

VOICES FROM
THE FIELD

CAMP INSIGHTS

SPRING 2023

Jcamp180[®]
From STRENGTH
to STRENGTH



THE JCAMP 180[®] JEWISH CAMP SOCIETAL TRENDS SURVEY

The JCamp 180 annual survey of Jewish camp leaders was launched in 2019 to understand the implications of a wide range of societal trends on Jewish camps — economic, social, technological, parenting, and Jewish communal life — along with camps’ emerging responses to these trends. For the first time, we also asked professional and volunteer leaders about what brings joy and the reverse: what sucks joy from their roles. The goal of the *2023 JCamp 180 Camp Insights Report* is to support effective planning for the future by Jewish camping organizations.

Who Responded

In March 2023, Board members and staff from camps affiliated with JCamp 180 were invited to participate in this fourth annual JCamp 180 Camp Insights Survey. A total of 177 individuals from 99 camps and camping organizations participated. Among respondents, 71% were professionals, and 27% were volunteers. Over 76% were from overnight camps, and 14% were affiliated with day camps with 10% from national and other camping organizations.

The largest segment, professionals from overnight camps, accounted for over half of the sample (54%).

By and large, respondents held similar views of the significance of the key trends across camp type (day/overnight), role (staff/lay leaders), gender, and age.

Trends Surveyed

The survey asked respondents to rate each of 25 societal trends on a five-point scale regarding “the extent to which [it] creates significant opportunities or challenges for your camp over the next 5 years.” (See Appendix I for full list and average ratings.)

JCamp 180, a program of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, invests in the sustainability and organizational effectiveness of nonprofit Jewish camps to assure the continuity of Jewish identity and culture through transformative camp experiences.





TOP TRENDS

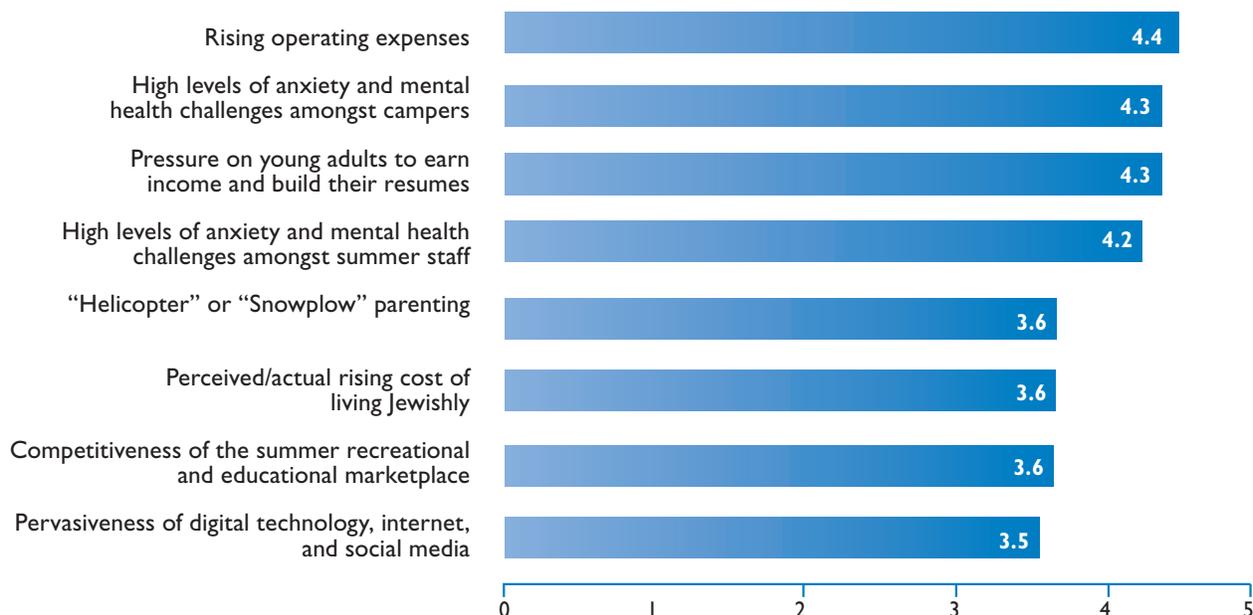
The top eight trends for 2023 are indicated in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

TOP EIGHT TRENDS

Based on the following scale: **5** | Very Significant **3** | Somewhat significant **1** | Not Significant

Overall Averages



For the first time, in response to global economic trends, we asked about **rising operating expenses** (1), and it immediately became the top-rated trend.

