70	54	X	807

another religion altogether, such as Catholic, Christian, Protestant, or Mormon. In addition, when asked about their Jewish denomination, 3% of the sample (55/2,095) identify as Messianic, which is not typically viewed as a Jewish denomination.

There are several reasons why the students who identify that their present religion is Christian or another non-Jewish religion would also identify as spiritually, ethnically, culturally, or religiously Jewish. Some of these students have Jewish cultural or ethnic backgrounds. For instance, they have a Jewish grandparent with whom they share Jewish holidays but were themselves raised as Christians. Other students may have no family connection to Judaism; however, as part of their own religion, they identify, in part, as religiously or spiritually Jewish. Still others may have no family or religious connection to Judaism but grew up in a neighborhood with Jews or belong to a Jewish fraternity or otherwise feel a sense of cultural affinity.

Some of these atypical identities are described explicitly in open-ended responses (e.g., “Have a mixture of Jewish heritage and religious views, although I am Pentecostal,” “Father is Jewish so I am ethnically, but I am spiritually Christian”). In most cases, it is difficult to discern the circumstances in which a respondent would identify as, say, Christian, but also Jewish. For instance, most of the respondents who identify as Messianic Jews consider themselves ethnically Jewish. It is not clear whether their parents or grandparents were Jews who converted out of Judaism into Messianic identity or whether they consider their Messianic tradition to be part of Jewish ethnicity.

In the analysis below, I restrict the Jewish sample to the 1,721 students who do not primarily identify with another religion and do not identify with Messianic Judaism. The restriction effectively removes 374 students who identify on the Screener question as having some kind of Jewish identity. The Jewish sample I analyze *does* include respondents whose religious identity falls into categories such as “none”, “atheist”, or “agnostic”. It only excludes those who affirmatively identify with a non-Jewish religion.

There are two main justifications for excluding students who identify affirmatively with a non-Jewish religion. First, this criterion is consistent with Pew’s methodology in its 2020 survey of U.S. Jews. Second, campus Jewish organizations are not mainly serving students who, though they may have Jewish heritage, are practicing Pentecostals, spiritually Christian, Jews for Jesus, and so forth.

**“For me, being Jewish is just that ancestral sort of history more than anything else.”**

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
FEMALE

**“A lot of times, I’m not certain if I should even be calling myself Jewish, because I don’t really feel Jewish enough. I’m very ethnically Jewish, but my family is so far removed from the traditions.”**

UC SANTA CRUZ  
MALE

**“Being Jewish means being part of a community and being able to make those connections with other people. I feel like my Jewish identity is less spiritual, but more just like having that community and being surrounded by individuals who share similar values as me.”**

TULANE UNIVERSITY  
FEMALE

# Demographics

The true population characteristics of Jewish-identifying college students are unknown. Since there is no central database or census of Jewish students, and a variety of definitions of Jewish identity, there is no single best way to gauge the representativeness of the Jewish sample. However, I can compare the Jewish students in the sample to the approximately 1,000 non-Jewish comparison sample, as well as to other available benchmarks.

**Gender.** Consistent with well-documented gender gap in higher education, the College Pulse sample skews female.<sup>13</sup> The Jewish sample is 49% female and 39% male. The remaining 12% identify with categories such as nonbinary (4%), genderqueer/gender fluid (2%), agender (2%), prefer not to say (4%), and unsure (1%). The non-Jewish sample is 56% female and 42% male. The remaining 2.5% identify with nonbinary categories. That is, the Jewish students are almost five times more likely to identify as not male or female.

**Race.** College Pulse collects race data through a single-choice survey question, where “two or more races” is a category but a respondent may not click multiple response options, such as White and also Black. The Jewish sample is 73% White, 8% two or more races, 5% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 4% Middle Eastern, and 2% Black. (Although the question-wording is slightly different, in Pew’s 2020 study of U.S. Jews, 28% of 18-29 year olds are Jews of Color, the same as in this study.<sup>14</sup>) The non-Jewish sample has a lower percentage of students who are White, Middle Eastern, and multiracial, and a higher percentage of students who are Asian, Black, and Hispanic.

