

How This Study Was Conducted and Why It is Reliable

223,000 HOUSEHOLDS INVITED	1,328 JEWISH HOUSEHOLDS SURVEYED	30+ COMMUNITIES FOR COMPARISON
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How the study was done

The Samueli Foundation commissioned a countywide study to learn more about Orange County's Jewish community. The Foundation engaged the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University to conduct the research in partnership with NORC at the University of Chicago. Responses were collected between November 2024 and March 2025.

Finding Jewish Households: Studying a Jewish community is challenging because government agencies do not track residents' religion, and there is no comprehensive list of Jewish residents in Orange County or elsewhere. The researchers therefore used three ways to reach Jewish households. They began with a large random sample of Orange County addresses, including households with no known connection to Jewish organizations. They also sent invitations through the mailing lists of Jewish organizations and made an open survey link available to anyone. In all, more than 223,000 households received an invitation by mail, email, or telephone, and 1,328 Jewish households completed the survey online or by phone.

Weighting For Who Answered: Using organizational lists makes it easier to find Jewish households, but it also makes people who are already connected to Jewish institutions more likely to be included. Those respondents were overrepresented in the raw results. The researchers addressed that problem through weighting, a standard survey method that adjusts how much each response counts so the final results better reflect the community as a whole. The benchmarks for those adjustments came from sources outside the survey and were set before the findings were analyzed. They included the American Community Survey, the American Jewish Population Project, and enrollment and membership records from local Jewish organizations.

How Orange County Compares: Many of the questions come from a survey instrument the Cohen Center has used in other Jewish communities. That allows us to compare Orange County's results with those from elsewhere and gives the study the benefit of questions that have been tested and refined over time.

Strengths of the study

LARGE SAMPLE SIZE

National polls routinely interview about 1,000 people to estimate the views of a country of nearly 270 million adults. This study included 1,328 Jewish households in a single county.

RANDOM SELECTION

Invitations went to a large random sample of Orange County addresses, including households with no known connection to a Jewish organization. Those households would be easy to miss if the study relied only on organizational lists.

INDEPENDENT RESEARCH

After commissioning the study, the Samueli Foundation engaged the Cohen Center and NORC to conduct the research. The Cohen Center has conducted community studies in many Jewish communities over the past decade. NORC at the University of Chicago is one of the country's oldest and largest independent social research organizations; it conducts the biennial General Social Survey across the U.S.

PUBLICLY AVAILABLE DATA

The dataset and technical appendices have been published, so other researchers can review the methods and check the findings themselves.

Questions people may ask

“How can 1,328 households speak for a whole community?”

Rather than asking everyone, a well-designed survey relies on a sample that reflects the larger population, much as a blood draw uses a small sample to estimate one's overall health. The size of the sample is only part of the equation. How people were selected and how well they represent the larger population are equally important. Here, 1,328 Jewish households completed the survey, a larger sample than those used in many national surveys that are routinely reported and relied upon.

“Wasn't this partly a convenience sample?”

In part, yes, and by design. Relying only on a random sample of addresses would have required contacting an extraordinary number of households to identify enough Jewish respondents and could still have underrepresented some parts of the community. Invitations through Jewish organizations helped reach groups, including more traditional and Orthodox households, that address sampling can underrepresent. The tradeoff is that people connected to Jewish organizations become overrepresented, which the researchers were able to measure and correct through weighting.

“I was never contacted. Neither was anyone I know.”

Most people are not selected for any particular survey. In this case, roughly 223,000 Orange County households received an invitation out of a county of more than one million households. The important question is not whether any particular person was contacted, but whether the researchers used methods capable of reaching different parts of the community. If a survey had reached you and everyone you know, there might be reason to doubt the results, since it would mean the sample was concentrated in one social circle rather than spread across the community.

“So some people’s answers count more than others?”

Yes. If young adults make up 12 percent of the community but only 6 percent of respondents, counting every response equally would understate young adults by half. Weighting gives those respondents greater influence so that the final sample better reflects the actual age distribution of the community.

“These numbers don’t match what I see at my synagogue.”

They may not, and that is one reason to conduct the study. What any of us sees at a synagogue or other Jewish organization reflects the people connected to that institution. The study was also designed to reach households with little or no connection to organized Jewish life.

“How much should I trust a specific number, like 42 percent?”

Every number in the report is an estimate, typically with a margin of error of about five percentage points. Small gaps between two numbers, therefore, may not be statistically meaningful. Patterns that appear across several questions are more reliable than any single percentage.

“Why believe this when polls get elections wrong?”

Election polling faces challenges this study does not. A pollster must reach a representative group of registered voters and then predict which of those people will actually turn out to vote. Political surveys face another problem when someone’s willingness to participate is itself related to their politics. In that case, the people who decline to answer can differ systematically from those who participate.

Those problems do not operate in the same way here. This study was not trying to predict future behavior or determine who would turn out for an election, nor were respondents asked to participate in a poll conducted by a political campaign or partisan organization. NORC surveyed people about their experiences and views as part of a study of Orange County’s Jewish community. Differences in who chose to respond still matter, which is one reason the researchers weighted the data. But the particular challenges that caused some election polls to miss the mark do not apply here.

