



The Reach and Impact of Birthright Israel: What We Can Learn from Pew’s “Jewish Americans in 2020”

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Abstract

The Pew Research Center’s 2020 survey of American Jews is a valuable resource to scholars of American Jewry, enabling interrogation of questions using data that no other source can reliably provide. One set of questions pertains to the reach and impact of Birthright Israel, the largest extant Jewish educational program targeted at Jewish young adults, on American Jews. Pew’s nationally representative sample provides important validation of previous findings regarding Birthright’s impact on participants and extends the generalizability of what has been learned. In this paper we use data from the 2020 Pew survey to assess the program’s “reach” into different segments of the American Jewish population and to extend the validity of existing findings regarding the program’s impact on participants’ attitudes and behaviors related to Israel and Jewish life. Pew’s data estimate that around 20% of American Jews ages 18–46 have participated in Birthright, and that among Jewish parents with a grown child, nearly 30% have an adult child who participated in the program. After controlling for preexisting differences between participants and those who have never been to Israel, Pew’s data also confirm that Birthright has a significant impact on a broad set of Jewish outcomes. These results support a more optimistic view of the future for US Jewry and suggest that the investment in large-scale educational interventions can substantially alter the trajectory of the American Jewish community writ large.

Keywords Pew Jewish Americans in 2020 · Birthright Israel · Impact of Jewish education · Jewish young adults · Evaluation of Israel experience · Jewish identity · Informal and experiential education · Jewish population studies

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Introduction

The Pew Research Center's 2020 survey of American Jews (Pew Research Center 2021) is a unique resource for understanding contemporary American Jewry. Pew's 2021 report summarizing the results of the study provided important insights about the size of the American Jewish community, its increasing diversity, and its growing political polarization and concern regarding antisemitism (Pew Research Center 2021). Like Pew's earlier 2013 survey (Pew Research Center 2013), the 2020 study sampled adult Jews of all ages, and the survey instrument included a broad range of questions about Jewish life, including religious and cultural practices, attitudes toward Israel, experiences of antisemitism, and racial/ethnic identity. This breadth of topics, combined with the study's high-quality sampling methodology, makes Pew 2020 a valuable resource to scholars of American Jewry, enabling interrogation of questions using data that no other source can reliably provide. One such topic of investigation is the impact of Birthright Israel, the largest extant Jewish educational program targeted at Jewish young adults, on the Jewish community in the United States. This paper uses data from the 2020 Pew survey to assess the program's "reach" into different segments of the American Jewish population. The Pew data are also used to extend the validity of existing findings regarding the program's impact on participants' attitudes and behaviors related to Israel and Jewish life.

On the basis of Pew's data, it is estimated that nearly 20% of American Jews ages 18–46 (the age group that was eligible to participate in the program at some point) have participated in Birthright Israel. It is also estimated that, among Jewish parents with a grown child, nearly 30% have an adult child who participated in the program. The effect of participating in Birthright Israel was estimated for 19 outcome measures related to Jewish life using statistical models to control for preexisting differences between Birthright participants and those who have never been to Israel. These models confirm the results of earlier, quasi-experimental findings conducted on samples of Birthright applicants, finding that Birthright has a significant impact on a broad set of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes related to Jewish identity, attachment to Israel, and Jewish communal life. These findings support a more optimistic view of the future for US Jewry than the common narrative suggests and highlight the potential of intensive short-term educational interventions to engage young adult Jews with their Jewish identities and with Israel.

Birthright Israel

Experiential peer travel to Israel has been a cornerstone of Jewish educational programs for diaspora Jews since the establishment of the State of Israel. Up until the turn of the twenty-first century, youth-focused Israel trips were extensions of diaspora Jewish education programs, including schools, summer camps, youth groups, and religious movements (Ezrachi 2015). As such, and because of their duration and expense, Israel travel programs were most likely to attract young Jews who were

already deeply immersed in Jewish life (Cohen 2008; Mittelberg 1999). Established in 1999, Birthright Israel built on the intensive, peer-experiential model of earlier Israel trips (Chazan 2022) and informal Jewish educational settings like summer camps (Sales and Saxe 2004). The Birthright initiative, however, shifted the target audience to young adult Jews with little or no prior connection to Jewish life. The program's goals are "to create opportunities for participants to explore their Jewish identities, strengthen their connection to Israel and its diverse society, and ensure the vibrancy of the Jewish people worldwide" (Birthright Israel Blog 2018). Since trips are both relatively short (10 days) and free to participants, Birthright Israel has been able to attract a large number of young Jews, including those with only peripheral connections to Jewish life, many of whom would not otherwise have considered traveling to Israel. Of those American Jews who applied to Birthright in 2018, nearly 37% had no prior exposure to formal Jewish education at any time (Wright et al. 2019, 40).

Since the program's inception, over 750,000 young adult Jews from around the world, nearly two-thirds of them from the United States, have participated in Birthright Israel educational trips (Mark 2020). Given the program's scope and increasing concerns that young Jews' relationships with Israel and the Jewish community are weakening (Bard 2019; Barnett 2018, 2016; Gordis 2019), understanding the extent to which Birthright has achieved its goals, and assessing its broader role in the US Jewish community, is especially important. To this end, Birthright has been the most intensively studied educational program in the Jewish world, including ethnographic studies and a broad range of surveys of applicants, participants, and even parents (e.g., Aronson 2017; Hagai et al. 2018; Kelner 2010; Sasson et al. 2014; Saxe and Chazan 2008; Wright et al. 2022).