Anxiety and mental health challenges among campers (2) and **staff** (4) and **pressures on young adults to earn income and build their résumés** (3) occupied the other top-ranked positions. These three trends consistently have been rated more significant than other trends for all years of the survey, including the one conducted pre-COVID-19, in which the trends were included.

As in prior years, **competitiveness of the summer recreational marketplace** (7) continues to be a highly rated trend. But this year saw several new top-rated trends. These included **helicopter or snowplow parenting** (5), which is the only

trend that has increased in significance each year; **perceived/actual costs of living Jewishly** (6), which moved up from being ranked 13th last year; and **pervasiveness of digital technology, internet, and social media** (8). This trend held steady, as it was in the eighth spot last year as well.

Dropping out of the top eight trends was **focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion for LGBTQ+ people** (from sixth to 12th this year). This likely reflects both the urgency of other trends as well as the many initiatives which camps have taken in recent years to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion. **Competition for fundraising dollars with other charities** dropped from seventh to ninth. And implications of COVID-19, ranked fourth last year, dropped to 17th, reflecting the pandemic’s receding impact.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

What Do These Rankings Mean?

Four overarching themes stood out from this year’s survey results.

1. Rising operating costs, the costs of living Jewishly, competition for funding, and marketplace competition all contribute to increasing challenges to **affordability and sustainability**.
2. Camps need to and are **delivering higher touch support and clarifying expectations with campers, staff, and parents** driven by a multitude of trends: marketplace competitiveness, mental health issues, helicopter parenting, the pervasiveness of digital technology, and a desire for résumé-building.
3. In an era of hyper-competition for attention, **deepening engagement with stakeholders on whom camp depends** — alumni, donors, volunteers — is more important than ever.
4. There is a critical **need to strengthen camp organizational models and governance to address the unprecedented business and interpersonal demands** on camp directors as well as on other professional and volunteer leadership.

At the same time, just as it brilliantly responded to COVID-19 (which exacerbated but did not cause the above challenges), the Jewish camping field continues to develop and implement adaptive responses to these challenges, summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Quick View of Key Challenges and Responses

Challenging Trends	Core Conditions for Success	Strategic Response
Dramatically rising costs of both camp and living Jewishly	Achieving financial sustainability while being affordable	Manage costs while growing fundraising, enrollment, and offseason revenues
Mental health issues of youth and young adults, pressures on Gen Z staff to grow their summer résumé/income, and increased helicopter parenting	Meeting ever-evolving needs of camp participants	Deliver high-touch support and clear expectations to campers, seasonal staff, and parents
Hyper-competition for attention of key stakeholders	Gaining support of stakeholders on whom financial and institutional sustainability depends	Deepen engagement with alumni, donors, and volunteers
Unprecedented business and people demands on camp professional and other leaders	Ensuring effective and engaged professionals and volunteers	Strengthen adaptive capacity of camp organizational models



Rising operating costs, the costs of living Jewishly, competition for funding, and marketplace competition all contribute to increasing challenges to affordability and sustainability.

Rising Operating Expenses and Cost of Living Jewishly

The number-one trend camp leaders identified was rising operating expenses. This includes significant increases in insurance, food, transportation, and compensation for summer staff, along with greater investments in mental health supports. At the same time, respondents ranked the rising costs of living Jewishly higher than ever. The result is that camps are under significant pressure to raise fees, while more and more families are less able to afford increased fees. Camps are faced with the challenge of balancing the need to raise tuition while providing financial aid with strained resources.

