

Chapter 1

Alone in a Crowd

Understanding Today's Young People & Why We Need Belonging?

The tree stands at the meadow's edge, branches reaching like yearning hands.
Whispers call from distant lands, and dreams of forests, woven strands, fill
the air.
Join the grove, where roots unite, in the shade where dreams take flight.
Listen to the leaves in the whispered night. Belong to the grove, the shared
delight.

Let's begin with a simple truth: humans aren't meant to be alone. At the very dawn of man, God looked at Adam and said, "It's not good for man to be alone." That remains true today, particularly for young people.

You might wonder why we focus specifically on young people when discussing belonging. After all, everyone needs to feel a sense of connection. Absolutely. However, young people today face unique challenges in finding their place in the world. They grow up in an era where digital connections are plentiful, yet genuine belonging often seems just out of reach.

Consider this: we live in an era where someone can have thousands of followers on social media yet experience deep isolation. Young people are navigating this complex web of virtual and real-world connections as they seek where they truly belong. Their struggles and successes in seeking belonging not only impact them but also influence the future of how our communities interact and thrive.

That's why we are exploring this topic. By examining how young people today experience belonging, whether they feel it or not, we can gain a deeper understanding of what it truly means to connect in contemporary society. More importantly, we can learn how to help them and perhaps ourselves in building the meaningful connections we all need.

1. Who are today's Young People?

Before we go further, let's clarify who we're referring to when we say "young people." It might seem obvious, but it's not as simple as it appears.

Different countries and organizations have different views on who is a “youth or a young person”. In some contexts, "youth" refers to teenagers, whereas in others it encompasses people in their twenties. The United Nations defines youth as persons aged 15-24.¹ Although we'll use this as a general guide, we won't focus on strict age limits. After all, real life isn't about fixed categories; it's about people living in families, neighborhoods, and communities where ages naturally blend.

Why is there such a strong focus on young people? Here's something interesting: the concept of "youth" as a distinct group is relatively recent. Historically, individuals were categorized as children or adults. However, today, young people are instrumental in shaping our world, and here's why:

First, the statistics are staggering. Approximately 1.2 billion of the world's 8 billion people are aged 15-24.² In many developing economies, the youth population is even larger, whereas developed nations are struggling with smaller numbers of young people.

But it's not just about numbers. Look around you; young people influence our culture in significant ways:

- They're driving trends in music, arts, and sports
- They're the first to embrace and master new technologies
- They're creating their own unique culture that influences everyone else
- They're the primary target for businesses trying to stay relevant

One significant characteristic of contemporary society is the rise of digital culture. Observe any young person with a smartphone or tablet, and you'll understand what we mean. While older generations may struggle with new technology, young people navigate it as easily as breathing. This digital landscape has evolved beyond being merely a tool; it is an essential part of how they connect, express themselves, and find a sense of belonging.

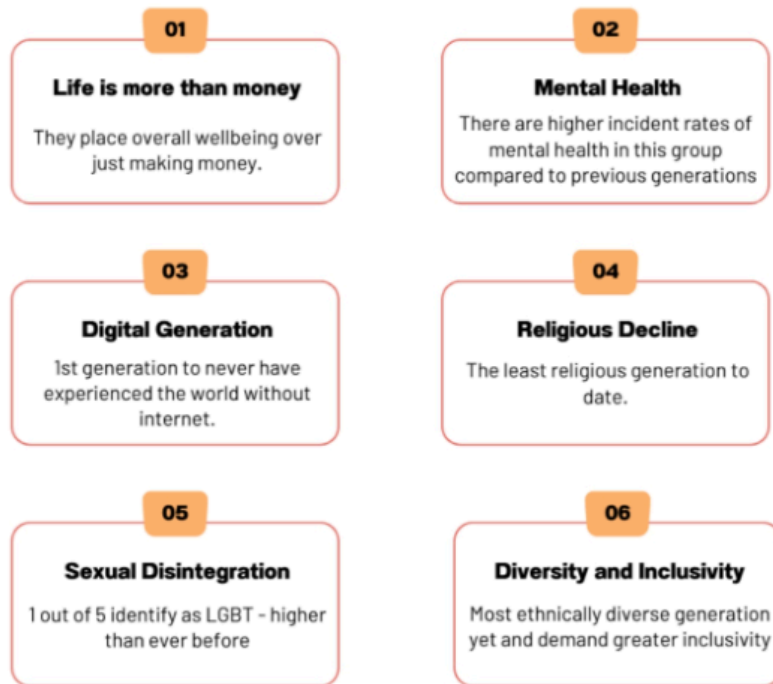
Other characteristics help us understand the context of young people today, as we explored in detail in one chapter of our previous book, *The Art of Listening to Young People – A Pastoral and Scientific Guide*. However, some of the key characteristics of Gen-Z (those born between 1997 to 2009, roughly ages 13-26) or young people/youth are:³

