

When the Birthright Experience Leads to Greater Involvement with Jewish Life

Presentation for Cohen Center Taglit-Birthright conference

Session:

Israel Experience Programs - Past, Present, and Future

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What happens to Birthright participants after the first trip to Israel?

- Can a first time Israel experience for a young adult serve as a spring board into more intensive involvement in Jewish life?
- If so, what are the conditions in which intensified involvement takes place?

Two Jewish Populations

1. Marginally affiliated

- Low level of Israel travel prior to college
- Birthright targets this population.

2. Affiliated

- Travel to Israel prior to college
- Children of affiliated Jewish families, who belong to organizations that send their constituents to Israel
- Do not qualify for Birthright.

Question:

Does participation on a Birthright trip lead the young adult from marginally affiliated home to engage in more intensive Jewish involvement?

Answer One: Low involvement

Birthright sponsored research shows high impact on a participants' cognitive and emotional connection to Israel, but relatively low levels of increased Jewish involvement after participants' graduate college.¹

¹ Chertok, Fern, Theodore Sasson and Leonard Saxe. 2009. ["Tourists, Travelers, and Citizens: Jewish Engagement of Young Adults in Four Centers of North American Jewish Life,"](#) Boston: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University.

Answer Two: Look at the Exceptions

- Low involvement might be correct when we look at the entire population of Birthright alumni; however, a minority of Birthright alumni do engage with Jewish life in an intensive fashion
- An understanding of how they become involved and what they pursue will provide insight into how the Israel experience might better promote greater Jewish involvement.

Three Case Studies

Explore

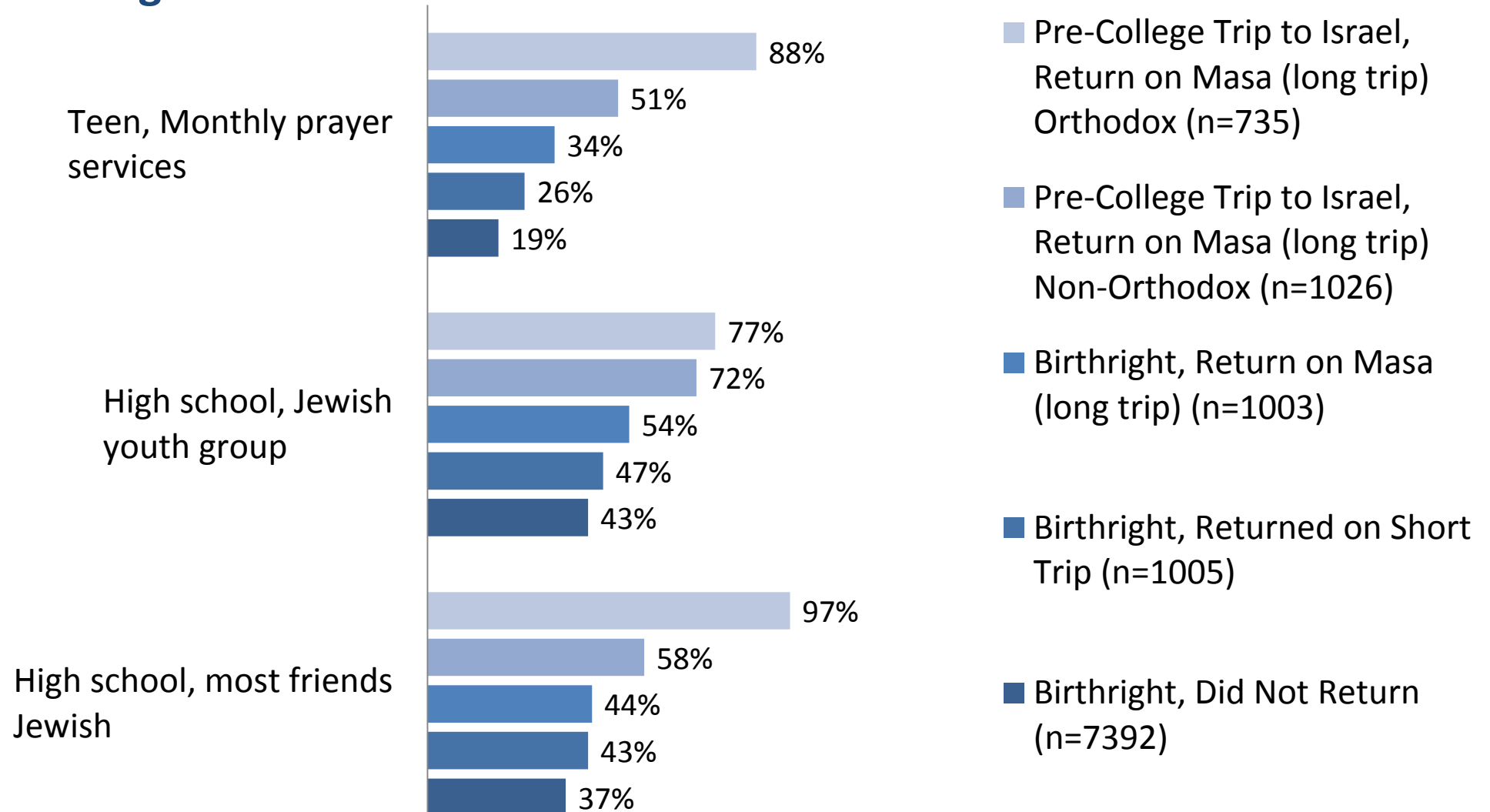
- Scale and nature of Jewish engagement by marginally affiliated Birthright alumni after their first Israel trip
- Conditions that facilitate post-trip involvement.

