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6 May 2020

To the attention of members of the Select Committee on 'Coronavirus and the impact on people with protected characteristics'

**Evidence on the Hasidic (Ultra-Orthodox) Jewish community in the UK by
Professor Kriszta Eszter Szendrői, University College London**

Executive summary:

- The evidence available to me suggests that i) the UK Jewish community is disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 outbreak at roughly about the same rate as the London Borough of Barnet and that ii) the Hasidic community in the Stamford Hill area is disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 outbreak at about the same rate as the London Borough of Hackney.
- The Hasidic community is, therefore, not more disproportionately affected by COVID-19-related mortality compared to the area they live in, Hackney. I hesitate to draw firm conclusions about the disproportionate affectedness of the wider UK Jewish community.
- I recommend that action should be taken to provide and disseminate transparent information about COVID-19 and to specifically discredit existing conspiracy theories, especially if they are entertained by highly visible public figures. Action should also be taken to protect the Jewish community and the Hasidic community from potential COVID-19-related anti-Semitic attacks. The local authority and charities working on cross-communities cooperation in Hackney should be financially supported.

1. Written evidence submitted by Professor Kriszta Eszter Szendroi (University College London), leader of an AHRC-funded research team working on the Yiddish language as spoken in the Hasidic communities in the UK and worldwide. Hasidic Jews adhere to a very strict interpretation of Judaism; they are sometimes also referred to as Ultra-Orthodox Jews. Europe's largest Hasidic community, of about 30,000 people, live in the Stamford Hill area of London's Borough of Hackney. Since the COVID-19 pandemic has started, my research group has prepared and disseminated translations of health advice and police notices and provided cultural advice to the NHS and the Metropolitan Police as well as overseas authorities.

2. Numerous media reports have reported the idea that the Jewish community in the UK, and specifically the Hasidic communities worldwide, have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

3. Whether the UK Jewish community, and the Hasidic community in particular, are indeed disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the reasons for this, should be uncovered for at least two reasons. First, because it may allow the implementation of policy changes to reduce their exposure to proportional levels or mitigate the effects. Second, it is also important to consider the potential dangers if the Jewish or the Ultra-Orthodox communities were to become regarded in public discourse as being disproportionately affected by COVID-19. It is possible that certain members of society would portray this as the Jewish community or the Ultra-Orthodox communities being a danger to other people around them. This is a pressing issue given the increase in violent anti-Semitic attacks in recent years in the UK and world-wide², often targeting members of Ultra-Orthodox communities, combined with a high level of media interest in the Ultra-Orthodox communities during COVID-19³. One should note in this context that the idea of blaming “Jews” for pandemics is deeply rooted in European history ever since the medieval Plague epidemics. Although such anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are only entertained by people from a very small minority here in the UK⁴, their followers are more numerous and mainstream elsewhere. But a recent survey rings alarm bells of a growing receptivity for conspiracy theories among the UK public as well.⁵

4. The evidence available to me suggests that i) the UK Jewish community is disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 outbreak at roughly about the same rate as the London Borough of Barnet and that ii) the Hasidic community in the Stamford Hill area is disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 outbreak at about the same rate as the London Borough of Hackney. See Table 1 and Chart 1 below. It is important to note that many London boroughs, including Barnet and Hackney, are statistically significantly more highly affected than other areas in the country, which calls for an explanation in itself, but this is not my present concern.

<i>Population</i>	<i>Number of deaths per 100,000</i>
UK Jewish	85.33
England & Wales	39.44
London Borough of Barnet	76.76
London Borough of Hackney	56.6
Hasidic neighbourhoods around London's Stamford Hill	63.09

Table 1. Number of registered COVID-19-related deaths per 100,000 people for relevant populations occurred before 17 April and registered before 25 April.

