

iBelong

EXPLORING HOW AMERICAN MUSLIM YOUTH EXPERIENCE BELONGING



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ABOUT THE FAMILY & YOUTH INSTITUTE (THE FYI)

The Family & Youth Institute is a 501 ©3 non-profit, independent, mental health research and education institute. Our community-engaged research and solution-seeking efforts empower Muslim Americans to address their mental health and family wellness needs. We work with the community to identify priorities, conduct empirical research and create data-driven and culturally appropriate solutions. We then partner with stakeholders to disseminate culturally relevant resources to ignite community-wide change. For more information, please visit www.TheFYI.org.

Acknowledgments

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This work would not have been possible without the dedication and care of the team:

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WHY STUDY BELONGING?

When thinking about exemplary youth around Prophet Muhammad (S), the first name that often comes up is Ali ibn Abi Talib (R)--his bravery, devotion, and deep sense of piety. But, what helped him develop his unwavering faith and devotion to Islam and grow into a thriving, resilient Muslim leader? His relationship to the Prophet (S) and the sense of community around him. **Are our masjid spaces today welcoming and supportive of the next Ali? This is what we set out to answer in Project iBelong.**

A sense of belonging is a **basic human need**. For adolescents, a sense of belonging often forms through relationships in spaces outside of school, such as in after-school programs and religious spaces (Berger et al., 2020). When young people feel a genuine sense of belonging, they are better equipped to contribute positively to themselves, their families, and their communities. Like all adolescents, Muslim youth navigate complex developmental changes, but they do so within a socio-political climate that can stigmatize their

identity. They are coming of age in an Islamophobic era marked by heightened surveillance, suspicion, and blatant discrimination--**disproportionately** bullied by peers and adults alike (Tahseen, Ahmed & Ahmed, 2019). The intersection of gender, ethnic/cultural and geographic identities adds another nuanced layer to these experiences (Ahmed & Hashem, 2016).

A **strong sense of belonging acts as a protective factor** against discrimination and minority stress and is linked to better academic, mental, and physical health outcomes (Bowe et al., 2021). Religious group belonging, in particular, supports positive mental health, providing purpose, meaning, and positive social connections (Koenig & Larson, 2001). Among young Muslims specifically, **religious group belonging and identity helps them** cope with discrimination, and is associated with greater civic engagement and well-being, and lower rates of substance use (Balkaya-Ince et al., 2019; Hashem et al., 2024; Tahseen & Cheah, 2018).

Are young Muslims benefitting from the protective effects of community and belonging?

Over the past fifty years, American Muslims have invested heavily in mosques, Islamic schools, and community centers. Even though more than half of the Muslim adults are young adults, they make up **only 29% of masjid attendees** --a number that has been steadily declining over the years (Bagby, 2020). Young people feel **distanced** from institutions built by previous generations. Research highlights key contributors to youth belonging in faith-based spaces: **alignment** with personal values, **mentorship** from committed adults, and **sustained youth programming** rather than one-time events (Sethi et al., 2021). Where do Muslim American masjid spaces stand on these positive traits? How are they supporting (or not) the social, emotional, and spiritual needs of adolescents? **We embarked on iBelong to answer these questions.**

iBelong

Project iBelong aims to provide research-driven strategies to enhance belonging and connection to mosques, Islamic centers, and Muslim organizations, ultimately supporting healthier youth outcomes across all domains of life. In this report, we present preliminary findings on the following questions:

What does belonging look like and why does it matter?

What are the barriers to belonging and what helps?

METHODS

Project Structure

We adopted a community-engaged approach to this project, which centers the voice of youth and community leaders in all phases of the research. The iBelong project consisted of the following phases:

Needs Assessment:

01

Survey: 328 young adults, aged 18 to 29, completed an online survey via Qualtrics on their experiences of belonging in the masjid during adolescence.

02

Data confirmation webinars: Survey findings were shared with diverse communities across the country through a series of webinars, providing an opportunity to validate whether the experiences and insights captured in the survey resonated with current adolescents.

03

Interviews with adolescents, parents, mentors, and mosque leaders identified opportunities and barriers to belonging within local Muslim institutions.

