



Special Series
on Diversity

The Cultural Bounds of Belonging: A Closer Look at Latine Young People

A report for Lasallian Mission
Opportunities Fund

Belonging: A Closer Look at Latine Young People

Terminology

ethnorace: a term used to describe social groups that are interchangeably defined as ethnic or racial, or simultaneously viewed as both ethnic and racial

Latine: a gender-neutral term referring to persons of Latin American descent or origin

Latinidad: the state of being Latine

panethnicity: an umbrella term that groups together distinct ethnic, tribal, religious, or national groups based on perceived cultural similarities (e.g., Asian, Latino, Native American)

Introduction

Latines are the fastest growing **ethnoracial** group in the United States.¹ They are also among the *youngest* ethnoracial groups in the United States. With a median age of 30, Latines are about nine years younger than the total American population.² This means that a key part of understanding young people is tuning into and amplifying the voices of Latines in the United States.

Latine Catholic youth and young adult ministry has historically focused on Spanish-speaking immigrants. But recent trends suggest that the landscape of the Latine population in the United States is changing. These days, 81 percent of Latines under the age of 35 are U.S. born.³ Our data show that less than 4% of Latines ages 13 to 25 are Spanish dominant, and almost half of young Latines speak mostly or only English. Furthermore, Latines increasingly understand their **panethnicity** in racial terms, with many identifying as multiracial—not just Latine, but Latine and Indigenous, or Black, white, and so on.⁴ This tells us that much like the rest of their Gen Z counterparts (the “most diverse” generation in history), Latine young people are greatly diverse

¹ As meaning and understanding evolve over time, the language we use evolves too. In the past 20 years, many terms have been used to describe a person of Latin American descent, including *Hispanic*, *Latino*, *Latin@*, *Latinx*, and, more recently, *Latine*. Like all new words, these terms are contested. At Springtide, we are committed to using the terms that reflect young people’s values or that they themselves prefer. In this report, we use *Latine*, a gender-neutral term for a person of Latin American descent, because it is inclusive of all young people regardless of gender identity and works well with the Spanish, Portuguese, and English languages. There are other ways of naming this demographic, even in the context of this report, as our work as researchers also relies on certain standardized terms when it comes to collecting demographic information through surveys.

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/13/key-facts-about-young-latinos/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/18/key-findings-about-multiracial-identity-in-the-u-s-as-harris-becomes-vice-presidential-nominee/>

as well—a reality that calls for an equally nuanced approach to ministry if their needs are to be met.

In 2021, Springtide undertook a joint project with John DeCostanza, Director of University Ministry at Dominican University, to better understand the needs of young Latine Catholics on college campuses. John and his team are pioneering an innovative approach to creating belonging, which they call “culturally informed ministry.” They asked us to help them understand any important cultural nuances that might show up in our *Noticed-Named-Known* framework for creating belonging, a framework we first uncovered and outlined in our 2020 report *Belonging: Reconnecting America’s Loneliest Generation*. This report outlines those findings, organized as five “key insights,” by drawing from survey and interview data from Latines ages 13 to 25. The survey data in this report come from Springtide’s nationally representative data set of 13-to-25-year-olds in the United States. For the interview data, we conducted 17 in-depth interviews with young people ages 18 to 25 who identified as Latino/a/x/e. Interviews focused on understanding when and why young Latines felt they belonged. Conversations were guided but open-ended, allowing for as much direction as possible from the interviewee. Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed thematically.

[How to read this report](#)

This report is organized in the following manner:

1. **Religious Trends:** a snapshot of religious trends among Latine young people ages 13 to 25
2. **Key Insights:** key findings and discussion of the findings, including data from the survey, interviews, and secondary data sets
3. **Conclusion:** a summary of the project and possible ways forward

[Religious Trends](#)

A snapshot of religious trends among Latine young people ages 13 to 25, hereafter “young Latines.”