Case Study One: A Return Trip to Israel

- 22% of Birthright alumni return to Israel after their initial trip.²
 - 11% participate on four month or longer programs in the Masa Israel framework
 - 11% on other shorter programs
- 78% do not return to Israel
- Of Masa participants aged 23 and over, 58% were on Birthright!

² Cohen, Steven M. and Ezra Kopelowitz. 2010. [“Journeys to Israel: The impact of longer-term programs upon Jewish Engagement & Israel Attachment.”](#) Jerusalem: The Jewish Agency for Israel.

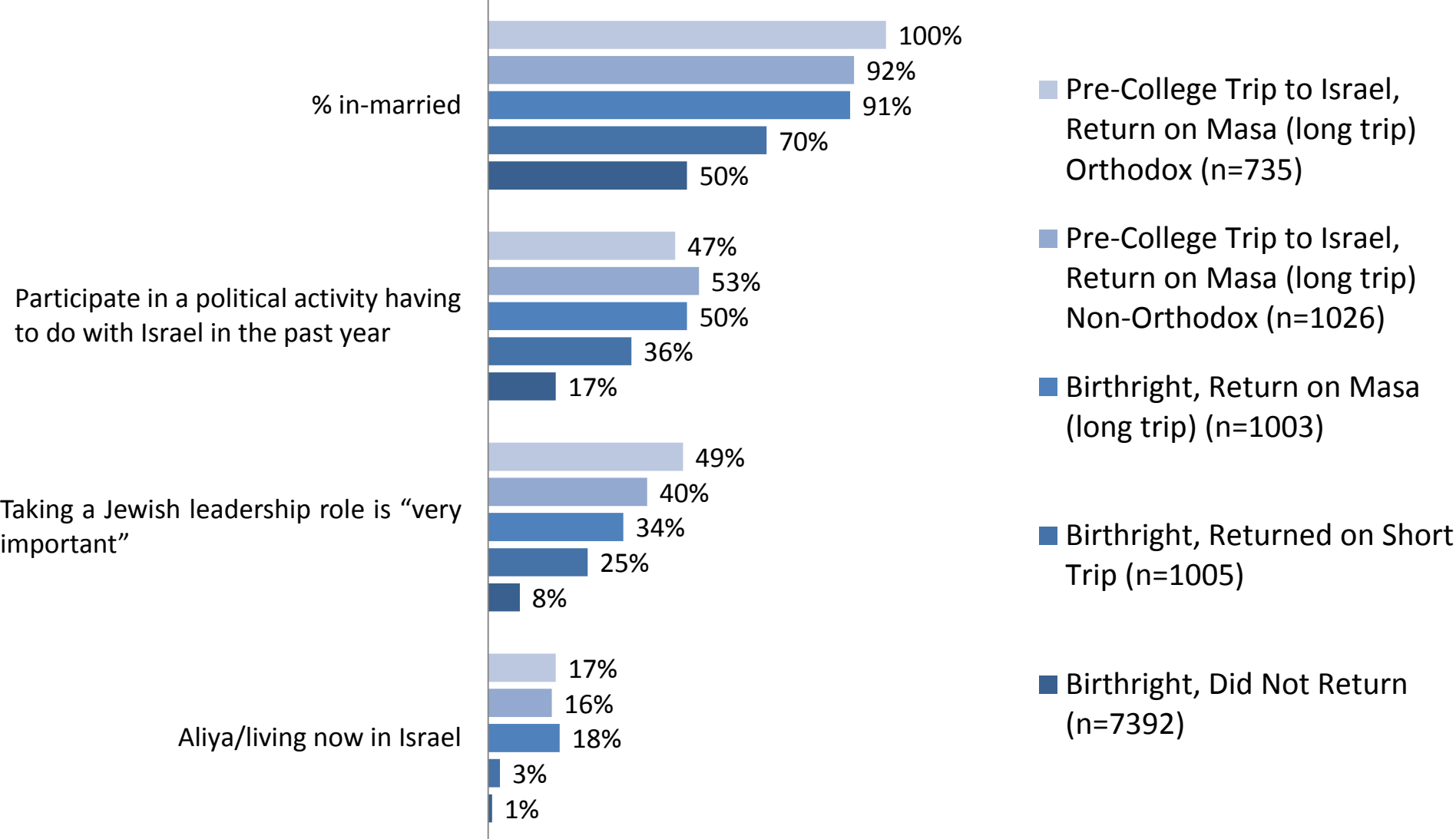
Birthright alumni show low to moderate childhood Jewish socialization, with those returning on a second trip coming from stronger Jewish backgrounds, but still significantly weaker than those who do not go on Birthright.



