

# **2022 Bahá'í Youth Survey: Analysis and Report**

January 2023

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# Executive Summary

## Background

Youth, both in society and within the Baha'i community, are in a state of crisis. Exacerbated by the pandemic,<sup>1</sup> youth are struggling with mental health, addiction, identity, and a lack of sense of purpose. Too often, youth feel hopeless and without a strong connection to their Creator and their Community. While numerous studies confirm these trends in greater society,<sup>2</sup> and the same trends are evident to those working with Baha'i youth, a group of individuals recognized that it would be helpful to have a more objective measure of youth's well-being in the Baha'i community along with a feedback mechanism to better understand how the Baha'i community can better support their needs. Conducted as an individual initiative in the latter months of 2022, this survey was developed to help address those concerns. We hope that it might support our collective efforts to better read our reality, engage in continuous learning, and "do everything in [our] power to protect the younger Bahá'ís, to strengthen their faith, deepen them in the Covenant, and enable them to take full refuge in the Will and Testament of the beloved Master..." (Shoghi Effendi, 26 October 1941 to an individual believer.)

## Purpose of the Survey

The survey sought to address several key questions, including:

- Are Baha'i youth struggling with their Baha'i identity?
- What factors have contributed to developing their Baha'i identity?
- What factors have caused obstacles to developing their Baha'i identity?
- What are Baha'i youth's experiences with the institute process?
- What personal issues are Baha'i youth struggling with?
- What societal issues do they care about?
- How can the Baha'i community better support Baha'i youth?
- What learnings can be gleaned from engagements with Baha'i youth that are viewed as successful and those that are not?

## Survey Method

Several individuals consulted about survey questions and built the survey in Survey Monkey. The survey was sent out through channels available to individual Baha'is. (As this was an individual initiative, formal institutional channels were not utilized.) The survey was structured so that both youth and parents could complete it independently. Parents were able to fill out the survey for multiple children who may have had different experiences, meaning for each child a new entry was created.

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<sup>1</sup> 37% of teens reported that the pandemic worsened their mental health. (Child Mind Institute, "2021 Children's Mental Health Report.") Suicide attempts among teenage girls increased by 51% from pre to post pandemic (4% for boys). (<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7024e1.htm>)

<sup>2</sup> The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children's Hospital Association together declared "a national state of emergency" in children's mental health. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control found that 45% of all high school students were "so persistently sad or hopeless in 2021 they were unable to engage in regular activities." More than 75% of schools expressed concern about student depression, anxiety and trauma. ("The crisis of student mental health is much vaster than we realize," Washington Post, December 5, 2022.)

## Survey Result Highlights

The results of the survey were both alarming and encouraging. Summarized in this report are reflections by parents and youth that include observations that the current approaches towards Baha'i youth are insufficient as well as concrete suggestions by parents and youth for successful ways to engage the youth. The report summarizes quantitative data and attempts to summarize qualitative data reflected in hundreds of individual comments provided. Many parents and youth took great pains to explain their views and summarize their feelings in over 700 comments. While it was not possible to include all comments, the authors sought to summarize their main themes and suggestions for action. We also included direct comments that were reflective of common sentiments.

## Data Highlights:

### Demographics:

- The perspectives of 449 youth or parents of youth are reflected in the survey results.
- 42% of responses are youths' individual perspectives, and 58% of responses are the perspectives of parents for one of their youth (for each child a new entry was created).
- 78% of respondents are from the USA.

### Youth Activities:

- In order of importance, respondents identified parents, Baha'i friendships, and attending "Peak Youth Experiences" (e.g., youth conference, intensive retreat, camp, conference) as the most important factors contributing to youth's Baha'i identity.
- 74% of parents and 46% of youth do not think that the youth activities in the Baha'i community are sufficient to support the youth.
- 100% of youth who filled out the survey directly and 96% of youth whose parents filled out the survey have participated in the institute process at some point.

### Struggles with Faith:

- 31% of parents indicated their child has rejected the Faith or is unsure about whether they consider themselves Baha'is.
- Among those who are not Baha'is, the top three reasons for not embracing the Faith, in order of prevalence, are: Lack of Baha'i friendships, they don't see the relevance of the Faith in their lives, they are challenged by some of the Baha'i laws.
- 94% of parents said that their children who are not Baha'is could return to the Faith under the right conditions (which included more "peak" events, Baha'i friendships, and welcoming LGBTQ+ members).
- Among youth who do not consider themselves Baha'is, parents report 90% remain in national's database as Baha'is.
- Where youth are confirmed Baha'is, 55% of parents worry that their youth will not remain in the Faith and 29% of the youth said that they worry that they will not remain in the Faith.

- Younger youth are questioning their faith more than older youth, which is also consistent with younger youth's disproportionately negative experience with the Institute Process compared to older youth.
- In order of prevalence, reasons for Baha'i youth considering leaving the faith are: Lack of Baha'i friendships and Baha'i peer role models to look up to, lack of strategy for high school-aged Baha'i youth, exclusion experiences, mental health, homosexuality/queerness, and harmful behaviors with the Baha'i community.

### **Struggles of Baha'i Youth:**

- Female Baha'i youth said they struggle most with mental health (68% of women) and social media (36% of women).
- Male Baha'i youth said they struggle most with porn (40% of men), mental health (30% of men) and social media (23% of men).
- 25% of both male and female youth struggle with chastity.
- There is a significant disparity in the perception by parents and youth about the issues they struggle with.

### **Individual Comments:**

- Comments describing youth's experiences in the Baha'i community and with the institute process reflected the following themes (in order of prevalence):
  - The lack of opportunities to build friendships among Baha'i youth
  - Feelings of isolation and loneliness
  - "Strictness" or rigidity of the institute process
  - The lack of relevance of the Ruhi curriculum to issues they face
  - Binary (all or nothing) or strict thinking around participation with little flexibility

### **Suggestion Highlights:**

- Provide more opportunities for youth to develop meaningful Baha'i friendships, both locally and regionally.
- Organize peak events that bring large numbers of youth from wide geographic areas to build friendships, share experiences, and create energy to sustain them in service.(i.e., conferences, camps, retreats).
- Have deepenings and frank discussions about difficult social issues relevant to the youth and the Baha'i perspective on them, particularly in regards to homosexuality and queerness.
- Develop a curriculum specifically for high school aged youth, as many mentioned a lack of curriculum for youth in this vulnerable stage of life. The JY curriculum was also identified as too simple and in need of a refresh.
- Involve youth (in the age range of the youth being targeted) or parents (of youth in the age range being targeted) in planning and decision-making about youth programs.

- Replicate or revive youth weekends at Greenacre, youth conferences, Clara Dunn Academy, NEBY Fest, other peak experiences where difficult issues can be discussed and peers they can look up to can be found. Regional and national youth events can provide often isolated youth a much needed sense of community and solidarity.
- Change the age range of Baha'i youth from 15-30 to 15-24 (i.e., high school and college ages).

## **Conclusion**

While imperfect in its data collection and sample methodologies, we hope that the information produced by the survey and summarized in this report might provide helpful ideas to support the efforts of individuals working with youth, along with National Spiritual Assemblies tasked with developing strategies to “support young souls to become educated, to set their feet firm on the path of service, and to navigate the obstacles that might hinder them from developing their inherent potentialities and contributing to the transformation of society.” (Letter from the Universal House of Justice to an Individual Believer dated 26 September 2022.)

Based on quantitative and qualitative data from this survey, a strategy that embraces wide geographic peak experiences, social connection, and issues relevant to the youth of today would significantly improve the experience of Baha'i youth. It is important for our communities to recognize the unique struggles that youth face today and have the courage and wisdom to address these issues, even if they may be complex. We hope that this survey provides communities a chance to sympathize with our youth along with an opportunity to better address their needs through knowledge and understanding.

# Methodology

## Survey Tool

A professional version of Survey Monkey was used to build the survey and analyze the data.

## Structure

The survey was structured so that both youth and parents could complete it independently. Parents were able to fill out the survey for multiple children who may have had different experiences, meaning for each child a new entry was created. Data collected was both quantitative and qualitative (through comments). A link to the survey is in the appendix.

## Data Collection

The survey was sent to listservs the authors had access to, placed on personal Facebook and other social media pages, posted on the Baha'i Mommies Facebook Group (5,500+ members), posted on the Largest Baha'i Facebook Group (43,000+ members), and forwarded to individuals.