Trainings: Guided by these findings, the iBelong team designed and implemented workshops across three diverse American Muslim communities, followed by meetings with mosque leadership to share a final report outlining key findings and actionable recommendations.

- a. **Youth-Only Workshop:** This workshop aimed to empower youth to articulate their needs and advocate for the changes they wish to see in their mosques.
- b. **Adult-Only Workshop:** This workshop focused on educating adults about Positive Youth Development (PYD) and equipping them with skills to actively listen to and meaningfully empower youth within their mosques.

- c. **Youth & Adult Workshop:** This joint workshop was designed to facilitate open dialogue between youth and adults, to build mutual understanding and collaboration.

Dissemination: The final phase focused on sharing results back with American Muslim communities, scholars, practitioners, and the broader scientific community. We presented preliminary findings at academic and Muslim conferences, and are diligently working towards community training resources as of the writing of this report.

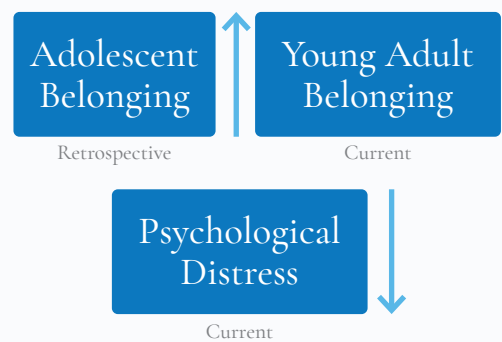
Participants

Findings presented in this report are from the participants of the online survey, recruited through convenience sampling and word of mouth. Youth (N = 328; Mean = 23.70 years) were ethnically diverse, % second-generation and about 60% female. IRB approval was obtained from UT-Austin.

RESULTS

Why does belonging matter?

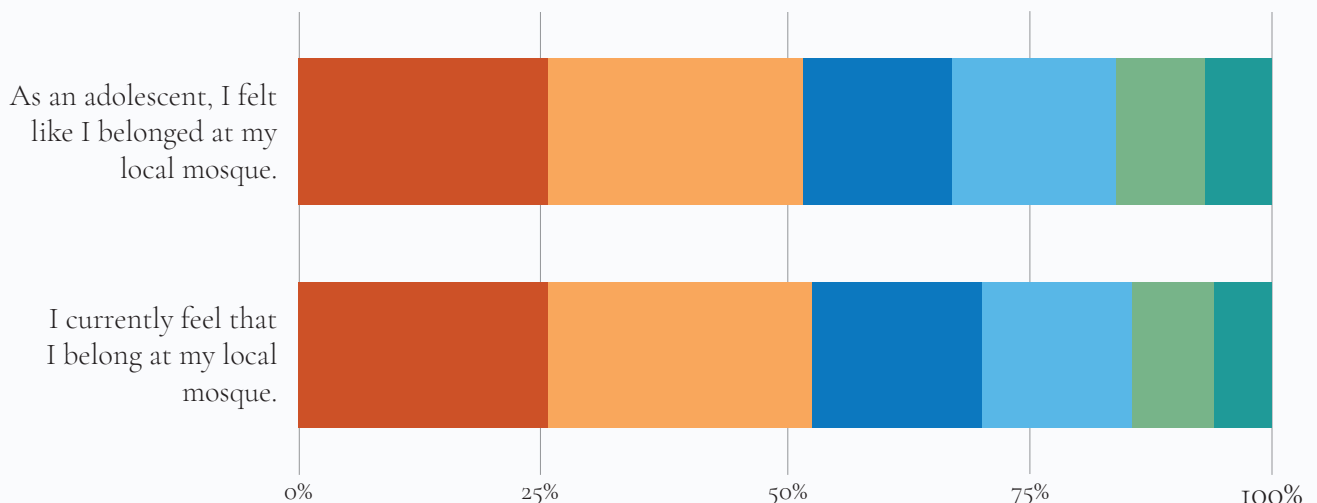
Masjid belonging as an adolescent **and** as young adult was negatively associated with current psychological distress*. Importantly, belonging as a teenager retrospectively has a lasting impact on mental health into young adulthood.



