

What Jewish College Students Have to Say About the Campus Climate

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A man holds an Israeli flag as a pro-Palestinian rally takes place nearby at Pennsylvania State U. Paul Weaver, AP

Jewish college students' perceptions of antisemitism and hostility toward Israel vary greatly from campus to campus, but apprehension about the current climate is pervasive, according to a [survey](#) by researchers at Brandeis University.

The share of students who said they were at least “somewhat” concerned about antisemitism on campus ranged from 55 percent at colleges with the “lowest antisemitic hostility” to 83 percent at colleges with the “highest antisemitic hostility,” which was calculated by examining students' answers to a series of questions about their campus environments.

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Researchers at Brandeis's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies collected data from close to 2,000 Jewish undergraduate students at 51 colleges in the United States. The sample was not designed to be representative of the Jewish population as a whole; surveyed students had all applied to Birthright Israel, which organizes free trips to Israel for Jewish college students and young adults.

The survey was conducted between November 19 and December 11 amid [high tensions](#) on college campuses over the war in Israel and Gaza.

On October 7, Hamas militants and other Palestinian militant groups killed 1,200 people in Israel and took more than [240 people](#) hostage, 110 of whom have since been released or rescued. Over the last two months, Israeli airstrikes have killed more than 18,700 [Palestinians](#), most of them women and children.

In the United States, colleges have been under particular scrutiny, as administrators wrestle with whether to condemn pro-Palestinian speech that some Jewish students, alumni, and donors see as promoting genocide; instructors get removed from classrooms over their comments on the war; and students demand that their campus leaders choose sides.

The Brandeis survey asked students about their “perceptions of anti-Jewish and anti-Israel hostility” and the levels of concern they had about antisemitism on their campuses. Antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiment are not the same, but some argue that opposing the state of Israel as a Jewish homeland is antisemitic.

Finding that the answers to these three questions were strongly correlated with one another, researchers combined them “into a single scale of antisemitic hostility.” The 51 colleges were then divided into quartiles: “highest antisemitic hostility,” “above-average,” “below-average,” and “lowest.”

- 85 percent of students at colleges in the “highest” quartile said they at least “somewhat” agreed that there was a hostile environment toward Jews at their institutions, while 49 percent of students at colleges in the “lowest” quartile said the same.

- 94 percent of students at colleges in the “highest” quartile reported they at least “somewhat” agreed there was a hostile environment toward Israel at their institutions, while 63 percent of students at colleges in the “lowest” quartile said the same.
- The top quartile, where students reported the most widespread antisemitism, included Boston University, Ohio State University, and the University of Pennsylvania. The bottom quartile, where antisemitism was reportedly less prevalent, included Duke University, University of Florida, and Pennsylvania State University.

Nineteen of the colleges in the survey were private; 32 were public. Nineteen were in the Northeast, 14 were in the South, 10 were in the West, and eight were in the Midwest. Fourteen institutions were small (up to 10,000 undergraduate students), nine were medium (10,000 to 20,000 students), and 28 were large (more than 20,000).

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Asked to consider political ideology, students said they were more concerned about antisemitism from the left than from the right. They were much more likely to report encountering anti-Israel hostility from other students than from campus administrators.

But Pamela Nadell, a professor at American University who testified at Congress's antisemitism hearing last week, said she was deeply concerned that 30 percent of students at colleges in the “highest hostility” quartile reported encountering anti-Israel hostility from faculty members.

“That to me is a major concern and actually something that I really think is a place where the university needs to figure out how to step in,” said Nadell, who directs American's Jewish Studies program.

Examining the perceived levels of antisemitic hostility on different campuses, Eitan Hersh, a political-science professor at Tufts University, noted that an institution's ideological diversity could be protective against such feelings because students on that campus are skilled at engaging with those with whom they disagree.

“For example, here at Tufts, I don't think there's much debate among the students about something like LGBT rights or abortion rights,” Hersh said. “I think the students are overwhelmingly on one side of those issues, and so they're not encountering diversity of views. But when it comes to Israel-Palestine, they are encountering a diversity of views. And as the students have very little exposure to debate and difference on political terms, they don't necessarily handle that very well.”

The report partially replicated a 2016 study by Brandeis researchers that examined “hotspots” of antisemitism on 50 college campuses with significant Jewish populations. According to the 2023 survey, most, but not all, of the campuses in the 2016 survey were represented again. In this study, researchers excluded survey data from colleges that had fewer than 15 responses (the highest was 113 responses).

Leonard Saxe, director of the Cohen Center and one of the authors of the report, said it is the first of a series that seeks to find strategies for responding to antisemitism on college campuses.

“That’s going to take another type of research to better understand,” Saxe said.