- About 30% of young Latines identify as Roman Catholic, 11% as Protestant, and 23% as “nothing in particular.” The remaining population of Latine young people falls into a variety of religious identities (Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, etc.).
- 73% of young Latines consider themselves at least slightly religious, while 76% consider themselves at least slightly spiritual.
- 64% of young Latines say that their religion shapes their daily life.
- 24% of young Latines attend weekly religious gatherings.
- A quarter (25%) of young Latines say that they know a higher power exists and have no doubts about it. Another quarter say that they believe in a higher power’s existence more than they doubt it. Only 8% of young Latines say they do not believe in a higher power.
- Over half (54%) of all young Latines report feeling slightly to moderately connected to a higher power.

- 30% of young Latines pray daily. Other common religious or spiritual practices include being in nature, writing, creating art, performing acts of service, and participating in acts of protest.
- 40% of young Latines say that they agree with some but not all of the things their religion teaches, and 46% say that there are parts of many religions they agree with. Yet, 47% of young Latines say they feel like they need to be connected to a specific religion.
- 44% of young Latines say that they are at least somewhat flourishing in their faith life.

Key Insights

Key Insight 1: For our young Latines, relating to others based on shared experiences and values fostered a greater sense of belonging than did shared ethnorace.

In our interviews, we found that young Latines do not necessarily feel more welcome in predominantly Latine spaces. For example, Sara, age 22, shared that she joined Latine social clubs in college in order to meet other people like her. It was there she realized that Latines come from “a lot of different places” and she felt like she didn’t fully belong. Another reason she felt like she didn’t belong is because many of the constituents of these clubs were first-generation college students or immigrants, and Sara was born and raised in the United States and had parents who had gone to grad school in the United States.

Dom, age 21, shared that he didn’t feel like he belonged in the Latine center on campus. A barrier for inclusion for him was the fact that although he understood Spanish, he couldn’t speak it fluently. Dom stated, “I could just see on their faces, like ‘Oh, you don’t get the slang that we are talking about here.’ So, I would just listen and laugh. I understood what they were saying, but I just couldn’t have the same exchange because I didn’t have the language for that.”

So where did young Latines feel belonging? Young Latines like Sara and Dom told us that they felt more welcome in spaces made up of people who had similar experiences as them and who shared their values. Many of the young Latines with whom we spoke stated that they felt welcome in second-generation spaces, regardless of the ethnicities represented in those spaces, because other second-generation immigrants could relate to their experiences of trying to speak their parents’ native language, translating documents for their parents, and feeling “*ni de aqui ni de alla*” (neither from here nor there).

Young Latines also felt more welcome in spaces made up of people with whom they were politically and socially aligned. Ana, age 22, stated that she didn’t enjoy being in predominantly Latine spaces because she valued a greater diversity of perspectives. Yet she stated: “There is a line between having people from different backgrounds who respect each other and then having people from very contrasting backgrounds that clash. Those are also very difficult spaces to be in.” When asked how she knew she would be respected by someone with a different background, Ana replied: “On a very basic level, if we are going to disagree on women’s rights . . . I know it’s not going to work out. And their feminism needs to be intersectional.” Many other

participants shared this sentiment, stating that more than shared ethnorace, shared social and political values importantly precede belonging.

Key Insight 2: When institutional support does not lead to substantive and meaningful change, spaces intentionally created for young Latines by predominantly white leaders can feel like symbolic support rather than genuine support.

All of the young Latine participants we interviewed reported experiencing prejudice or discrimination because of their ethnoracial identity. Because of that, participants generally felt weary of efforts by predominantly white leaders to serve Latine youth. In some cases, young Latines felt that the institutional support they did receive seemed more symbolic—“performative,” in their words—than genuine.

When we asked young Latines what institutional actions make them feel genuinely supported, four characteristics emerged.

1. **There is a demonstrated need for a specific initiative.** Well-intentioned actions may fall short with young Latines if such actions seem unnecessary or less important to them than other things. For example, Sara, the 22-year-old respondent quoted in Key Insight 1, stated:

If an institution tried to make things bilingual or tried to speak Spanish, I would wonder why. If it was done at my school where everyone is predominantly white and predominantly English speaking, I would really question if there is a demonstrated need for this. So, what is the real reasoning? And if it's because you want to seem more inclusive and multicultural, I think there are more pressing changes, like curriculum.

