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THE COST OF LOVING CRISIS

Why young people are dating less

Intergenerational Foundation Research Paper

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Intergenerational Foundation

Foreword

At Fire on the Hill we're in the business of storytelling because stories connect with people, change perceptions and foster action. Through this analysis the Intergenerational Foundation highlights the stark economic reality facing young people today – and they do it through the most emotive lens – relationships.

Dating is often treated as a matter of individual choice, but the evidence presented in this study suggests that increasingly, that isn't the case for many young people. I was genuinely shocked to see that the "Dating Deficit" (the share of people who are romantically active and want a relationship but do not have one) among Gen Z stands at more than double the rate of any other generation. This is not a coincidence - more than half of Gen Z say financial pressures are a major barrier to dating.

Housing is central to this story. By 2023, 43% of young people were living with a parent, compared with just 29% living with a partner. And, as an organisation employing young people in London, it's startling to see that this rises to 48% in the capital.

At the same time, third spaces are becoming increasingly difficult to access. When these spaces disappear or become less accessible, opportunities for social connection can disappear with them.

The challenges facing younger generations have rightfully gained significant attention over the past year - from the student loan system to rising living costs - but the impact of these pressures on relationships and social lives is less often considered. The ability to form meaningful relationships, create a home and build a family should not become a privilege.

At Fire on the Hill, we are passionate about shaping a more advanced, more sustainable, more open, more truthful and more equal world. That's why we are proud to support the Intergenerational Foundation with this important research into the barriers preventing young people from dating.

As professional communicators, we hope that this research prompts a broader conversation about steps that can be taken to facilitate younger generations to enjoy higher quality lives with opportunity across broad areas of life. It's only by understanding the complex pressures facing young people we can create a fairer and more equitable future for all.

Nick Ward, Director of Strategy at Fire on the Hill

Fire on the Hill

Summary

Britain is facing a relationship recession. Young people are forming relationships later, and less often, than previous generations. This does not appear to reflect a widespread rejection of commitment or a preference for remaining single. Most still want to find a partner and build a life with someone. The problem is that younger generations now face economic and social conditions that make it harder to form and sustain long-term relationships.

Drawing on three decades of household data and an exclusive nationally representative survey carried out by our research partners Opinium, this report argues that younger generations are increasingly being priced out of dating and relationships. High housing costs have made it harder to leave the parental home or move in with a partner, while squeezed incomes have made dating and socialising less affordable. Many of the shared spaces in which people once met have disappeared or become more expensive. And although dating apps have made potential partners more accessible, these apps tend to incentivise continued engagement rather than the formation of lasting relationships.

For most people, the ability to meet a partner and form a lasting relationship is an important part of a flourishing life. Of course, the government cannot make people fall in love, but it can shape the conditions in which relationships form. Improving housing affordability and protecting accessible social spaces would give younger people a better chance of building the lives that earlier generations were able to take for granted.

Key Findings

- **Young people are far less likely to be in a relationship than previous generations were at the same age.** In 2023, 46 per cent of 25–29 year-olds were single, up from 29 per cent in 2011. The share living with a partner by their mid-twenties has more than halved in three generations: 67 per cent of Baby Boomers, 55 per cent of Generation X, 41 per cent of Millennials, and just 29 per cent of Generation Z.[1]
- **Most single young people are not single by choice.** Exclusive polling from Opinium found that only 18 per cent of Generation Z say they are not interested in a relationship. The “Dating Deficit", the share of people who are single but seeking a relationship, is 56 per cent. More than double the rate of any other generation**.**
- **Young adults are increasingly living with parents, not partners.** In 2009, 56 per cent of 25–29 year-olds lived with a partner and 17 per cent with a parent. By 2023 those positions had almost reversed, at 29 per cent and 43 per cent respectively. The

[1] In this report, Baby Boomers are the cohort born between 1946 and 1964 (currently aged 62 to 80), Generation X between 1965 and 1980 (currently aged 46 to 61), Millennials between 1981 and 1996 (currently aged 30 to 45), and Generation Z between 1997 and 2012 (currently aged 14 to 29).

age at which living with a partner overtakes living with a parent has risen from around 24 in 2009 to around 28 in 2023.

- **Young people cite money and opportunity as the main barriers.** Opinium's survey found that 57 per cent of Gen Z say financial pressures are a major barrier to dating, 54 per cent point to a lack of opportunities to meet new people, and 49 per cent would go on more dates if money was not a factor.

