

# Disruptions and Opportunities: The Impact of COVID-19 on the U.S. Jewish Community

## *A social science approach*

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Judaism and Public Health: Living in the Shadows of Pandemics  
ASU Judaism, Science and Medicine Group Conference  
March 2022

**Brandeis**

COHEN CENTER FOR  
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# Communal concerns at the start of the pandemic

*Selected comments from EJewishPhilanthropy*

## Immediate health and financial needs:

### *Elderly, poor, and isolated*

- For the first time in a generation, we must completely refocus our efforts for the coming months to provide for the dramatic, **additional needs of the elderly, poor, children at risk, those who are abused in their homes, the newly unemployed and of course those who are ill.** Failure to do so would be to completely underestimate the size and scope of the present tragedy. (Joseph Hyman, March 30, 2020 )
- The immediate concern must be **for vulnerable families and seniors** as income streams are frozen and as communal resources diminish. (Steven Windmueller, Ph.D., March 30, 2020 )
- In this new world of social distancing and self-quarantining, there have been concerns raised about the needs of **isolated people, particularly the elderly.** (Ellen Flax, March 27, 2020)

## Jewish institutions: *Synagogues, Jewish education, Jewish professionals*

- On the operational side, questions are arising about the **economic viability of synagogues, schools, and camps...** *The longer-term realities would suggest an economic tsunami that will be both wide and deep, affecting broad segments of the Jewish institutional landscape and placing substantial pressure on the core resources of our fundraising and foundation networks* (Steven Windmueller, Ph.D., March 30, 2020 )
- **Your Rabbis are spent. They are overworked and worried.** They're worried about congregants and families and about the long-term survival of synagogues. They're worried about isolated individuals and suicides and how to say *viddui* over the phone or lead a funeral. They're scared for their families and sad for canceled *B'nai Mitzvah* and delayed weddings. They're burned out – and it's only week 2. The needs are endless. (Betsy S. Stone, Ph.D. March 25, 2020)

## Sustaining Jewish life online: *Effectiveness, reach*

- **Can we create a meaningful Pesach experience independent of people?** Can we host our friends, and if so, how many friends should we be hosting? Can we still have deep, all-night conversations when bound by the rules of social distancing? We always wanted the *Pesach seder* to be a safe space; how can we make this one safe on a whole new level? (Rebecca Blady, March 16, 2020)
- **In a matter of weeks, the Coronavirus has brought Jewish education around the world to go online.** The amount, quality and diversity of content could have a profound, long-lasting positive impact on the menu of options for Jewish education, for all ages in all geographies. ... By harnessing the momentum of distance learning, the cost of Jewish education could be significantly lowered. (Gidi Grinstein and Eran Shayshon, April 24, 2020)

# How do social scientist respond to pandemic?

## We conduct surveys

### **Brandeis CMJS surveys of 10 Jewish communities, May to July 2020**

- ~15,000 respondents
- Listed samples from 10 federated communities across the United States
- <https://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/research/resilient-communities/index.html>
- Aronson, J. K., Saxe, L., Brookner, M. A., Boxer, M., & Magidin de Kramer, R. (2022). American Jews and the Domestic Arena: Issue 2, The Impact of the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic on US Jewry: A Preliminary Assessment. In *American Jewish Year Book 2020* (pp. 87-107). Springer, Cham. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-78706-6\\_3](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-78706-6_3)

### **Orthodox Union (OU) COVID-19 Community Portrait Study. 3 waves: June/July, August, Oct 2020**

- 11 Orthodox synagogues
- 1759 responses from 942 individuals
- Bankier-Karp, A. L., & Shain, M. (2021). A longitudinal study of COVID-19's effects upon the religious group resources, psychosocial resources, and mental health of Orthodox Jews. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