Start by asking and listening to what young people say they need or hope for in their lives, and design supportive action from there.

2. **The action leads to meaningful change.** Many of the young Latines we spoke to expressed a desire to see more impactful and meaningful action on the part of the institutions they belonged to. Young people interpret actions as impactful when they deliberately seek to effect long-term and large-scale change. And actions are meaningful when they address social and ecclesial questions that young people care about—questions about the nature of who they are, truth, beauty, goodness, justice, suffering, and so on. Ana, 22, explained:

During college, for different days of the year—for example, Lunar New Year or Cinco de Mayo or Mardi Gras—the dining halls would decorate and have special menus. I see that as performative. Is there support before and after these performances for students? For Latinx people who are first generation, who are low-income . . . what supports are there, and how accessible is it to get these things?

Ana thought the special menus were fun, but she didn't think they were as impactful as material support for under-resourced students. The survey data reflect this trend: 30% of the young Latines we surveyed indicated that they are driven away from their faith community to the extent that the community "never takes any action to make a difference in the world."

- 3. Diverse experiences are accounted for.** Young Latines take pride in breaking the mold of what Latines are and what they should be. They yearn for others to see that *Latinidad*, the state of being Latine, is not monolithic. Rather, it is made up of different countries, languages, immigration statuses, races, classes, cultures, beliefs, values, hopes, and dreams. Carlos, age 22, explains:

Prescribed *Latinidad* is a homogenous *Latinidad*, prescribed by the outsider culture. For example, the US government prescribes *Latinidad* onto folks who are of Latin American descent and, in doing so, mashes them together. So, we're fed this pan Latin American experience. But folks who are Latino themselves experience differences. We see the colorism, the racism, and the differences between us. We have different racial experiences, different socioeconomic experiences, different legal and immigration experiences, different experiences because we may be queer.

When organizational leaders assume universality of experience, they risk alienating an increasingly larger share of Latines who believe there are as many differences between Latines as there are similarities, and that those differences should be celebrated.

- 4. Actions are aligned with personal values.** We see time and time again that it is important to young people that the organizations in their lives act in ways that cohere with their personal values. Springtide data show that the eight values driving America's young people are *accountable, inclusive, authentic, welcoming, impactful, relational, growthful, and meaningful*.⁵ For example, Esteban, age 20, shared that he still believes in God and prays, but, he says, "I just don't really support the Church because I think there's just a lot of stuff that they're against, that they talk down upon." In Esteban's case, he believes that he and the Church have different social and political values, making it impossible for him to remain there. Like Esteban, 58% of young Latines told us that is important for their faith community to share their values.

Key Insight 3: Like other young people, young Latines associate a sense of belonging with people rather than institutions. Being known and accepted by the people who make up those institutions is key.

When we asked young people how institutions inform their sense of belonging, many stated that belonging is not about institutions at all, but rather the relationships they have. This is very

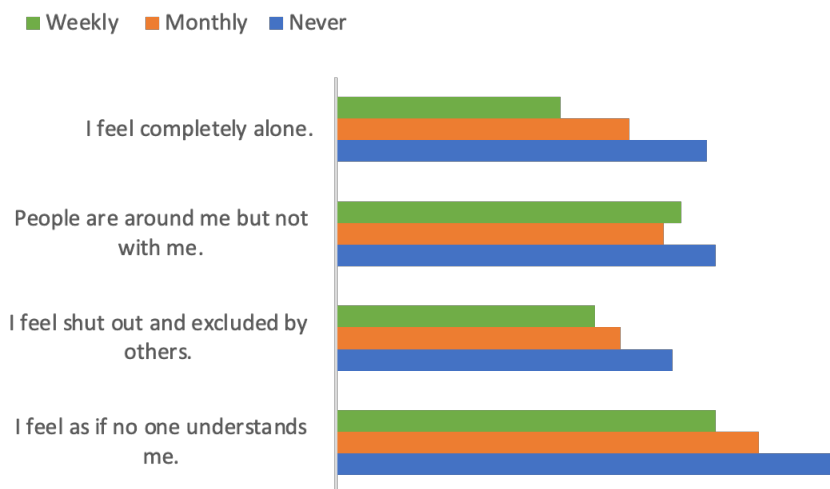
⁵ Josh Packard and contributors, *Meaning Making: 8 Values that Drive America's Newest Generation* (Bloomington, MN: Springtide Research Institute, 2020).

similar to Springtide’s general findings about belonging reported in *Belonging: Reconnecting America’s Loneliest Generation*.