The Second Trip

- Birthright alumni who return to Israel for a second trip are far more involved with Israel and Jewish life than those who do not return
- Those who return on a longer second trip are more involved than those who return on a shorter trip.

Birthright alumni who return to Israel begin to look like those who grew up affiliated, which is particularly the case for those who return on longer trips.



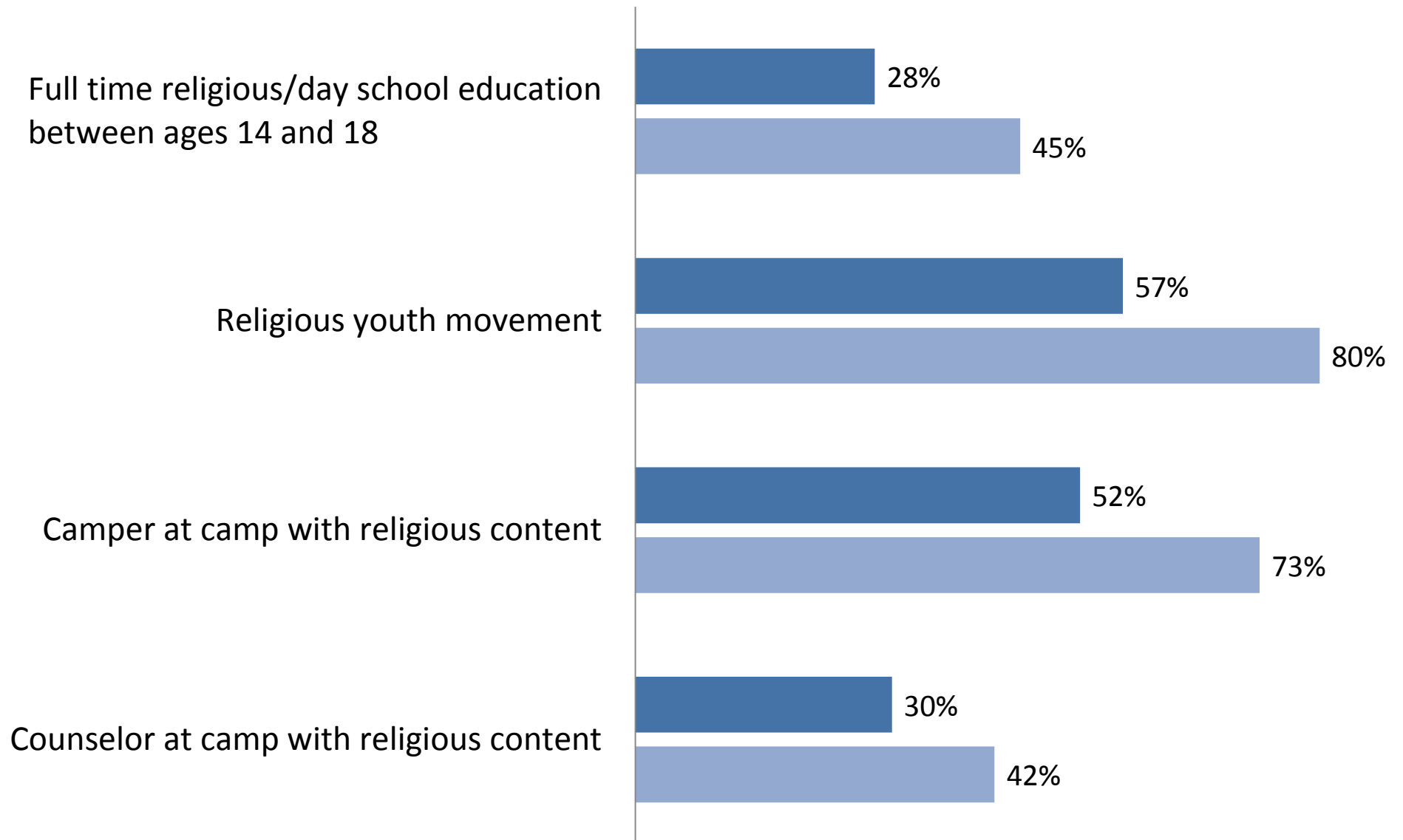
Case Study Two: Involvement with Israel advocacy