Do youth feel like they belong?

Among survey participants, about 50% of young adults felt that they belonged both as an adolescent and currently as a young adult. However, about 40% of young adults also felt that they did not belong or were unsure.

*multiple regression; $sr^2 = .12$, $p < 0.05$, controlling for age, gender, and ses



- Strongly agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Somewhat disagree
- N/A

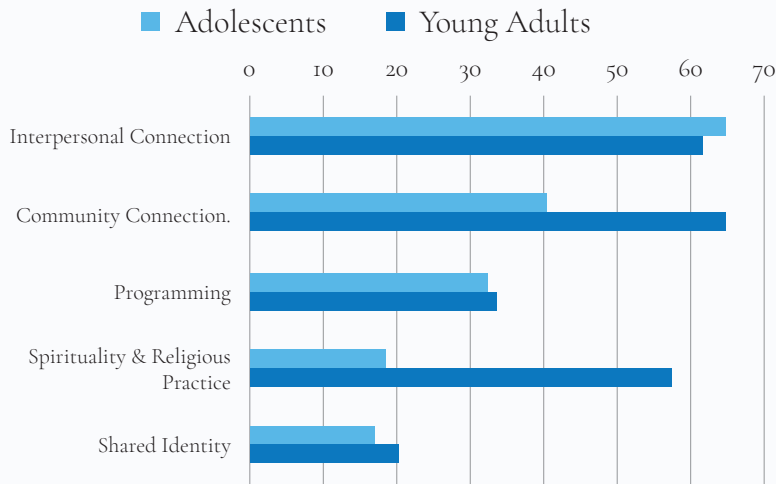
WHY DON'T YOUTH BELONG?

While the quantitative data offer a strong overview of *what* is happening, the survey's open-ended questions allowed us to explore the *why* by asking participants to reflect on their experiences of belonging during adolescence (retroactively) and young adulthood.

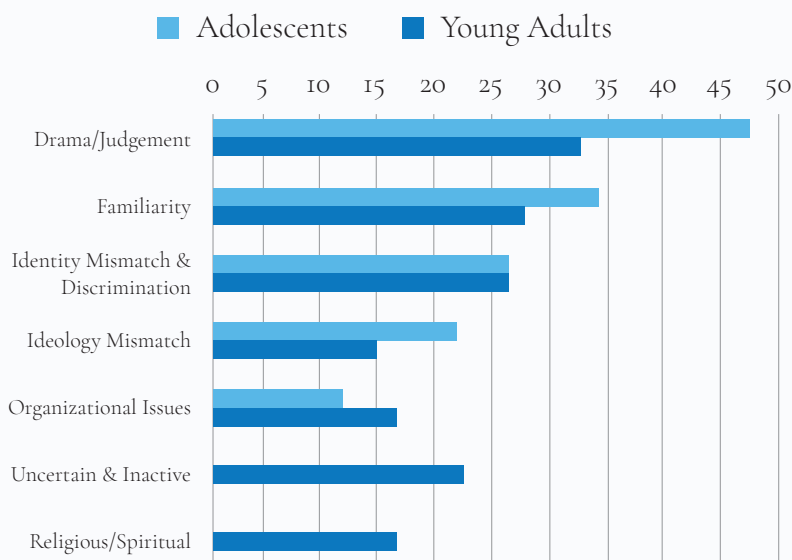
Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we coded participants' responses to the following questions:

- What made you feel like you **belonged** at the mosque?
- What made you feel like you **did not belong** at the mosque?

What made you feel like you belong?



What made you feel like you did not belong?



Discussion

The most impactful theme that emerged across participants was **interpersonal dynamics and community connection**--this refers to the meaningful relationships and interactions adolescents have with adults, peers, mentors, and other community members, which help them feel seen, supported, and valued within their mosque community. Interestingly, the **same factor that promotes belonging (interpersonal interactions) also serves as the reason for *not* belonging**. In many cases, it was not the events themselves, but how young people were spoken to, welcomed, guided, or dismissed that shaped whether - or not - they felt the masjid was a place for them. While programs and organizational structures certainly play a role in shaping engagement, the overall findings suggest that the **quality of relationships** within the community

has the most important influence on belonging.

