

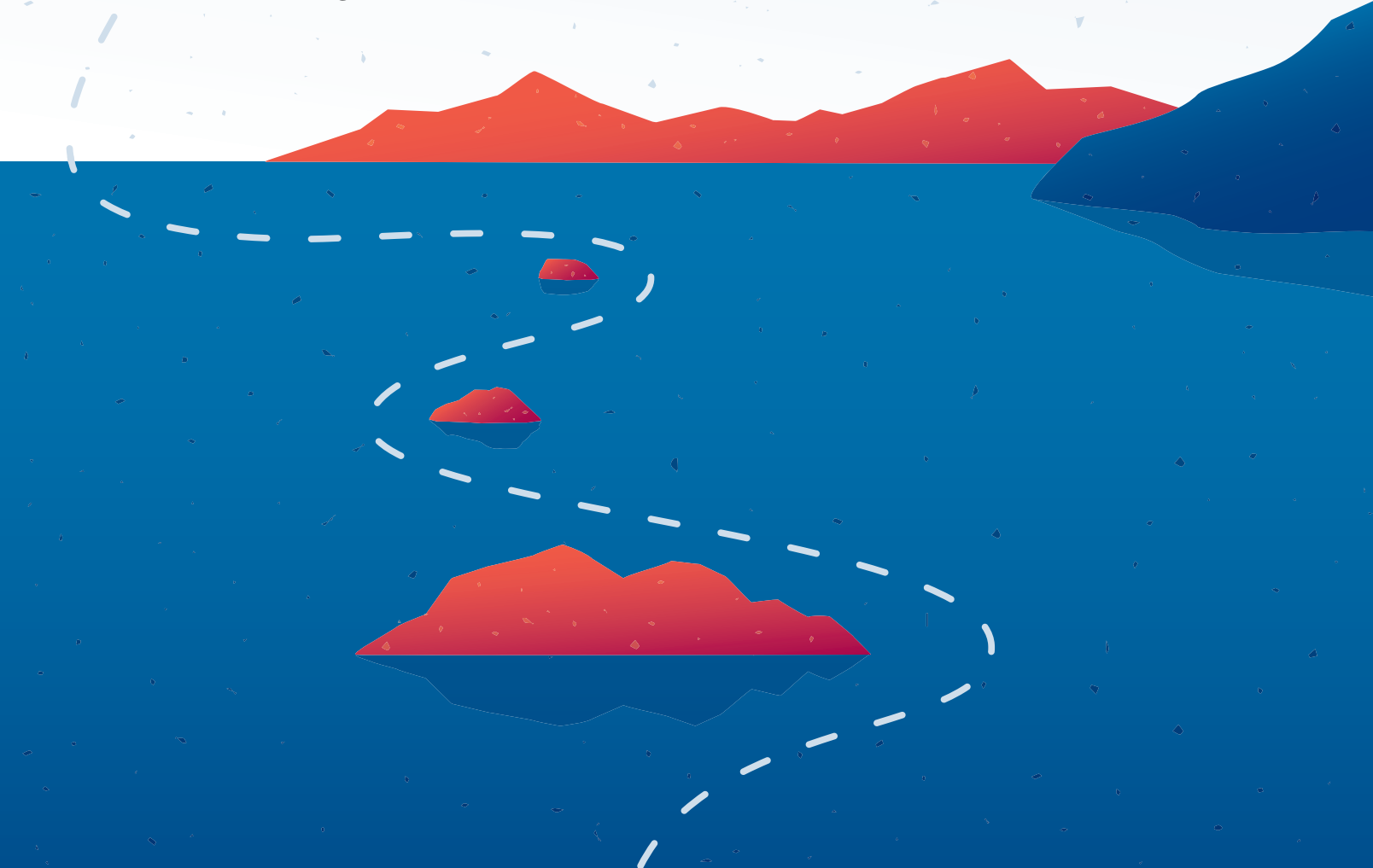


# NAVIGATING INJUSTICE

A Closer Look at Race,  
Faith & Mental Health

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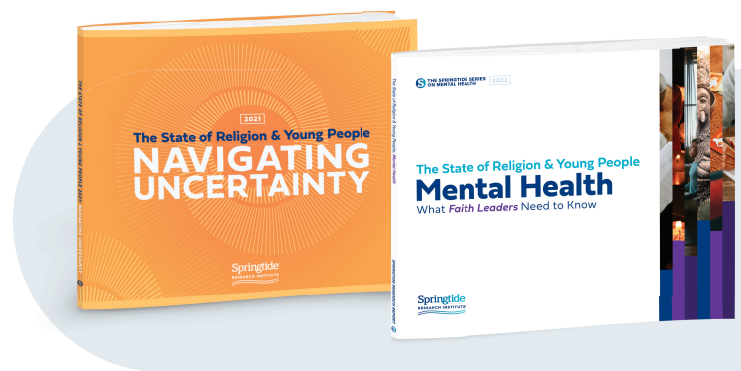
# Introduction