“We sometimes feel like we are holding on with one hand rodeo-style, trying not to fall off the bucking bull that is our current economic environment.”

Cost Reduction

Although camps are “reviewing all expense items” and “cutting costs where we can,” most camps already run lean, with limited ways to bridge the gap solely through cost-cutting. One approach a number of camps are considering is to offer shorter sessions to respond to market interest in lower cost options.

“It’s difficult to balance the rising costs of running our program with making our program accessible financially.”

Increasing Enrollment Income

Traditionally, financial gaps are made up by increasing enrollment or fundraising. A number of camps are concerned about growing enrollment beyond their current ability to staff and support quality experiences for both campers and staff. But many are still intensely seeking to grow enrollment by adding new or improved programs and facilities and leveraging year-round engagement to increase retention. Other strategies include more actively pursuing various target groups, e.g., Israelis, people in small towns, and “the 80% of Jewish kids who don’t already attend Jewish camp.” A priority is to work with partners, including synagogues, JCCs, schools, PJ Library, and others to reach traditional and new constituencies, often through events and year-round programming. The use of virtual tours, video technology for information sessions, and even interactive games is becoming a permanent fixture of recruitment, along with more conventional amplification of marketing, social media, and personalized communication with families.

“Making camp more affordable is a massive opportunity for our field. We have one of the most effective strategies for lifelong impact on young Jews, and we are pricing out most Jewish families.”



Growing Fundraising

With respect to fundraising, camps are intensifying their use of personal touches, donor stewardship, and the pursuit of grants. These approaches are supported by developing a case for support and establishing a year-round schedule for fundraising activities. Camps also are strengthening their dedicated fundraising resources through enhancing development, alumni, and legacy committees; strengthening board fundraising capacity; and augmenting professional development. Long-term, many are also working toward building a culture of philanthropy across the organization and a number are launching endowment campaigns to ensure long-term financial sustainability.

Diversifying Revenues

Yet another approach camps are taking is to diversify their revenues. Camps are capitalizing on COVID-19 receding to re-energize, start, or explore the operation of rental business during the shoulder season and, occasionally, year-round. Rental group targets include weddings, b'nai mitzvah, school-group events, and nonprofit and corporate retreats.

Other strategies include increasing year-round, fee-based activities, e.g., for winter school breaks and sleepovers; selling new services where the camp has core expertise, e.g., catering, before- and after-school programs, environmental education, and mental health first-aid training; and operating day camp, family camp, or specialized camping programs, with some camps considering replacing a week of the current summer program with such offerings.

Camps need to and are delivering higher touch support and clarifying expectations with campers, staff, and parents driven by a multitude of trends: marketplace competitiveness, mental health issues, helicopter parenting, the pervasiveness of digital technology, and a desire for résumé-building.

For the four years of this survey, including pre-COVID-19, camper mental health issues have been one of the two highest rated trends. And they are not going away. In response, camps are further increasing the number of mental health professionals available, making time and space for campers to meet online with their therapists, and providing CORE (Chill Out, Relax, and Energize) spaces.

Seasonal Staff

Mental health issues not only affect campers but also the North American young adults — Gen Z — who act as seasonal staff. In addition to coping with those issues, camps are facing greater difficulty in recruiting and, especially, retaining older summer staff who, along with their parents, feel tremendous pressure to build their résumés and advance their academic/work lives. In response to these challenges, camps are engaged in a flurry of staff-related initiatives.

“We hired our camp social worker part-time during the year to help with screening new campers, speaking with families of campers with mental health concerns, and developing support plans in advance of camp.”



These include increasing salary and bonuses, e.g., for staff members returning to camp jobs; promoting the opportunities that camp provides for boosting such career-relevant skills as time management, conflict resolution, and supervision; assisting staff with résumés; collaborating with alumni and community partners to find work opportunities and internships (often difficult) for staff; and creating more opportunities for staff to work for shorter or more flexible periods during the summer.

“Recruiting/retaining staff is at a crisis level for our camp.”