1. Why does this research matter?

1.1 The value of relationships

Broadly, there are two kinds of reasons to care about whether young people can form lasting relationships. The first is intrinsic. Humans are social by nature and rely on close relationships, romantic or otherwise, to flourish. For most people, finding a partner and building a shared life is an important part of what it means to live well. A society in which a growing share of people are unable to do this, despite wanting to, should therefore be a cause for concern in its own right, regardless of the wider economic or practical implications.

The second reason is instrumental. Positive, healthy, long-term relationships tend to be good for the people in them. Adults who are married or living with a partner report higher life satisfaction, on average, than those who are single, and partnership eases the dip in life satisfaction that many experience in middle age.[2] Stable relationships can also provide emotional, practical and financial support, helping people to cope with illness, unemployment and other periods of difficulty.

Beyond the benefits for individuals, relationships also matter for the economy and the state. The fertility rate in England and Wales has been declining since 2010 and reached its lowest point on record at 1.39 children per woman in 2025. This is well below the level of 2.1 children per woman needed to sustain the population.[3] Falling fertility rates have typically been explained by the childbearing decisions of established couples, yet less attention has been given to how couples are formed to begin with. We can expect that later and less frequent partnerships will feed into falling fertility rates. Combined with an ageing population, these trends risk leaving a smaller working-age population to support rising spending on pensions, health and social care. The decline in relationship formation is

[2] Perelli-Harris, B. et al. (2019). "Mind the 'Happiness' Gap."
[3] Office for National Statistics, (May 2026). 'Births in England and Wales: 2025'

therefore not simply a private or cultural matter, but may also deepen the demographic and fiscal pressures that younger and future generations will ultimately inherit.

1.2 A question of fairness between generations

Since its inception in 2011, the Intergenerational Foundation (IF) has documented how younger generations in Britain have fallen behind. Young people today are more highly educated than previous generations, but face a more difficult labour market, stagnant wages, unprecedented burdens from student loans, and much lower rates of home ownership. Much of IF's work has focused on the material causes and consequences of intergenerational inequality. Less attention has been paid to how these pressures shape young people's personal (and romantic) lives.

This report argues that the ability to form and sustain a relationship is becoming one more thing that younger generations are being priced out of. The same economic pressures that have weakened their financial security also affect whether they can afford to date, meet potential partners, leave the parental home and live together. For the most part, earlier generations could expect to have established an independent, adult life with a partner by their late twenties or early thirties. This trajectory is much harder for younger generations to replicate today. This is not just the result of a change in relationship culture. When economic conditions restrict younger generations' ability to pursue the lives they want, or have similar opportunities to flourish as previous generations, that becomes a question of intergenerational unfairness.