The American Academy of Pediatrics, the Children’s Hospital Association, and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry have declared the mental-health crisis among young people in the United States a national emergency. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, national surveys showed major increases over the past decade in mental-health issues like depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among young people.<sup>1</sup> The latest data from Springtide Research Institute® confirm these trends. **In 2022, nearly half of young people (47%) told Springtide they were moderately or extremely depressed, 55% reported being moderately or extremely stressed, and 45% said they were moderately or extremely lonely.**<sup>2</sup>

For Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC hereafter), the mental-health crisis is compounded by experiences of racial prejudice and discrimination. Research in psychology shows that these experiences are associated with elevated levels of trauma symptoms, depression, anxiety, and suicidality.<sup>3</sup> Despite these experiences, Springtide data reveal that young BIPOC are flourishing mentally and emotionally at rates comparable to their White peers. Further, young BIPOC report high levels of life satisfaction, agency, and self-esteem.

**When asked about the kinds of things that support their mental health, over half of young BIPOC (58%) said that their faith matters.** But *why* and *how* does faith matter for young BIPOC’s mental health, and what can faith leaders do to help?

The present study draws from and expands on several of Springtide’s existing studies, like *The State of Religion and Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertainty* and *The State of Religion and Young People 2022: Mental Health—What Faith Leaders Need to Know*, to address these important questions. These previous reports address topics like uncertainty and mental health broadly in order to track and understand the national trends. But research shows that mental-health challenges vary significantly across subpopulations.



**For example, girls are more likely than boys to be diagnosed with anxiety.<sup>4</sup> Black children are twice as likely to die by suicide than White children.<sup>5</sup>** For this reason, this study narrows its focus from the mental-health challenges of the total population of young people in the United States to the mental-health challenges of young BIPOC in particular. We hope that the actionable insights within this study empower faith leaders to address complex topics like mental health, ethnic-racial identity, and racial injustice from a social scientific perspective in order to create and sustain mentally healthy environments for young BIPOC.

# Religious & Ethnic-Racial Identities

The construction of social identities is a normal part of the developmental process, typically beginning in childhood and increasing in complexity during adolescence. A young person’s social identities are developed by a wide range of factors, including parental or peer socialization, experiences of social inclusion or exclusion, and cultural messages about the bounds of belonging within and between different social groups.<sup>6</sup> **While young people explore and embrace many types of identities, two are of special interest to the present study: religious identity and ethnic-racial identity (hereafter ERI).**

Religious identity is often overlooked in the United States, perhaps because religious disaffiliation has increased over time.<sup>7</sup> However, Springtide data from 2022 show that 68% of young people ages 13 to 25 consider themselves at least slightly religious, and 77% say they are at least slightly spiritual. Further, a majority of young people today believe in the existence of a higher power—25% of young people say they believe in a higher power’s existence more than they doubt it, and 27% say that they *know* a higher power exists and have no doubts about it. **This suggests that while affiliation may be down, spiritual yearning, curiosity, and identity remain prevalent today.**

When looking at variation in religious identity and beliefs across race, minor differences emerge. In general, young BIPOC are as religious as their White peers. Typically, however, Black young people report higher rates of religiosity, spirituality, and belief, as shown in Figure 1:

## Percent who say they believe that a divine being has a plan for their life

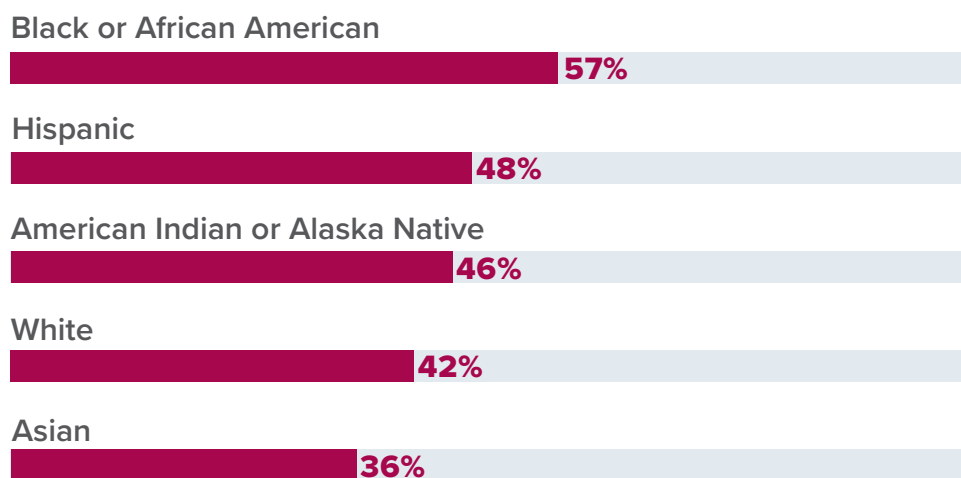


Figure 1: Springtide Research Institute survey of US young adults ages 13 to 25 conducted in 2022