### **UJA/Federation of New York study of COVID impact, Feb-April 2021**

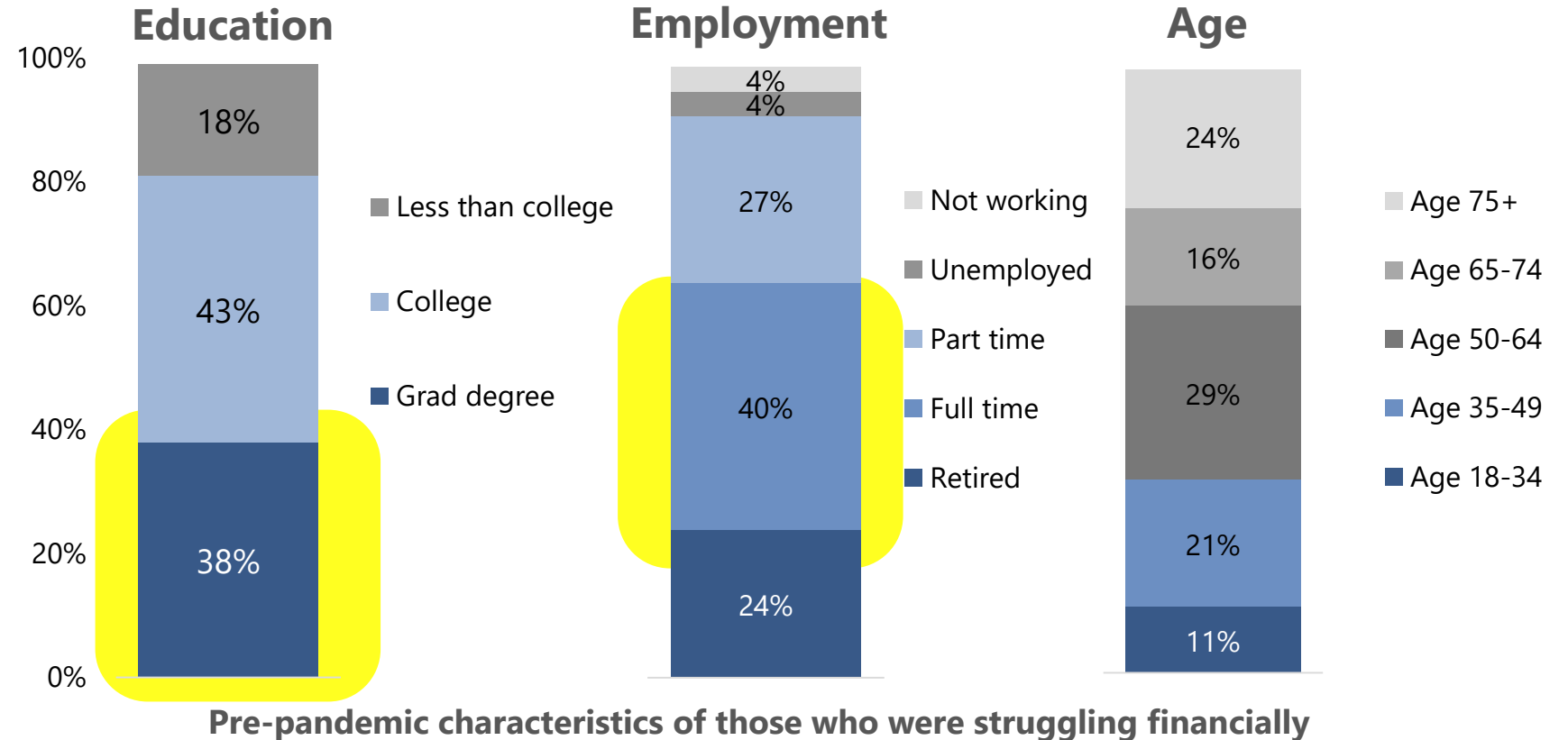
- 4403 respondents
- <https://jewishdatany.ujafedny.org/data-tool>

# Health and financial well-being

# Who is struggling financially?

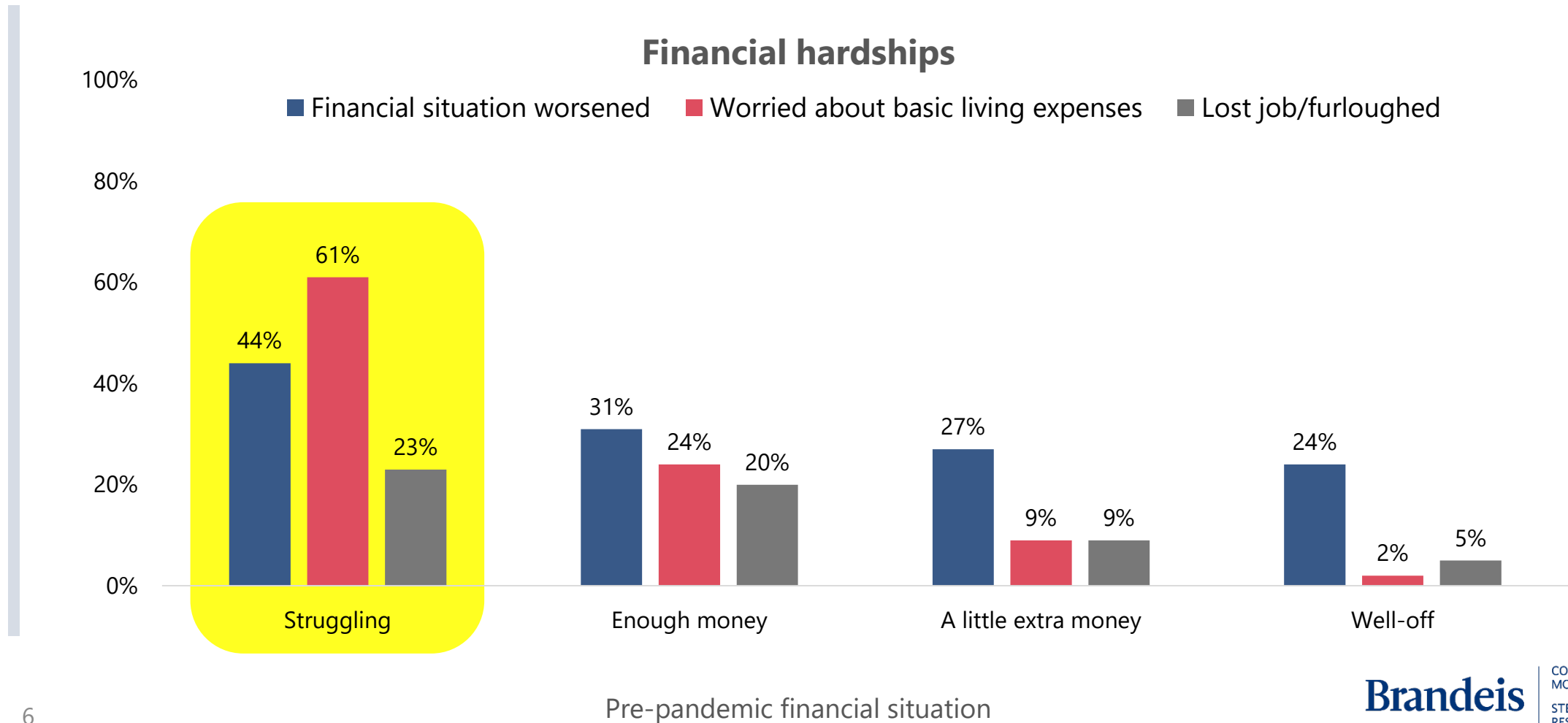
11% of households "could not make ends meet" or "just managed to make ends meet"