## Limitations

- Parents who filled out the survey included their perception of their youth's experiences who have left the faith (and so the parents' survey results skew more negative).
- Youth who filled out the survey were engaged enough in the Baha'i community to learn about the survey and be willing to fill it out (and so the youth's experiences skew more positive and the direct views of youth who have left the faith were not largely captured).
- The survey was long and so some filled out the first part of the survey and not the latter parts.
- The overwhelming majority of respondents were White or Persian and so the perspectives of Black, Indigenous, or other people of color are noticeably underrepresented.

# Data Results

## Demographics

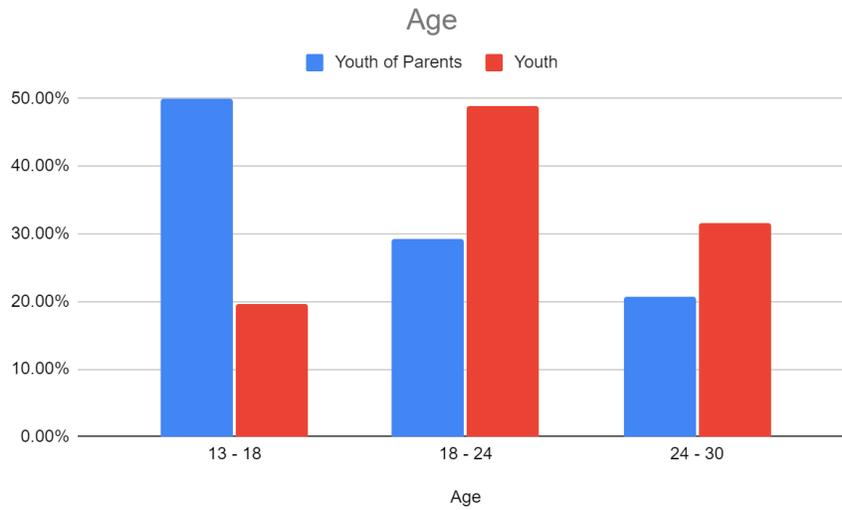
### Totals

- A Total of 382 parents and youth fully or partially filled out the survey. This represented a total of 449 youth (parents had 291 youth among them and then 158 youth filled it out). (We have no way of knowing the degree of overlap or relationship between the youth and adults, but their separate perceptions seem important.)
- 42.28% of respondents were youth (167) and 57.72% (228) of respondents were parents (the ages of the parent's youth are represented below as "youth of parents").

### Age

On average, the parents' responses represented younger youth's experiences whereas the youth's responses represented older youth.

1. 79% of the parents' youth were between 13-24 years old
2. 80% of youth responding were between 18-30 years old

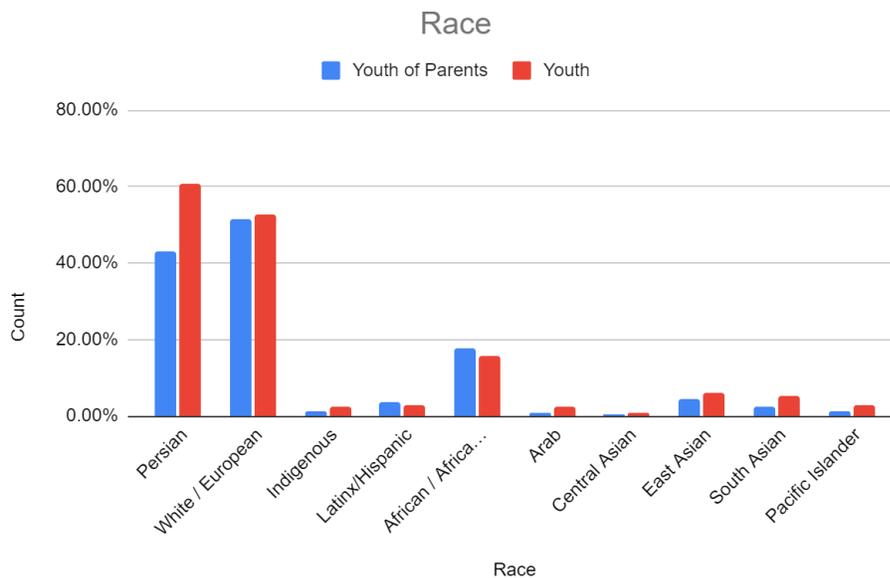


### Location

78.48% of respondents were from the USA; 8.35% from Europe; 4.56% from Canada; 3.54% from the Pacific and other locations had less than 1% each.

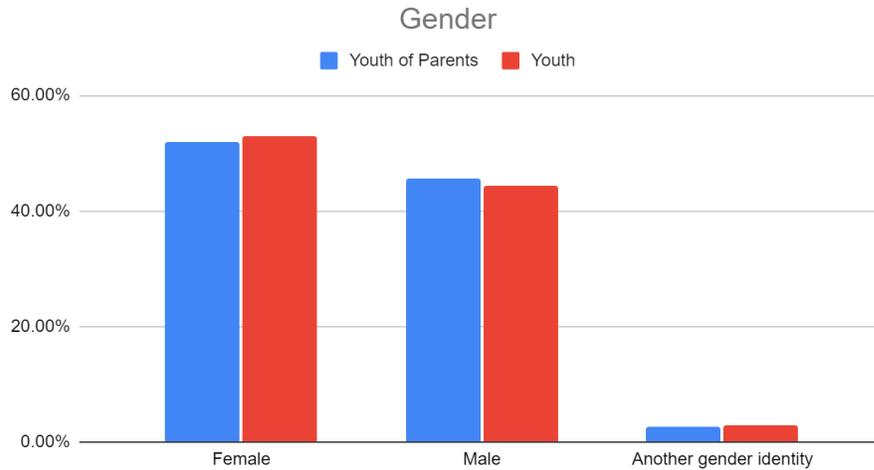
### Race

The vast majority of respondents were white and Persian. Persians made up over 60% of the youth respondents and a little over 40% of the parent respondents. The below chart totals more than 100% because participants could select more than one race.



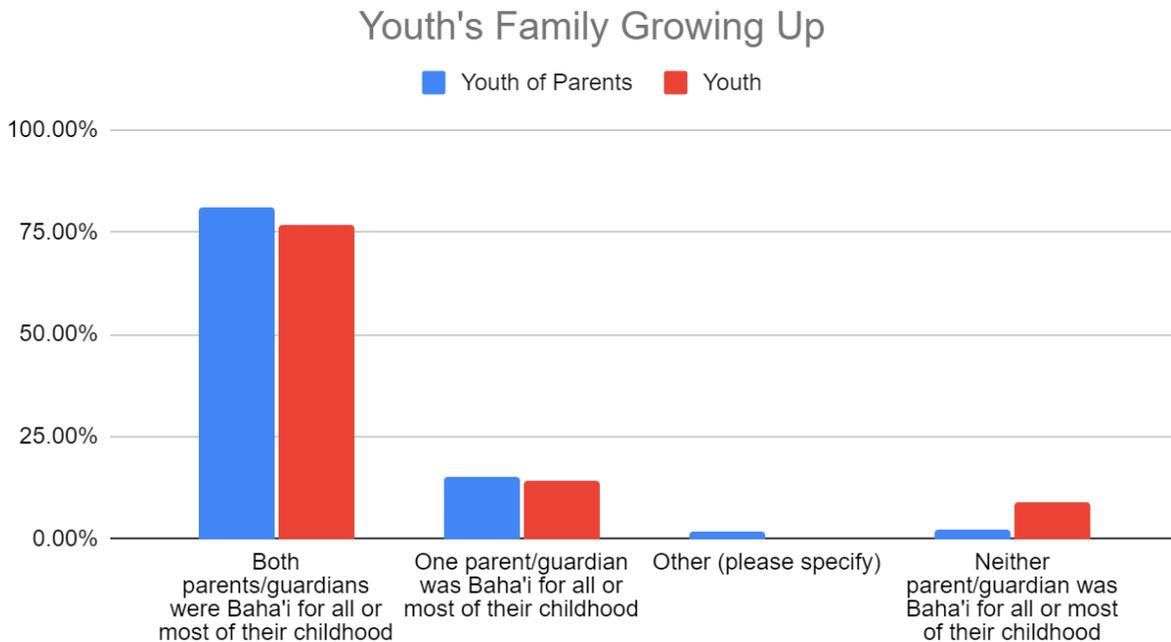
### Gender

More females than males were represented in the survey with 10 responding with "another gender identity."



