
As the rush to preserve the Shoah heats up, a Pew study shows that museum visits succeed in improving one’s knowledge of the Holocaust and result in warmer feeling towards Jews.

By STEWART AIN
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In response to the surge in anti-Semitic hate crimes in the city — they rose 23 percent last year — the de Blasio administration has taken a series of steps to stem what the mayor has called a “crisis.” There are now increased police patrols in Brooklyn’s Jewish communities, and more security cameras are being added. The Department of Education has added hate crime awareness programming this month for middle and high schools in Williamsburg, Crown Heights and Borough Park.

And in what may be the most symbolic action, the city has begun sending eighth- and 10th-grade public school students from those communities to the Museum of Jewish Heritage-A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in Lower Manhattan.
Now there is hard data to suggest such visits are more than symbolism. A just-released Pew Research Center survey reveals that such visits actually improve one’s knowledge of the Holocaust and result in warmer feeling towards Jews. It appears to be the first study in the U.S. confirming the efficacy of such museum visits.

“It’s nice to have that kind of validation,” said Jack Kliger, president and CEO of the museum, who said the findings suggest how little students are being taught about the Holocaust before their museum visits.

“The idea that there is a lack of Holocaust education is not new,” he said. “Younger people have not been exposed to it and their parents were not exposed.”

Recent studies have found that there is a significant lack of knowledge about the Holocaust. New York is only one of a dozen states to mandate its teaching.

The findings are also validation for programs around the city teaching lessons of the Holocaust. Another city initiative involves schoolchildren visits to the Jewish Children’s Museum in Crown Heights. Started by the City Council two years ago and funded by the city, the children spend an entire day at the museum — even receiving a free lunch there.

“When they come to Crown Heights, they ask about the chasidic Jews they see and we explain that Jews come in all sizes and dresses,” explained the museum’s founder, Devorah Halberstam. “The programs started with middle school kids. We have now started with high school students. I would love the Department of Education to hook up with us.”

The museum opened in 2004 and weaves Jewish history, values and culture into specially designed computer games and videos. More than 75,000 visitors attend annually.

In Glen Cove, L.I., the Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center teaches about 23,000 schoolchildren each year free of charge and arranges school programs, according to its chairman, Steven Markowitz.
Markowitz said his center has developed a curriculum for young people who have been arrested for scrawling a swastika or noose on buildings and say they didn’t know the meaning of the symbols.

According to the Pew survey, U.S. adults who said they had visited a Holocaust memorial or museum (27 percent of 10,971 respondents in an online survey) correctly answered 2.9 questions out of four multiple-choice questions posed about the Holocaust. By comparison, those who have never visited a Holocaust memorial or museum answered 2.0 questions right, on average.

In addition, the survey said, “respondents who get more questions right also tend to express warmer feelings toward Jews.”

Conversely, non-Jews who did not know how many Jews were killed in the Holocaust declined to answer or overestimated the number expressed “cold feelings towards Jews.”

The survey was conducted online from Feb. 4-19, 2019, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 1.5 percent.

A separate survey for about 1,800 American teenagers ages 13 to 17 found that on average they displayed a lower level of knowledge about the Holocaust than their elders. Only 38 percent of teens knew 6 million Jews perished in the Holocaust (45 percent of adults knew) and just one-third knew Adolf Hitler came to power through a democratic process (compared to 43 percent of adults).

The survey found also that while Jews, atheists and agnostics correctly answered an average of three of the four questions about the Holocaust, Mainline Protestants, Mormons, Catholics, evangelical Protestants and Americans who described their religion as “nothing in particular” answered about half of the questions correctly. In addition, the Pew study found that “members of the historically black Protestant tradition got one of four right, on average.”
No Quick Fix

The three Brooklyn neighborhoods from which a total of 14,000 public school students in grades 8 and 10 will be visiting the Museum of Jewish Heritage have large African-American and Jewish populations. In addition, public school families with students 12 and older will be able to visit the museum with their parents free of charge, according to Abraham Foxman, director emeritus of the Anti-Defamation League and head of the museum’s Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism. He said he believes in the worth of Holocaust museums because of the “impact of seeing and touching and feeling [the exhibits]. That is why museums are becoming more interactive — they have more of an impact than just reading alone.”

But Deborah Lipstadt, a professor of Holocaust studies at Emory University in Atlanta, stressed that “going to a Holocaust museum is not a magic bullet against anti-Semitism. There has to be more within a larger context, otherwise they will go in and say, ‘You see, the Nazis hated the Jews, too.’” Foxman agreed, saying: “There is no quick fix to undoing hate; it’s a very long process. But the experience one has in museums is one element in the unlearning of hate or being sensitized to prejudice. It provides a deeper understanding of what happened than reading a book or seeing a movie.”

Already, the museum teaches more than 60,000 schoolchildren annually. But this is the first time the city’s Board of Education is working with school principals to foster such field trips. Foxman said the museum is planning to bring in specially trained docents to lead the student groups. The city has also begun bringing chasidic rabbis into public schools “to talk about why they dress the way they do and the history of their communities,” according to Deborah Lauter, executive director of the city’s Office for the Prevention of Hate Crimes. In addition, she noted that Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams is launching a project called Breaking Bread, Building Bonds. The goal is to have 10 everyday people from various ethnicities, identities and religions gather for dinner with the goal to learn from each other and about each other. (See page 18 for Editorial Notebook report.)

During his annual state of the state address earlier this month, Gov. Andrew Cuomo promised the state would expand the Museum of Jewish Heritage so that it will “become a learning destination for school children across the state.” Two Long Island Democratic lawmakers, Assemblyman Chuck Lavine and State Sen. Todd Kaminsky, have introduced legislation that would amend the education law to require that the “symbols of hate” be incorporated into the curricula for grades six through 12.

“I am disgusted that vile, despicable incidents of hate are continuing to happen right here in my own backyard,” Kaminsky said in an email to The Jewish Week. “To stop this hate from spreading, we must empower our youth with knowledge. My bill would ensure that every student in New York learns about the swastika and its hateful meaning.”

His bill has passed the Senate committee and is now on the calendar for floor discussion. The Assembly bill is still awaiting committee action.