- One-quarter older adults (age 75+, retired)
- 32% under 50
- 4 out of 10 had grad degree
- 4 out of 10 employed full time

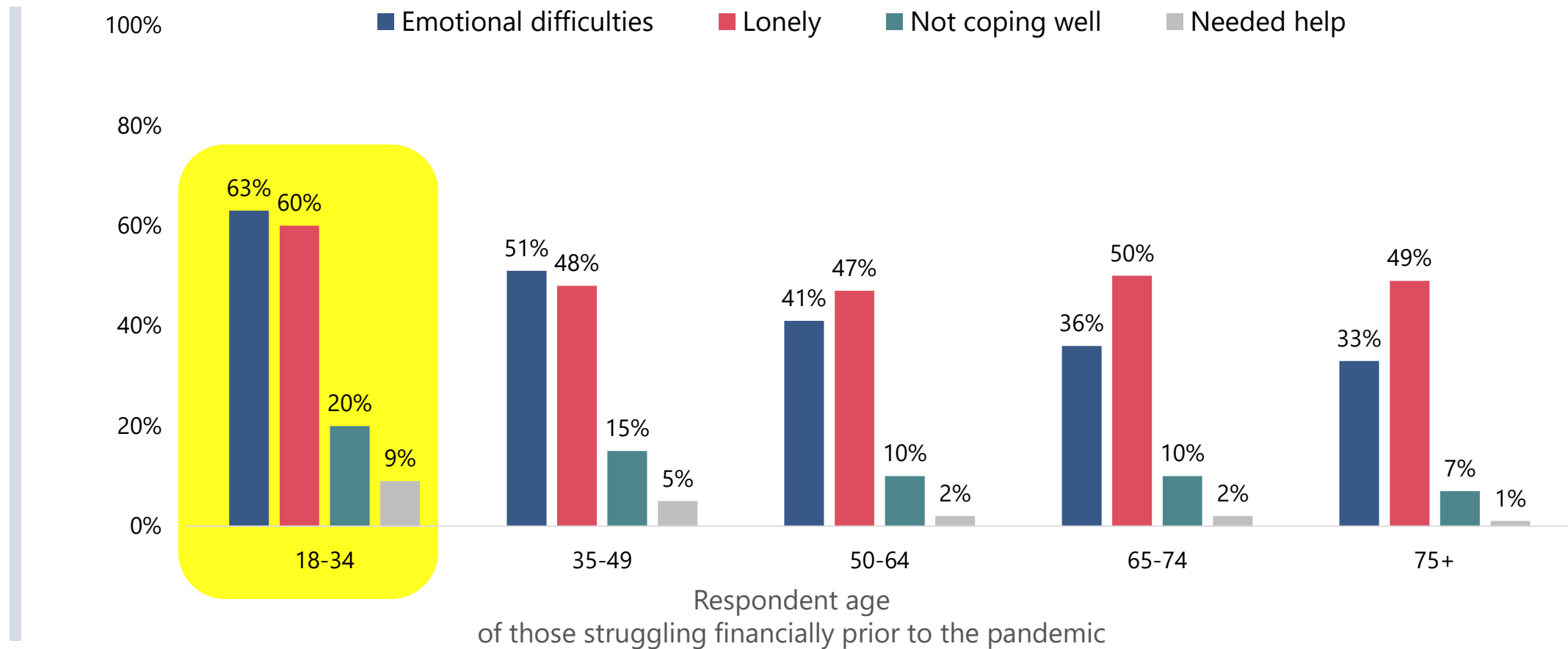


# Growing Financial DIVIDE:

*Financial situation worsened most for those struggling before pandemic*

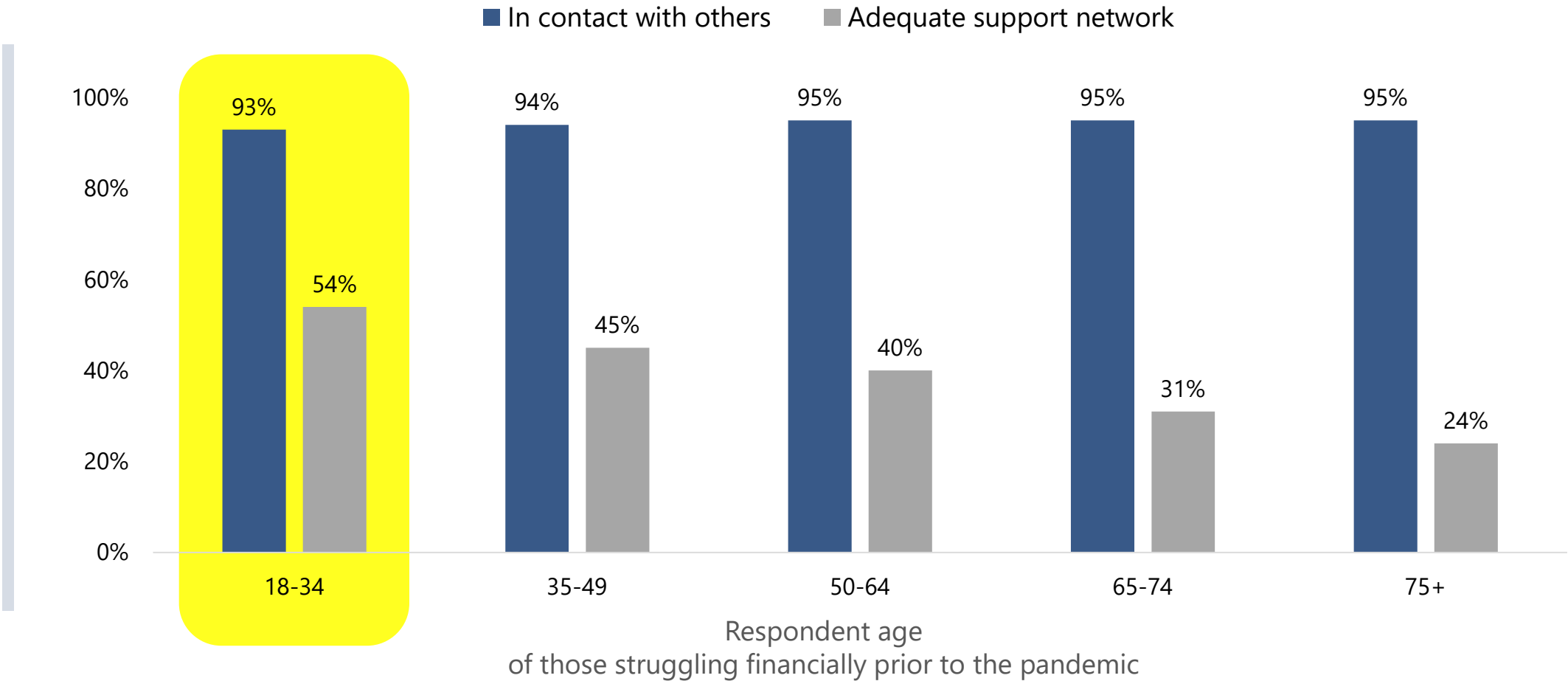


# Greater emotional difficulties for younger respondents... who were struggling financially prior to the pandemic



Emotional difficulties: Emotional or mental difficulties hurt ability to live day-to-day life in past week sometimes, often, or all the time  
 Not coping well: Coping not at all or not too well  
 Needed help: Needed help accessing mental health services

# ...Despite having stronger social networks



In contact with others: In contact with family and friends not living with you sometimes or often in past week  
Adequate support network: Fair number or a lot of people you can rely on



# Mental health crisis due to isolation

*“Staying home without direct human contact for a very long period of time has been very rough, even with heavy use of electronic and phone communication ... ”*

*“Personally, the hardest impact has been how lonely I am. I am used to spending time with lots of friends and family and being completely alone is really difficult for me.”*

