

PRIORITIZING JEWISH TEEN WELL-BEING

2

Dear colleagues and community,

When BeWell embarked on this groundbreaking project more than a year ago—alarmed by skyrocketing rates of teenage anxiety and historic levels of sadness and hopelessness, yet believing deeply that Jewish tradition is a powerful tool for well-being—our aim was to understand how American Jewish teens navigate the complexities of adolescence. Our inquiry was guided by the belief that understanding stressors and sources of support that are unique to Jewish teens would better position all of our efforts to create a *kehillah kedosha*, a “holy community.”

We are grateful that our research team was able to deftly shape this pioneering research, with valuable insights from our advisory group, which helps us both articulate and measure the many dimensions of Jewish teen well-being.

Today’s teens face numerous pressures: academics, social dynamics, identity formation, and the complex act of becoming. For Jewish teens, typical adolescent struggles are compounded by rising antisemitism and the aftermath of October 7—they are moving through a world where they can feel isolated, misunderstood, or under attack. These can be life-shaping challenges.

The following pages illuminate the experiences of thousands of Jewish middle and high schoolers. We are grateful that our organizational partners helped us reach so many. By offering us a glimpse into their world, these teens shared insights that can guide, challenge, and inspire us.

At the heart of the research findings lies a powerful insight: Jewish teens’ overall well-being is intimately linked to the importance they place on being Jewish. They benefit from a tradition that offers incredible courage, support, and strength. And yet their Jewish identity also heightens their awareness of—and stress about—the tensions of our times.

Jewish teens need us now. This research reveals a plea for wisdom, understanding, care, and investment. Working together, as Jewish professionals, educators, community leaders, caregivers, and parents, we have the sacred responsibility of helping teens not just cope with the world, but also feel empowered and equipped to shape it. Together we can increase hope and optimism—and build resilience.

Thank you for being a part of this vital conversation and contributing to this *kehillah kedosha*.

SARA ALLEN

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INTRODUCTION

American teens are facing a mental health crisis.⁴ This issue has garnered widespread attention, dominating headlines in the popular press⁵ and prompting a wave of research focusing on a number of suspected causes.⁶

Studies from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institute of Mental Health, Pew Research Center, and the American Psychological Association have consistently found high rates of depression and anxiety among teens, as well as rising rates of suicide. The Surgeon General of the United States has called this situation an “urgent public health issue” and released an advisory calling for additional resources to support American teens.¹

However, American teens are experiencing this crisis in different ways. Studies of LGBTQ+, racial and ethnic minority, and immigrant and refugee teens, as well as teens from lower-income families and those with disabilities have identified additional factors that undermine wellbeing for teens with marginalized identities.² These include increased exposure to discrimination and stigma, higher levels of chronic stress, limited access to culturally competent mental health care, and socioeconomic challenges.³

In 2022, BeWell, a national campaign founded to respond to the growing mental health crisis among Jewish youth, initiated the development of a shared conceptual framework to bring coherence to the language and concepts Jewish teen service providers use to discuss well-being and ensure that new and evolving initiatives are aligned in purpose, approach, and goals (See Appendix A: BeWell Shared Framework). The shared framework underscored the need for a deeper understanding of American Jewish teenagers. In 2023, BeWell commissioned the first national study of American Jewish teenagers to focus on well-being. The study results are summarized in this report as part of an effort to equip organizations to better understand and serve their teens.*

BEWELL BACKGROUND

BeWell builds the capacity of Jewish organizations to understand and respond to a growing mental health crisis, drawing on Jewish tradition, culture, and community to promote well-being. A national initiative of Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA), in partnership with the Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies, BeWell is the only forum that unites the education and engagement and clinical worlds. BeWell sits at the intersection of prevention, preparedness, and education, building the field by increasing knowledge and resources, networking practitioners, scaling proven models and interventions, and increasing access to developmentally and culturally appropriate care and support. This effort is grounded in the belief that Jewish heritage has the power to enrich our lives and deepen our connections.

* This research was designed to explore the interplay between Jewish teens' experiences and perspectives and their overall sense of well-being, rather than diagnose mental health conditions or evaluate acute psychological distress.

Strength, Stress, and Support: A National Study of American Jewish Teen Well-Being was designed to explore how Jewish teens' communal involvement, interpersonal connections, and perceptions of themselves as Jews relate to their overall well-being.** Teens reported on their sense of well-being using the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being, a validated scale that assesses five aspects of well-being derived from the field of positive psychology: engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness, and happiness.*** The survey also asked teens to pinpoint sources of stress in their lives and highlight where and with whom they find support. The findings reflect the responses of 2,489 Jewish teens who live in 49 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

Beginning with an explanation of research methods, this report provides descriptive details about the teens who responded, including demographic characteristics and information about their Jewish involvement. Next, the report presents an overview of Jewish teens' well-being, including key predictors of well-being. The following sections detail sources of stress for Jewish teens and where they are finding support.

** Without comprehensive demographic data on American Jewish teens, it is impossible to know what constitutes a truly representative sample. In seeking a reasonable substitute, the research team first explored the possibility of working with a polling or marketing firm, but none had access to a large enough sample of American Jewish teens to fulfill the study objectives. Through discussions with BeWell, the research team determined that we could recruit a larger and likely more diverse sample of teens by working with BeWell's network of partner organizations. Preliminary interviews with teens affirmed the decision to work with partner organizations for recruitment, as teens indicated that they would be more likely to complete a survey if they received it from a trusted source. To recruit teens, the research team distributed information about the survey through listservs maintained by BeWell's partners, social media advertising, and respondent and parent networks. These findings therefore represent Jewish teens reached through Jewish organizational networks, including those with varying levels of Jewish organizational involvement.

*** In survey design, a validated measure refers to a question or set of questions that has been rigorously tested and shown to accurately and consistently measure the concept it is intended to measure.