However, unlike other young people, Latines’ sense of belonging *increased* by participation in religious gatherings. When we distinguish between young Latines who go to church weekly, young Latines who go to church monthly, and young Latines who never go to church, we see that social isolation decreases as participation in religious gatherings increases. For example, 58% of young Latines feel as if no one understands them. This drops 9 percentage points among those who go to Mass once a month and 14 percentage points among young Latines who go to Mass once a week.

Table 1: Comparison of Latines’ social isolation by frequency of participation in religious gatherings

Percentages of 13-to-25-year-olds who AGREE (responding “always” or “sometimes”) with each statement.



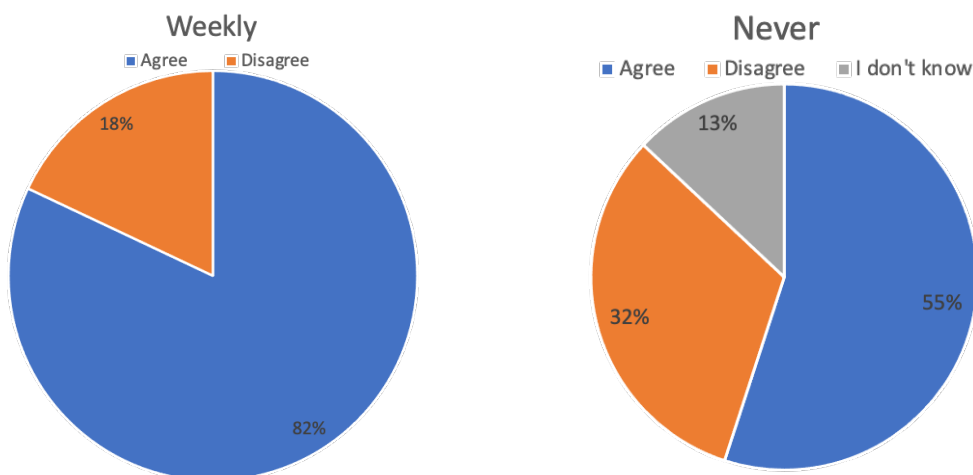
In addition, 60% of Latines agree and strongly agree that the things they do in their life have meaning and are worthwhile, while only 10% disagree. However, important differences emerge when we look at the responses from Latines who *do* and *do not* participate in religious gatherings. 82% of young Latines who attend weekly religious gatherings say that what they do in life is valuable and worthwhile, while only 55% who never attend religious gatherings agree that what they do in life is valuable and worthwhile.

From this, we can conclude that religion still plays an important role for young Latines but primarily as a conduit to purpose and meaning. It is reasonable to assume that as other

institutions and avenues to meaning appear, the exclusive domain of religion in this regard may recede.

Table 2: Comparison of Latinas who believe that what they do in life is valuable and worthwhile by frequency of participation in religious gatherings (weekly vs. never)

Percentages of 13-to-25-year-olds who AGREE (responding “always” or “sometimes”) with the statement, “I believe that what I do in life is valuable and worthwhile.”



However, while 77% of young Latinas state that they are at least slightly religious, only 30% of young Latinas attend religious gatherings regularly. And while many Latinas—both affiliated and unaffiliated—engage in personal religious or spiritual activities like art, meditation, and prayer, almost half of young Latinas say they feel like they *need* a religious or spiritual community.

We asked young Latinas what it would take for them to feel welcome in a religious or spiritual space. They told us that *acceptance*—both of themselves and others—is key. For example, Mari, age 19, told us that she stopped going to church as soon as she came out as gay to her mom. Her mom told her that she would no longer “force” her into a space in which Mari is not accepted.