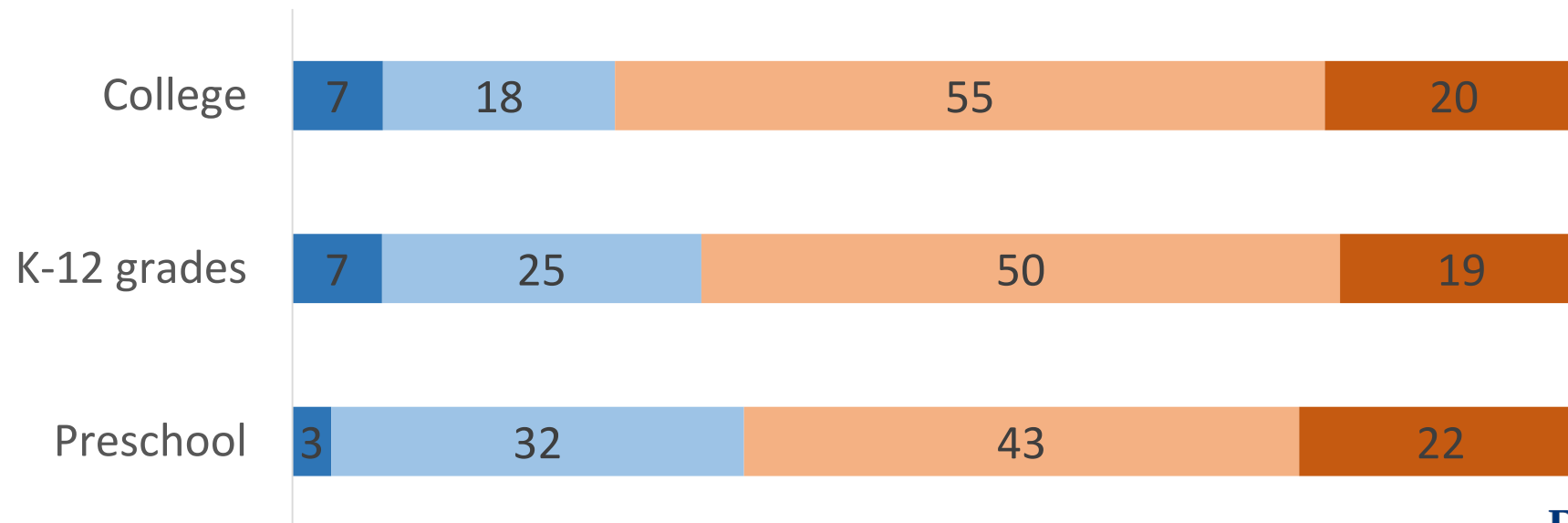
*“Sense of isolation; inability to visit and celebrate with family; frustration (and anger) with federal and state governments' response to the crisis.”*

# Well-being of children

- *Although most parents were coping well, and most parents thought their children were coping well..*
- *Most parents were somewhat or very concerned about their children's emotional and social well-being due to disruptions caused by the pandemic*

