

Health

Why aren't young people having sex?

Sexual activity in young people is on the decline. Should we be worried about what this means for society, asks **Alexandra Thompson**

THE comedy film *No Sex Please – We're British* was released in 1973 with a largely youthful cast and one too many double entendres. Half a century later, that title seems more apt than ever, at least among the younger members of society. Over the past few decades, sex appears to have been on the decline among teenagers and young adults – but it's not just happening in Britain.

In the US in 2010, 12 per cent of 18-to-29-year-olds reported not having had sex in the past year, according to the General Social Survey, a long-running sociological survey. In 2024, that figure had doubled.

A similar decline in sexual activity among young people is occurring in high-income countries such as Australia and Germany. But it is most notable in Japan, with a recent review finding that around half of Japanese people remain sexually inexperienced through their mid-20s. This may explain why the number of deaths in Japan exceeded its births by almost 1 million in 2024, a “quiet emergency” according to the then-prime minister, Shigeru Ishiba. So, what is going on, and is it really an emergency?

Of course, the amount of sex people have has always fluctuated, says Kaye Wellings at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. In the 1950s, the norm was to wait until you were married, she says, then when the contraceptive pill became available in the 1960s, “there was talk about a sort of free lunch, you could have sex without any consequences”. The beginning of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s made people much more restrained, she says. “But the 90s, I think is when the imperative changed and became



More people may now feel comfortable identifying as asexual

one of encouraging sex.”

The current decline in sexual activity among young people doesn't have a single, clear explanation. Some say today's tough financial climate prevents them from being more independent. In 2023, for example, 18 per cent of 25-to-34-year-olds in the US lived in a parent's home – up from 9 per cent in 2000. “If you're living at home, it's not necessarily the most conducive environment to having lots of sex,” says Luke Brunning at the University of Leeds, UK.

Youth unemployment is also high in countries such as the UK, which may partly explain why, on average, sexual inactivity seems to be slightly more

pronounced among young men than young women – with the odds rising if they are out of work or have a low income. “It shouldn't be that a man's earning ability or financial status should be considered as attractive, but when you look at the research, it seems to be a universal pattern,” says Peter Ueda at the Karolinska Institute in Sweden.

“Sex can be an intimidating experience. The less you do it, the less you feel comfortable with it”

Rising sobriety might be another factor, if it makes young people more inhibited. A report by analytics company Gallup found that the proportion of 18-to-34-year-olds in the US who say they drink alcohol has fallen from 72 per cent to 62 per cent over the

past two decades – but drinking has increased from 49 per cent to 59 per cent among people aged 55 and over. “You can pin it to ‘generation sensible,’” says Wellings. “That label has been given to young people who drink less, use less drugs [and] have less sex.”

Then there are technological advances. The younger generation seems to have swapped in-person socialising for digital devices, but sexual encounters generally require physical contact. “Gen Z have been called the most connected but loneliest generation because they're really connected to each other, but they're mostly really connected with screens,” says Natasha McKeever, also at the University of Leeds. “That can mean they're more nervous about in-person interaction.”

Theoretically, dating apps have made it easier to connect than ever before, but their rollout since the early 2010s hasn't coincided with a rise in sexual encounters among young people. "These apps were not designed for people to actually have sexual intercourse, but to be hooked on the apps," says Andras Kolto at the University of Galway, Ireland. Users are now increasingly logging off, with some studies linking use of dating apps to depression and anxiety.

Reducing the stigma

Mental health issues may also be contributing towards the decline in sexual activity, with a report in *The Lancet Psychiatry* warning we have "entered a dangerous phase" with these problems among young people. "If people are not feeling great, they might not always be in the headspace to be engaged with sex," says Brunning. Anxiety can even become a self-perpetuating cycle. "Sex can be a very daunting, intimidating experience, and the less you do it, the less you feel comfortable with it," says McKeever. "So, if people aren't having sex for long periods of time, it might be that they get to a point where they really want to have sex, [but] they feel very anxious about it."

For some, this inactivity is a concern, given that sex has been linked to improved quality of life and overall health, and around half of women and two-thirds of men report wanting more of it. "When we see a decline in sex, the fundamental problem is we're seeing a failure of more and more people to live the lives they themselves say are meaningful and valuable and important," says Lyman Stone at the Institute for Family Studies in Virginia.

But not everyone agrees that

young people are being negatively affected by this, providing they are content with their situation. For example, a study of heterosexual 18-to-39-year-olds in Japan found that around half of those who were single had no interest in romantic relationships. "There are more things for young people to do probably now than there were in the past," says McKeever. "There's a lot more opportunity for travel. There are more diverse careers open to people. Sex isn't the only good thing in life."

The shift could also be explained by reduced stigma around some young people not wanting to have sex, says McKeever, perhaps due to increased awareness around consent since the #MeToo movement or to young people now feeling more comfortable identifying as asexual. "When I was younger, I feel like a lot of people were having sex just because they thought that's what they had to do to be cool or it was a rite of passage, whereas now I think young people are more clued-up."

Of course, knowing exactly how sexual activity has changed among young people is limited by data issues. People may exaggerate or downplay their



Young people drinking less alcohol could be a factor in having less sex

9%

How many US 25-to-34-year-olds lived with their parents in 2000

18%

How many US 25-to-34-year-olds lived with their parents in 2023

24%

How many US 18-to-19-year-olds said they had no sex in the past year in 2024, double the figure in 2010

In Japan, the drop in the birth rate has been called a "quiet emergency"



experiences depending on whether they are questioned about them face-to-face versus via an online survey, or according to the taboos of the time. "When the social climate is that taboos are very strong, you will under-report. At times when it's considered to be status conferring, you will over-report," says Wellings. Studies also vary in how they define sex or a young person.

Then there's the issue of volunteer bias – that certain types of people tend to put themselves forward for such studies, making the results less applicable to the general population. "Online populations tend to bias towards young, single, childless [people]," says Stone.

Exact numbers aside, researchers are unanimous that young people are having less sex than older generations did at their age. Similar to the situation in Japan, this has coincided with birth rates reaching record lows in the UK and US.

So is a lack of sex a societal emergency, as the number of children dwindle? No, says Kolto, who expects changing circumstances will eventually see numbers pick up again, as in previous decades. "The decline in adolescents' sexual activity will surely not be the end of [the] human race," he says.

"I don't think we have evidence that the situation [in the West] counts as a problem yet," says McKeever. But if politicians are worried about a lack of sex, there are some solutions. "Young people [having] less sex than some decades ago is a symptom of the pandemic of alienation [and] the cost of living and housing," says Kolto. "Politicians should take care of solving these issues, then sex will take care of itself." ■