# Gen Z's life in 'Digital Babylon' presents opportunities

September 23, 2024

Barna and Impact 360 concluded a series of Gen Z reports Sept. 12 with *Leading Gen Z,* a simulcast highlighting their final set of conclusions, based on more than a decade of research.

Presenters David Kinnaman, CEO of Barna, and Jonathan Morrow, director of cultural engagement and student discipleship for the Impact 360 Institute, took turns illuminating their findings, offering insights into discipleship opportunities for this generation.

Describing himself as "a geek, for Christ's sake," Kinnaman pointed out Gen Z is the first generation to have grown up with digital tools all around them.

He characterized that atmosphere as "digital Babylon, where access to ideas, alienation from specific ways of thinking about life and tradition, and skepticism of authority sort of define them."

Kinnaman noted how much of a challenge "digital Babylon" presents in impacting Gen Z for Jesus. It has changed the landscape of what people immerse themselves in and the ways they think about what it means to be human and live a life of meaning, he observed.

## Living in digital Babylon

"We're living in a world, aren't we, where the Google search bar is sort of like our best friend, our adviser, our educator, our counselor," he said.

"It really is remarkable how these digital devices, these smartphones,

social media—it's really close to what we could invent if we were trying to invent the Holy Spirit—our ever-present help in time of trouble and lost directions. And maybe you need a good friend, right?"

But looking at what the data shows about this generation immersed in the digital world offers an opportunity to understand what the world looks like to them, Kinnaman said.

Christianity has never faced a time like this, Kinnaman suggested, with these kinds of challenges and complexities.

He also pointed to the nuances, "in terms of the persuasiveness of what it means to be Christian and how do we actually help this generation—how do we help ourselves—learn to be rooted and built-up in Christ in this current digital Babylon."
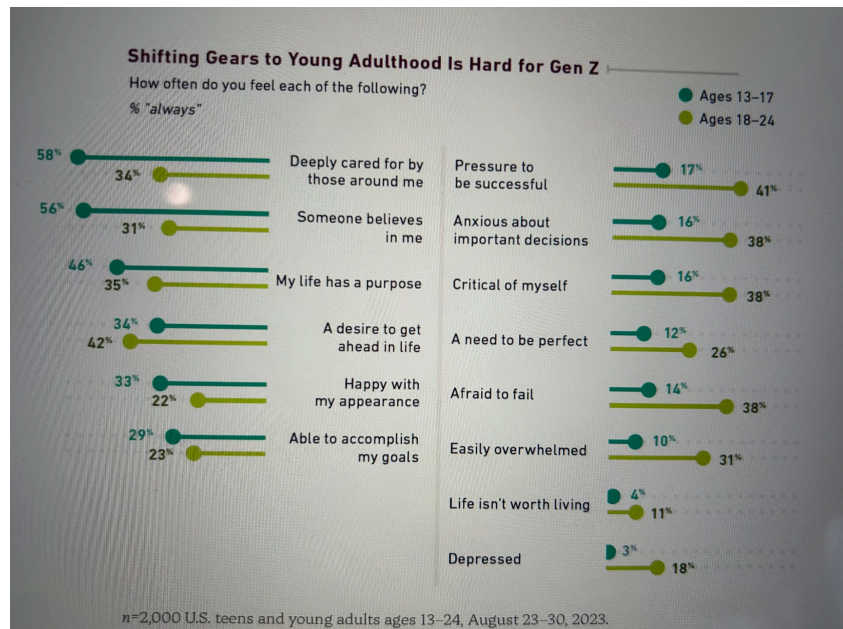
Discussing the "inner world" of Gen Z, Kinnaman explained this generation is characterized by anxiety and ambition.

They want to accomplish great things and see the world. If they are Christians, they "want to see the church restore its credibility in the world, and they're ambitious to do that," he said.

"But the flip side of this is this level of anxiety and this hum ... sort of like static electricity that is always in our heads about all the things we haven't done yet and haven't accomplished."