The largest body of research, carried out by the present authors along with our colleagues at Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), has assessed the impact of participation in Birthright on the lives of Jewish young adults.¹ The CMJS research program has been conducted for more than 20 years and has assessed the short-, medium-, and long-term effects of participation in Birthright Israel (Saxe et al. 2008; Shain et al. 2015; Wright et al., 2020, 2022), primarily among North American participants.²

As with all attempts to evaluate the impact of an educational intervention, the most serious threat to the validity of inferences about Birthright's effect on participants is selection bias—the possibility that the apparent causal impact of an intervention was actually due to preexisting differences between those who selected the intervention and those who did not. In the context of evaluating Birthright Israel, the threat of selection bias means that simply comparing the level of Jewish engagement of those who went on Birthright to those in the age appropriate population who did not is likely to produce an overestimate of Birthright's impact: Those who chose to

¹ The studies of Birthright Israel conducted by CMJS have been funded both by the Birthright Israel Foundation and a number of private philanthropies and individual donors.

² Most of CMJS' research has focused on North American applicants and participants, but additional research has been conducted with South American, European, Russian, and Ukrainian participants (e.g., Volodarsky et al. 2019).

apply to the program may have already been predisposed to be more deeply engaged in Jewish life than those who did not.

In most of CMJS' prior studies of Birthright's impact, potential selection artifacts were addressed through the use of quasi-experimental designs. In these studies, those who had participated in a Birthright trip were compared with others who applied to Birthright but were not offered an opportunity to participate, either due to a scarcity of open slots during a particular travel season or due to logistical factors (e.g., lack of overlap between applicants desired travel dates and available trip dates). Although not a true experiment (where the treatment is assigned randomly), this design provides a powerful bulwark against selection bias, since the logistical factors that determine assignment to the program are unlikely to be strongly related to key outcomes of the study (see Saxe 2014a, b). To further strengthen their ability to make robust causal inferences, some of these studies collected data from participants and nonparticipant applicants both before the Birthright trips departed and several months after they ended. For these studies, Birthright's impact was evaluated using difference-in-differences statistical models, which compare the changes observed among Birthright participants (before and after the trip) to the changes observed among nonparticipant applicants during the same time period (see e.g., Saxe et al. 2019). In other studies, statistical models were used to control for differences in Jewish background and demographic characteristics that existed between applicants who were offered a chance to participate and those who were not (e.g., Saxe et al. 2011).

Over the past two decades, these studies have consistently found that Birthright participants become more connected to and engaged with multiple domains of Jewish life after returning from the trip. Studies evaluating Birthright's short- and medium-term impact repeatedly document that the program leads participants to be more emotionally connected to Israel and their own Jewish identities. These effects are evident across participants with differences in Jewish background, parental intermarriage, and political ideology (Sasson et al. 2014; Saxe et al. 2008, 2019; Wright et al. 2019). Parallel outcomes were found by a panel study which has repeatedly assessed a sample of participants and nonparticipants who applied to the program in its first decade of operation (2001–2009). Over the course of 10 years and six waves of data collection, this study finds persistent program impacts on connection to Israel, the likelihood of marrying a Jewish partner, and various forms of Jewish religious and communal engagement (Saxe et al. 2011, 2014a, b, 2017; Wright et al. 2020).

Limiting analyses to those who applied to Birthright, enhances the validity of the causal inferences made by the CMJS impact studies, providing strong evidence of Birthright's influence on participants from a variety of backgrounds. However, focusing only on those who choose to apply to the program does not provide a direct answer to questions about Birthright Israel's overall impact on American Jewry. One question concerns the extent of the program's "reach" into different segments of American Jewry. Are there particular types of Jews who are especially likely, or unlikely, to participate in the program? Another question concerns the generalizability of the findings regarding Birthright's impact on the broader American Jewish population, including those who did not apply to Birthright. To what extent are

the program effects identified by quasi-experimental studies of Birthright applicants also evident in a dataset that is designed to be representative of the entire American Jewish population?

Pew's 2020 Survey of American Jews

The Pew Research Center's 2020 survey of American Jews provides an opportunity to address these questions about the reach and impact of Birthright Israel. One of the study's most important features is the sampling methodology it used to achieve a broadly representative sample of respondents. Unlike the 2013 survey, Pew 2020 used a stratified, national, address-based sampling (ABS) frame to screen for Jewish respondents.³ Using this ABS sample and a dual-mode survey (online and mail), the study obtained responses from 4718 US adults who identified as Jewish.⁴ The use of ABS to achieve a more representative sample, and the large number of respondents interviewed, allowed the study to generate reliable estimates of the prevalence of different attitudes and behaviors among American Jews (Tighe et al. 2022).

Jewish respondents to the Pew survey who were young enough to be eligible for Birthright (ages 46 or younger at the time of the survey) were asked if they had participated in the program. All respondents were asked if they had a grown child who had participated. Pew can therefore be used to estimate Birthright's "reach": The level of participation in the program among different age groups, gender identities, and various levels of Jewish backgrounds (measured by denomination, religion raised, Jewish parentage, and history of formal Jewish education). Past research has also found that Birthright has a profound impact on the parents of those who participate, leading these parents to become more interested in Israel, especially if they have not been to Israel themselves (Aronson 2017). We therefore also estimate the proportion of parents who have a grown child who participated in Birthright, and the extent to which being a parent of a child who participated in Birthright, varies by the parent's involvement in Jewish life, including whether or not the parent has traveled to Israel.

The Pew data also provide an opportunity to extend the validity of existing findings on the impact of Birthright Israel on participants' attitudes and behaviors related to Israel and Jewish life. Although earlier quasi-experimental studies have found that Birthright has a significant impact across a variety of outcomes on those with little or no prior involvement in Jewish life, these studies are still limited to those Jews who applied to Birthright Israel in the first place. This leaves open the question of how the program might impact those who have not yet made the choice,

³ Attempting to capture a national representative sample of American Jews using random digit dialing (RDD) has become increasingly difficult (Curtin, Presser, and Singer 2005; Saxe, Tighe, and Boxer 2014; Wright and Peugh 2012). Other methods, including use of lists of distinctive Jewish names or those known by Jewish organizations, and online opt-in panels are frequently even more problematic and risk misrepresenting the attitudes and engagement of US Jews, especially those with limited connections to Jewish life. An ABS frame addresses both of these issues.