A national survey recently conducted of teen and young adult pro-Israel advocates found a similar story.

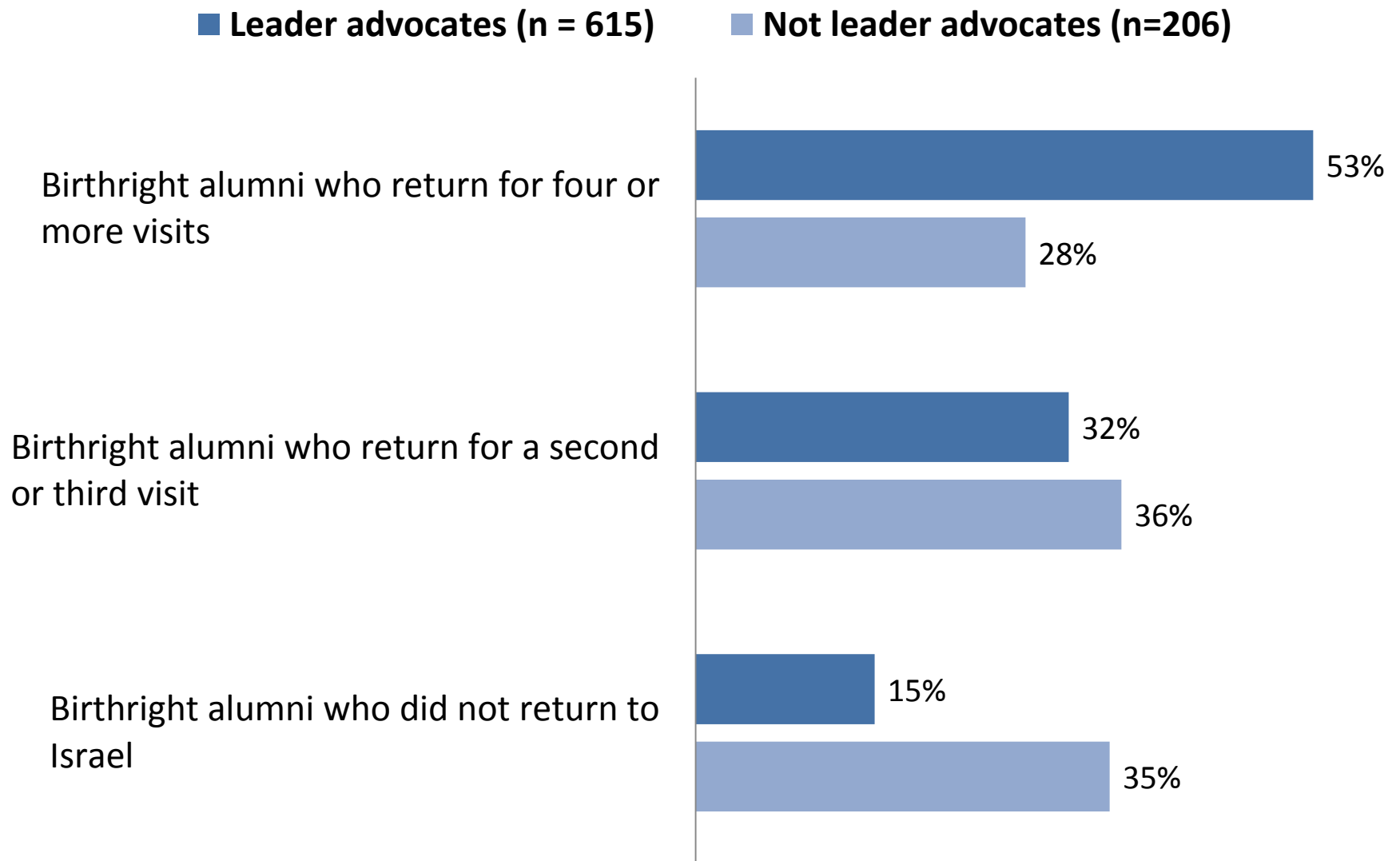
- The most active “leader advocates,” are organizers and initiators of Israel advocacy activism and are for the most part raised in strongly affiliated Jewish homes.
- The major exception: 26% of the leader advocates who are Birthright alumni and have a weaker level of childhood Jewish affiliation.