### Family Religious Background

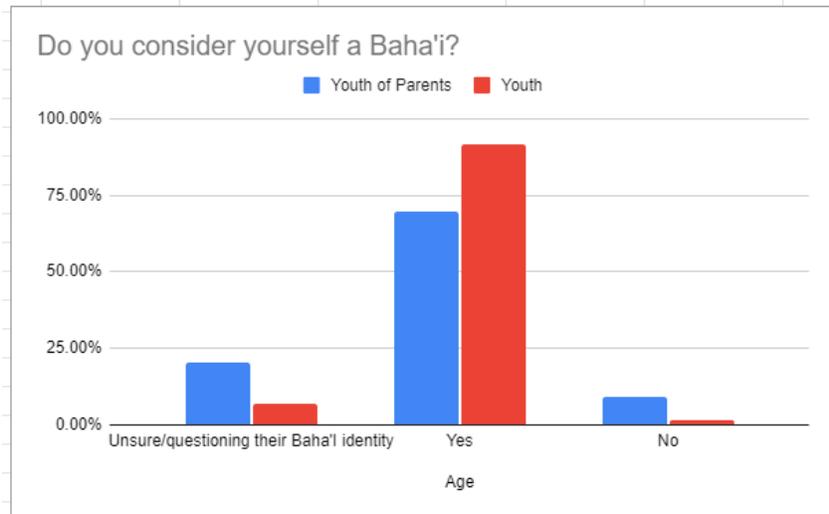
The vast majority of youth's views represented in the survey grew up in Baha'i families (over 75%). Additionally, 75% of respondents have extended Baha'i families.



### Baha'i Identity

#### Youth Who Consider Themselves Baha'is

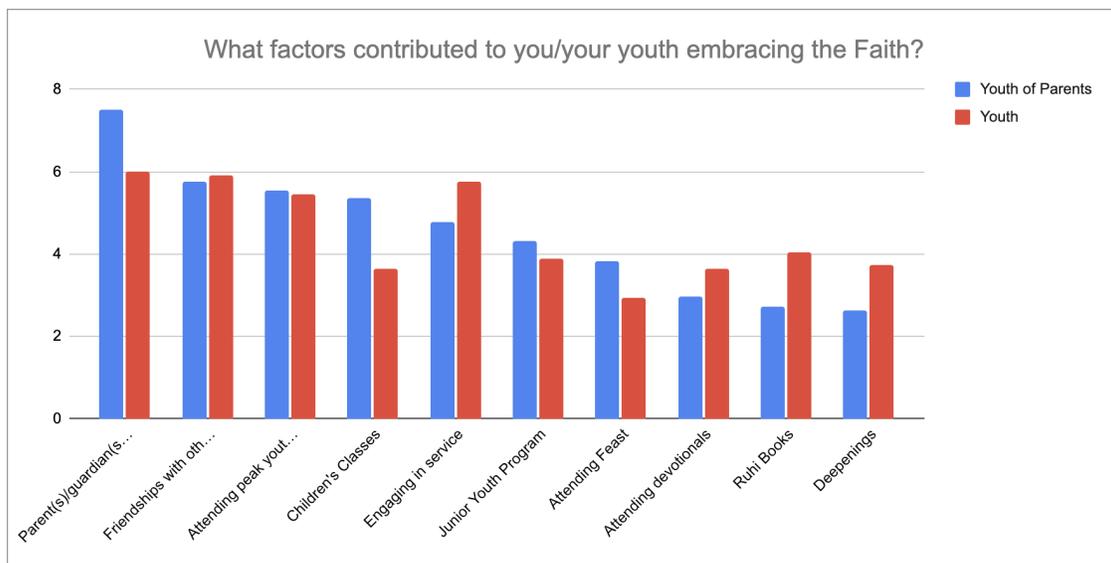
- Parents filling out the survey identified 70% of their youth as Baha'is (with 9% not identifying as Baha'is and 20% questioning their faith).
- 92% of the youth who directly filled out the survey consider themselves to be Baha'is.



### Factors Contributing to Bahá'í Identity

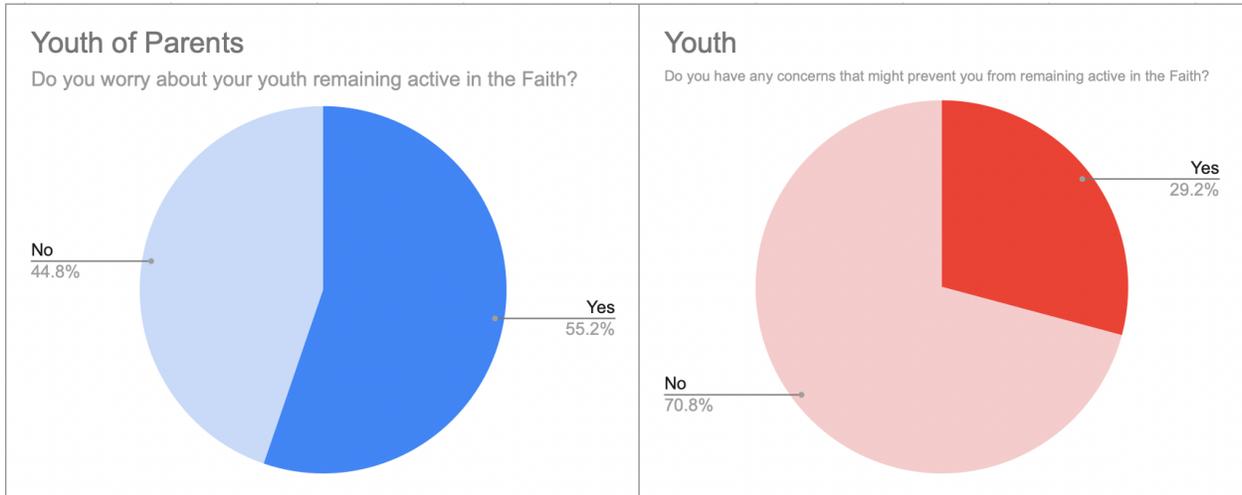
For those who identify as Baha'is, the top 3 factors contributing to their Baha'i identity, in rank order are:

1. Role of Parents
2. Bahá'í Friendships
3. Attending "Peak Youth Experiences" (e.g., youth conference, intensive retreat, camp, conference)
4. Fourth-ranked, the youth identified service and the parents identified children's classes.

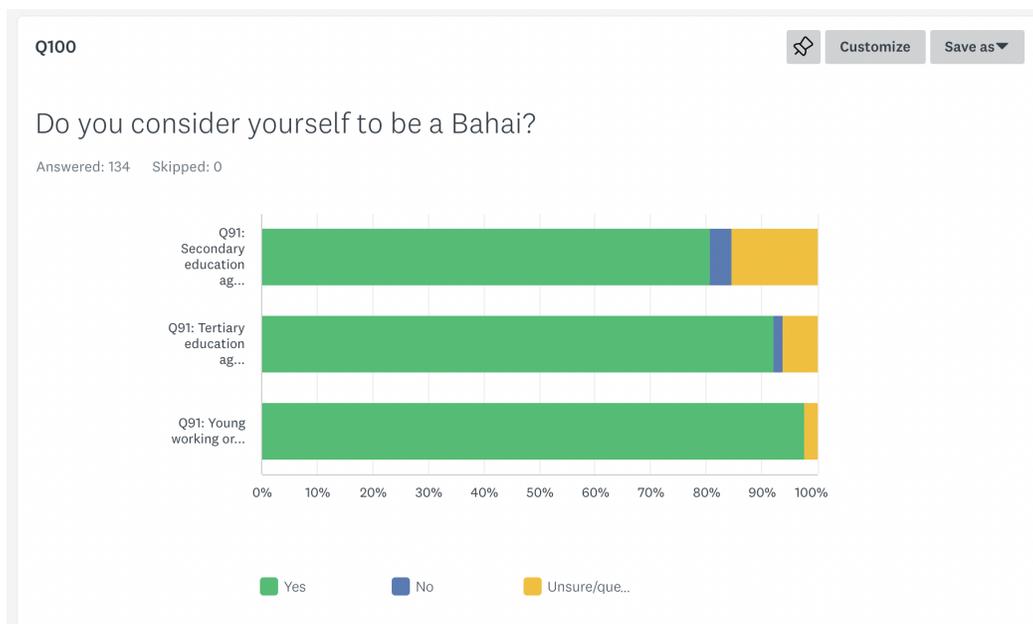


### Concerns about remaining in the Faith

Even where the youth consider themselves Baha'is, 55% of parents worry that their youth will not remain in the Faith. 29% of the youth said that they worry that they will not remain in the Faith. (The Bahá'í view on homosexuality was the dominant reason given, and dislike of Ruhi books was the second most common reason.)