⁴ The Pew study achieved an overall response rate of 16.6% (Pew Research Center 2021, 237–238). This is the product of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) RR3 response rates for the initial screening interview (20.1%) and the extended interview offered to Jewish households (82.4%).

or had the chance, to apply. Pew's 2020 data offer an opportunity to validate earlier findings using an independent data source that includes nonapplicants, allowing for a better generalization of the impact of the program to the American Jewish population as a whole. The present analyses use Pew's data to estimate Birthright's impact on participants' emotional attachment to Israel and Israeli Jews, participants' Jewish identity, the likelihood of the participant having a Jewish spouse or partner, and more than a dozen behavioral measures of engagement with Jewish life. The findings further the understanding of the impact of educational interventions, such as Birthright, on the future of the American Jewish community.

Data and Methods

The present analyses make use of an amended version of Pew's public-use dataset. To account for sampling and nonresponse bias and correctly estimate standard errors, all analyses apply weights supplied by Pew. Analyses of Birthright's reach among the population of American Jews were limited to those who had an opportunity to participate: the 1348 respondents ages 18–46 at the time of the survey. Older respondents were not eligible for any Birthright Israel trips (when trips began in winter 1999/2000 they were open to Jews between the ages of 18 and 26).⁵ However, analyses of parents include all 2678 respondents (of any age) who report having grown children. Analyses in the quasi-experimental Birthright studies omitted respondents who were raised Orthodox since, owing to their high baseline levels of participation in Jewish life, they show little or no variance on most measures of Jewish engagement (Wright et al. 2020, 5). Analyses of Birthright's impact in this paper follow the same reasoning and approach, and are thus limited to the 995 respondents ages 18–46 who were not raised Orthodox.

Measures

Respondents were asked how many times they had ever been to Israel, with options of "Never," "Once," "More than once," or "Lived in Israel." Those who reported that they had visited Israel at least once and were younger than age 46 were asked, "Did you ever participate in a Birthright Israel trip?" ("Yes" or "No"). These two questions were combined to create a single measure of Birthright Israel participation that divided respondents into three groups: those who had never been to Israel, those who had been on a Birthright Israel trip, and those who had visited Israel at least once but had never participated in a Birthright trip. All respondents were also

⁵ To protect respondent anonymity, the Pew public use dataset includes a four-category variable for age: 18–29, 30–49, 50–64, and 65+. Since the question about Birthright participation was only asked of those younger than age 46, all Birthright participants in the dataset are between the ages of 18 and 45. However, the age variable provided in the public use dataset does not allow for these individuals to be compared with a group of nonparticipants of the same age range. To address this issue, Pew allowed us to amend the public use dataset with a restricted continuous age variable. This variable is used to limit the analyses of Birthright participation to those between the ages of 18 and 46, and as a control in the regression models discussed below.

asked, “Do you have a grown child who has been on a Birthright trip to Israel?” with options of “Yes, have a grown child who has done this,” “No, do not have a grown child who has done this,” and “Do not have grown children.” For analyses of Birthright’s reach among parents of “grown” children, we excluded those parents who reported that they did not have any grown children.

To extend the validity of prior findings regarding Birthright Israel’s impact, the constructed variable measuring Birthright participation was used as the independent variable. Following Birthright’s goal of offering Israel travel opportunities to those who would have not otherwise visited Israel, the models compare Birthright Israel participants with those who have never been to Israel.⁶ The comparison group includes individuals who applied to Birthright Israel but were not offered a chance to participate (the comparison group in earlier quasi-experimental studies) as well as individuals who never applied to Birthright. Because Pew did not ask respondents whether they applied to Birthright, it is impossible to distinguish between these two groups.

Outcome variables assessed in the models include a host of measures that are similar to those used in earlier quasi-experimental studies. Specifically, a study evaluating the long-term effects of Birthright on its participants documented Birthright’s impact on connection to Israel, marrying a Jewish spouse, and a variety of behavioral outcomes (including measures of communal, religious, and social/cultural engagement with Jewish life) (Wright et al. 2020). The Pew dataset includes a number of analogous questions that were chosen as dependent variables for this analysis. The measures examined include: the respondent’s emotional attachment to Israel, whether the respondent’s spouse considers themselves Jewish,⁷ how much the respondent feels they have in common with Jews in Israel, and the extent to which the respondent feels a sense of belonging to the Jewish people. Fifteen additional items that encompassed a similar scope of behavioral measures used in the dedicated Birthright evaluations were also included. To simplify analysis and presentation, all 19 outcome measures were dichotomized.⁸ To maximize variance, for some outcomes only the top category was included as an outcome, while for others, multiple categories were aggregated. Table 1 shows weighted percentages for all 19 dichotomized outcomes among Jews ages 18–46 who were not raised Orthodox.

⁶ Specifically, the models include two dummy variables, one for “Birthright participation” and a second for “went to Israel but not on Birthright,” leaving “never traveled to Israel” as the omitted category. This paper only discusses results related to the first of these two variables. Comparisons are not reported with the group that “went to Israel but not on Birthright.” The dataset does not have any information about the form of other Israel travel (which includes having lived in Israel, family vacations, and business trips and conferences, as well as non-Birthright peer educational trips) or sufficient information to allow us to statistically control for the different backgrounds of those who engaged in different types of Israel travel. As a result, it is not possible to provide a meaningful interpretation of the differences between individuals in this group and the other two groups.

⁷ Spouses were considered Jewish if a respondent indicated that their spouse was “Jewish by religion” or a “Jew of no religion” and non-Jewish if they had only “Jewish background,” “Jewish affinity,” or were not Jewish in any way.