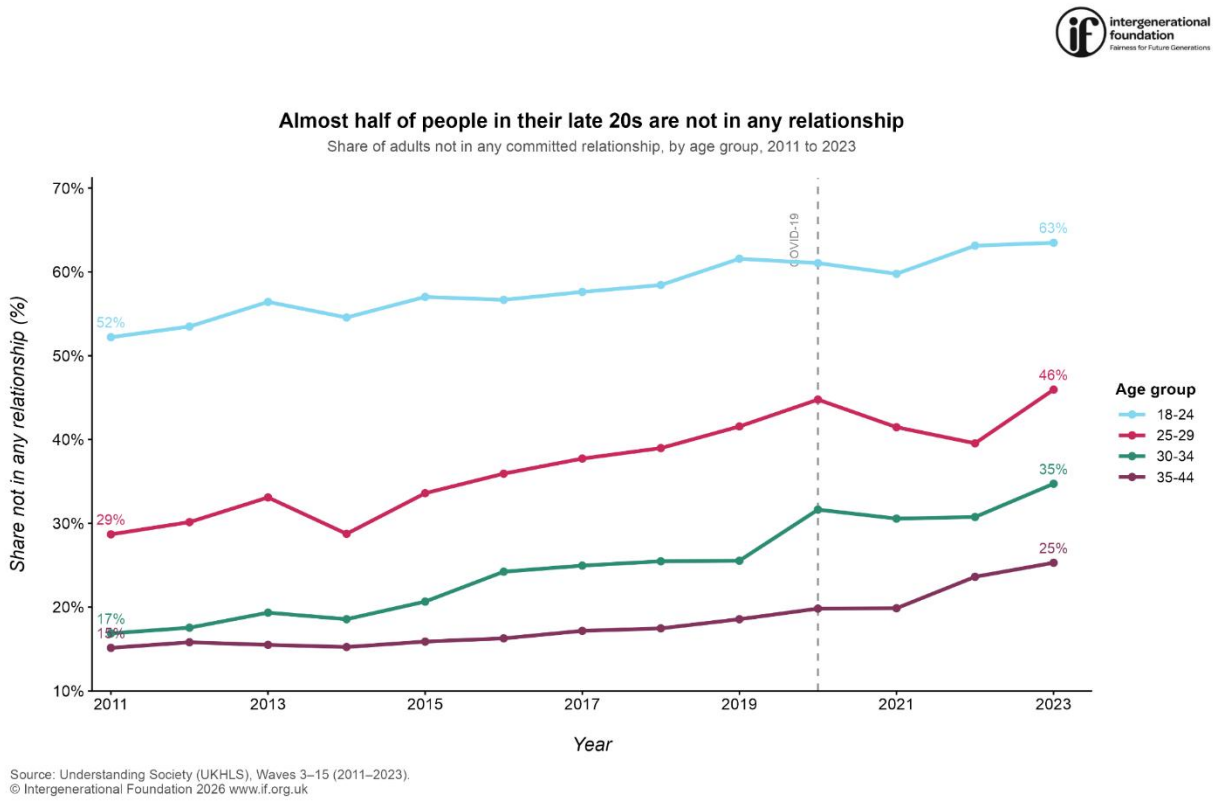
2. Young people are struggling to date

2.1 Young people are dating less

According to the UK Household Longitudinal Study, the share of young adults in relationships has fallen dramatically. As Figure 1 shows, in 2023, nearly half (46 per cent) of 25–29 year-olds were single, up from just under a third (29 per cent) in 2011.[4] There is a visible dip in 2020, which can be attributed to post-Covid relationship disruptions, but the share of single people recovers only briefly before reaching its highest point in 2023.

[4] Single is defined as individuals who are not married, in a civil partnership, currently living with a partner, or are in a relationship but living apart.

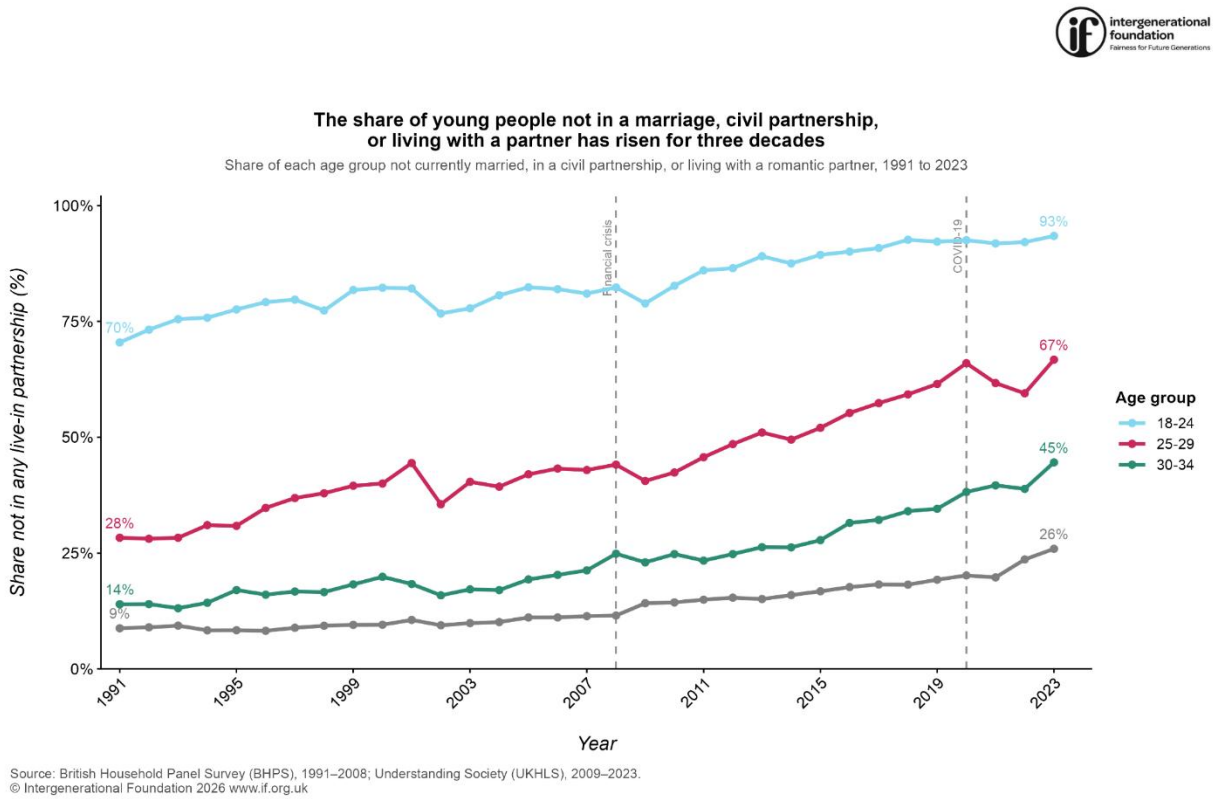
Figure 1:



The rising percentage of those not in a relationship is consistent across every age group, though most significant among those in their late twenties and early thirties. These are the ages at which previous generations typically settled down. Over the same period, the share of single 18–24 year-olds rose from 52 per cent to 63 per cent. Additionally, the share of single individuals rose by 18 percentage points among 30–34 year-olds and by 10 percentage points among 35–44 year-olds.

However, this rise in singlehood is not limited to the past decade, but rather a longer-term shift in people's ability to form relationships. Figure 2 illustrates the long-term change. Extending the data back to 1991, we can see the share of 25–29-year-olds who, at the time of the survey, were not married, in a civil partnership, or living with a partner rose from 28 per cent in 1991 to roughly two-thirds (67 per cent) by 2023, more than doubling. This measure excludes relationships in which partners live apart, and so captures only the more committed forms of partnership. Nonetheless, the stark contraction in people in committed relationships over three decades shows the decline is not just a small habitual change, but a significant shift in behaviour.

Figure 2:

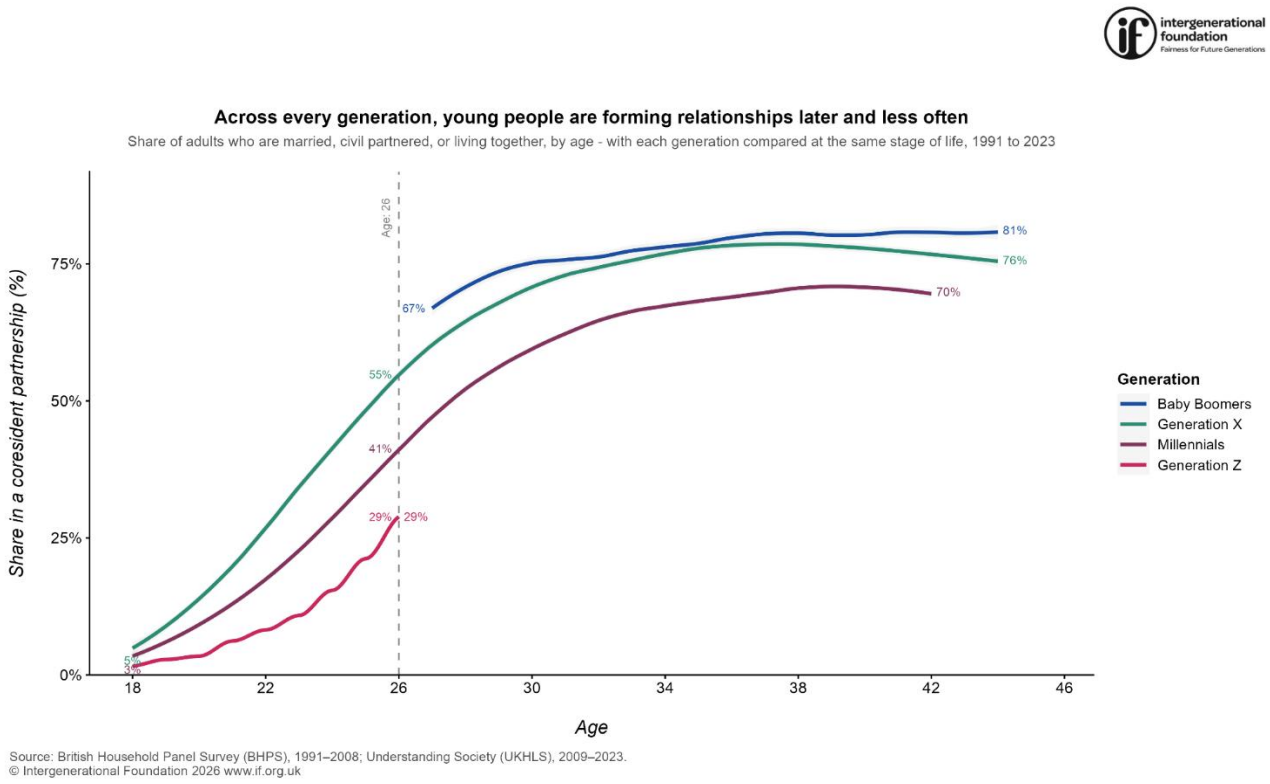


If we map how young people's committed relationship formation today compares to earlier generations, the decline is stark. Figure 3 follows each generation across its life course, plotting the share who are married, in a civil partnership, or cohabitating, at each age.