The data also shows that younger youth are questioning their faith more than older youth, which is also consistent with younger youth's disproportionately negative experience with the Institute Process compared to older youth.



### Comments About the Maintenance of the Baha'i Identity of Youth Who Consider Themselves Baha'is

There were over 90 comments about the religious identity of their youth, below is a summary of prominent themes, some concrete suggestions for improvement, and a sample of representative direct quotations.

### *Themes ( in order of prevalence)*

55% of parents worry that their youth may not remain active in the Faith, and 29% of youth themselves say they have concerns that may prevent them from being active in the Faith. Below is a thematic summary of the reasons they provide for this concern.

- **Lacking Baha'i friendships or Baha'i peer role models to look up to:**
  - Overwhelmingly, the primary reason parents cited as the reason for concern that their children would not remain Baha'is is because they lacked meaningful Baha'i friendships or exposure to older Baha'i youth to look up to.
  - Related to this was mention of how they are the only youth in their community; the focus on neighborhood activities was isolating; and how there are no larger youth gatherings they are aware of to join.
  - Lack of community bonds and/or a community, i.e., being an isolated believer
- **Lack of a strategy for high school-aged youth**
  - Several parents mentioned frustration that there seemed to be intentional activities and a curriculum for children, Junior Youth, and college-age Youth but nothing comparable for high school age youth which is a particularly vulnerable time in their life.
  - Others specifically mentioned that the Ruhi curriculum was not meeting their needs and the focus on youth jumping from the junior youth curriculum directly into teaching children's classes and animating was not meeting their needs and even causing burnout or rejection of the Baha'i community.
  - Youth attributed an overemphasis on the Institute to the exclusion of other experiences and programs for withdrawal in the Faith.
  - Youth find it difficult to strike the balance between school, life, and service
- **Exclusion experiences:**
  - Baha'i parents described their children feeling socially excluded from other Baha'i youth, particularly where the other youth were Persian and their youth was not, or where the community was wealthy and their youth was not.
  - Others mentioned that youth felt condescended to or patronized by Baha'is applying pressure to serve directly from graduating from the junior youth curriculum when their own Baha'i identity was not yet formed. The nature of the activities were heavy on service and learning but provided little joyful expressions or opportunities to build bonds of friendship
- **Mental health:**
  - Many youth have mental health issues that make engaging in the Baha'i community particularly difficult.
  - It is difficult to have or establish healthy boundaries with the Baha'i community and its members' expectations.

- Guilt and shame tactics used by some Baha'is in leadership positions to convince youth to serve have been traumatizing.
- **Homosexuality/Queerness**
  - The subject of homosexuality/queerness dominated the comments by youth on what might prevent them from remaining active in the Faith. Some noted they themselves are queer and feel a lack of support. Others noted that while they do not identify in this manner, they struggle to accept the Faith's teachings and community members' attitudes.
- **Harmful behavior:**
  - Some parents mentioned that their children were exposed to harmful behavior including sexual advances by well-respected young Baha'i men.
  - Some had experiences where sexual abuse was mishandled by institutions.

### *Suggestions*

- More peak events that bring large numbers of youth from wide geographic areas to build friendships, share experiences, and create energy to sustain them in service.
- ISGP was cited as a good experience, but limited in who can or would want to attend
- The Clara Dunn Academy in Washington State was cited as a good experience
- More direct conversation and opportunities to understand the Faith's position on current issues, particularly homosexuality/queerness.

### *Sample Direct Quotations from Comments Reflecting Common Themes*

- "I am the single youth left of my age cohort, out of 12 youth. That is less than 10% staying in the faith, in what used to be a stage 3 cluster."
- "The only thing that leaves the door open for me is the guidance on homosexuality. It's not a personal struggle for me, yet is the hardest guidance to accept and often the biggest barrier for contacts of mine being comfortable with the Faith and is quite heartbreaking. It's not for lack of trying, it's a topic I've studied extensively and heartily for years. I am still firmly, and anticipate staying a Baha'i but this is the thing that tests my adherence the most."
- "Additional to my experience with queerness and feeling unaccepted by my community as a result, I have witnessed countless seekers/Baha'is lose interest and even be turned away from the Faith by other Baha'is in my area... This puts intense mental strain on me when interacting with these individuals in my area during activities, knowing their negative feelings towards queer people and actively excluding people from our Faith."
- "I have found that when I try to be more active spiritually or in regards to social justice, I become overwhelmed with anxiety about being a good enough person. I never feel like I'm good enough or that I'm doing enough, and I end up feeling like a bad person who isn't filling their spiritual or community obligations. When I step back and stop thinking about it, I feel so much happier and fulfilled. This makes it very hard for me to be active both as a

Baha'i and as a member of my community. I do what I can (for example praying, fasting, attending feasts when I can), but the anxiety comes back when I actively start striving."

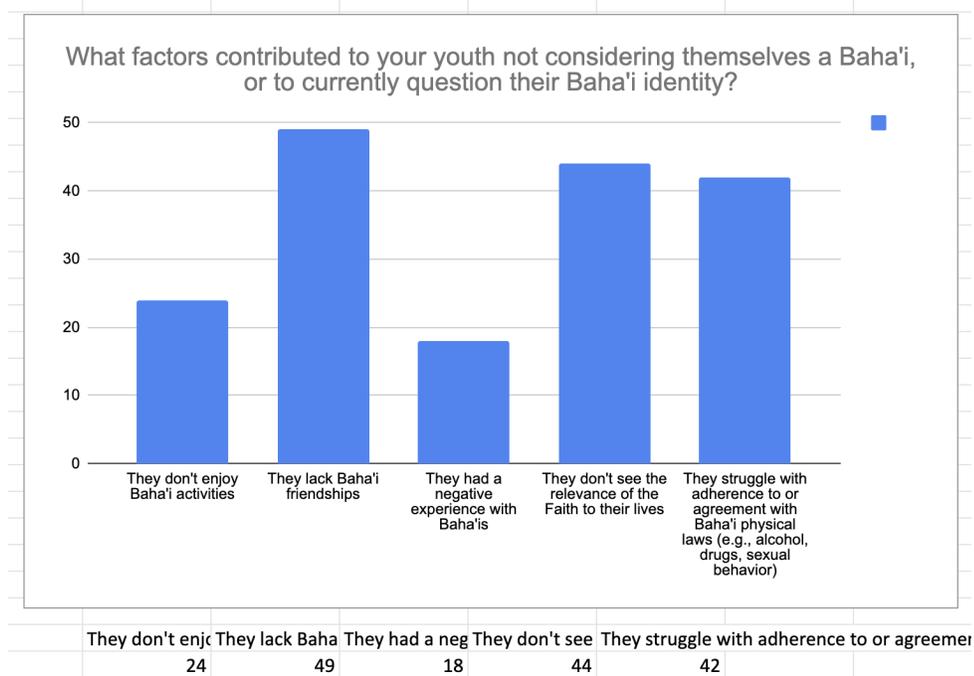
- "I cannot stress enough how important the Baha'i community's engagement with race amity and racial justice is to me. While I did not become a Baha'i because of the teachings on race unity, I have become aware recently of just how central it is to the Faith's progress... In my opinion, the American Baha'i community has not and still isn't putting the issue at the forefront in every single endeavor. If we do not do this..., we are not making any progress towards our goal of becoming the best example of a racially unified community in the world."
- "At about 16/17 my daughter started feeling like there wasn't a place for her in our area. The Sunday school closed and there was no program for teenagers after 14. When we broached the concern with our LSA we were told that teaching childrens classes and Ruhi books were next. It wasn't enough. They needed a safe place to ask their questions and none was provided. We began a youth group.... which was very active with service work and fundraising but because it wasn't part of the 5 year plan the LSA didn't support it and so eventually we had to let it go."
- "Yes it is a constant worry. We are in an isolated community and worry that our children are not developing a Baha'i identity by being engaged and involved in a wider Baha'i community."
- "I honestly don't, but we have lost way too many youth in the past 10 years, because there are no places for them to come together and study the writings and be inspired."