⁸ More specifically, dichotomization enabled the use of a single analytic method (in this case, binary logistic regression models) to analyze all 19 outcomes, and the presentation of a single measure of effect

Due to selection bias (see above), using the Pew dataset to simply compare Birthright participants with those who have never traveled to Israel in terms of engagement in Jewish life would overstate the effect of participating in Birthright on any given outcome. For example, those who had no formal Jewish education were less likely to participate in Birthright compared with those who attended day school or some form of supplementary Jewish education (see Table 2 below). If participation in formal Jewish education increased subsequent engagement in Jewish life, we would expect to see higher levels of engagement among Birthright participants, *even if Birthright had no effect at all*, purely because Birthright participants (compared with nonparticipants) were more likely to have received some form of formal Jewish education. To mitigate selection bias, the present analyses employ statistical adjustments to control for nine background variables that theory and extant data suggest may be correlated with the decision to apply to Birthright and with the outcome measures in question among the non-Orthodox population. These include binary variables indicating whether the respondent had two Jewish parents (versus one or no Jewish parents), attended Jewish summer camp, celebrated a bar or bat mitzvah, was classified by Pew as a “Jew by religion” (versus “Jew of no religion”),⁹ whether the respondent or either of the respondent’s parents were born in the Middle East or North Africa,¹⁰ and the respondent’s age (as a continuous variable). A categorical control for a respondent’s “most intense” form of formal Jewish education was also included: no formal Jewish education (omitted category), supplementary Jewish school, and Jewish day school. Finally, we included binary controls for gender and non-white racial identity.¹¹

Since all outcomes have been dichotomized, analyses of Birthright’s impact were conducted using binary logistic regression models, which include the control variables discussed above. These models estimate the difference in the probability of being “engaged” (with respect to the outcome in question) associated with participating in Birthright Israel, as opposed to never having been to Israel, holding all other variables constant. In other words, these models allow us to answer the following question: If we observed two individuals who had identical values for all of the control variables (*viz.*, race, gender, Jewish parentage, summer camp attendance,

Footnote 8 (continued)

size for each outcome. Ordinal outcomes would have required a different method (e.g., ordered logistic regression models) and produced multiple effect sizes (one for each category).

⁹ Pew defined “Jews by religion” as those who identify their present religion as Jewish, whereas “Jews of no religion” are defined as those who identify as Jewish, but identified their religion as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular” (Pew Research Center 2021, 2).

¹⁰ Pew’s public use dataset does not identify whether a respondent or their parents were born in Israel; only the region. These variables are treated as proxies for having been born or having a parent who was born in Israel.

¹¹ A more conservative alternative approach was also tested. Instead of comparing Birthright participants with those who have never been to Israel, we compared those who have been on Birthright with all other respondents. In this approach we included an additional control for having gone to Israel on a non-Birthright trip. This approach likely does a better job of controlling for selection bias owing to prior Israel travel, but it also risks underestimating the effect of Birthright, insofar as returning to Israel may itself be an impact of the trip. See footnote 12 *sub* for a discussion of results using this alternative approach. Application of this approach does not change the basic findings, although the magnitude of the effects is smaller.

religion and denomination raised, bar/bat mitzvah, place of birth, age, and formal Jewish education), and one of these two participated in Birthright Israel while the other had never been to Israel, would the Birthright participant be more likely to experience the outcome in question?

Since the coefficients produced by logistic regression models cannot be directly translated into statements about changes in probability, our analyses use average marginal effects (AMEs) to provide a concrete measure of Birthright's effect on each outcome variable, holding other factors constant. In these models, the reported AME represents the average percentage point change¹² in the likelihood of experiencing the outcome associated with participating in Birthright Israel (as opposed to never having been to Israel), holding all other variables constant.¹³

Results

Assessing Birthright's Reach

Table 2 shows the overall distribution of the three-part constructed Birthright participation variable for all Jewish adults ages 18–46, and then separately by background characteristics. We also present 95% confidence intervals around each estimate, which represent the range of plausible values. An estimated 20% of Jewish adults ages 18–46 report having gone on a Birthright trip (with the confidence intervals around this estimate ranging from 18% to 22%). Although the estimated proportion of Birthright participants was slightly higher among those under age 30, this difference was not statistically significant. Jewish females are significantly more likely to have participated in Birthright than Jewish males. Among those raised “Jewish by religion,” 24% had gone on a Birthright trip, significantly higher than the percentage among those who were raised Jewish but not by religion (14%) and those who currently identify as Jewish but were not raised Jewish at all (7%).

Among those ages 18–46, estimated Birthright participation rates were 10% for those raised Orthodox and 25% of all Jews ages 18–46 who were not raised Orthodox. An estimated 27% of those raised Reform and 24% of those raised Conservative participated in Birthright. Estimated rates of participation were higher for those who had some form of supplementary Jewish education (30%) or who attended Jewish day school (21%), compared with those who had no Jewish

¹² A percentage point change is the difference between two percentages—in this case, probabilities. Thus, if the probability of an outcome increased from 20% to 25% or from 30% to 35%, these would both represent an increase of five percentage points.

¹³ The “average” qualifier is needed because the estimated change in probability of the outcome associated with any given variable (e.g., participation in Birthright) depends on the “baseline” probability of experiencing that outcome (Hoetker 2007). AMEs deal with this by separately computing the percentage point change associated with Birthright participation (versus never having been to Israel) for each observation, holding other variables at those observations' own values, and then averaging all of those results together. In the supplementary appendix we present an alternative approach to dealing with this challenge by calculating predicted probabilities associated with participating in Birthright versus never having been to Israel, holding all other covariates at their mean values.