Finally, it's worth noting that for belonging as a young adult, some key themes emerged that were not as salient for belonging as a teen. Broader community connection and spirituality and religious practice was much more important for young adults' belonging than that of adolescents. Spirituality and religious practice refers to factors that impact young people's worship and sense of spirituality in the masjid. Also, an important barrier for young adults was related to experiencing organizational issues as they serve in the community. These findings highlight the need to **tailor youth services and programming to the unique needs and wants of each age group**--rather than blanket youth programming.

EXAMPLES AND QUOTES

In this section, we provide some detailed examples of the major themes that emerged: interpersonal connection and issues, and identity differences and discrimination.

Interpersonal connection

Participants reported a level of connection with other individuals in their congregation - friends, adults, peers, and family.

Friends:

“ I had a lot of Muslim friends that I would hang out with at the masjid which made it fun.

Adults:

“ Mentors at the mosque
Friendliness of the imam
Encouragement of the elders

Family:

“ My extended family (grandparents, aunt, uncle, cousins) and immediate family also went, made me feel safe

Interpersonal issues

Participants referenced drama and (general) poor treatment that came from other congregants as a major reason for feeling like they didn't belong. These subthemes were: general drama, judgement, exclusionary behavior, bullying, and backbiting/gossiping.

Bullying:

“ The people that attended the mosque were rude and horrible to me.

Backbiting/gossiping:

“ The adults were judgemental and always waited for the young people to make mistakes to ridicule them and they were two faced and always talking trash.

Identity differences and discrimination

Another barrier participants referenced was specific identity differences, including experiences of discrimination between themselves and the congregation. These identity differences included age, class, gender, ethnicity, and whether they were born as a Muslim or not.

Ethnicity:

“ Having the same ethnic background, knowing others there, and having stronger Arabic skills.

Gender:

“ Condescending tones, not speaking to women well or excluding us from conversations

Age:

“ Elders blaming the young generation on being “too Americanized”, not helping us with what we’re actually going through, instilling fear more than explaining to us why we should do what we were taught

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall the findings show that community belonging is important for young people's mental health and interpersonal dynamics are a **key** driver of positive belonging. How can community and masjid leaders use these findings to support youth? The key is to adopt a multifaceted approach to youth belonging in our masajid that incorporates structural, interpersonal and intergroup factors:



Structural:

- Secure funding from community members/donors/philanthropists that is bound to youth-specific expenses (Sharh Al-Waqf).
- Create opportunities and pathways for leadership and governance for adolescents within the organization.
- Conduct yearly needs assessments of youth-related concerns, strengths, and needs.
- Establish a Code of Conduct and accountability measures for behaviors that violate community norms



Interpersonal:

- Focus on the people and relationships in the masjid--not just events
- Mandate yearly leadership and advocacy training for leadership that focuses on policy priorities and creating an implementation plan
- Provide mentors with training on how to have positive interpersonal relationships with young people
- Facilitate regular listening sessions between adults and young people



Intergroup:

- Learn and teach how to navigate diversity along various identities (gender, ethnicity)
- Be intentional about creating inclusive spaces and programming uniquely tailored to young adults versus teenagers
- Foster intergroup and intergenerational connections through programming and community messaging

In Report 2, we provide a more detailed analysis of adult-teen relationships in the masjid space and intergroup dynamics, their effects on youth belonging, and comprehensive recommendations for programming.

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RELATED RESOURCES

[Muslim Youth Identity Research Bulletin](#)

[Uplifting Black Muslim Youth Toolkit](#)

[Mentoring Muslim Youth Workshop](#)

[Bullying Prevention Toolkit](#)

[Digital Parenting Toolkit](#)



The Family & Youth Institute (The FYI) is a national organization dedicated to strengthening the mental health and well-being of Muslim Americans through community-centered research, education, and culturally grounded resources. By transforming research into practical tools, programs, and learning experiences, The FYI empowers individuals, families, and communities to thrive, address real-world challenges, and foster healthy development across all stages of life.

For more information, please visit www.TheFYI.org