5. I recommend that action should be taken to provide and disseminate transparent information about COVID-19 and to specifically discredit existing conspiracy theories, especially if they are entertained by highly visible public figures. Action should also be taken to protect the Jewish community and the Hasidic community from potential COVID-19-related anti-Semitic attacks. The local authority and charities working on cross-communities cooperation in Hackney should be financially supported.

6. The specific question we are concerned with here is whether the UK Jewish community as a whole, and especially the Hasidic community, is disproportionately affected compared to the areas they live in. Relevant data is plotted in Chart 1 below. As far as the Hasidic

community is concerned, I believe that it is safe to draw the conclusion that they are not more disproportionately affected compared to the area they live in. The Stamford Hill community predominantly lives in Hackney and they have a comparable age-distribution. (The Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities in the UK have about 7.6% of over 65s⁶ while Hackney itself has 7%⁷.) I hesitate to draw any firm conclusions regarding the Jewish community as a whole. Note that Barnet seems to provide a handy if not overly precise comparison because about 60% of UK Jews live in metropolitan areas similar to Barnet.⁸ In fact, 20% of the UK Jewish population lives in Barnet, and about 19.2% of Barnet's population is Jewish.⁹ At the same time, the Jewish population of the UK has a much higher (21%¹⁰ vs. 13.5%¹¹) rate of over 65s, which is known to be the age-group that accounts for the majority of the COVID-19-related mortality. So, the comparison of COVID-19-related mortality rates between the Jewish UK population and that of the Borough of Barnet is not a very precise one.

