

New study sheds light on U.S. Latino Jewish population

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(RNS) As a group, Jewish Latinos don't get much attention—either from Jewish or Latino-Latina communities in the U.S.

The first detailed survey of Americans who are both Latino or Latina and Jewish aims to shed light on this minority within a minority, who number more than 200,000 people. Among the conclusions of the recently released study: Latino and Latina Jewish people are proud of their dual identities, but also distinct within the larger American Jewish and Latino-Latina American population.

"They don't really fit in Latin America and they don't really fit here either," said Juan Mejia, a Colombian-born rabbi who converted to Judaism. Mejia now works in Oklahoma and speaks and writes about Jewish Latino and Latina people. He said the new survey resonated with him

In Latin America "they were religiously deviant in mostly Catholic countries," Mejia said. And American Jewish people, whose ancestors mostly came from Europe, often "don't know how to relate to them either."

Mejia gave the example of one New York Jewish person who found out that Mejia was from Colombia and responded, "My cleaning lady is Colombian." Latin American Jewish people are in the whole highly educated, and wealthier than American Jewish people in general. Nearly seven in ten Latino-Latina Jewish households earn more than \$100,000 a year, compared with 30 percent of American Jewish households.

The study's authors also found that members of the group feel strongly connected to Israel and their families' Latin American homelands, even if they weren't born there.

“They are looking for a space of their own to articulate their multiple identities,” said Dina Siegel Vann, who is originally from Mexico City and directs an institute for Latino affairs at the American Jewish Committee.

The AJC commissioned the study, which was conducted by Latino Decisions, a public opinion firm that convened ten focus groups of Latin American Jews in five cities with significant Latino-Latina Jewish populations: Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, and New York.

According to the survey, Latino and Latina American Jewish people feel very connected to the American Jewish community through Jewish culture and ritual. At the same time, focus groups members consistently described American Jewish people as more formal in their social and religious practices, “making it difficult to relate at a personal level.” Many Latino and Latina American Jewish people doubted that most American Jewish people knew of their presence in the U.S.

“Every time I say ‘I’m a Mexican Jew,’ they say, ‘Oh, so your mom converted,’ because they don’t think we exist,” said one focus group participant.

Latino and Latina Jewish people said they related to the Latin American community through the Spanish language and a shared love for close families, great parties and the entrepreneurial spirit. They cited class and socio-economic differences as barriers between Jewish and non-Jewish Latino and Latina people.

“Most felt that non-Jewish Latinos have limited experience or information about Jews altogether,” the survey concluded.

Jewish communities in Latin America were built out of migrations that started in the late 19th century. The descendants of these immigrants who now live in the U.S. are overwhelmingly American citizens: 81 percent.

Latin American Jewish people are not necessarily from a Sephardic background, those whose families originally came from Spain. Many Latino and Latina Jewish people in the U.S. are Ashkenazi, descended from German and Eastern European Jews.

Focus group participants talked about strong and enduring ties to Latin America. They frequently visit family, conduct business and keep up with current events and the Jewish communities in those nations.

Latino and Latina Jewish people also reported a particularly strong affinity for Israel and said their Jewishness centered more on ties to the Jewish state and Jewish culture than on synagogue or religious practice. “News from Israel does not feel like it’s ‘over there’; it’s right here,” said one focus group member.