At age 27, we can see that two-thirds of Baby Boomers (67 per cent) were already living with a partner. At the age of 26 (the most recent age for Gen Z at the time of the survey), Generation X was at 55 per cent; Millennials at 41 per cent; and Generation Z at just 29 per cent. In three generations, young people in committed relationships have more than halved. This gap is present through each generation's life cycle, highlighting this relationship recession.

What Figure 3 shows is the erosion of something earlier generations could largely take for granted: the reasonable expectation of having built a life with a partner by one's late twenties. Each generation now reaches traditional markers of adulthood at later stages in their life: home ownership, financial independence, and now even relationships.

Figure 3:



2.2 The Dating Deficit

A falling partnership rate does not, on its own, tell us whether young people are just choosing to be single or are unable to find a partner. To answer that, IF commissioned a nationally representative survey of UK adults, carried out by Opinium in July 2026.[5] Its findings make clear that the retreat from relationships is, for the most part, not chosen. Among Generation Z, 34 per cent are in a relationship, and only 18 per cent say they are not interested in one. The remainder want to be partnered but are not: 28 per cent would like a relationship but are not currently dating, and a further 15 per cent are actively dating or looking.

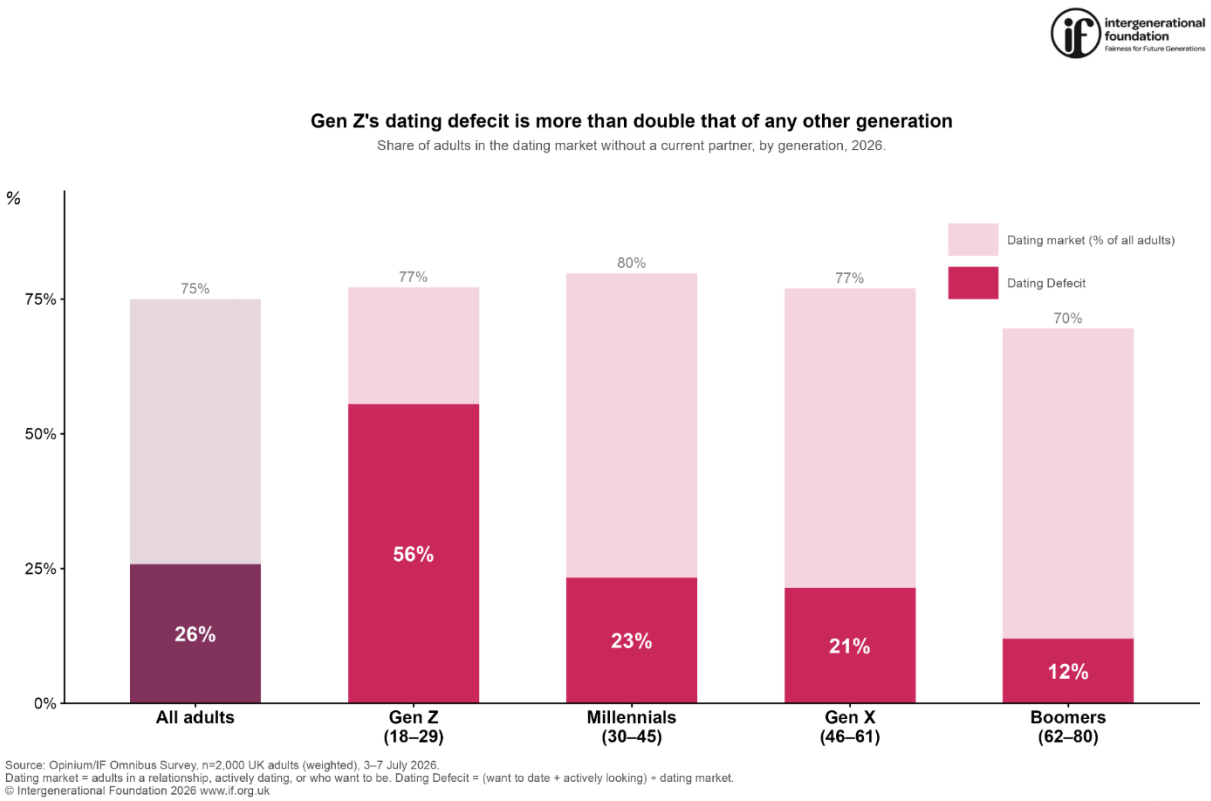
We capture this by looking at the **Dating Deficit**. This measure expresses the percentage of people who want a relationship but do not have one as a share of the population, excluding those who say they are not interested in a relationship.