¹ UN Secretary General, “International Youth Year: Participation, Development, Peace,” Report of the Secretary General (United Nations, June 1981)

² United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs - Population Division, “World Population Prospects 2024: Summary of Results” (New York: United Nations, 2024)

³ Michael Dimock, “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), January 17, 2019.

Some Key Characteristics of Gen-Z



Understanding these trends is not just academic; it's crucial for anyone who wants to help young people thrive. This digital culture, the trends, and the ways of connecting are not simply fads. They create the frameworks through which young people perceive and engage with the world. To support them in building meaningful connections and finding true belonging, we must first grasp their world.

2. The Deep Need to Belong

Have you noticed how young people make every effort to be at every hangout? There's something about this always-on-the-move social scene that unsettles many adults. But if you look beyond the surface, you'll find something deeper: young people have a genuine need to connect with others. It's not merely about having fun. Research indicates that these social bonds play a crucial role in the healthy development of children's brains.⁴

Let us examine a story that shows how strongly the need for belonging can influence our choices and identities. (*The stories throughout this book are real-life experiences, some from interviews, others from the author's own experiences and encounters. The names and places of the persons have been changed.*)

⁴ Dianna Ilyka, Mark H. Johnson, and Sarah Lloyd-Fox, "Infant Social Interaction and Brain Development: A Systematic Review," *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 130 (November 2021): 448–69, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2021.09.001>.

A teacher once met two brothers, George and John. George was visibly anxious about his younger brother, who had begun spending his evenings with a group known around the neighborhood for drug use. Fearing the worst, George confided in the teacher, hoping someone could intervene before the situation escalated.

Curious and concerned, the teacher arranged to speak with John directly. What he heard from the younger brother was unexpected and revealing.

“Yes, I hang out with them every evening,” John admitted calmly. “But it’s not about the drugs. These people are my real friends. They accept me and care about me. They’re the only ones who have my back when I’m in trouble.” Taken aback, the teacher gently pressed further, bringing up the concerns George and others had raised. But John’s response was anything but dismissive; it was passionate, even wounded. “The adults-they just don’t understand!” he said, almost pleading. “All they do is lecture and yell. But my friends? When I was bullied, I tried telling the adults. Do you know what they said? ‘Just avoid them.’ But my friends? They did something about it. They stood up for me. The bullying stopped.”

This encounter left a lasting impression on the teacher. It revealed a truth often overlooked by those trying to “rescue” young people from bad influences:

Belonging is a powerful force. It is not merely about being included; it is about being seen, valued, and defended.

Belonging runs deep, really deep. When someone truly becomes part of a group, especially in times of vulnerability, the emotional roots grow thick and strong, like a tree planted in fertile soil. You can’t simply yank those roots out with warnings, threats, or punishments. Attempts to do so, no matter how well-intentioned, often backfire, causing pain, mistrust, and resistance.

That’s what George’s family learned the hard way. Their desperate efforts to pull John away from the group by talking firmly were unsuccessful. Why? Because they were unknowingly trying to sever bonds that had become lifelines. Bonds formed not only through shared activities but also through shared pain and mutual defense. The people they feared were the very ones John believed had saved him when no one else would.