Table 1 Jewish engagement measures

	Respondents ages 18–46 not raised Orthodox
Somewhat/very attached to Israel	47% (42–52%)
A great deal belong to the Jewish people	36% (32–41%)
Have a lot in common with Jews in Israel	54% (49–58%)
Current spouse is Jewish (married respondents only)	33% (28–39%)
Held or attended a seder last Passover	62% (57–66%)
Fasted at least part of the day last Yom Kippur	42% (38–46%)
Keep kosher	12% (10–15%)
Ever attend Jewish religious services	71% (67–75%)
Sometimes/often do something to mark Shabbat	33% (29–37%)
Synagogue member	21% (18–24%)
Donated to Jewish charity in past 12 months	32% (28–36%)
Typically wear distinctive Jewish clothing	12% (10–15%)
Sometimes/often read Jewish newspapers/seek Jewish news online	34% (30–38%)
Somewhat/very closely follow news about Israel	42% (38–47%)
Sometimes/often cook or eat traditional Jewish foods	71% (67–75%)
Sometimes/often go to Jewish film festivals/seek Jewish films	18% (15–22%)
Sometimes/often watch Jewish/Israeli TV shows	32% (28–37%)
Sometimes/often listen to Jewish or Israeli music	26% (23–29%)
Sometimes/often read Jewish lit./biog./Jewish history	39% (36–43%)

Weighted data. 95% confidence intervals in parentheses

education at all (9%). Likewise, 30% of Jews who attended Jewish summer camp participated in Birthright, compared with 13% of those who did not attend Jewish summer camp. Among Jews ages 18–46 who had two Jewish parents, 28% participated in Birthright, compared with 11% who had only one or no Jewish parents.

Table 3 shows estimates of the proportion of Jewish adults with grown children who have a child who participated in Birthright. Overall, 28% of parents with grown children report having a child who participated in Birthright. Among those parents who have been to Israel themselves, 36% have a child who has been to Israel on a Birthright trip, compared with 19% for those who never visited Israel. Table 3 also shows that parents who are synagogue members are more likely to have a grown child who went on Birthright compared with non-members, as are those who have a Jewish spouse or partner compared with those who have a non-Jewish spouse or partner or who have no current partner.¹⁴

¹⁴ Over 90% of those who indicate that they have a current partner are married.

Table 2 Travel to Israel, including on Birthright by demographics and Jewish background (Jews ages 18–46)

	Never been to Israel	Went on Birthright	Traveled to Israel but not on Birthright	Total
All Jewish adults under age 46	56% (52–60%)	20% (18–22%)	24% (22–27%)	100%
<i>Age</i>				
18–29	55% (49–61%)	20% (17–25%)	25% (20–30%)	100%
30–46	56% (51–61%)	19% (16–23%)	24% (21–28%)	100%
<i>Gender*</i>				
Male	58% (53–62%)	16% (13–19%)	27% (23–31%)	100%
Female	53% (48–59%)	24% (20–28%)	23% (20–27%)	100%
<i>Religion raised***</i>				
Jewish by religion	44% (39–49%)	24% (21–27%)	32% (29–36%)	100%
Jewish, not by religion	80% (73–84%)	14% (10–21%)	6% (4–9%)	100%
Not Jewish	79% (73–84%)	7% (4–10%)	15% (10–21%)	100%
<i>Denomination raised***</i>				
Orthodox	20% (14–27%)	10% (6–17%)	70% (62–77%)	100%
All non-Orthodox denominations	56% (51–60%)	25% (22–28%)	19% (16–22%)	100%
Conservative	38% (20–38%)	34% (26–41%)	38% (31–46%)	100%
Reform	59% (52–64%)	27% (23–31%)	15% (11–19%)	100%
Something else	71% (63–78%)	17% (12–23%)	12% (08–18%)	100%
<i>Highest level of formal Jewish education***</i>				
None	80% (75–84%)	9% (7–11%)	12% (8–16%)	100%
Supplementary school	55% (49–60%)	30% (26–34%)	16% (13–19%)	100%
Day school	28% (23–35%)	21% (16–27%)	51% (45–57%)	100%
<i>Summer camp***</i>				
Did not attend	75% (71–79%)	13% (11–16%)	12% (10–15%)	100%
Attended	27% (24–31%)	30% (26–34%)	43% (39–47%)	100%
<i>Jewish parents***</i>				
Two Jewish parents	33% (30–38%)	28% (24–32%)	39% (35–43%)	100%
Other	79% (76–82%)	11% (9–14%)	9% (7–12%)	100%

Weighted data. 95% confidence intervals in parentheses. Asterisks indicate significance of design adjusted chi-squared tests. * = $p < 0.05$, ** = $p < 0.01$, *** = $p < 0.001$

Extending the Validity of Prior Research on Birthright’s Impact

Figure 1 summarizes the results of binary logistic regression models that estimate the impact of participating in Birthright Israel on 19 outcome measures. All models are limited to respondents ages 18–46 who were not raised Orthodox, employ weights, and include the nine control variables discussed above. For each outcome, Fig. 1 presents average marginal effects (AME), that is, the average percentage point

Table 3 Having a grown child who is a Birthright alum by Jewish characteristics

	Parents who have a grown child who...		Total
	did not participate in Birthright	participated in Birthright	
All	73% (70–75%)	28% (25–30%)	100%
<i>Travel to Israel***</i>			
Visited Israel	64% (61–67%)	36% (33–39%)	100%
Never visited Israel	81% (77–84%)	19% (16–23%)	100%
<i>Synagogue members***</i>			
Members	63% (59%–66%)	38% (34–42%)	100%
Not members	79% (76–81%)	22% (19–24%)	100%
<i>Spouse/partner religion***</i>			
Jewish	66% (63–69%)	34% (31–37%)	100%
Not Jewish	80% (75–84%)	20% (16–25%)	100%
No current spouse or partner	76% (71–80%)	24% (26–31%)	100%