### **Those who do not consider themselves Baha'is**

- 31% of youth whose parents filled out the survey are questioning or do not consider themselves Baha'is (7% of youth who filled out the survey are questioning or do not consider themselves Baha'is).
- 94% of parents<sup>3</sup> said that their children who are not Bahá'ís would come back to the Faith with the right conditions. Among those identified as the "right conditions" (in rank order of prevalence) are:
  1. Peak events (specifically, conferences)
  2. Bahá'í friendships
  3. Welcoming LGTBQ+ members
- Of those who are not Bahá'ís, below are the top 3 reasons for why they are not Bahá'í are:
  1. Lack Baha'i Friendships
  2. Don't see the Faith's relevance in their lives
  3. Challenges with adherence to Bahá'í law

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<sup>3</sup> There was insufficient youth data to draw conclusions.



- 90% of youth (identified by parents and youth) who do not consider themselves Bahá'ís continue to be registered in national's database as Bahá'ís.

### Comments About Why Youth Left the Faith and What Might Cause Them to Return

There were over 221 comments about why youth left the Faith and what might cause them to return. Below is a summary of prominent themes, some concrete suggestions for improvement, and a sample of representative direct quotations.

#### *Themes (in order of prevalence)*

For parents of youth who have left the faith, below are the seams and a summary of why they left and what might cause them to return.

- **Believing that Baha'i laws and perspectives are not relevant and meeting the needs of current-day society**
  - Many mentioned that their children have left the faith because of the Baha'i perspective on LGBTQ issues as well as the refusal of the Baha'i Community to engage in more aggressive advocacy techniques on public policy issues.
- **Lack of Baha'i friendships**
  - As with other sections, the theme of the lack of Baha'i friendships or role models to look up to was frequently cited as a primary reason their youth has left the Faith.
- **Impact of covid**
  - Many mentioned that, even if they were active before the pandemic, the isolation and shift to zoom-based interaction, caused their youth to leave the Faith and they have not returned.

- **Mental health**
  - A number of parents cited the mental health issues of their children, particularly anxiety, depression, and eating disorders, as reasons for not engaging in Baha'i activities.
  - It was mentioned by several that they felt that the Baha'i Community was not accommodating for people who had special mental health needs.
  - A few mentioned feeling ostracized by the mental health issues of their children, including one who believed the community ostracized her after her daughter's suicide attempt.
- **Lack of belief in God**
  - Several mentioned that their children do not believe in God.

### *Suggestions*

- More opportunities to develop meaningful Baha'i Friendships
- Provide opportunities to develop their personal mystic connection to the divine.
- More frank discussions about difficult social issues (particularly LGBTQ issues) and the Baha'i perspective on them
- Bring Back NEBY Fest (Northeastern Baha'i Youth Conference)

### *Sample Direct Quotations from Comments Reflecting Common Themes*

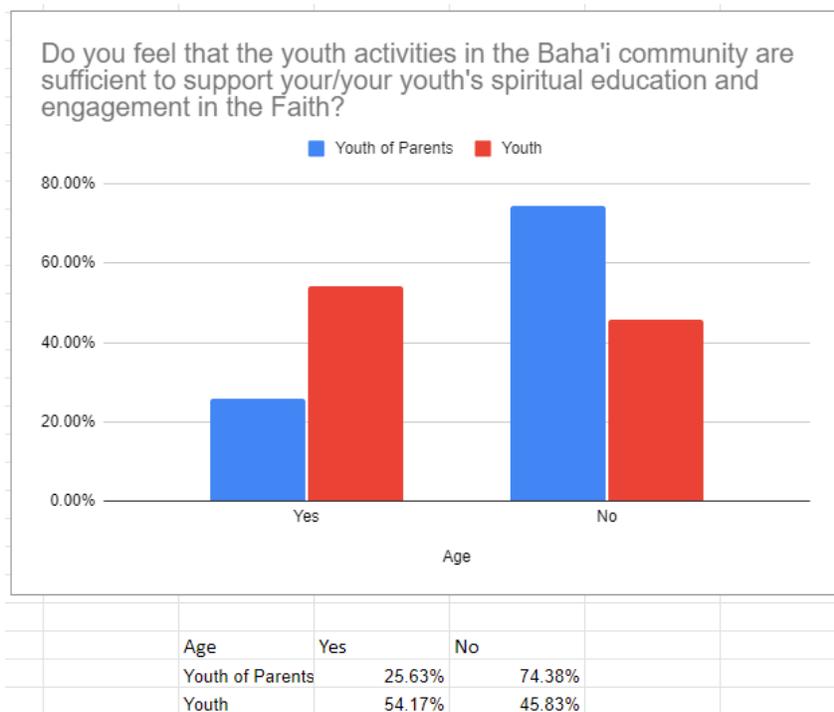
- "I think she needs to have a deeper understanding of the Faith and the purpose of religion as a whole. Every time we attend a summer school setting, she feels stronger in the Faith, but for the most part, summer and winter schools have become regionalized or non-existent because of the institute process. Why can't the Bahai community have both?"
- "Consistent exposure to a strong Baha'i community or friend group of like-minded youth who he is able to spend time with and identify with, including discussing and participating in social justice topics."
- "I could come back to the faith if I gained a greater sense of spirituality and a connection to/ belief of a higher power. I know that the Baha'i faith goes beyond those aspects, but it is still difficult for me to really feel Baha'i as of now."
- "Yes, if same-sex marriage and gender-expansive identities were recognized, celebrated, and protected by the Baha'i community and if abolition of hierarchy was taken seriously."
- "Views on homosexuality. One of his best friends came out as gay and trans last year and so he feels Baha'is are homophobic."
- "With mostly older Persians in our local community, every time we needed to reach out to the cluster for social support. The kids in other communities were clicky, and the adults unfriendly. So.. we started our own network groups.. the animators quit. Then we sent her to camps, the tutors didn't follow-up. We sent her AGAIN.. the tutors still didn't follow up...."

- “My youth was a registered Baha’i through childhood until 2018 when he took himself off the membership rolls. Part of the reason: The “long-term” grassroots approach to social action, ie “having conversations” rather than taking action in matters that need immediate attention (such as climate control). He feels it’s already too late, why aren’t the Baha’is taking action beyond having elevated conversations (which he agrees is important for the long term but lacking immediacy such as stopping the large oil companies through legislation.)”
- “Feels that the community lacks real understanding of racism and is discriminatory against LGBTQ+ community and feels there is some hypocrisy in the practice of our states values. She still believes in Baha'u'llah, prays regularly and participates in holy days, and any anti racist activity sponsored by the local institutions.”

### Youth’s Experiences in the Bahá’í Community

#### Overall

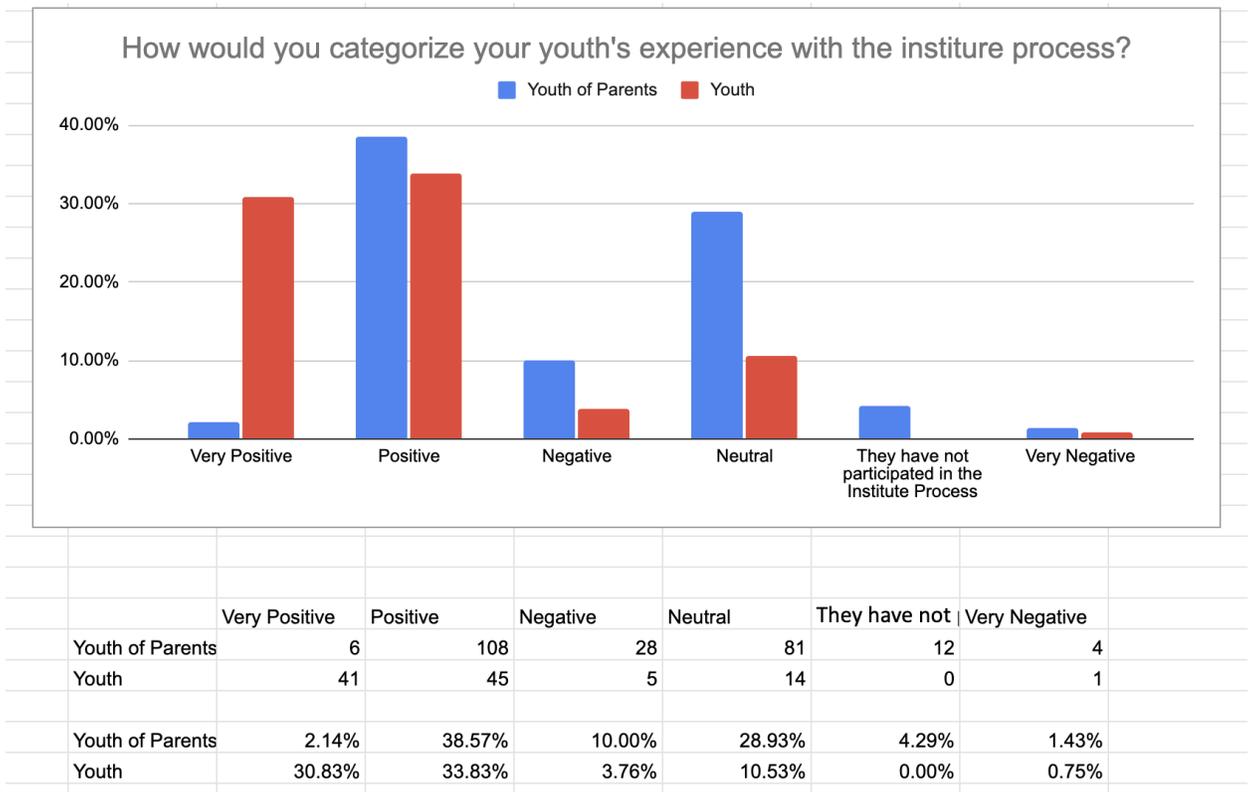
- 74% of parents and 46% of youth do not think that the youth activities in the Baha’i community are sufficient to support their youth. (In comments many clarified that, even if they said they felt it was “sufficient,” they did not feel as though it was enough and cited Bahá’í conferences and retreats as needed.)