This story reminds us that the desire for connection is not a peripheral human need but rather a foundational one. When we fail to understand or respond to this need with empathy and patience, we risk pushing people further into the very places we seek *to protect them from*.

Here's where it gets interesting: When we examine why young people join groups, even those that concern adults, we find some common patterns. Whether we're talking about a church youth group or a street gang, the basic human needs being met are often very similar. Researchers refer to these as "push and pull factors"-the factors that attract young people to certain groups and repel them

from others.⁵ That urge to connect, to be part of something, isn't going away. It's hardwired into our very nature as humans. The real question is: How can we help guide this need to belong in positive directions?

3. The Epidemic of Loneliness & Young People

When a young person says, “I’m just feeling lonely,” or “I’m bored and useless,” it’s easy to dismiss it as a passing phase, a moment of moodiness, or growing pains. And sometimes, that’s all it is. However, these expressions often point to something more profound: a longing for a meaningful connection and a sense of belonging that extends beyond superficial relationships.

This need is not merely emotional; it is foundational to our humanity. The Second Vatican Council, in its profound reflection on the nature of the human person, recognized this truth: “By his innermost nature, man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others, he can neither live nor develop his potential.” In other words, a relationship is not optional, but it is essential. Without a genuine connection, our sense of purpose fades, and the human spirit begins to wither.

Understanding this helps us listen differently. Behind the casual complaint of boredom or the quiet admission of loneliness may be a more resounding cry: a desire to be seen, known, and loved. It is in answering this cry that we begin to guide young people toward the kind of belonging that nurtures life, growth, and hope.

There is no doubt that loneliness is a profound reality for many young people today. While the COVID-19 pandemic intensified this experience, it did not create it. As the former U.S. Surgeon General observed, the loneliness epidemic had already been growing silently within modern society.⁶ The scope of the problem is deeply concerning. According to a 2024 *Gallup* poll, 20% of U.S. adults reported feeling lonely, with the highest rate among young men aged 15 to 34 (24%).⁷

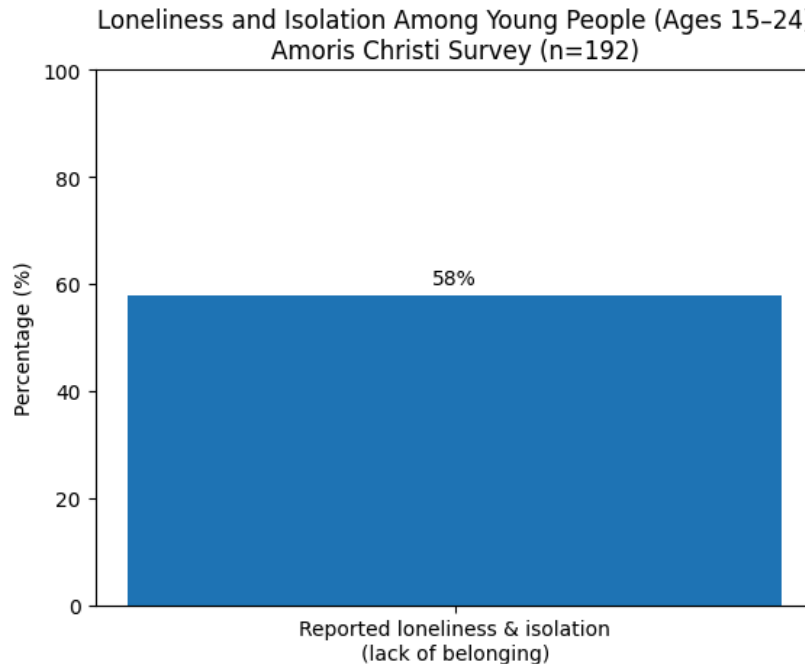
Our findings, as reported in a survey by *Amoris Christi*, reinforce this troubling trend.

In a study of 192 young people (ages 15–24) from three continents, 58% reported experiencing loneliness and isolation stemming from a lack of belonging.

⁵ Scott H. Decker and Barrik Van Winkle, *Life in the Gang: Family, Friends and Violence*, Cambridge Studies in Criminology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139174732>.