Weighted data. 95% confidence intervals in parentheses. Asterisks indicate significance of design adjusted chi-squared tests. * = $p < 0.05$, ** = $p < 0.01$, *** = $p < 0.001$

change in the likelihood of experiencing the outcome in question associated with participating in Birthright as opposed to never having been to Israel, holding all other variables constant.¹⁵ The figure also displays 95% confidence intervals around the AMEs, with asterisks that indicate the statistical significance of the underlying logistic regression model coefficient. Thus, for example, Fig. 1 shows that in regard to feeling “somewhat” or “very” attached to Israel, the model estimates an AME associated with Birthright participation of 27 percentage points. This result indicates that, on average, a Birthright Israel participant is 27 percentage points more likely to report feeling “somewhat” or “very” attached to Israel compared with an individual who has identical background characteristics but who has never visited Israel.¹⁶

The results presented in Fig. 1 identify 12 statistically significant relationships associated with Birthright participation (out of 19 outcomes). The effects of Birthright were strongest for attachment to Israel, having “a lot” in common with Jews in Israel, following news about Israel, holding or attending a seder, and having a Jewish spouse. Other relationships that were statistically significant but of smaller magnitude included feelings of belonging to the Jewish people; donating to Jewish charities; cooking or eating traditional Jewish foods; watching Jewish/Israeli TV

¹⁵ Full model results are available upon request. The average variance inflation factor (VIF) for the independent variables included in these models was 1.7, and did not exceed 5 for any independent variable, indicating moderate correlation between variables, and a low threat of multicollinearity.

¹⁶ See Fig. 1A in the supplementary appendix for an alternative approach to estimating the effect size associated with Birthright participation (through the calculation of predicted probabilities holding other covariates at mean values).

shows; reading Jewish literature, biographies, or history; listening to Jewish/Israeli music; and fasting at least part of the day on Yom Kippur. Birthright participation had no statistically significant association with most other measures of Jewish religious practice, including kashrut observance; religious service attendance; synagogue membership; or wearing distinctive Jewish clothing, such as a kippah or Star of David bracelet or chain.¹⁷

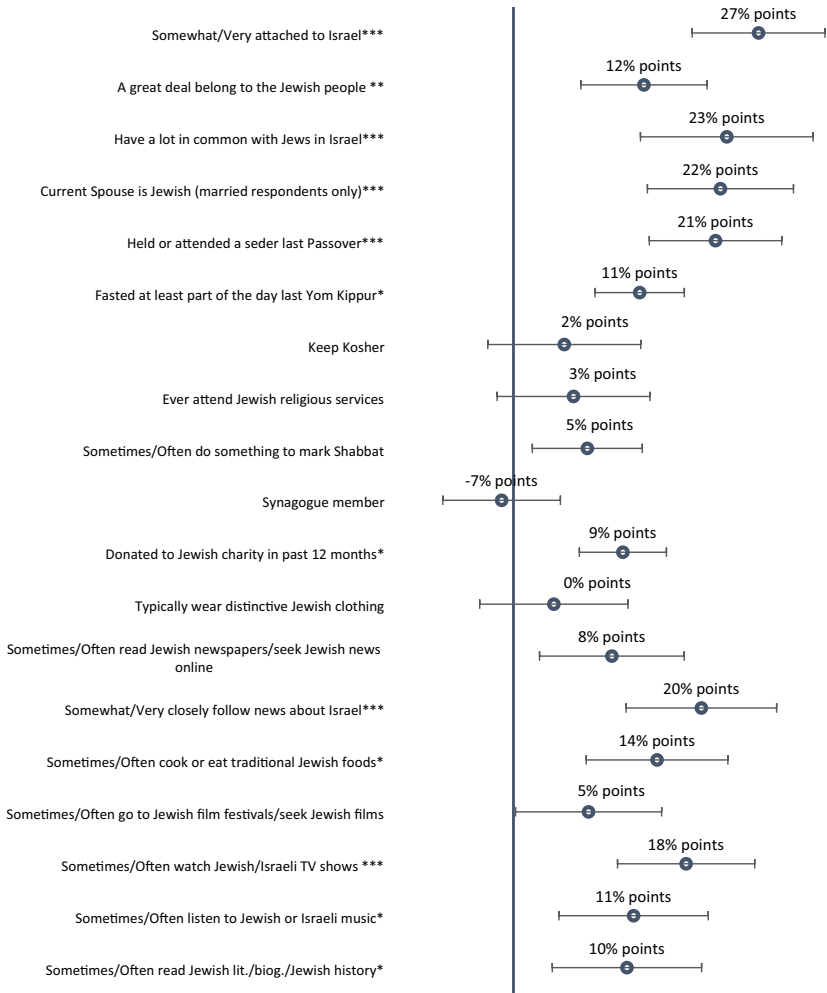
Although not directly comparable, these results are of a similar magnitude to findings from the long-term, quasi-experimental evaluations of Birthright's impact—especially after accounting for the confidence intervals that exist around all estimates derived from survey data. For example, Fig. 1 shows that on average, participating in a Birthright trip was associated with a 27-percentage-point increase in the likelihood of feeling “somewhat” or “very much” attached to Israel, holding all other control variables constant. In comparison, Wright et al. (2020, 14) estimated that among Birthright applicants who were currently in a committed relationship, Birthright participants were 21 percentage points more likely to be “very” or “somewhat” connected to Israel, compared with similar nonparticipant applicants.¹⁸ Likewise, Fig. 1 indicates that, on average, participating in Birthright Israel is associated with a 22-percentage-point increase in the likelihood of having a Jewish spouse (as opposed to a non-Jewish spouse). In Wright et al. (2020, 8), the predicted probability of having a Jewish spouse is 16 percentage points higher for Birthright participants, compared with similar nonparticipant applicants.