## Parental concern regarding child's emotional and social well-being

■ Not at all concerned   ■ Not too   ■ Somewhat   ■ Very concerned

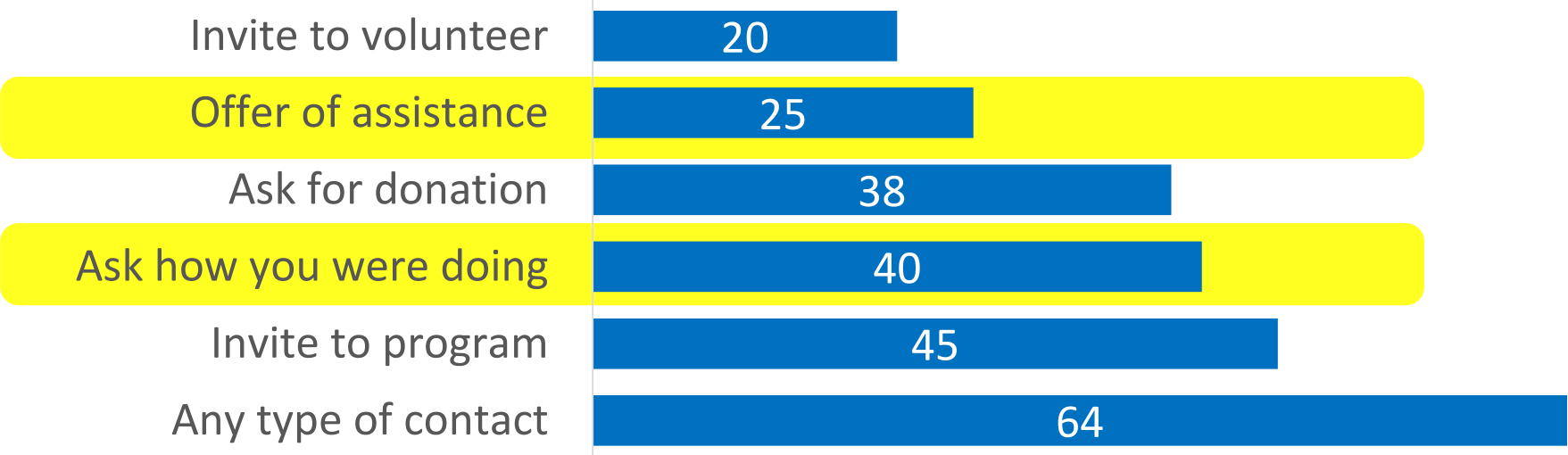


# Jewish institutions

# One-third of Jewish adults were not contacted by a Jewish organization in first months of crisis

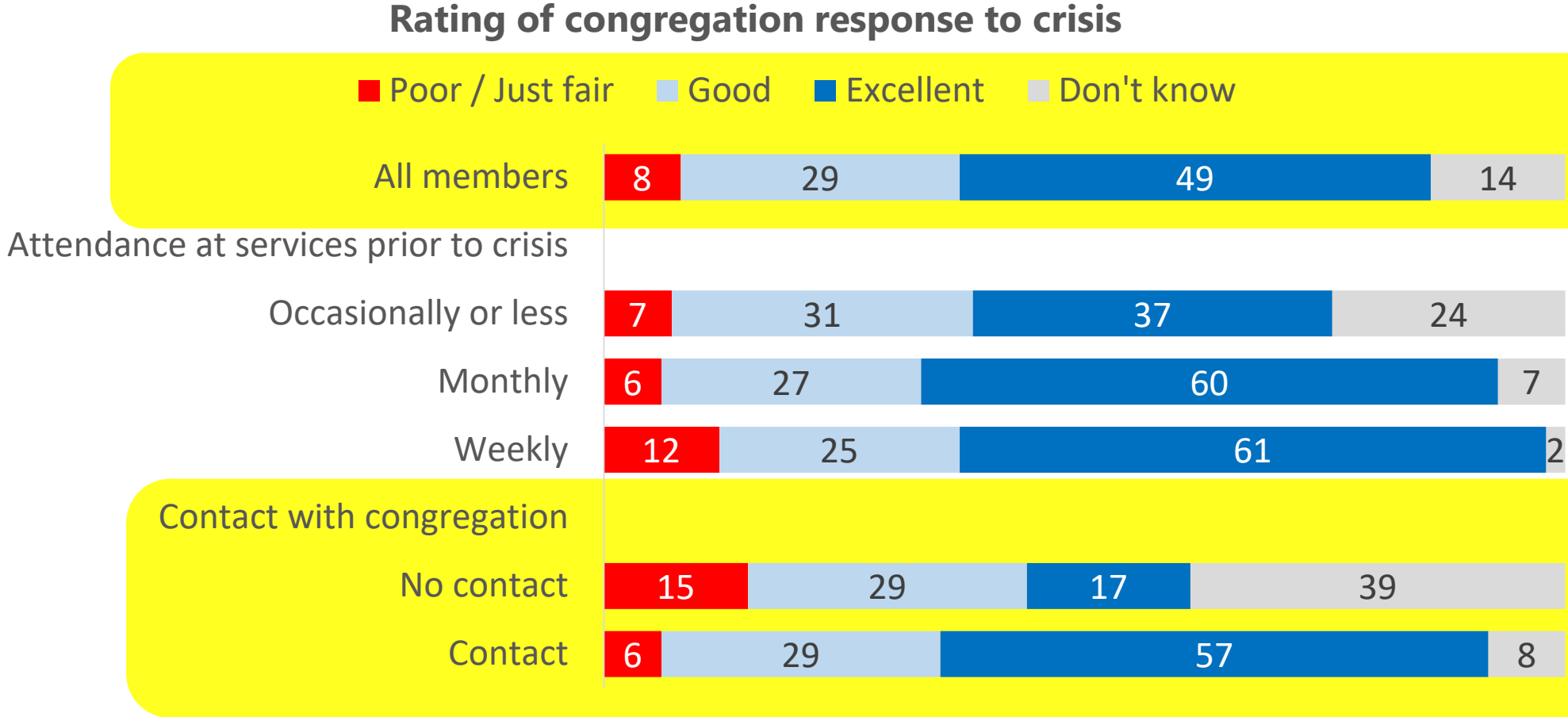
- *All respondents were on Federation list and known to community*
- *Respondents may have considered only personal messages as contacts*

Types of contact with Jewish organizations