[5] Opinium surveyed 2,000 UK adults between 3 and 7 July 2026; results are weighted to be nationally representative.

As Figure 4 shows, the dating deficit for all UK adults is 26 per cent. Among Generation Z that figure reaches 56 per cent, more than double the rate of any other generation. For Millennials it is 23 per cent, for Generation X 21 per cent, and for Baby Boomers just 12 per cent. In other words, of every young person that is "romantically active", more than half are not in a relationship.

This is not because more young people are looking: 70 and 80 per cent of adults in every group are either partnered or want to be. The problem is that the success rate in entering a relationship is significantly worse for younger people. One might attribute this to young people simply finding a partner later in life. But Figure 3 already contests this, showing that, at the same age, each successive generation is less likely to be partnered than the one before.

Figure 4:



3. Choice or constraint?

Young people are far less likely to be in a relationship than earlier generations. And, as the survey has shown, this is not simply a cultural shift among young people in choosing partners later in life and prioritising education and careers first. Instead, for those in the

dating deficit, the question that arises is what constraints have caused such a shift in behaviour.

3.1 Financial pressures

Some of the shift is undoubtedly cultural. Attitudes to marriage, cohabitation, and relationships in general have evolved over recent decades, with later partnerships becoming much more common across developed economies. However, this change in preferences alone cannot address the reason why such a large proportion of young people want to be in a relationship but are failing to do so.

In our survey, young people did not describe their singlehood as a matter of choice. When asked:

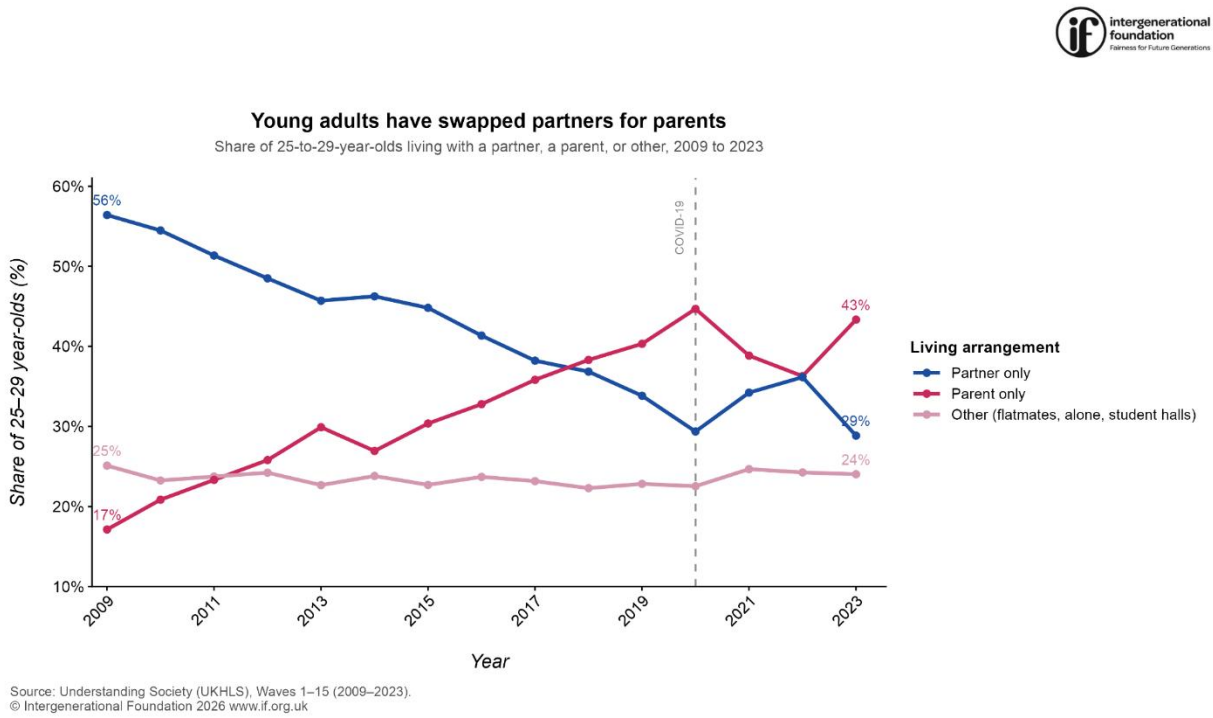
- 61 per cent of Gen Z agree that young people face greater barriers to finding a partner than previous generations.
- 56 per cent of Gen Z say that financial pressures are a major barrier to dating.
- 49 per cent of Gen Z said that they would go on more dates if money was not a factor.