#### Experiences with the Institute Process

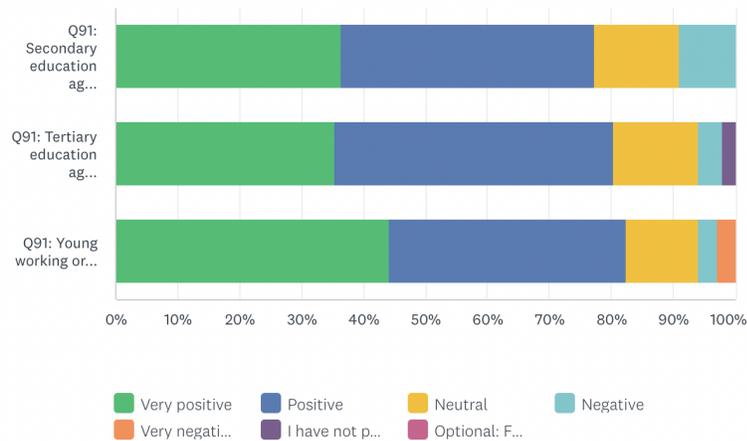
- 96% of youth whose parents filled out the survey participated in the institute process
- 100% of youth who filled out the survey participated in the institute process

- 41% of youth whose parents filled out the survey had a positive experience with the institute process. (Note: parents represented the views of youth no longer active in the faith as well as those who are, while the youth who filled out the survey were largely active Baha'is by natural selection. This may mean that the parent's perspectives are more accurate, as they are able to represent the experiences of those who remained in the Faith as well as those who did not.)
- 86% of youth who filled out the survey had a positive experience with the institute process.
- 53 parents filled out the optional comment section to further explain their children's experience with the Institute Processes. Specifically, several clarified in comments that they had positive experiences with children's classes and the junior youth empowerment program, but not with the Ruhi books for youth.
- It appears as though the age of youth influences their experience with the Institute Process. Specifically, younger youth have a more negative experience with the Institute Process than older youth.



How would you characterize your experience with the Institute Process (e.g., children's classes, junior youth groups, study circles)?

Answered: 107 Skipped: 27



### Comments About the Institute Process and Baha'i Community Experiences

There were over 203 comments about the Institute Process and the experience of youth in the Baha'i community, below is a summary of prominent themes, some concrete suggestions for improvement, and a sample of representative direct quotations.

#### Themes (organized in order of prevalence)

- **Social Connections/Friendships**
  - Negative experiences with the Institute process because of insufficient opportunity or emphasis on developing friendships or social connections was a predominant theme. Part of this had to do with an academic or school-like focus on the Institute materials, which lacked sufficient opportunity for socialization. Part of this was a result of negative social dynamics within groups. Also identified was the neighborhood Focus which often meant that isolated youth lacked an opportunity to connect with youth that lived further away, leaving them alone with a lack of meaningful friendships.
  - Where there was a positive experience with the Institute process, the social connection to other youth was a strong factor.
  - Genuine friendships with others participating in the Institute process are vital to a positive experience for the youth..
  - Combining the Institute materials with camping, sports, and other fun activities create spaces for junior youth and youth to connect and create true friendships.
- **Isolation**
  - Related to the theme of lack of friendships, there was a specific emphasis on feelings of isolation. Some reflected on experiences where Persians who were longtime friends or related to each other felt "clannish" in a way that excluded others. Others reflected on living in an area where there were no youth and, either because of the neighborhood Focus or because of the lack of Youth conferences,

camp, or Retreats where youth could come from various locations and join, youth were left alone and isolated.

- **Rigidity of the Institute Process**
  - Several remarked that the Institute process felt too strict and rigid. Activities in the Baha'i Community appeared solely focused on the Ruhi books or the Junior Youth materials and there was a repeated concern that these curricula were not working well for youth. Some shared experiences where there were efforts to create other deepening experiences for youth that were discouraged by the Baha'i community.
  - One youth noted the importance of flexibility, i.e., being accompanied to serve prior to taking the relevant Ruhi books was vital to maintaining their enthusiasm while building a deeper base of knowledge rooted in both action and study.
- **Relevance**
  - Several remarked that the Institute curriculum uses examples that youth cannot relate to and that current social issues and pressing questions that they have are not commonly addressed in the Institute materials.
  - Deepenings on current social issues are needed to help youth remain connected to their faith, and to counter the adult expectation that youth "simply obey/understand."
  - Classes can feel disconnected from issues that cause youth to struggle, starting from the age of junior youth and on. Multiple mentions that the junior youth books are experienced as "too simple."
  - The Institute Process without practice and application in real life can feel empty.
  - The age range of "youth" in the Baha'i community(15-30) is not appropriate for common relevance of issues.
- **Hyper-neighborhood focus**
  - The focus on neighborhood activities to the exclusion of youth from other geographic locations was often cited as a source of isolation and loss of vibrancy and the Baha'i community.
- **False Dichotomies**
  - Several referred to frustrations with feeling as though, rather than trying to add onto or improve on activities that were going well, but had some problems, those activities were entirely disbanded. For example, the loss of centralized children's classes and youth conferences was often mentioned as a source of isolation and loss of vitality in the Baha'i community. Several discussed believing that this tendency to "throw the baby out with the bathwater" or go from one extreme to the other was a negative cultural trait in the Baha'i community that we need to address.
- **Tutor or animator inconsistency and skill**
  - When the youth had positive experiences with the Institute process, it was commonly mentioned that it was because of the consistency and skill of the animator or the tutor. Several mentioned that tutors or animators were young, not energized, not very well deepened themselves, and not consistent, which had a profound effect on the experience of their youth.
  - Positive experience with the Institute Process flow from "nourishing" relationships with animators and "vibrant tutors" who "make the text applicable to reality"

- **Lack of curriculum for youth (particularly for high school age)**
  - Several mentioned that jumping from the junior youth empowerment program into Ruhi books is not working for the Youth, particularly of the high school age. There was repeated mention of a need for a specific strategy and curriculum for the Youth that would address the issues that are important to them.
  - The existence of ISGP was noted, but several felt like it was too late because it focused on college kids and it has a very academic focus which described it as intense academically, stressful, and without allowance for socialization.
  - Too much responsibility is placed on older youth to lead activities and serve with little programming provided for their own nurturance. Faraway conferences and events were their only or main source of support with other Baha'i youth and that disappeared.
  - For youth being asked to serve the Institute, a lack of "oversight and accompaniment" along with excessive "pressure" to produce results contributes to challenging if not traumatic experiences for them.
  - Several youth complained of guilt and shame tactics used by members of the community to induce them to serve, focusing on messages of obedience and responsibility, without efforts to encourage their interest, hear their concerns, or address their needs for spiritual sustenance.
- **Events feeling "stagnant" or "boring"**
  - There was repeated mention of Institute related events feeling stagnant or boring. Some of this was attributed to the very small size of events as well as the lack of skill of those leading them.
  - Youth need engaging programming around intensive Ruhi study that is mindful of their needs, e.g., more limited attention span than (older) adults
- **Impact of COVID and Zoom Format**
  - Several mentioned that COVID interrupted activities; that youth had negative experiences engaging over Zoom; and that it has been hard to recover from the COVID/Zoom era.
- **Harmful experiences**
  - Three respondents (roughly 1%) mentioned exposure to drugs, alcohol, homosexual behavior, and sexual abuse in Institute activities.