Camps are investing in mental health professionals dedicated to staff; strengthening staff training to deal with campers’ mental health issues; and paying more attention to staff self-care. More time off and breaks during the day, enhanced staff lounges and amenities, and additional staff programming are being implemented by many camps to meet the changing needs of summer staff. Camps also are introducing more rigorous intake and supervision of staff.

Recognizing the high costs of mental health support, camps are pursuing specialized fundraising and grants, and are especially appreciative of the Foundation for Jewish Camp’s ground-breaking Yedid Nefesh support for mental health initiatives.

“We try to ensure that parents have the communication and window into camp that they are looking for, but balanced with the awareness that their kids are away from home, and not everything needs to be micromanaged.”

Parents

Camps strive to balance the desire of many parents to know about or even shape their children’s experience in camp with their own aims of strengthening campers’ resilience and independence.

When camp leaders were asked “What most sucks the joy from the camp experience,” respondents frequently talked about the challenge of dealing with difficult parents. Indeed, it is likely that the effects of micromanaging parents may be contributing to the lack of resilience of many campers and staff.

Camps are coping in different ways. Before the summer, camps are intensifying communication with parents about the needs of their kids and camp’s health resources, developing plans for campers with challenges, making the screening process more rigorous, and setting clearer expectations for parents’ acceptable behavior. During the summer, camps are sending out more newsletters, social media posts, and blogs and leading more Zoom call updates.



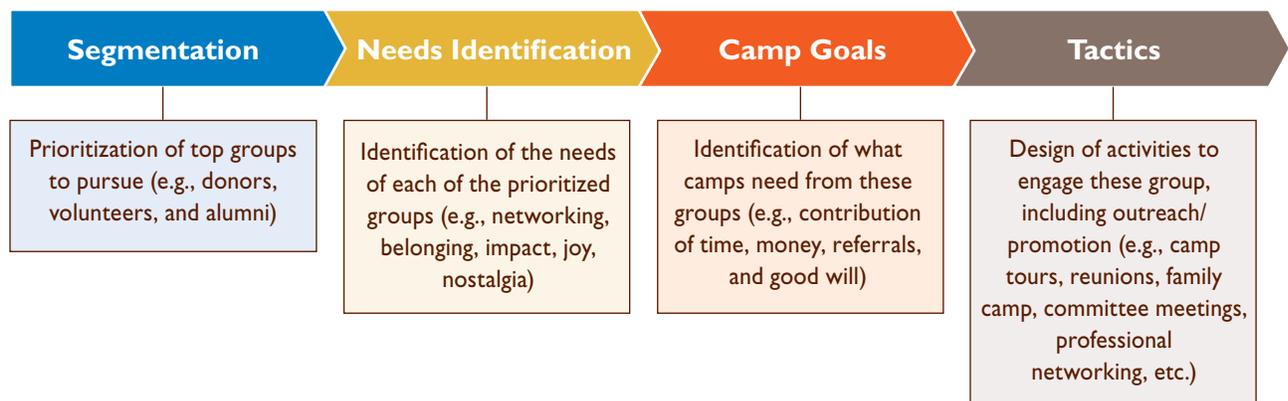
In an era of hyper-competition for attention, deepening engagement with stakeholders on whom camp depends — alumni, donors, volunteers — is more important than ever.

Camp sustainability and success also require engaging current and prospective stakeholders, most notably donors, volunteers, and alumni. Fundraising requires significant contributions from a broad spectrum of donors, of which alumni are a critically important source. Engaged alumni can also be vital sources of camper, staff, donor, and volunteer referrals and participation.

Successful engagement of current and prospective donors, volunteers, and alumni benefit from a set of common processes as highlighted below.

“We are building an engagement model that focuses on campers/staff/families/alumni at various life stages. At each level we are developing plans to steward volunteerism and philanthropy.”

Figure 3: Common Processes for Stakeholder Engagement



Also critical is the dedication of specialized human resources, committee support, and effective communications technology and administration. Of course, each stakeholder group requires unique supports as well.

How camps gear up to engage donors, volunteers, and alumni will determine much of their success over the coming years.