⁶ Office of the Surgeon General (OSG) *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, 2023. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

⁷ James Mary Page and Witters Dan, “Daily Loneliness Afflicts One in Five in U.S.,” *Gallup.com*, October 15, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/651881/daily-loneliness-afflicts-one-five.aspx>; Vigers Benedict, “Younger Men in the U.S. Among the Loneliest in West,” *Gallup.com*, May 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/690788/younger-men-among-loneliest-west.aspx>.



The consequences are not only emotional but profoundly holistic, affecting physical health, mental well-being, economic stability, and social connection. The former Surgeon General’s report, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, presents compelling evidence drawn from a wide array of systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Among the most alarming findings is the fact that the mortality associated with chronic loneliness is comparable to smoking fifteen cigarettes a day.⁸ Loneliness is linked to a 29% increase in the risk of heart disease and a 32% increase in the risk of stroke.⁹ The cognitive toll is no less severe, with chronic loneliness and social isolation raising the risk of developing dementia by nearly 50%.¹⁰ For those who already experience emotional struggles, the impact is even more pronounced; loneliness more than doubles the risk of developing depression.¹¹

In light of this evidence, one thing is unmistakably clear: loneliness is both a danger and a widespread issue. Among young people, especially, it poses a serious threat that cannot be ignored. The question we must urgently ask is: *How can we help young people discover and nurture authentic belonging?*

⁸ Office of the Surgeon General (OSG), *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*.

⁹ Nicole K. Valtorta et al., “Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Coronary Heart Disease and Stroke: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Observational Studies,” *Heart (British Cardiac Society)* 102, no. 13 (July 1, 2016): 1009–16, <https://doi.org/10.1136/heartjnl-2015-308790>.

¹⁰ Carlo Lazzari and Marco Rabottini, “COVID-19, Loneliness, Social Isolation and Risk of Dementia in Older People: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Relevant Literature,” *International Journal of Psychiatry in Clinical Practice* 26, no. 2 (June 2022): 196–207, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13651501.2021.1959616>.

¹¹ Farhana Mann et al., “Loneliness and the Onset of New Mental Health Problems in the General Population,” *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 57, no. 11 (November 2022): 2161–78, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-022-02261-7>.

Human beings are intrinsically wired for connection, and young people today intuitively grasp this truth. So why, then, is there an epidemic of loneliness? While it is tempting to point to the digital revolution—and, indeed, to social media and technology—for having undoubtedly transformed the way we relate, it would be simplistic to place all the blame there.

Scholars and psychologists point to a far more complex reality. Robert Putnam, in his landmark study *Bowling Alone*, attributes much of the growing isolation to the decline of social capital—reflected in the erosion of community institutions, civic engagement, and shared life.¹² Others highlight broader societal shifts such as urbanization, geographic mobility, shrinking household sizes, and cultural shifts that prioritize independence over interdependence.¹³ Psychologists also emphasize the role of early relational wounds and insecure attachment patterns in shaping a person's ability to trust and form meaningful bonds (Attachment theory).¹⁴ Added to this is a deep-rooted emphasis in American culture on individualism and personal freedom—values that, while noble in some respects, can sometimes come at the cost of community and shared responsibility. To examine each of these dimensions in detail would go beyond the scope of this book.

But what is unmistakably clear is this: young people are longing for connection. They are crying out for relationships marked by a sense of belonging.

And the symptoms of this longing are all around us. It is incumbent upon us not just as individuals, but as communities and institutions to recognize this cry and respond. The loneliness epidemic is not just a crisis of the heart; it is a call to action.

This online book will also address this; it will examine belonging from perspectives in philosophy, psychology, evolutionary science, and theology. By examining it from multiple perspectives, we gain a holistic understanding of belonging. Having understood what belonging is and why we need it, the book will address how we can help young people belong, while also taking into account each person's journey, the limits of belonging, and the obstacles that impede this process.

