Living on the Edge: Economic Insecurity among Jewish Households in Greater Rhode Island

Fern Chertok & Daniel Parmer

Executive Summary

Rhode Island families including Jewish households were especially hard hit by the recent economic downturn and there is little indication of improved conditions on the horizon. The Jewish Alliance of Greater Rhode Island faces difficult decisions about how and where to best deploy its funds to address economic need in Jewish households. Research was conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS) at Brandeis University to more fully understand the economic challenges and needs of Jewish households in the catchment communities of the Alliance. The study employed several streams of information about the economic condition of Jewish households, including examination of macro-level indicators, a community scan of services currently available, systematic collection of information about requests for assistance at the synagogue level, and in-depth interviews with individuals currently experiencing economic hardship.

**Economic Insecurity;** **Poverty, Near Poverty, and Economic Vulnerability**

Using a tripartite definition of contemporary economic insecurity – poverty, near poverty, and economic vulnerability – the findings suggest that a substantial portion of Jewish households in the communities served by the Alliance face economic difficulty. A small portion (under 2%) of Jews in Alliance catchment areas fall below the federal poverty guidelines (FPG). Approximately 18% of Jewish households live in near poverty defined as income higher than the FPG but at or lower than 200% FPG. One of the unfortunate hallmarks of near poverty is that these households struggle to make ends meet, but earn too much to be eligible for most forms of public assistance. The third category, economically vulnerable, refers to households who earn more than 200% FPG and less than the median income. Approximately 30% of Jewish households in Alliance service areas fall into this situation. Although the upper end of this range would appear to provide sufficient income, the reality is that even families earning the median income are stretched to meet basic costs of living in Rhode Island. Households earning the median income are also characterized by a limited financial safety net and unexpected costs can be the difference between financial security and debt or delinquency. With fixed incomes, few employment opportunities, and rising costs of living, many seniors and the elderly find themselves in the category of economic vulnerability.

Economic scenarios were developed for two broadly representative communities: Warwick and Attleboro as well as for the Orthodox community of Providence. Adapting the approach of the Economic Progress Institute of Rhode Island, an economic scenario was developed for each community based on the income and expenses of a family of four for Warwick and Attleboro and a family of five for the Providence Orthodox community. These three community economic portraits suggest that Jewish households earning even the median income will struggle to cover their basic needs. Even modest unexpected costs such as those needed to repair a vehicle or a household appliance may strain their economic security. With limited or no surplus each month, families earning the median income face a tenuous economic situation. Although the current analyses focus on three specific communities the economic portraits developed relate to many communities falling under the Alliance umbrella.

For many Jews and the Orthodox especially, living a Jewish life necessitates a variety of additional costs. For Orthodox households the costs for Jewish living entail kosher food, *mikvah* fees, and enrollment in one of Providence’s Jewish day schools. For Non-Orthodox families the costs of Jewish participation include synagogue membership and formal and informal Jewish education. This analysis indicates that for many Jewish households in Alliance catchment communities, including those making the median income, the costs associated with Jewish living and communal participation can represent a significant and often untenable stretch to their financial resources.

In order to gather systematic information about the types of need brought to the attention of synagogue rabbis and professional staff, the study developed and implemented an on-line data collection system. One of the striking elements of the congregational data is that most of the requests made to synagogues were for relatively small amounts (less than $100) often to tide the household over until the next paycheck. The majority of the requests came from households experiencing difficulty paying bills or providing adequate nutrition to their family. Over half of the households contacting clergy or congregational social workers for assistance were described as underemployed and 12% had experienced a job loss. In almost equal proportions, the requests made to synagogues seem to originate from two populations in need: economically vulnerable households within the congregation and households in poverty or near-poverty from outside the congregation.

**Recommendations**

The picture that emerges from the current analyses is that economic insecurity is a reality for upwards of half of the Jewish households in the communities served by the Alliance. The economic stability of these households can change month to month and even modest unexpected expenses or loss of hours at work can catapult a family earning the median income into hardship and the need for external assistance. Several suggestions are made for short and longer term action. Some are focused on establishing context, frameworks, and norms for community wide investment to address the economic needs of local Jewish households. Other suggestions are focused on meeting the more immediate needs of households in a timely manner that preserves their dignity.

* ***Teach the “Torah” of Giving and Receiving Help:*** The Alliance in collaboration with communal organizations should create new framework for teaching the “torah” of assistance which recognizes both giving and receiving help as integral to Jewish tradition.
* ***Establish a “Chevre Fund”:*** The Alliance should develop a Chevre Fund supported through crowd funding for meeting the immediate needs of Jewish households facing economic turbulence.
* ***Design a One-stop Portal for Services and Assistance:*** What is needed is a single point of entry for Jewish households in Rhode Island as they try to navigate the services to which they may be eligible.
* ***Broker Job Search Services for Under- and Unemployed:*** There is a clear need for career and job search services for both the under and unemployed brokered through Jewish communal organizations in neighboring states.
* ***Identify Resources for Assisting those on the Margins:*** Resources such as case management referral and education are needed on how best to approach individuals whose financial instability is a byproduct of their social marginalization.
* ***Establish a Forecasting Committee:***  The Alliance, in collaboration with other communal organizations, should create a committee to periodically take the economic pulse of the community and scan for new areas or populations experiencing economic hardship.

Reaching out to those that are facing economic insecurity, be it poverty, near poverty or economic vulnerability is a central task for the Jewish community. The Jewish community knows how to mobilize to address rapidly emerging and changing situations around the world as evidenced by the communal response to rescue and resettle Soviet Jewry (Beckerman, 2010). By contrast, chronic internal issues such as economic insecurity seem to creep up on the community unawares. The Jewish community needs t be as vigilant in safeguarding the wellbeing of local community members. The Jewish Alliance of Greater Rhode Island has taken an important first step towards developing an effective, respectful and fundamentally Jewish approach to economic insecurity within its households.