Discussion

The present analyses of Pew's 2020 survey of American Jews provide independent confirmation of how participation in educational travel to Israel with Birthright Israel influenced a generation of American Jews. Our findings broadly confirm the results of previous studies of Birthright's impact on its participants and extend the generalizability of the findings to a population that includes those who did not apply to Birthright. Basing these analyses on Pew's national survey of American Jews

¹⁷ The alternative models discussed above, which compare those who have been on Birthright with all other respondents but include an additional control for having gone to Israel on a non-Birthright trip, confirm most of the results presented in Fig. 1. In these models, Birthright participation was still significantly associated with an increased likelihood of being “very” or “somewhat” attached to Israel ($p < 0.001$), having “a lot” in common with Israelis ($p < 0.01$), having a Jewish spouse ($p < 0.001$), holding a seder ($p < 0.01$), cooking or eating traditional Jewish foods ($p < 0.05$), and watching Jewish shows ($p < 0.01$). In these models, Birthright's effects on feelings of belonging to the Jewish people, fasting on Yom Kippur, donating to Jewish causes, following news about Israel, watching Jewish films, listening to Jewish music, and reading Jewish literature were not significant at the 95% confidence level. It is likely that these differences are partly due to the failure of the models shown in Fig. 1 to fully control for selection bias, and partly due to these alternative models underestimating Birthright's effect (by controlling for return trips to Israel that were themselves an impact of the program). Unfortunately, it is not possible to adjudicate this question empirically using the Pew 2020 data.

¹⁸ In Fig. 7 of Wright, Hecht, and Saxe (2020), the predicted probability of being “very much” or “somewhat” connected to Israel was 44% (15% + 29%) for nonparticipants and 65% (29% + 36%) for Birthright participants. The difference between these two values is 21 percentage points.



Note: Average marginal effects indicate the estimated percentage point change in the probability of experiencing each outcome associated with participation in Birthright Israel (vs never having been to Israel). Asterisks indicate significance of coefficient for "Birthright participant" in logistic regression model (*=p<.05, **=p<.01, ***=p<.001). Model omits those raised Orthodox.

Fig. 1 Average marginal effect of participation in Birthright Israel (as opposed to never having been to Israel)

allows us to estimate how this impact may manifest itself among diverse segments of the American Jewish population. Finally, the findings highlight the impact of experiential education and its potential for large-scale effects on the Jewish community.

Birthright's Reach

On the basis of Pew's national sample, it is estimated that approximately 20% of American Jews who were young enough to have been eligible for Birthright since its launch in late 1999 (46 years old or younger at the time of the survey) participated in the program.¹⁹ There is, however, substantial variation in Birthright participation among different groups of American Jews. Those who were raised Orthodox were less likely to participate than those who were raised Reform or Conservative. This disparity can be explained by Birthright's eligibility rules, which, due to the program's focus on attracting less affiliated Jews, limit participation to those who have spent fewer than three months on peer educational or study programs in Israel. This eligibility rule excludes many Orthodox Jews who studied in Israel during or immediately after high school. Pew's data also confirm that the program has succeeded in attracting a substantial number of American Jews with little or no prior connections to Jewish life, estimating that, among American Jews ages 18–46 who had no exposure to formal Jewish education growing up, nearly 10% participated in Birthright's 10-day educational trips. Analyses also indicate that, among the Birthright age-eligible non-Orthodox population who had been to Israel on any kind of trip, more than half participated in a Birthright trip. This figure is similar among those who did not have two Jewish parents—a growing segment of the US Jewish population.

Although Birthright participation has become normative among much of American Jewry, there are segments of the population that remain underrepresented among participants. Pew's data show that those who engaged in supplementary Jewish education, Jewish day school, or Jewish summer camp were more likely to participate in Birthright than those who did not have these experiences. Participation in Birthright was also substantially lower among those without two Jewish parents. Importantly, research suggests that participants with the fewest prior connections to Jewish life are the most strongly impacted by the trip (Wright et al. 2019). If Birthright increases its reach among Jews with fewer prior Jewish experiences, the program's overall impact on the American Jewish community would likely be magnified.

The analyses also provide evidence for the growing impact of the program on the American Jewish community via the “spillover” effect on Jewish parents identified by Aronson (2017). Among Jewish parents with a grown child, nearly 30% have an adult child who participated in Birthright. Even among parents who have not themselves visited Israel, nearly 20% have a child who has participated in Birthright. Since Aronson's work suggests these parents' relationship to Israel is strongly impacted by the Birthright participation of their child, it is another indicator of Birthright's broad effect on the Jewish community.

¹⁹ Given that the 95% confidence intervals range from 18% to 22%, this estimate seems plausible when compared with data from Birthright's own registration system, which indicates that roughly 430,000 American Jews have participated in the program as of 2019 (authors' analysis of Birthright registration data). That number is roughly 17% of Pew's own midpoint estimate of the number of American Jews under age 46 (2.5 million) and roughly 18% of Pew's lower-bound estimate (2.38 million).

Validating Birthright's Impact

The results of our analyses of Birthright's impact using Pew's data provide confirmation of earlier findings that participation in Birthright has a significant long-term impact on a broad set of outcomes related to engagement with Israel and Jewish life. The present analyses identify significant differences on a set of key outcomes between Birthright participants and those who have never been to Israel, even after controlling for preexisting differences between participants and those who have never been to Israel.

Our analyses found that the unique effects of Birthright participation were strongest for outcomes related to Israel attitudes and measures of Jewish peoplehood. Birthright participants were 27 percentage points more likely to be "very" or "somewhat" attached to Israel and 23 percentage points more likely to feel that they had "a lot" in common with Israelis, compared with other Jews who had similar background characteristics but who had never been to Israel. Differences attributable to Birthright participation were also found on several key social dimensions of Jewish life, including having a Jewish spouse/partner, feelings of belonging to the Jewish people, donating to Jewish causes and various forms of Jewish "cultural consumption." Given the program's focus on providing a person-centered group experience (Chazan 2022), it is not surprising that participation most profoundly affects individuals' sense of connection to other Jews. These results echo those from studies focused on Birthright's long-term impact, which likewise found Birthright's impact to be strongest on outcomes related to Israel and social-communal measures of Jewish engagement (Wright et al. 2020, 2022).