**Sexual Orientation.** On sexual orientation, the Jewish sample is 64% heterosexual/straight, 14% bisexual, and 7% gay/lesbian. The remaining 15% identify in categories such as queer (3%), pansexual (3%), other (2%), unsure (2%), questioning (2%), asexual/aromantic (1%), and fluid (1%). The non-Jewish sample

is more likely to identify as heterosexual (73%). By comparison, in Pew’s 2020 study, 75% of 18-29 year old Jews identified as heterosexual. The difference between the percent heterosexual in Pew versus the percent heterosexual in this study may be a function of the sampling or may reflect true differences between the subset of young adults who are currently in college versus the broader set of 18-29 year olds.

**Political Identity.** The Jewish sample leans heavily Democratic. Almost three quarters (73%) are Democrats, and the remainder are split evenly between independents and Republicans. This pattern matches what Pew found among 18-29 year olds. The non-Jewish sample also leans heavily Democratic, but less so (62%) than the Jewish sample.

**Socio-Economic Background.** Just over half of the Jewish sample identifies as upper class or upper-middle class, a third as middle class, and about 15% as working class or lower class. Again, this tracks with Pew’s finding that just over half of U.S. Jewish households have annual income over \$100,000. The non-Jewish sample is considerably lower in socio-economic status, with only 27% identifying as upper or upper-middle class. Half of the Jewish sample reports they are on financial aid, compared to 63% of the non-Jewish sample. A quarter of the Jewish sample attended private or parochial high schools, compared to 16% of the non-Jewish sample.

**Geography.** The Jewish and non-Jewish samples in College Pulse differ, in expected ways, in the regions where they grew up.<sup>15</sup> The Jewish students are about twice as likely as the non-Jewish students to originate from the mid-Atlantic and from New England, and they are about half as likely to come from the American South.

While the College Pulse sample of Jewish students shows demographic traits that are in tune with what one might expect from analysis of the Pew data on a somewhat similar population (18-29 year olds), it is worth reiterating that the sample here cannot be taken as representative since the true population

characteristics are unknown. As such, how can the data be interpreted? To use party identity as an example, just because 73% of the Jewish sample identifies as Democrats, we cannot confidently assume that 73% of the true population of Jewish identifying college students identifies as Democrats. Maybe the true rate is 65% or maybe it's 80%. However, even if the true rate is unknown, if the Democratic and Republican students in the sample are representative of the Democratic and Republican students in the population, then we can make reasonable inferences about how the two kinds of students differ from one another on measures in the survey, such as their attitudes toward Jewish identity.

# Jewish Background and Affect

While the Screener question defines the Jewish sample for the purposes of this study, I endeavored to capture a range of attitudes and background traits that further characterize Jewish identity. I use a battery of five survey questions that capture a student's family background and four questions that capture a student's feelings toward their Jewish identity. From these variables, I create two scales – *Background* and *Affect* – that I use throughout the report.

Conceptually, the difference between the *Background* scale and the *Affect* scale is that the former focuses on traits that parents/guardians chose for the students as children. It captures how students were raised. The *Affect* scale measures feelings and identities that the students have chosen for themselves.

Of course, the varieties of Jewish experience and the nuances of Jewish identity are much more complex

than I can hope to summarize through nine survey questions or a set of scales. Scales like these are imperfect and incomplete. They do not encapsulate all that it means to be Jewish. At the same time, in quantitative analyses like this one, scales are helpful in summarizing relationships between variables. My goal here is not to provide a definitive accounting of Jewish identity among college students, but to transparently show the building-blocks of two useful, but imperfect, scales that help us to analyze survey data.

## A. FAMILY BACKGROUND AND JEWISH IDENTITY

### BACKGROUND 1

**How often would you say you did Jewish things growing up?**