Israel leader advocates who traveled to Israel on Birthright come from less affiliated backgrounds

■ Leader advocate who traveled to Israel on Birthright (N=615) ■ Other leader advocates (n = 1740)



As the Masa research showed, those Birthright alumni who do not return for a second trip are far less likely to get involved as Israel leader advocates.



Policy Implications

From these first two case studies it is clear that Birthright can serve as a conduit for the less affiliated into intensive Jewish involvement.

- From a policy perspective, the question is not “is it possible to use the Israel experience as a means to increased involvement in Jewish life?”
- Instead, we need to ask: “How do we raise the numbers of alumni who convert the initial trip to Israel into intensive Jewish involvement?”

Case Study Three: Converting Birthright Participation into Jewish Involvement

Starting in 2008, Hillel began placing full-time professional Jewish educators on college campuses in the United States.

- These “Senior Jewish Educators” (SJE) focus on encouraging students to engage in meaningful Jewish experiences.
- Research conducted for Hillel³ shows the SJE intentionally seek out interaction with students either before or after the Birthright trip.

³ Steven M. Cohen, Jack Ukeles, Minna Wolf, Ezra Kopelowitz. 2010. [“Assessing the Impact of Senior Jewish Educators and Campus Entrepreneurs Initiative Interns on the Jewish Engagement of College Students -- Two year summary: 2008-2010.”](#) San Francisco: The Jim Joseph Foundation.

Surveys of students on SJE campuses showed that Birthright participants who meet with an SJE exhibit greater growth in their participation in Jewish life on campus than those who do not. *Without an SJE involved, Birthright shows no impact on participants compared to those who didn't go on Birthright.*

Self Reported Jewish Growth N=1247	Haven't met SJE		Met SJE 1-5 times		Met SJE 6+ times	
	Went on BRI	Didn't go	Went on BRI	Didn't go	Went on BRI	Didn't go
Index scores from 0 to 100						
Index of Jewish learning growth from last year	-1	-.1	10	3	23	18
Index Jewish personal involvement growth from last year	.6	2.3	7	3	11	6
Index of Jewish organizational activity growth from last year	-2.7	.8	5	2	11	6
Index of Hillel activity growth from last year	-1.6	.4	2.6	2.9	19	9
Index of perceived Jewish growth	57	55	64	58	65	62
% whose most friends are Jewish	58%	51%	48%	63%	49%	58%

In Summary - Converting Interest into Involvement

- **Meaningful involvement opportunities**

The case studies on Israel advocacy and return travel to Israel show that those who are motivated, do convert their interest into continued Jewish involvement, by embracing available opportunities.

- **Effective work of educators**

As shown in the Hillel SJE case study, educators positioned at the right time and place, before, during and after trip increases the likelihood of Israel experience participants embracing involvement opportunities offered to them.