

Robert Brym and Rhonda Lenton

Patterns of Canadian-Jewish Inter-marriage, 2021

Definitions of Inter marriage and “Jewish”

Inter marriage occurs when people from different religious, ethnic or social groups wed or live together in a common-law arrangement. As is customary in the literature, we refer to both these conditions as inter marriage. This paper briefly examines how Canadian Jewish inter marriage rates vary across time, gender, age cohort, and community size. It also compares the inter marriage rate for Canadian Jews with the rate for Canadian Catholics and Protestants (by far the two largest religious groups in Canada), and the Canadian Jewish rate with the corresponding rate in a few other countries. Finally, it examines factors affecting the likelihood that children of religious inter marriage will be raised Jewish. The main data source for this paper consists of custom tabulations from the 2021 Census of Canada.

For the most part we analyze the inter marriage rate of Jews by religion. On occasion we discuss the inter marriage rate of Jews according to what demographer Charles Shahar calls the “standard definition” of Jewish.¹ By that standard, Jews are individuals who identify themselves as Jewish by religion or say they identify with no religion but identify as Jewish by ethnicity or culture. We define the inter marriage rate as is typical in the literature: the number of marriages in which one spouse is Jewish and the other spouse is non-Jewish divided by the number of marriages with at least one Jewish spouse.²

We restrict our analysis to heterosexual married couples because Statistics Canada custom tabulations on Jewish gay and lesbian married couples are unavailable as of this writing.

Tendencies in Canadian-Jewish Marriage

The Jewish inter marriage rate in Canada varies across five key variables, irrespective of which definition of Jewish is applied:³

- *Time.* Canadian Jewish inter marriage was rare a century ago but has been increasing since then. The rate of inter marriage has increased as Canadian society has secularized, prejudice against Jews has declined, Jews have become more acculturated, and Jewish/non-Jewish interactions and associations have become more common in education, work, and leisure activities.
- *Gender.* Jewish men have been somewhat more likely to inter marry than have Jewish women, although this tendency declined as women became less restricted to domestic roles and more engaged in interactions and associations in the public sphere.
- *Age.* Younger Jews have a higher inter marriage rate than do older Jews because they have had more opportunities to interact and associate with non-

Jews. However, the higher intermarriage rate among young Jews is partly a life-cycle phenomenon. Jews in their late teens and twenties have not yet reached the mean age of marriage in Canada, now about thirty-one years. As currently unmarried young Jews age and marry, their eventual inter-marriage rate will be revealed.

- *Community size.* Intermarriage varies strongly with the size of the pool of potential Jewish marriage partners in a given locale. The intermarriage rate is lower in large Jewish communities than in small Jewish communities.
- *Country.* The intermarriage rate in Canada is about the same as the rate in the UK and Australia, but roughly one-half the rate in the US.

Table 1 adds data to some of the foregoing generalizations.

In 2011, the Canadian Jewish intermarriage was about 20 percent for Jews by religion and 26 percent for Jews by the standard definition.⁴ By 2021, the respective rates had risen to more than 27 percent and nearly 33 percent.⁵ Clearly, individuals who define themselves as Jewish by religion are less likely to intermarry than are individuals who define themselves as Jewish by ethnicity or culture and identify with no religion.

Table 1 Religious intermarriage among Jews, Catholics, and Protestants, Canada, 2021 (percent in parentheses)			
Spouse 1 Jewish			
	Spouse 2 Jewish	Spouse 2 not Jewish	Total
Age spouse 1			
Under 40	11,440 (63.7)	6,525 (36.3)	17,965 (100.0)
40+	50,190 (75.0)	16,740 (25.0)	66,930 (100.0)
Total	61,625 (72.6)	23,275 (27.4)	84,900 (100.0)
Spouse 1 Catholic			
	Spouse 2 Catholic	Spouse 2 not Catholic	Total
Age spouse 1			
Under 40	346,415 (73.4)	125,370 (26.6)	471,785 (100.0)
40+	1,855,670 (82.3)	400,135 (17.7)	2,255,805 (100.0)
Total	2,202,090 (80.7)	525,500 (19.3)	2,727,590 (100.0)
Spouse 1 Protestant			
	Spouse 2 Protestant	Spouse 2 not Protestant	Total
Age spouse 1			
Under 40	98,010 (62.1)	59,710 (37.9)	157,720 (100.0)
40+	906,395 (72.8)	339,370 (27.2)	1,245,765 (100.0)
Total	1,004,400 (71.6)	399,085 (28.4)	1,403,485 (100.0)
Note: Some percentages may not total exactly 100.0 due to rounding.			
Source: Custom tabulation from the 2021 Census of Canada.			