4. Authentic Belonging: A Path to Youth Wellbeing

Parents, teachers, and community leaders are deeply concerned about the paths many young people are taking today. They witness their children retreating into their phones, struggling with anxiety, or associating with troubling peer groups. Intuitively, they sense something is off, but often feel powerless to intervene in a meaningful way.

And yet, both research and experience point to something transformative: genuine belonging. Not the superficial kind that comes from being part of a club or social activity, but deep, authentic

¹² Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 1. Touchstone ed, A Touchstone Book (London: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

¹³ Eric Klinenberg, *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Appeal of Living Alone* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2012).

¹⁴ John Bowlby, "Attachment and Loss. 1: Attachment / John Bowlby," Pimlico 282 (London: Pimlico, 1997).

relationships in which young people feel truly seen, accepted, and valued. This kind of belonging becomes a powerful buffer against the challenges they face. It combats loneliness, fosters resilience, and provides the emotional security necessary to navigate life's uncertainties.

When young people are supported by a true community group where they can be their authentic selves while feeling connected to something greater, they are far less likely to seek validation in harmful places or engage in destructive behaviors. Belonging should be understood as a fundamental human need, as essential as food, water, or shelter. Just as we would never expect a plant to thrive without water, we cannot expect our youth to grow into healthy, confident adults without the nourishment of meaningful connection.

The evidence is clear. Strong social relationships are consistently recognized as the primary source of meaning, purpose, and motivation in life.¹⁵

In our own survey conducted by Amoris Christi, 92% of young respondents reported gaining emotional benefits, a sense of identity, or a sense of purpose through belonging to a community.

Social connection helps reduce stress and protect mental health.¹⁶ In children and adolescents, meaningful relationships are associated with educational benefits, including better academic outcomes than those without such relationships.¹⁷ Working adults also benefit: close bonds are associated with greater job satisfaction, increased creativity, and stronger professional performance.¹⁸ The positive impacts extend beyond individuals to entire communities. Communities with high levels of social connection show better health outcomes and overall improved well-being.¹⁹ Economic research has shown that socially connected communities tend to do better economically and emotionally than those marked by isolation and fragmentation.²⁰

However, here is something equally important: belonging must be authentic and personal. Forcing young people into groups or activities that do not resonate with their identity can deepen their sense of disconnection. Belonging cannot be manufactured or imposed. It must arise from relationships

¹⁵ Laura Silver et al., “What Makes Life Meaningful? Views From 17 Advanced Economies,” *Pew Research Center*, November 18, 2021,

<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/11/18/what-makes-life-meaningful-views-from-17-advanced-economies/>.

¹⁶ Steven M. Southwick et al., “Why Are Some Individuals More Resilient than Others: The Role of Social Support,” *World Psychiatry* 15, no. 1 (February 2016): 77–79, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20282>.

¹⁷ David L. DuBois et al., “How Effective Are Mentoring Programs for Youth? A Systematic Assessment of the Evidence,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 12, no. 2 (2011): 57–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100611414806>.

¹⁸ Alok Patel and Stephanie Plowman, “The Increasing Importance of a Best Friend at Work,” *Gallup.com*, August 17, 2022, <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/397058/increasing-importance-best-friend-work.aspx>.

¹⁹ Ichiro Kawachi and Lisa F. Berkman, “Social Capital, Social Cohesion, and Health,” in *Social Epidemiology*, ed. Lisa F. Berkman, Ichiro Kawachi, and M. Maria Glymour (Oxford University Press, 2014), 0, <https://doi.org/10.1093/med/9780195377903.003.0008>.

²⁰ National Conference on Citizenship (NCOC), “Civic Health and Unemployment: Can Engagement Strengthen the Economy?,” 2011, <https://ncoc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2011UnemploymentCHI.pdf>.

and spaces that allow young people to be genuinely themselves, to contribute, and to be received with dignity. We must listen closely to what a meaningful connection looks like for each individual and accompany them in identifying or creating spaces where those connections can truly flourish.

Ultimately, this is not just about solving the problem of loneliness. It is about helping our young people lay the foundation for a life of connection, resilience, and joy. When we succeed in this work, we not only prevent harm but also empower a generation to thrive and change a young person's life.