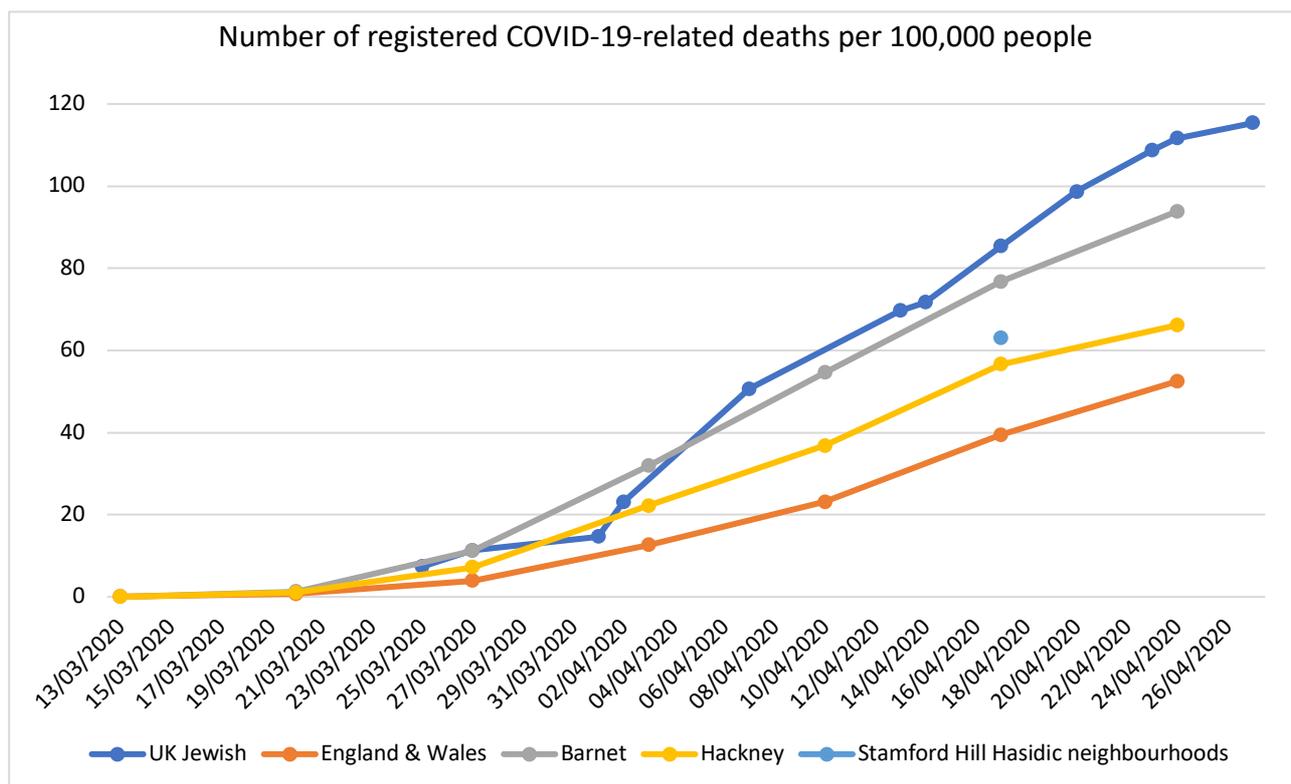


Chart 1: Daily development of the number of COVID-19-related registered deaths per 100,000 people in England & Wales, in the UK Jewish community, in the Borough of Barnet, in the Borough of Hackney and in the neighbourhoods of Hackney in and around Stamford Hill where Hasidic people live¹²

7. Why is there then a long-standing perception that the Jewish population or the Hasidic population has been disproportionately affected by COVID-19? In my view, the answer lies in the differences in the ways COVID-19-related deaths have been counted in the Jewish communities versus the country as a whole over the past two months. Jewish COVID-19 deaths have been calculated by a fairly precise and efficient method of specific burial societies reporting to the Board of Deputies daily from very early on. Given that Jewish burial rites include the so-called *tahara* or ritual cleansing, it is vital that deaths due to COVID-19 are recorded officially by the burial societies, as *tahara* is not performed on the affected bodies. This means that the data is collected first-hand from the burial societies and is likely to be quite precise regarding whether the death was COVID-19-related. In

comparison, it is only in recent days that the Office of National Statistics has provided data on registered COVID-19-related deaths In England and Wales. The data available now is precise in terms of location and timing, and fine-grained enough to reveal local differences, but it still has a time lag of about two weeks. Earlier, we had to rely on the much less precise data that has been provided by the Department of Health, which have grossly underrepresented the actual mortality rate. To conclude, Jewish data appeared to be disproportionately high to a large extent because it was more precise much earlier on.

8. Stamford Hill in the London Borough of Hackney is home to Europe's largest Hasidic community, estimated to be around 30,000 people. Hasidic communities worldwide have been singled out in the media and also by government authorities as being non-compliant with lockdown regulations. Ample evidence exists of such violations, but their rate, especially compared to the rate of comparable violations in less visible communities, is not known. For this reason, it seems important to check whether the Hasidic community has suffered from a disproportionate mortality rate. I used the following method to estimate this. Hasidic neighbourhoods in London concentrate in the 6 MSOAs South Tottenham (MSOA Haringey 029), Stamford Hill North (MSOA Hackney 001), Stamford Hill West (MSOA Hackney 003), Stamford Hill South (MSOA Hackney 004), Upper Clapton (MSOA Hackney 029), Clapton Leaside (MSOA Hackney 028), Stoke Newington East/ Cazenove (MSOA Hackney 006). Using ONS data available about the COVID19-related deaths in these areas and about the population of these areas, it appears that the mortality is not higher in these neighbourhoods than in the Borough of Hackney as a whole. (In addition, given widely-believed estimates that the population size of Hasidic people living in the Stamford Hill area is about 30,000, they make up about 50% of the seven neighbourhoods in Hackney and Haringey listed above. This means one would expect there to be about 20 deaths due to COVID-19 to have taken place. Anecdotal evidence from the community ranges from 13 to 23 deaths, which is consistent with the above.) This means that there is no reason to think that the rate of Hasidic violations was substantially different from other areas in Hackney or that it had a significant effect on the mortality rate. This is important to note, because Hasidic deaths amount to over 6% of UK Jewish deaths, on 17 April figures, which is about twice the rate that would be expected based on the relative demographics of the Ultra-Orthodox community versus the Jewish community as a whole.¹³ The disproportionately high estimated mortality rate of the Hasidic community in Stamford Hill is simply due to the fact that Hackney itself, where the Hasidic community lives, has been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. In this vibrant, high-immigrant neighbourhood, the pandemic hit early and spread at a very high rate. Overall, this could only have been stopped by a much more systematic UK or EU-wide pandemic preparedness system in place before the pandemic hit.