## GOING FORWARD

# Three Practical Steps for Faith Leaders

### 1 KNOW WHAT YOU CAN'T KNOW.

In addition to the challenges posed by adolescence and young adulthood, young people today are aware of and grappling with impactful national and global events like climate change, civil unrest, racial injustice, the COVID-19 pandemic, and more. As trusted adults in young people's lives, we want to help. But there's only so much we can truly understand about what it's like to be a young BIPOC in the US today. In Zion's words:

**“ [Faith leaders] need to approach situations with the knowledge that they can't really understand what it's like. I think to a great degree they can understand [some things about] being a Black young person, say like fear of police, discrimination in the workplace and in schools. They can understand that to some degree, but I feel that there's other things compounded, especially with social media, coming of age in the pandemic, turning 18 during the pandemic, all these things that have changed the entire world going forward.**

—Zion, Black / African American and Jamaican, 20

The good news is that we don't have to be experts on the lived experiences of young BIPOC. Instead, we can practice leading with empathy and humility.

Rather than saying, “I was young once too, so I know how you feel, and I know what you need to do to improve your situation,” try “Though I was young once too, I don't know what it's like to be a young person today. I know it must be challenging with everything going on. I'm here to support you in any way I can.”

We must listen to young BIPOC without placing the burden on them to teach us. Racial trauma can be difficult and painful to talk about. Just the act of speaking about racially traumatic incidents out loud can itself retraumatize those who have experienced it. Researching what it's like to be a young BIPOC today to form a knowledge base on which to build and reading this study are great first steps. We can then follow up with real, meaningful, and substantive support based on the concerns and needs our young people express, incorporating one or more of the coping mechanisms outlined on page 16.



## Narratives That Build Hope

Faith communities often possess a host of resources that are inherent to the community. This includes hope-filled narratives of BIPOC forebears who were faith-filled agents of change. The stories of faith leaders model what it's like to be unashamed of one's ERI and unapologetic about one's faith. These stories model struggle, lament, and resilience by people who look like our young BIPOC. These narratives help restore the historical memory of our young people in a framework that demonstrates a mutual faithfulness—the faithfulness of our forebears to hold the torch in challenging times and God's faithfulness to provide the necessary courage to persevere.

## Spaces to Explore

One of the most important things faith leaders can do is create spaces where young people feel safe enough to explore and discover their spiritual yearnings and curiosity. Young people's spiritual yearnings might center on identity, beliefs, or the exploration of their purpose in life. In a society where BIPOC youth feel physically and emotionally unsafe, having a space where they can bring their whole ERI with them while they ask hard questions about faith is coveted. Spaces like these are more than refuges; they become incubators where young people can be formed and affirmed within the context of a loving, faith-filled intergenerational community. Ultimately, the ministry of presence offered by faith leaders is an invaluable resource that reinforces a message that young people have a place to belong and the possibility to flourish.



**Dr. Sarah Farmer,**  
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Research  
Advisory Board

Dr. Sarah Farmer

is an associate director at the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. She previously served as an assistant professor of practical theology and community development in the School of Theology and Ministry at Indiana Wesleyan University and as an associate research scholar and lecturer at Yale Divinity School, where she helped direct the Adolescent Faith and Flourishing Program at Yale Center for Faith and Culture. As a practical theologian, Sarah has taught in the areas of community transformation, faith formation, youth ministry, and liberative pedagogy. She is coauthor of *Raising Hope: 4 Paths to Courageous Living for Black Youth* (United Methodist General Board of Higher Education, 2017).

Sarah received her MDiv and PhD from Emory University, where she taught as an adjunct faculty and codirected a certificate in theological studies program at a women's prison. She cofounded the Youth Arts and Peace Camp in Chester, Pennsylvania, and worked with the Youth Hope-Builders Academy at Interdenominational Theological Center.

Sarah is married and has three children. In addition to serving on the Research Advisory Board for Springtide Research Institute, she supports work in her local community, like the Isaiah Center for Justice and Reconciliation Community Development Corporation and Hope House. Sarah also loves finding adventures to do with her children, mentoring her students, watching superhero and Hallmark movies, listening to audiobooks, and doing puzzles created by BIPOC.



# OUR MISSION

Compelled by the urgent desire to listen and attend to the lives of young people (ages 13 to 25), Springtide Research Institute® is committed to understanding the distinct ways new generations experience and express community, identity, and meaning.

We exist at the intersection of religious and human experience in the lives of young people. And we're here to listen.

We combine quantitative and qualitative research to reflect and amplify the lived realities of young people as they navigate shifting social, cultural, and religious landscapes. Delivering fresh data and actionable insights, we equip those who care about young people to care better.

## ***Navigating Injustice: A Closer Look at Race, Faith & Mental Health***

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