Fernanda, 18, told us that simply being invited and going to church regularly wouldn’t make her feel more connected. Instead, she told us that she would feel welcome in a religious or spiritual

community that “allowed everyone the space and respect to believe as much as they want to and to transition into that space at their own pace.”

Acceptance came up again when we asked young Latines what the adults in their lives in general could do to better serve them. Nieves, age 20, told us:

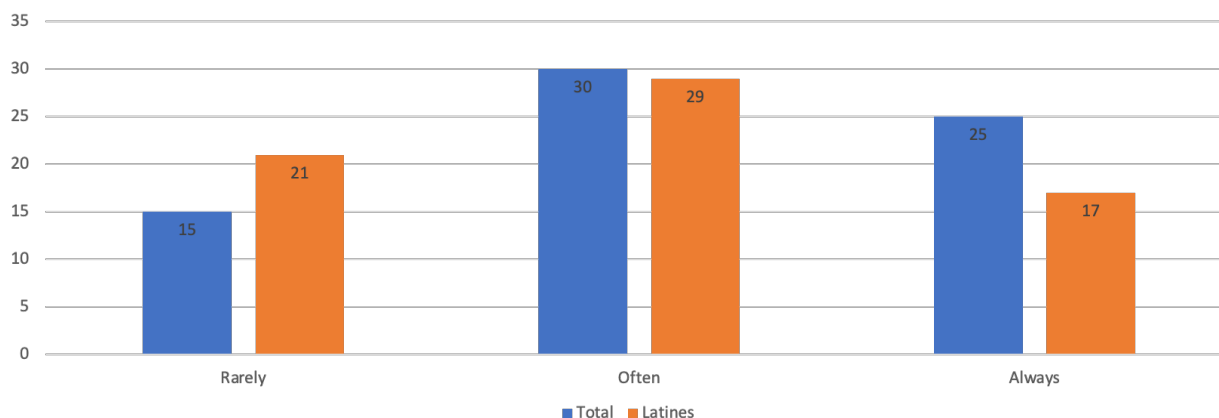
Make them feel accepted for who they want to be, who they want to look towards, or what they want to look towards. With having that key conversation, you’re able to open that door wide open for them . . . to feel comfortable within their own skin, their own ideas, and their own views and aspirations.

Young Latines are no different than their Gen Z counterparts in this respect. For young people in general, acceptance is a key part of belonging. Indeed, it is the highest level in Springtide’s data-driven model for belonging: *Noticed-Named-Known*. In our 2020 *Belonging* report, we note that “accepting young people without judgment is an essential condition for deep belongingness to occur. If a judgmental posture is present, belongingness is not possible.”⁶

The difference is that Latines report lower levels of understanding from the adults in their life than do their peers, and this understanding is a key element of acceptance.

Table 3: Comparison of the total population and Latines who believe that most adults in their life understand them

Percentages of 13-to-25-year-olds who responded RARELY, OFTEN, and ALWAYS to the statement, “I believe most adults in my life understand me.”



⁶ Springtide Research Institute, *Belonging: Reconnecting America’s Loneliest Generation* (Bloomington, MN: Springtide Research Institute, 2020), 68.

Young Latines, like others in their generation, yearn to be known and accepted. But the data show us that young Latines feel less understood and accepted than do their peers. We call this ***the acceptance gap***. Asking and listening to young Latines can tell us when and why this gap exists, and how to close it.

Conclusion

This study explores the question “Is belonging culturally bound?” in order to help institutions create or sustain meaningful communities for diverse populations. Our findings indicate that while the core of our *Noticed-Named-Known* framework remains intact and useful, there are some important considerations to keep in mind in order to create belonging for Latine young people. Institutions should build environments where young Latines can share lived experiences, access vital resources, and feel unequivocally accepted on arrival. Insights from young Latines in this report can help guide organizational leaders as they seek to create positive, meaningful, and impactful change in the lives of the young Latines they serve. Additionally, this study provides good reason to believe that there may very well be important nuances for other cultural groups as well that should be explored and documented.