“We have three board seats that we specifically look to fill with young alumni (typically, late 20s) and also have two non-voting board seats for [final year] campers, all calculated to keep our alumni represented and engaged.”

“We have six touch points for every donor and volunteer this year.”



There is a critical need to strengthen camp organizational models and governance to address the unprecedented business and interpersonal demands on camp directors as well as on other professional and volunteer leadership.

Twenty years ago, the major demand on camps was the traditional management of relations with campers, parents, and staff and day-to-day operations and programs. Since then, business demands have grown markedly. Camps have found themselves required to replace and add buildings and infrastructure, sometimes on a large scale; professionalize fundraising to pay for infrastructure and scholarships; expand alumni relations; adopt and deploy technology for virtually all camp functions; develop resources to cope with complex physical and mental health issues; increase security; and strengthen board recruitment and operations to address growing societal and legal expectations for stronger governance.

Camps have responded to these many demands by hiring camp directors and senior staff to play stronger business roles and by involving boards more deeply in fundraising and improving their own governance processes. Today, these business issues continue amid a backdrop of dramatically rising costs and affordability challenges.

At the same time, the last several years also has seen an explosion of new and complex people issues related to mental health; recruiting and retaining staff; safety, inclusion, and belonging; and the pervasiveness of social media along with the lingering implications of COVID-19.

All the while, financial and institutional sustainability requires camps to broaden and deepen their engagement with donors, volunteers, and alumni, adding another layer of complexity to the role of camp leaders.

The result is unprecedented demands on the skills, bandwidth, and well-being of camps' management professionals, CEOs, executive directors, and directors as well as senior staff and boards and councils. The need to rethink the competencies and organizational models for running camp, strengthen governance, and support the Director-Board partnership will be critical to ensuring continued camp success.

Camp Leadership: The Joys and Woes

For the first time, the Camp Insights survey asked respondents about both what brings joy and what sucks joy from senior staff and volunteer leaders in the camping field.

These responses helped inform the societal trends analysis. They also stand on their own as a helpful window into what keeps leaders dedicated to their responsibilities and what difficulties they experience.



“Watching all the campers in the same place at the same time, singing and dancing in unison — showing the true power of community.”

“Friendships with coworkers and funders, longstanding relationships with happy families, and campers who have become staff.”

“Building and making a change in the life of a camper — creating a space where kids can be kids — where they feel safe and confident away from their social media and the stress of their regular lives.”

“Seeing the potential for growth and ability of more campers to become caring, engaged, and empowered Jewish earth citizens.”

The Joy of Working/Volunteering at Camp

“What brings you the most joy in your role at camp?” Most respondents to this question were camp professionals, and most of them derived their joy from seeing the joy of their campers. Vignettes painted included observing campers who are “happy and carefree,” “forming friendships and community,” “laughing and crying when they have to leave,” “making friends,” “finding their happy place,” “singing and dancing,” and “enjoying each other without electronics.”

Camp professionals also conveyed their joy from seeing campers grow in so many ways: “increasing maturity, confidence, leadership,” “showing their best selves,” “acquiring new skills,” and “learning about Israel.” They derived joy from working with staff and connecting deeply with colleagues, mentoring, and “working with my supportive team and board” as well as the satisfaction of successfully working with parents and families.

Professionals spoke of the satisfaction gained from knowing their hard work in areas such as recruitment and fundraising pays off in a strong camp. Woven through many of the comments is a sense of heart-felt pride about working for an organization with a rich history, one often intertwined with their own experience as a camper and which, through their work, will extend into the future.

Lay leaders expressed similar sentiments, gaining joy from seeing campers “smiling and engaging,” “observing them enjoy Shabbat,” “being on the ground and seeing the magic happen,” and “watching young campers have transformative experiences where they are safe to explore their own identities.” Many lay leaders also commented on their satisfaction in “seeing the results of our efforts to upgrade our camp,” “helping to ensure our Jewish future,” and “working with a great director and board.”