# Most members thought congregations responded well

- Fewer than 5% anticipated leaving for nonfinancial reasons
- Higher ratings among those who were in contact with congregation



# Jewish life

# Online Jewish life: Opportunities and challenges

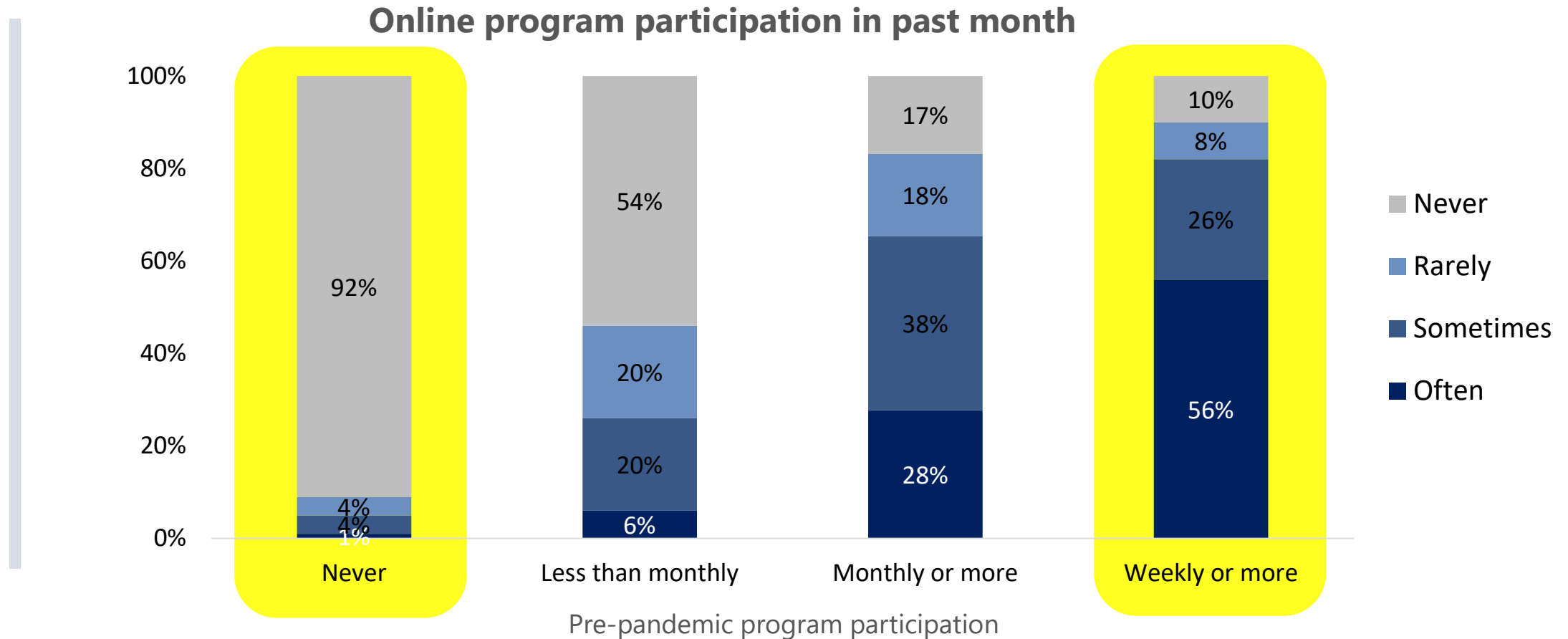
*“I have not traditionally been able to attend weekly services at my synagogue because they start too early. However, now we all make it a priority to end our work/school activities by 5:00 on Friday, log into services, and spend that time together as a family.”*