Table 1 also shows that in 2021 Jews by religion under the age of forty were about 11 percentage points more likely to be intermarried than were Jews over the age of thirty-nine (36 percent versus 25 percent).

Intermarriage among Jews, Protestants, and Catholics

According to Table 1, the rate of religious intermarriage among Jews was 8 percentage points higher than the rate for Catholics and 1 percentage point *lower* than the rate for Protestants.

Catholics form the largest religious group in the country while Protestants rank second. The two groups comprise nearly 82 percent of Canadians who identify with a religion. In contrast, Jews comprise just under 1 percent of Canadians who identify with a religion, numbering fewer than Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Buddhists.⁶

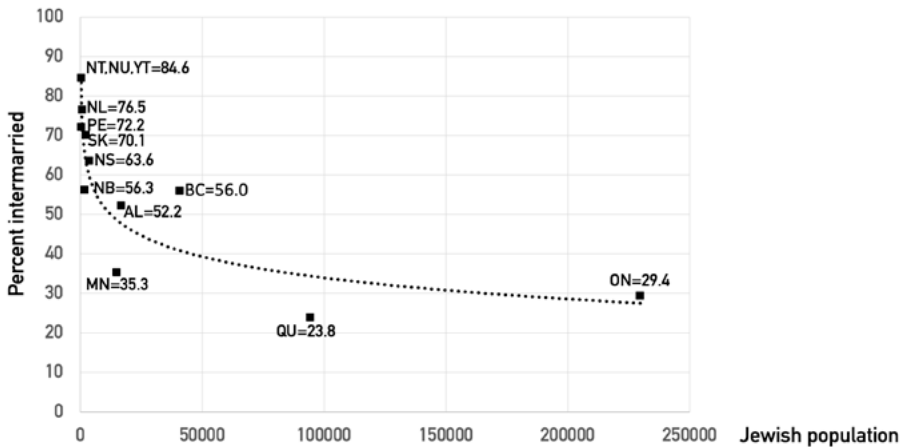
Based on population size alone, one would expect Canadian Jews to have a much higher intermarriage rate than do Canadian Catholics and Protestants. Yet all else is not the same. The Canadian Jewish community is relatively socially cohesive for such a small population group and is overwhelmingly concentrated in two very large communities (Toronto and Montreal) and three large communities (Vancouver, Ottawa, and Winnipeg), each with substantial pools of potential Jewish marriage partners. In 2021, nearly 87 percent of Canada's Jews by religion resided in these five cities, almost 74 percent in Toronto and Montreal alone.⁷

Intermarriage and Community Size

Figure 1 illustrates the tendency for the intermarriage rate to decline with community size. Using the standard definition of Jewish, it plots the Jewish intermarriage rate by the number of Jews in each province and the northern territories. (The pattern is similar when census metropolitan areas are the units of analysis instead of provinces and territories.)

The plot forms a nearly perfect logarithmic curve. This means that, in areas with few Jews, a small increase in the number of Jews results in a relatively large decline in the intermarriage rate, while in areas with many Jews, a large increase in the number of Jews results in a relatively small decline in the intermarriage rate. For example, the expected decline in the intermarriage rate as the Jewish population increases from two thousand to four thousand is about 15 percentage points, while the expected decline in the intermarriage rate as the Jewish population increases from one hundred thousand to one hundred and fifty thousand is only about 3 percentage points.

Figure 1 Inter-marriage rate for Jews (standard definition), by Jewish population, provinces and territories, 2021, in percent



Source: Custom tabulation from the 2021 Census of Canada.