Other Side of the Coin: What Sucks the Joy out of Working/Volunteering at Camp?

Participants also commented on parts of their job that “sucked the joy from camp.” An overarching theme for professionals was the stress of “increasing pressure to produce more with less,” in the context of “being so understaffed/overworked and responsible for so many jobs that aren’t mine.”

“The never-ending slog, the prospect of lawsuits, year-round staff turnover, summer staff recruitment, sense of existential threat of the marketplace — who wants what we’re offering?”



Both professionals and lay leaders indicated that the most significant source of stress came from dealings with parents. Respondents cited the many helicopter and bulldozer parents holding unrealistic or untenable expectations. Others described many parents' style of communication as adversarial or rude.

Leaders also mentioned that some seasonal staff having unreasonable expectations, acting entitled, lacking professionalism, or just “[not being] there for the right reasons.”

A further stress noted was the sheer administrative and operational demands that take time away from working with campers and staff.

Other factors included the continuing impact of COVID-19, challenging lay leader relationships, recruitment problems, and the difficulties of dealing with staff and camper mental health issues.

“Dealing with parents for whom there is a disconnect between their child’s needs, what we see and address on a daily basis, and reality.”

NEXT STEPS

Moving Your Camp Forward

The issues presented here are complex, intertwined, and not easily solved by one report or in one year. It is our hope that each camp will see themselves in at least some of these issues and recognize that these trends are far-reaching and affecting most, if not all, day and overnight camps across North America. Even more important, we hope that camps will continue to wrestle with these current problems and develop and share innovative and effective solutions that benefit the entire field.

We are committed and excited to be working with you on this journey.

Dive Deeper

Want to know more about the specific topics raised here in the Trends report? JCamp 180 has provided more details from the survey on several specific questions and topics, including alumni engagement, managing Gen Z staff, the economics of camp, social justice issues, enrollment, and technology. Find out more about the challenges, opportunities, and solutions offered by your peers at JCamp180.org/CampInsights2023.

Engage Your Lay Leaders and Staff: Discussion Guide

We encourage camps to take time to step back from the day-to-day to reflect on how these societal trends manifest at your camp and to think about potential solutions. To help you in this process, we have developed a set of questions to facilitate the sharing of perspectives and the development of a camp-wide point of view on key trends facing your camp and potential strategic responses. Boards, senior staff, or seasonal staff can discuss them over a 30 to 60 minute session or in a more elaborate format including small groups.



1. Which societal trends are most relevant to our camp today? How are these trends showing up as opportunities and/or challenges?
2. What additional local or camp-specific trend(s) should our camp be addressing?
3. What have been our responses to the top trends? What's working, what's not working in the approaches we have taken?
4. What are the most promising approaches our camp should pursue or at least explore in 2023 and beyond?
5. What would help us to better understand or implement these approaches?
6. What might be the obstacles and how can we overcome them?
7. What are our next steps?

Share Your Learnings

JCamp 180 looks forward to working with our camp partners to discover and share potential solutions to the challenges and opportunities our Jewish camping field is facing. We are committed to harvesting promising solutions and innovations, and disseminating them widely to help the entire field address the challenges, opportunities, and complexities of the times we are in.

We would love to hear your views on this report, its implications for Jewish camp, and any related actions you are undertaking or considering. Contact us at jcamp180@hgf.org.