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References and sources:

¹ For example: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/jews-vastly-overrepresented-in-uk-coronavirus-deaths-here-are-some-theories-why/>; <https://www.timesofisrael.com/30-british-jewish-victims-of-coronavirus-buried-in-three-day-span/>;

[https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/why-are-britain-s-jews-being-so-hard-hit-by-coronavirus-;](https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/why-are-britain-s-jews-being-so-hard-hit-by-coronavirus-)
<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8199359/Did-Purim-festival-spread-coronavirus-Jews-Annual-celebration-brought-large-numbers-together.html>; <https://www.thejc.com/comment/analysis/coronavirus-are-jews-disproportionately-dying-after-contracting-covid-19-1.498609>;

² See for instance: <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-urges-action-after-fbi-reports-jews-were-target-of-most-religion-based-hate>; <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-urges-action-after-fbi-reports-jews-were-target-of-most-religion-based-hate>;

³ For instance: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/21/nyregion/coronavirus-jews-hasidic-ny.html?smid=tw-share>;
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/opinion/hasidic-jews-covid-distancing.html>;
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/23/concern-ultra-orthodox-jews-not-get-message-coronavirus>;
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/06/calls-to-seal-off-ultra-orthodox-areas-adds-tension-to-israels-virus-response>;

⁴ <https://global100.adl.org/country/united-kingdom/2019>

⁵ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/corona-virus-origin-where-come-from-conspiracy-theory-chinese-lab-vodka-cocaine-garlic-a9436731.html>

⁶ Figure 3 of https://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/JPR_2015.Strictly_Orthodox_rising.What_the_demography_of_British_Jews_tells_us_about_the_future_of_the_community.pdf

⁷ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/overviewoftheukpopulation/august2019#the-uks-population-is-ageing>

⁸ <https://www.bod.org.uk/jewish-facts-info/jews-in-numbers/>

⁹ <https://www.bod.org.uk/jewish-facts-info/jews-in-numbers/> and <https://jsna.barnet.gov.uk/1-demography>

¹⁰ Figure 4 of https://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/JPR_2015.Strictly_Orthodox_rising.What_the_demography_of_British_Jews_tells_us_about_the_future_of_the_community.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/overviewoftheukpopulation/august2019#the-uks-population-is-ageing>

¹² Data sources for the number of COVID-19-related deaths for the UK Jewish community are from media reports (mostly Jewish Chronicle, e.g. <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/152-uk-jews-have-died-after-contracting-coronavirus/>; <https://www.timesofisrael.com/30-british-jewish-victims-of-coronavirus-buried-in-three-day-span/>; <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/uk-jewish-coronavirus-deaths-covid-19-1.498714>) of numbers collected by the Board of Deputies, the Office of National Statistics (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath/datasets/deathregistrationsandoccurrencesbylocalauthorityandhealthboard>) for data for England & Wales, Barnet and Hackney, and also for the Hasidic neighbourhoods in the Stamford Hill area (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsinvolvedbylocalareasanddeprivation/deathsoccurringbetween1marchand17april#middle-layer-super-output-areas>). Population data used to calculate mortality per 100,000 people was taken from the Office of National Statistics <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/censusoutputareaestimatesinthelondonregionofengland> and <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/censusoutputareaestimatesinthelondonregionofengland>

¹³ https://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/JPR.2018.Vital_statistics.Births_and_deaths.pdf