*“We have had a weekly Zoom "meeting" to celebrate Shabbat every Friday evening since mid-March. It includes our children, grandchildren and extended family. We've talked about continuing the new tradition after social isolation ends.”*

*“The biggest personal impact [of the pandemic] is isolation. It has confirmed for me that being with and around people is indispensable. This cannot be overcome with technology.”*

# Online Jewish life: Who participates?

Online Jewish life primarily appealed to those who were most engaged before





# Was Jewish belief a protective factor?

Findings from OU study of Orthodox Jews

Feelings of closeness to God *lowered* levels of depression and anxiety, *lessened* perceived stress, and *decreased* loneliness for many Orthodox Jewish adults.

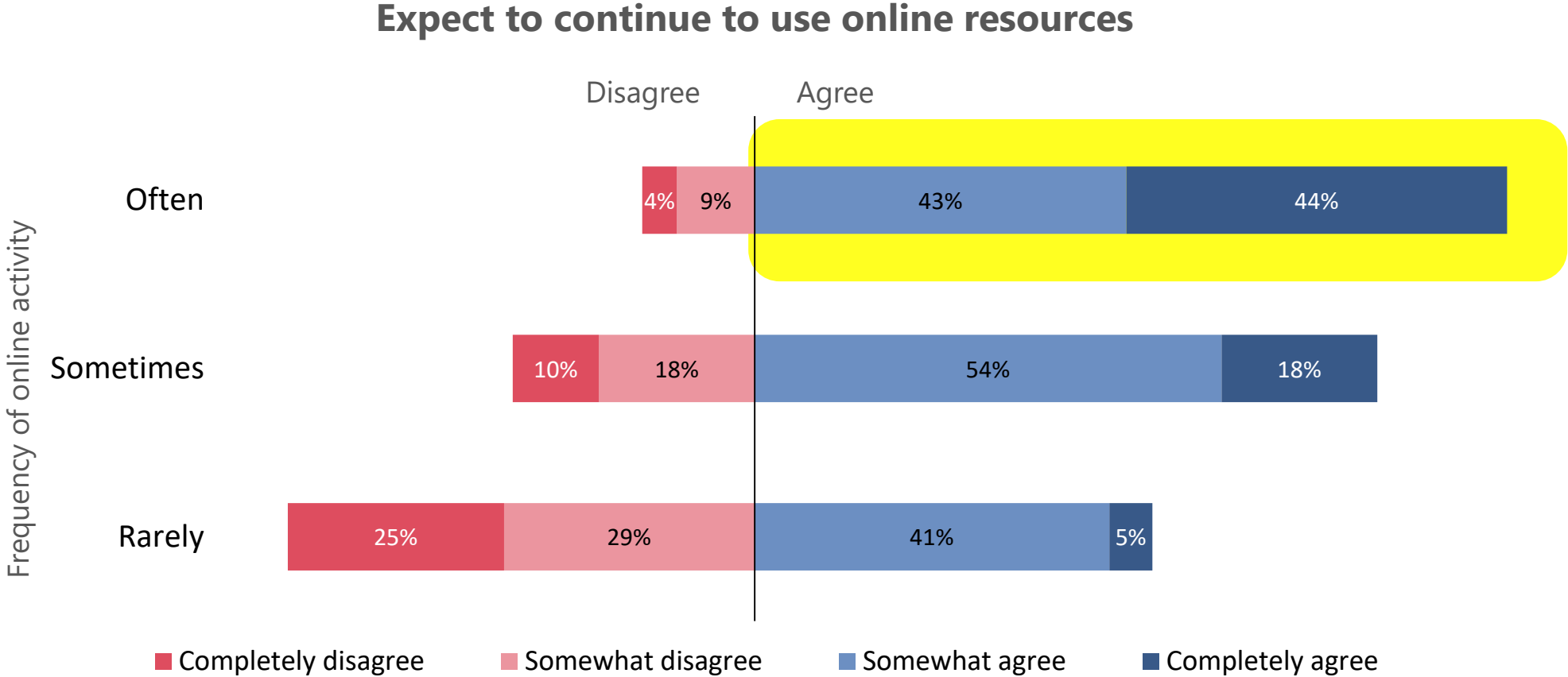
I am incredibly grateful and feel a strong sense of bracha. This all has hit the 'reset' button on my relationship with Hashem...creating a regrounding and has made my sense of Hashem and His presence with me more palpable and strong.