The largest deviation from the logarithmic pattern in Figure 1 is that of British Columbia, the province with the third-largest number of Jews and an intermarriage rate about 16 percentage points higher than the curve anticipates. Its deviation may be due partly to the fact that British Columbia's Jewish population has grown relatively quickly in recent decades. A high rate of Jewish in-migration likely means that a relatively large proportion of the Jewish population has comparatively weak ties to the local Jewish community. Moreover, 83 percent of British Columbia's Jews reside in Vancouver, Victoria, and Kelowna, and in those three cities combined, 31 percent of Jews by the standard definition said they identify with no religion in 2021. As noted earlier, Jews who identify with no religion tend to intermarry at a significantly higher rate than do Jews who identify as Jewish by religion.⁸ Future research should control for the rate of Jewish in-migration and the percentage of Jews with no religion when examining the relationship between intermarriage and community size. Our expectation is that, with these controls, the relationship between intermarriage and community size will weaken.

The second largest deviation from the logarithmic pattern is Manitoba, where the intermarriage rate is around 15 percentage points *lower* than the curve predicts. Ninety-four percent of Manitoba's Jewish population reside in Winnipeg, but the proportion of Winnipeg Jews who identify with no religion is not especially small; nearly 20 percent of Jews in that city say they identify with no religion. However, the rate of Jewish in-migration to Winnipeg is comparatively low—net Jewish out-migration has worried community members for decades—and that alone may account for Winnipeg's Jewish community having an unexpectedly low intermarriage rate for a community its size.

The third largest deviation from the logarithmic pattern in Figure 1 is Quebec, where the rate of Jewish intermarriage in 2021 was about 11 percentage points lower than the curve anticipates. Our impression is that Montreal’s rate of Jewish in-migration is relatively modest—like Winnipeg, its Jewish population actually shrank between 1976 and 2016—and this likely contributes to its unusually low intermarriage rate. Moreover, nearly 96 percent of Quebec’s Jews reside in Montreal, and Montreal has the county’s lowest proportion of Jews by ethnicity who say they identify with no religion of any Census Metropolitan Area—9 percent of all Montreal Jews by the standard definition. Canada’s largest Haredi community is found in Montreal, amounting to more than one-fifth of the metropolitan area’s Jewish population. Haredim undoubtedly exert a downward pull on the intermarriage rate.

Offspring of Intermarried Couples

A good indicator of a family’s religious atmosphere is the religion in which the youngest child in the family is raised. Table 2, based on 2021 census data, divides all couple families with at least one Jewish member of the couple into three types—those who were raising their youngest child Jewish (nearly 64 percent of the total), those who were raising their youngest child with no religion (more than 30 percent of the total), and those who were raising their child in a non-Jewish religion (just over 6 percent of the total).

Table 2 Jewish couple families with children living at home, by religion of youngest child, 2021 (percent in parentheses)				
	Spouses			
	Both Jewish	Only husband Jewish	Only wife Jewish	Total
Children				
Youngest child, Jewish religion	31,940 (94.4)	2,770 (17.8)	5,280 (39.0)	39,990 (63.5)
Youngest child, no religion	1,850 (5.5)	10,020 (64.3)	7,235 (53.4)	19,105 (30.3)
Youngest child, non-Jewish religion	55 (0.1)	2,795 (17.9)	1,025 (7.6)	3,875 (6.2)
Total	33,845 (100.0)	15,585 (100.0)	13,540 (100.0)	62,970 (100.0)
Notes: (1) The 2021 census records 290 families in which neither parent was Jewish and the youngest child was being raised Jewish. These families may represent coding errors and are therefore not included in this table. (2) Some percentages may not total exactly 100.0 due to rounding. Source: Custom tabulation from the 2021 Census of Canada.				

Table 2 shows that, in 2021, 39 percent of religiously intermarried families in which the wife was Jewish were raising the youngest child Jewish (Table 2). The comparable figure for religiously intermarried families in which the husband was Jewish was

less than 18 percent. Thus, the youngest offspring of Jewish intermarriages are more than twice as likely to be raised as Jews if the wife is Jewish than if the husband is Jewish. A similar but less pronounced gender difference is evident when we compare intermarried families in which the youngest child is raised in no religion. Such cases represent 64 percent of intermarriages in which the husband is Jewish but just 53 percent of cases in which the wife is Jewish.