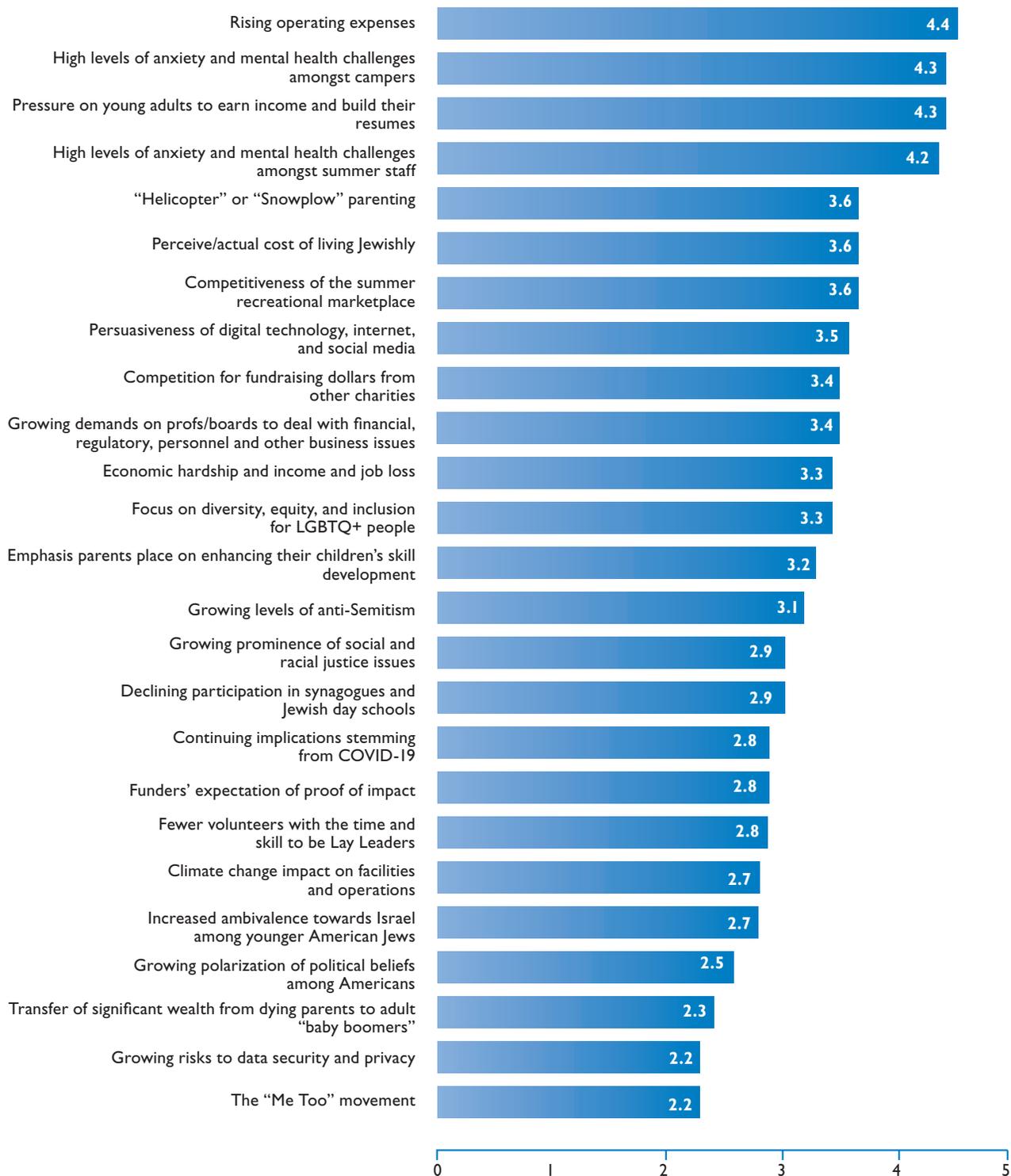
Michael Miloff, Herschel Singer, Sarah Eisinger, Kevin Martone



Appendix I – Ranking of Trends for 2023

Based on following scale: **5** | Very Significant **3** | Somewhat significant **1** | Not Significant

Trends Ranked by Overall Average Score





The **Harold Grinspoon Foundation** (HGF), fueled by Founder Harold Grinspoon's entrepreneurial spirit, strives to build Jewish identity and strengthen Jewish life with its PJ Library®, JCamp 180®, and Life & Legacy® programs. Through partnerships and leveraged giving, the HGF encourages other funders to support the Jewish community. The Foundation and its partners are nurturing new generations, cultivating legacy giving and investing in experiences that enhance continuity and assure the Jewish future. To date, the HGF has disbursed more than \$320 million through its programs, inspiring over \$1.5 billion in gifts from others.