Young people perceive these external factors as major barriers in their ability to form meaningful relationships. These perceptions are supported by the evidence, first and foremost in young people's changing living arrangements.

3.2 Living with parents, not partners

The constraints facing young people are nowhere clearer than in their household compositions. As Figure 5 shows, the living arrangements of people in their late twenties have shifted drastically over the last 15 years. In 2009, 56 per cent of 25–29 year-olds lived with a partner, while just 17 per cent lived with their parents. Around a quarter lived in "other" arrangements (alone, with flatmates, or in other shared households), which remained relatively flat throughout this period. The "other" line indicates that young adults are not moving into independent living arrangements as partnership formation declines, but directly back into the parental home.

Figure 5:



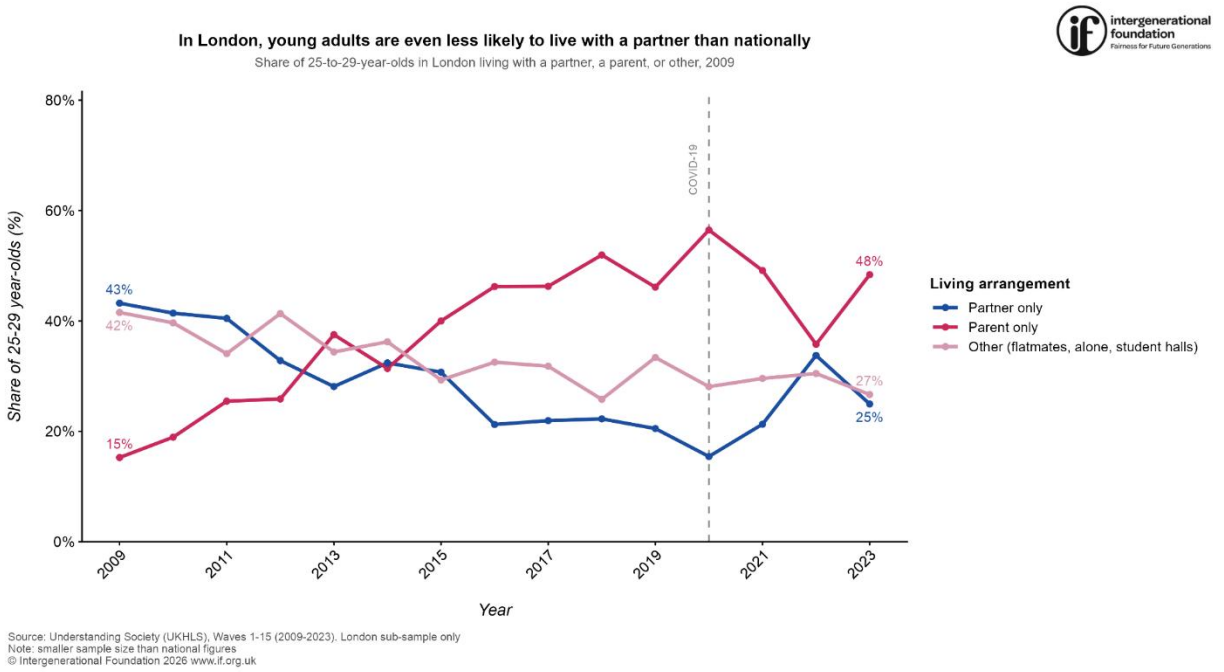
The share living with a partner has fallen consistently, and the share living with a parent has risen at the same rate. The two lines crossed in 2017, marking the first point in time where more young adults in their late twenties were living with their parents than with a partner. By 2023, 43 per cent lived with a parent and only 29 per cent with a partner.