Knowing Gen Z is experiencing anxiety around their ambition offers leaders who work with them an opportunity. Leaders can help them develop a good "theology of ambition" that recognizes it's God's work, and not one's own, that allows people to accomplish all that God has called them to do, Kinnaman explained.

# Struggling to transition to adulthood



**Shifting Gears to Young Adulthood Is Hard for Gen Z**
How often do you feel each of the following?
% "always"

● Ages 13–17
● Ages 18–24

| | Ages 13–17 | Ages 18–24 |
|---|---|---|
| Deeply cared for by those around me | 58% | 34% |
| Someone believes in me | 56% | 31% |
| My life has a purpose | 46% | 35% |
| A desire to get ahead in life | 34% | 42% |
| Happy with my appearance | 33% | 22% |
| Able to accomplish my goals | 29% | 23% |

| | Ages 13–17 | Ages 18–24 |
|---|---|---|
| Pressure to be successful | 17% | 41% |
| Anxious about important decisions | 16% | 38% |
| Critical of myself | 16% | 38% |
| A need to be perfect | 12% | 26% |
| Afraid to fail | 14% | 38% |
| Easily overwhelmed | 10% | 31% |
| Life isn't worth living | 4% | 11% |
| Depressed | 3% | 18% |

n=2,000 U.S. teens and young adults ages 13–24, August 23–30, 2023.

Graph showing shift between adulthood and teen years is hard for Gen Z. (Screenshot)

The data Kinnaman discussed breaks survey participants into two groups, those 13 to 17 years old and those 18 to 24 years old.

Looking at the transition from teen to young adult shows an opportunity for churches to meet a need, Kinnaman noted. There is a significant gap between what teens and young adults in Gen Z reported in terms of how deeply cared for they felt—58 percent of those aged 13 to 17 compared with 34 percent of those aged 18 to 24 reported always feeling deeply cared for by those around them.

Likewise, 56 percent of teens reported always feeling "someone believes in me," compared with only 31 percent of young adults.

Additionally, young adults were more likely than teens to report negative feelings—reporting always feeling: pressure to be successful (41 percent to 17 percent); anxiety about important decisions (38 percent to 16 percent);

self-critical (38 percent to 16 percent); and afraid to fail (38 percent to 14 percent).

In light of the continuing trend to delay marriage and having children—which might help offset some of the reported negative feelings—these gaps offer churches a considerable opportunity to support Gen Z in transitioning to adulthood, Kinnaman suggested.

While the gaps may partly reflect young adults are simply perceiving these "heartbreaking indicators of mental health and challenges" more when they leave childhood, they still need a strong support system, which churches can provide, Kinnaman noted.

## Not all bad news

Kinnaman highlighted one positive post-pandemic development. Gen Z has a better understanding of mental health and broader vocabulary and willingness to talk about it. But the data around the mental health issues they face still shows Gen Z is struggling.

Four percent of teens and 11 percent of young adults reported always feeling like life isn't worth living. Suicide isn't new, Kinnaman pointed out, but what is new is the access (to Google) and "the alienation from the community of faith and those that can love us."

What's new is the increased skepticism toward authority—"the digital Babylon markers," he continued.

"In digital Babylon, where it's like: 'Man, I'm feeling really lonely,' and you're going to pull up your phone. And you're going to go: 'What do I do?'—search bar—to deal with the loneliness that I'm feeling."

These are real people dealing with real existential crises reflected in the numbers—young people who would benefit from Christians coming

alongside them as they sort through the complex transitions they're thinking about and experiencing.

That reality presents a "fields-are-white-unto-the-harvest" level of opportunity for Christians who work with Gen Z students and young adults, Kinnaman declared.

[Barna and Impact 360's reports](#) contain many more findings about Gen Z, with suggestions for how the openness of this generation can be a catalyst in reaching them for Jesus. The researchers expressed optimism about the generation, noting quite a few characteristics of Gen Z they considered to be quite positive.