What factors are responsible for these gender differences? Research shows that, in Canada, women in general tend to be more religious than men are and they are more likely than men are to be the primary caregiver in families and therefore have greater influence on offspring.⁹ It seems likely that these patterns hold for Jews, but in the absence of research on the subject this remains a matter of speculation.

The most common pattern in both types of families is for the youngest child to be raised with no religion. That pattern is evident in more than 53 percent of intermarried families in which the wife is a Jew and more than 64 percent of families in which the husband is a Jew. Because ethnic identification is a valid criterion for being considered Jewish by the standard definition, and because, as noted, a substantial percentage of intermarried parents are raising their children as Jews by religion, we would not be surprised if future research discovers that more one-half of the children in intermarried Jewish families remain Jewish by the standard definition when they become adults.

The least common pattern in intermarried families is for the youngest child to be raised in a non-Jewish religion. In 2021, this was the case in fewer than 8 percent of intermarried families where the wife was a Jew and in just under 18 percent of intermarried families in which the husband was a Jew.

Finally, previous research shows that, in intermarried families, the propensity to raise children Jewish, belong to a synagogue or other Jewish organization, light Shabbat candles, attend religious services, and donate to a Jewish organization is substantially higher in Canada than in the US. Moreover, earlier research shows that the rate of intermarriage is influenced by sources of immigration and the number of years parents attended Jewish day school. That is, controlling for other relevant factors, individuals with more years of education in a Jewish day school are less likely to religiously intermarry than are individuals with fewer years of education in a Jewish day school. And Jewish immigrants from Europe, excluding the former Soviet Union, have a relatively high Jewish intermarriage rate, while Jewish immigrants from Israel and the rest of the North Africa/Middle East region have a relatively low Jewish intermarriage rate.

Robert Brym is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Toronto. His main research projects have focused on the politics of intellectuals, Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union and its successor states, the second intifada, and Jews in Canada. For downloads of his published work, visit <https://utoronto.academia.edu/RobertBrym>.

Rhonda Lenton is president and vice-chancellor, York University, and a sociologist by training. Her areas of specialization include gender, quantitative research methods, and higher education. She previously worked at McMaster University, and is co-author (with Robert Brym and Keith Neuman) of the 2018 *Survey of Jews in Canada* (2019) and (with Robert Brym) "Jewish Religious Inter-marriage in Canada," *Canadian Jewish Studies / Études Juives Canadiennes* 30 (2020).

1

Charles Shahar, 2021: *The Jewish Population of Canada* (Toronto: Jewish Federations of Canada, 2023).

2

Charles Shahar and Randal Schnoor, 2011 *National Household Survey: The Jewish Population of Canada: Part 5, The Jewish Family; Part 6, Intermarriage* (Toronto: Jewish Federations of Canada-UIA, 2015).

3

Robert Brym and Rhonda Lenton, "Jewish Religious Intermarriage in Canada," *Canadian Jewish Studies / Études juives canadiennes* 30 (2020), 67-82.

4

Ibid.; Shahar and Schnoor, 2011 *National Household Survey*, 29.

5

Custom tabulation from the 2021 Census of Canada.

6

Statistics Canada (2023a), Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population: Profile table, <https://tinyurl.com/2xv29r8r>.

7

Robert Brym, "Canadian Jewish Population 2021: Focus on Occupational and Social Integration," *American Jewish Year Book 2021*, vol. 121, edited by Arnold Dashefsky and Ira M. Sheskin (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022),

299-312; Robert Brym, "Canada's Jewish Population, 2023: Focus on Minorities and Attitudes toward Israel's New Government," *American Jewish Year Book 2023*, vol. 123, edited by Arnold Dashefsky and Ira M. Sheskin (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2024a), 291-308.

8

Robert Brym, "Jewish Continuity and the Canadian Census," *Canadian Jewish Studies / Études juives canadiennes* 39 (2024), 14-31; Brym, "Canada's Jewish Population, 2023."

9

Louis Cornelissen, "Religiosity in Canada and its Evolution from 1985 to 2019," Statistics Canada, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/y9yj7msm>; Statistics Canada, 2022, "More than Half of Women Provide Care to Children and Care-Dependent adults in Canada, 2022," <https://tinyurl.com/mr2jhrs>.