### *Suggestions*

- Create more peak experiences for youth where they can come together from larger geographic areas and make friendships (i.e., conferences, camps, retreats)
- Emphasize the development of social connection in friendships in the Institute process
- Develop a curriculum specifically for youth
- Encourage deepening on issues relevant to the youth
- Involve youth (who are of the age of the youth being targeted) or parents (of youth of the age being targeted) in planning and decision-making about youth programs.

- Change the age range of Baha'i youth from 15-30 to 15-24 (i.e., high school and college ages).

### *Sample Direct Quotations from Comments Reflecting Common Themes*

- "I think that youth is largely a lost group in the institute process. Why are there JY groups but no youth groups, as in other faiths? I also think youth fellowship is wildly underemphasized which is a huge opportunity for us to grow."
- "More youth events and deepenings on topics proposed by the youth themselves. Less instruction/micromanaging/judgment and more open dialogue & professional speakers."
- "There are not enough youth activities for fellowship or for study. Those for fellowship need to be held during times when youth are on holidays and should include large groups of youth, at least 50. In this age when the Faith is young these activities need not be restricted to only one region."
- "Over the last 20 years - We would have appreciated the opportunity, as Baha'i parents, to be consulted on how to engage our childrens friends and neighbors in a Baha'i inspired children class and youth animators while at the SAME time building a strong bahai community AND IDENTITY for our own Baha'i children. Had we built UPON a vibrant local Baha'i school in addition to our neighborhood childrens classes - I believe both my children and hundreds of other Baha'i children and youth would be strong teachers of the Faith and would have learned how to better teach the Faith to their friends and neighbors and host devotions. The hardcore case and desist (Sunday school approach) - seemed to be a "throw baby out with bath water" approach."
- "If the animator isn't committed and enthusiastic, the youth most certainly will not be. He was not inspired or galvanized and never had the opportunity to develop a strong Baha'i identity with Baha'i peers."
- "As an older youth, I was always expected by parents to hold the responsibility of facilitating/initiating these groups. My community was very small so there wouldn't always be assistance. It left me feeling drained and yearning for groups of my own to participate in and nurture myself. Those were few and far between except for conferences and events that required much travel."
- "I would love to see more regional camps and conferences, both for the youth attending them and as service opportunities for the youth to serve the younger children (ie., Camp GreenAcre). Youth need to be together more, to serve together, to create a real sense of belonging to a Youth movement."
- "One overarching issue that keeps coming up for me, as a parent and an educator, is how in the Baha'i community the age groups are broken down with "youth". Many people who are not Baha'is and are involved parents have an issue with this as well. Grouping the 15-20 year olds, or even 15-22 year old (to include college kids) might make sense. But after around 22/23 years of age, there is a completely different mindset. 22/23-30 would be considered "young adults" in most communities, and putting these two ages together is problematic pedagogically as well as practically. There are very different things going on their lives. And also, safety-wise, putting high school kids with much older young adults may not always be a good idea, or even a safe one."

- “Apart from the institute materials, my JY group found a huge benefit in going on camps together, combining JY meetings with sports or other fun activities, as well as having spaces where we could hang out freely amongst ourselves. It created true friendships within the group and made it sustainable.”
- “The ability to study the Ruhi books in a study circle while carrying out an act of service was vital. If I would have been told not to do a JY group or cc until I had completely finished both books, this would have killed my enthusiasm and drive. Being accompanied as I did service along with studying the book was very effective for me .”
- “There seems to be a false assumption that the training institute was meant to substitute the role of parents in the spiritual education of their children, the role of summer/winter schools, deepening, firesides, and other activities and that it alone would suffice to ensure spiritual education and guarantee engagement in the Faith. In reality, this is not its purpose, though participation in the courses of the training institute certainly may have that effect because after all, they are intended to develop attitudes, habits, qualities, skills and abilities through study of the Creative Word. Parents, institutions and communities owe it to themselves, their youth and their communities to seek to reflect, understand, learn and adjust course. We need these false dichotomies to yield.”
- “Not only they are not sufficient, they are of such low quality that they are a negative experience! They discourage critical thinking, try to indoctrinate the young adults who are well educated, by unqualified individuals who are not well versed in the social discourses and try to actively steer clear from hot topics. Very disappointing. These are why I am worried about the level of involvement of my children in the Baha’i community. They will always have their Faith, but Baha’i communities have provided exceptionally negative experiences for our kids.”
- “I am dismayed to see that it seems all we do in The Faith formally now is study Ruhi books and try to recruit people to decentralize Childrens classes and JY groups. The writings of the central figures have been divided into small out of context chunks, and then non infallible words (neither the central figures nor the UHJs) are pored over and taken as sacred. There is pretty much zero Baha’i youth community for my kids and I believe the institute process is a large reason why. We JUST started to try to gather our youth to form bonds of friendship— it feels forced and possibly too late. I am going to start a gathering to study the writings of the central figures of the Faith with a group of Baha’i youth to mirror the positive and formative experience I had growing up. I believe we have lost a generation of youth and the chance for them to have strong friendships with other Baha’is that would have nurtured their Faith and benefited the Cause. The loss of larger regional and national conferences, the size and diversity of which were often so inspiring, is also frustrating.”
- “Our activities seem focused on knowledge and action, but we are forgetting Abdu’l-Baha’s emphasis on “volition.” Youth have to want to engage and that desire comes from joy, friendships, inspiration, and connection to the divine. None of that is currently cultivated in the Institute process, which is all study and service.”

## Issues of Concern for the Youth

### Issues Youth “Struggle with”

There was a clear disconnect between the perception of parents and youth on the issues youth are struggling with. For example, while 46% of parents said that their youth don’t struggle with any of the issues listed, only 17% of youth felt that they don’t struggle with the issues listed. The top four issues you are struggling with, in rank order, are:

1. Mental health
2. Social Media
3. Chastity
4. Porn

We saw a big gender difference in the issues youth face. For example, women are much more likely to struggle with mental health (68% of women) than men (30%) and social media (36%) than men (23%). Men are more likely to struggle with alcohol (8.5% of men), porn (40% of men) and gaming (12.7% of men).

Notably, it appears that female Baha’i youth struggle with mental health issues at higher rates than the general population.<sup>4</sup> Female Baha’i youth in the survey identified struggling with mental health at a rate of 68%, while the U.S. national rate is 49%.<sup>5</sup>

Also notable is the fact that Baha’i young men reported to “struggle” with pornography at a rate of 40%. Finding comparable data from the general public was difficult. One source indicates 50% of teens felt “guilty or ashamed” after watching porn, and that 25% of teens felt like they should watch less porn than they do<sup>6</sup>. Our survey used different terminology than the cited study, so it is difficult to make a direct comparison.