It has enhanced my belief that Hashem is in charge -- He runs the world, and can effect changes almost instantly

It hasn't impacted my thinking about God at all. It has only made me pray for the health of my loved ones more consciously.

# Future of online Jewish life

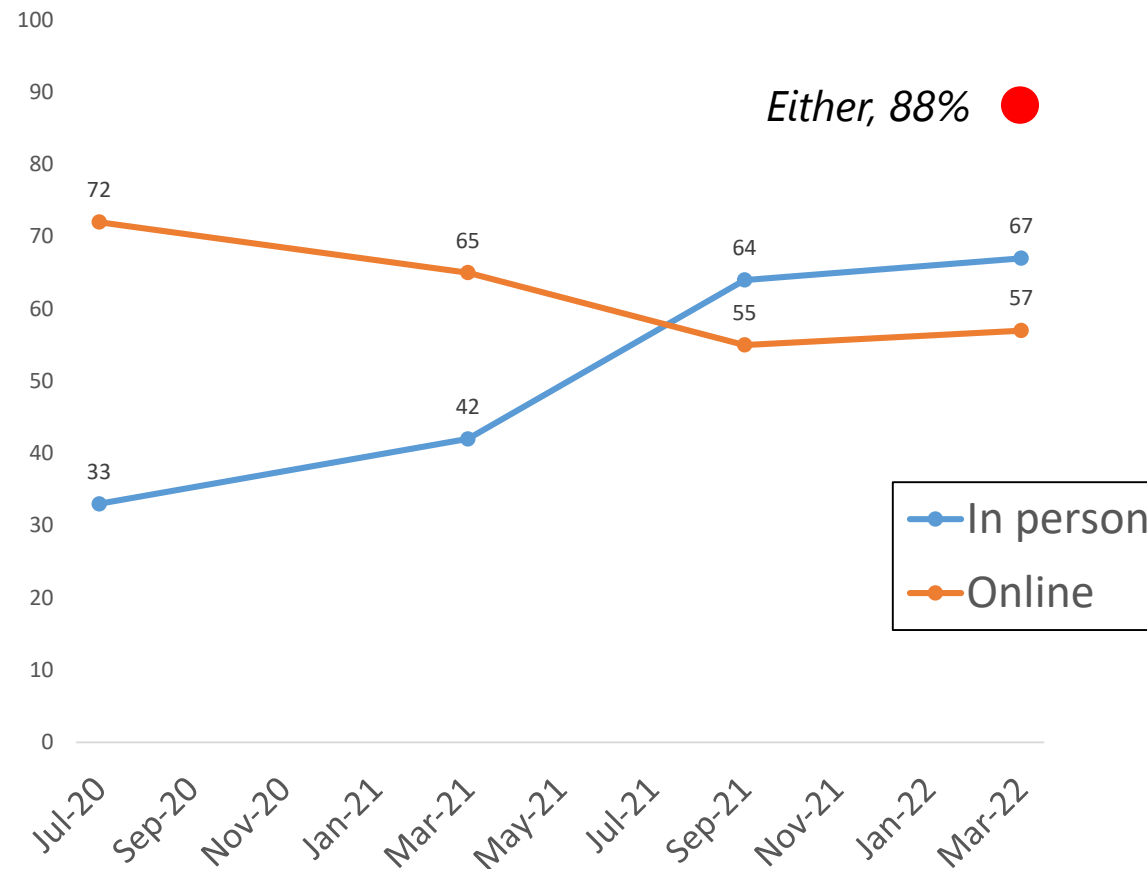
In 2020, over 85% of frequent users of online Jewish life expect to continue to participate



# What lies ahead?

Pew Research Center (Not Jewish), March 2022

## Religious service attendance ...all US adults who attended monthly pre-pandemic



# Opportunities and challenges: Takeaways

After two years, can we expect to return to status quo?

## Mental Health

Renewed attention to mental health needs, particularly among young adults and children

- National trend, not limited to Jewish community
- Loneliness as a community priority

## Financial needs

Renewed attention to economic divide between haves and have-nots in Jewish community

Struggling includes not only the traditional “poor,” but many working, highly educated families  
Will there be further difficulties as government aid declines?

## Jewish life

Jewish organizations should focus on outreach and personal connections

Online Jewish life is complement, not substitute, for in-person Jewish life

- Focus on hybrid models (example, remote lecture with in-person discussion groups)

Just as the beginning of the pandemic required thoughtful responses from Jewish organizations, so too will this post-pandemic transition present new opportunities and challenges.