At the same time, consistent with previous research (Saxe et al. 2008),²⁰ few statistically significant relationships were found between Birthright participation and explicitly religious outcomes, including kashrut observance, marking Shabbat, or religious service attendance. This result is not surprising given the program's goals and the fact that it is a (relatively) brief intervention. Although the program offers participants opportunities to engage in religious practices, it does not explicitly seek to promote religious modes of engaging with Jewish life. Indeed, although participation in a 10-day educational program like Birthright may be a catalyst for engaging in Jewish religious practice, it seems unlikely that such a brief educational intervention would dramatically increase engagement in the more intensive ritual practices, such as kashrut observance.

Although the finding of a strong association between Birthright participation and Jewish engagement closely echoes findings from earlier studies, there are important limitations to the inferences that can be drawn from the findings about Birthright's impact in the Pew data. Unlike earlier quasi-experimental studies of Birthright's impact, this observational study could only account for selection effects through statistical controls. It is possible that even among those American Jews with identical background characteristics (viz. race, gender, Jewish parentage, summer camp

²⁰ In the long-term evaluations, Birthright has sometimes been found to have a moderate impact on religious practice outcomes, but this effect tends to be fully mediated through its impact on having a Jewish spouse or partner (Wright, Hecht, and Saxe 2020).

attendance, religion and denomination raised, bar/bat mitzvah, place of birth, age, and formal Jewish education) those who applied to and participated in Birthright were still predisposed to higher levels of Jewish engagement compared to those who did not apply or participate. Since the Pew survey did not ask whether respondents applied to Birthright (meaning that the comparison group includes both applicants and nonapplicants), this challenge cannot be fully addressed through statistical means.²¹ Nevertheless, the close alignment between these results and those from earlier quasi-experimental studies provides important cross validation of both analyses. The more methodologically robust quasi-experimental studies provide a strong rationale for interpreting the differences identified in Pew as largely driven by the causal impact of Birthright participation. Conversely, the results presented here strongly suggest that earlier results are not merely artifacts driven by peculiarities of the sample frame or the data collection procedures.

The analyses of Birthright's impact are also constrained by the limited number of questions about Birthright included in the Pew survey. The survey did not ask when individuals participated in Birthright or when other trips to Israel occurred. This makes it infeasible to use the Pew data to explore questions related to the timing of the intervention or the extent to which Birthright's effect is mediated through return trips to Israel.²² Finally, one question that remains challenging to answer using either the Pew data or quasi-experimental studies concerns the mechanism underlying Birthright's effects on participants. Ethnographic studies (e.g., Kelner 2010), as well as additional quantitative studies, are needed to better understand how and why Birthright produces the impacts identified both by quasi-experimental studies and the 2020 Pew data.

One particular area that deserves further attention is the role of Israel as the setting for the program and the extent to which this setting influences the program's impact. The initial spark that triggered the development of Birthright came from political scientist and former Israeli minister Yossi Beilin. In the early 1990s, he told American Jews that they should no longer consider Israeli Jews as their "poor cousins" and instead, should use their philanthropy to educate American youth (Beilin 2000). He proposed that Israel be the site for engaging young Jews from around the world. More recently, Shain (2021) has proclaimed the present era as the "Israel Century" and "Israeliness" as the current paradigm for world Jewry. Birthright is seen as an exemplar of these trends.

Unfortunately, Pew's data do not provide opportunities to explore the extent to which "Israeliness" has become the blueprint for Birthright participants. It seems unlikely, however, that a 10-day exposure to Israel would create a fundamentally Israeli-framed identity for American Jews. As Abramson (2017) has elucidated, the diasporic identity that Birthright engenders is multidimensional. What is clear is that an intensive group experience can be a catalyst for identity change. Israel is the setting, but Birthright participants come to see themselves as part of the Jewish

²¹ However, the fact that the more conservative alternative models also produce broadly similar results provides additional evidence for a causal interpretation of these results, as discussed in footnote 16.

²² The long-term panel study of Birthright applicants provides some insights on both of these questions (Saxe et al. 2017; Wright, Hecht, and Saxe 2020).

people—both those who live in the land of Israel and those outside of it. Developing a better understanding of what it means for one's identity to be connected to the Jewish homeland is a priority for future research.

Conclusion

Although Birthright Israel was launched in 1999 amid considerable skepticism by Jewish organizational leaders (Bayme 2002, 409; Liebler 2007), over two decades the program has become an important rite of passage for Jewish adults and has continued to expand its reach. The impact of the program on those who participate has been evident for some time. Along with substantial evidence of the program's impact among those who applied to participate, analysis of data from the Pew 2020 survey of American Jews provides a window into the program's effect on the US Jewish community *writ large*. Although the trip they participated in only lasted 10 days and, for some, took place over two decades ago, substantial differences between those who traveled to Israel on Birthright and similar individuals who have never been to Israel provide important cross-validation of earlier results from studies of Birthright applicants.

The 2013 and 2020 Pew studies of American Jews have promoted substantial discussion regarding the health and wellbeing of the US Jewish community. Some have pointed to the growing proportion of Jews of no religion and to the fact that only one-third of US Jewish households are synagogue members as reasons to be concerned about the long-term vitality of the Jewish community (Stephens 2021). Commentators have been particularly pessimistic about the future of younger American Jews, whom the Pew study finds to have lower levels of attachment to Israel and Jewish life (Bayme 2021; Sharon 2021). However, the Pew data confirm previous research indicating that Birthright has a broad and substantial impact on participants' engagement with Israel and Jewish life. That the program impacts a diverse and increasingly large share of the American Jewish community has now been documented and provides a number of reasons to be optimistic about the future of American Jewry.

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