We also looked at the mental health data by age, but did not see significant differences by age. Struggles with chastity and alcohol seem to be highest amongst college age youth,

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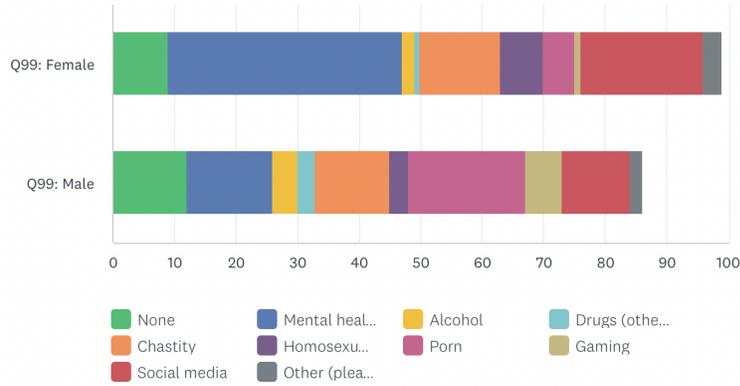
<sup>4</sup><https://healthpolicy.usc.edu/evidence-base/national-survey-findings-shed-light-on-dimensions-of-teen-mental-health-concerns/>

<sup>5</sup><https://opa.hhs.gov/adolescent-health/mental-health-adolescents>

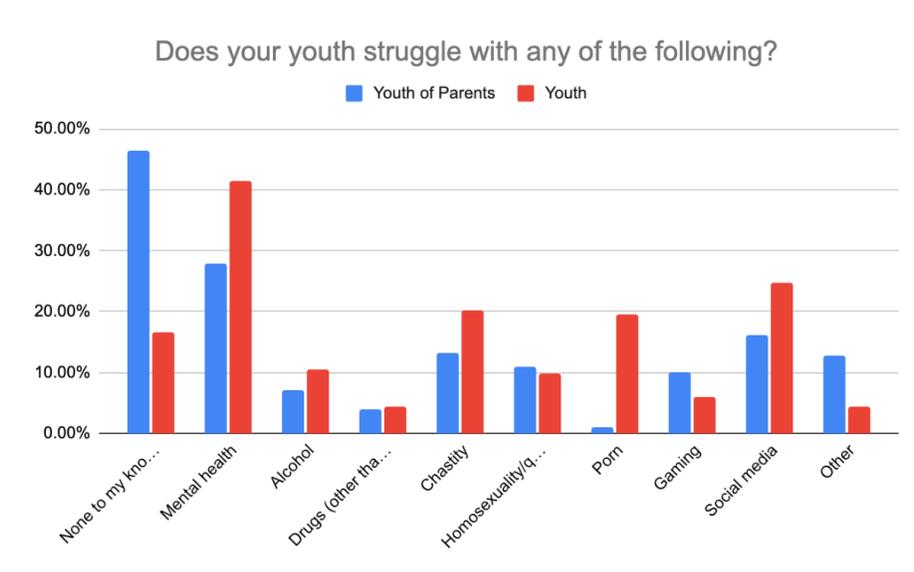
<sup>6</sup><https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/2022-teens-and-pornography-final-web.pdf>

# Do you personally struggle with any of the following issues? (check all that apply)

Answered: 103 Skipped: 0



	NONE	MENTAL HEALTH	ALCOHOL	DRUGS (OTHER THAN ALCOHOL)	CHASTITY	HOMOSEXUALITY/QUEERNESS	PORN
Q91: Secondary education age (13 - 18 years old)	31.82% 7	50.00% 11	4.55% 1	0.00% 0	4.55% 1	13.64% 3	4.55% 1
Q91: Tertiary education age (18 - 24 years old)	15.69% 8	54.90% 28	9.80% 5	5.88% 3	35.29% 18	7.84% 4	29.41% 15
Q91: Young working or professional age (24 - 30 years old)	18.18% 6	45.45% 15	3.03% 1	6.06% 2	21.21% 7	15.15% 5	27.27% 9
<b>Total Respondents</b>	21	54	7	5	26	12	25



## **Comments About Issues Youth Struggle with**

There were over 60 comments about issues youth struggle with. Below is a summary of prominent themes, some concrete suggestions for improvement, and a sample of representative direct quotations.

### *Themes (roughly organized in order of prevalence)*

- **Homosexuality or solidarity with the queer community**
- **Anxiety/mental health**
- **Women not being on the House of Justice**
- **Chastity**

### *Suggestions*

- Replicate or revive youth weekends at Greenacre, youth conferences, Clara Dunn Academy, NEBY Fest, other peak experiences where difficult issues can be discussed and peers they can look up to can be found.
- Develop discourse and approaches to help youth understand and manage discussion of difficult issues rather than current avoidance strategies.

### *Sample Direct Quotations from Comments Reflecting Common Themes*

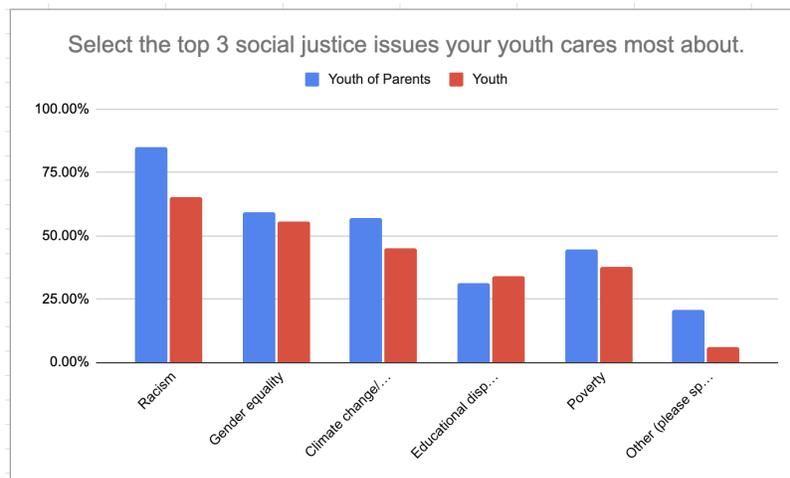
- “He needs peers – friendships with people who will explore these topics together- but first, friendship. We developed these at summer schools and conferences. Without these, I know I wouldn’t have explored the Faith more deeply.”
- “Loving outreach by peers in local community, activities relevant to where they are in life, confidence that they will be embraced with inclusive and forgiving attitude.”
- “We should consider youth as souls with special needs rather than adults when they reach the age of 15 . Nothing is done much for them . They are just requested to serve whether the environment to serve is appropriate or not . Their basic needs such as being in a group of youth same age to build identity is not respected . Consideration of clusters are more important than mixing youth from different regions so they can find the environment they need.”
- “The notion of virginity leads youth to thinking that whether or not they have (PIV) intercourse is the only standard that matters (not whether they have other sexual activities). They are then completely unequipped to know the spiritual significance of chastity, while harming themselves with guilt-ridden attitudes and repressing their sex impulse in a way that often harms themselves (or others). The other aspect that make it really challenging is that communities don't have open dialogue due to taboos. Youth are then left suffering on their own with no one to turn to if they don't have trusted confidants. Parents even when they are helpful and open are sometimes too hard to turn to for

discussions of this nature. Yet there are too little opportunities for communities to have fruitful discussions. Never once before I got married did a single Baha'i offer me a satisfactory, meaningful, thorough exploration of the implications of chastity on one's spiritual life that didn't overemphasize the refraining from sex part without going into the actual full effects."

### Social Justice Issues Youth Care About

The top 3 social justice issues youth care about, in rank order, are:

1. Racism
2. Gender Equality
3. Climate Change



### Comments About Social Justice Issues the Youth Care About

There were over 65 comments about social justice issues youth care about. Below is a summary of prominent themes, some concrete suggestions for improvement, and a sample of representative direct quotations.

#### *Themes (roughly organized in order of prevalence)*

- Racism
- LBTBQ Rights
- The Environment
- Gender Equality

#### *Suggestions*

- More spaces to discuss relevant social issues
- Assist youth interested in specific social issues to network and connect.
- Develop youth relevant discussion materials/media on key social issues that help deepen/galvanize their energy.

### *Sample Direct Quotations from Comments Reflecting Common Themes*

- “More loving communities. Better way of dealing with the homosexual population.”
- “They believe in Baha’u’llah but are turned off by many Baha’i activities. They also struggle with the Faith’s perspective on homosexuality which they see as contrary to building an inclusive society. The community would need to be willing to have deep and authentic conversations for her to engage.”

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the survey offers urgent areas for improvement, encouraging suggestions for ways forward, and shining examples of successes in the community. We hope that the insights contained in this report, while far from a perfect representation, might contribute to our ongoing efforts to learn and grow from our experiences.

## **Appendix**

1. [Link to the survey.](#)
  - a. Note that the survey is not accepting new responses, we only provide this link if you’d like to click through and see the structure of the survey for yourself.
2. [Full Summary Data PDF](#)
  - a. For sake of transparency, we’ve included the full PDF our survey software generates with all of the summary data/graphs.
  - b. Individual responses have been removed from this PDF to protect privacy, as some put identifiable information into their responses.
  - c. Note that due to the structure of the survey, parents of youth filled out a different section for each of their youth (all of the first children are in one section, the second children in a different section, and so on). In order to generate the analysis and graphs in this report, these different sections had to be compiled together outside of the scope of our survey software, which is why the summary PDF shows different sections for parents of youth.