The pandemic left a visible mark. The share living with a parent rose sharply in 2020, as young adults returned home during lockdowns, before falling back in 2021. Notably, some of those who left their parental home after lockdown moved in with partners rather than into independent arrangements or with friends. This might have been due to disruptions of the pandemic accelerating relationship decisions. While the impact of COVID is there, it was short-lived, and the longer-run trend of young adults swapping partners for parents has since resumed.

Focusing on London, which has the highest cost of living in the UK, reveals an even sharper decline in cohabitation. As Figure 6 shows, the same reversal occurs among 25–29 year-olds, with an even wider gap, but most significantly, living with a partner is now the least common arrangement for a young Londoner, behind both living with a parent and living in a flatshare or alone. Young Londoners are much more likely to be living in "other"

arrangements compared to other parts of the country. This is a reflection of the rental market where sharing a flat with strangers is common, and the most affordable way to leave the family home. Where housing is least affordable, living with a partner has become the hardest arrangement to afford.

Figure 6:

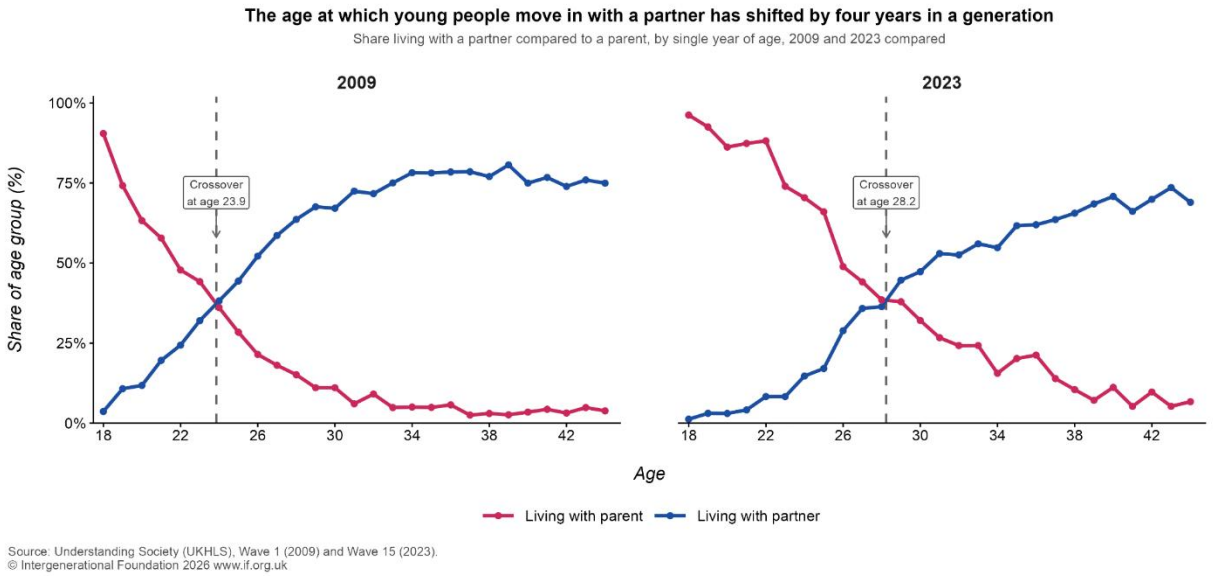


3.3 Leaving home later

With more young people living in their parental home, we can also investigate the age at which they typically leave to live with a partner. As Figure 7 shows, in 2009, the "crossover age", the point at which individuals are more likely to live with a partner than a parent, was around 24 years old. By 2023, that crossover age had risen closer to 28 years old.

A shift of over four years in the space of fourteen is a significant change. This confirms a broader trend of "prolonged adolescence" and delayed independence among younger generations. These figures suggest protracted dependency on parents is impacting young people's ability to form relationships.

Figure 7:



Source: Understanding Society (UKHLS), Wave 1 (2009) and Wave 15 (2023).
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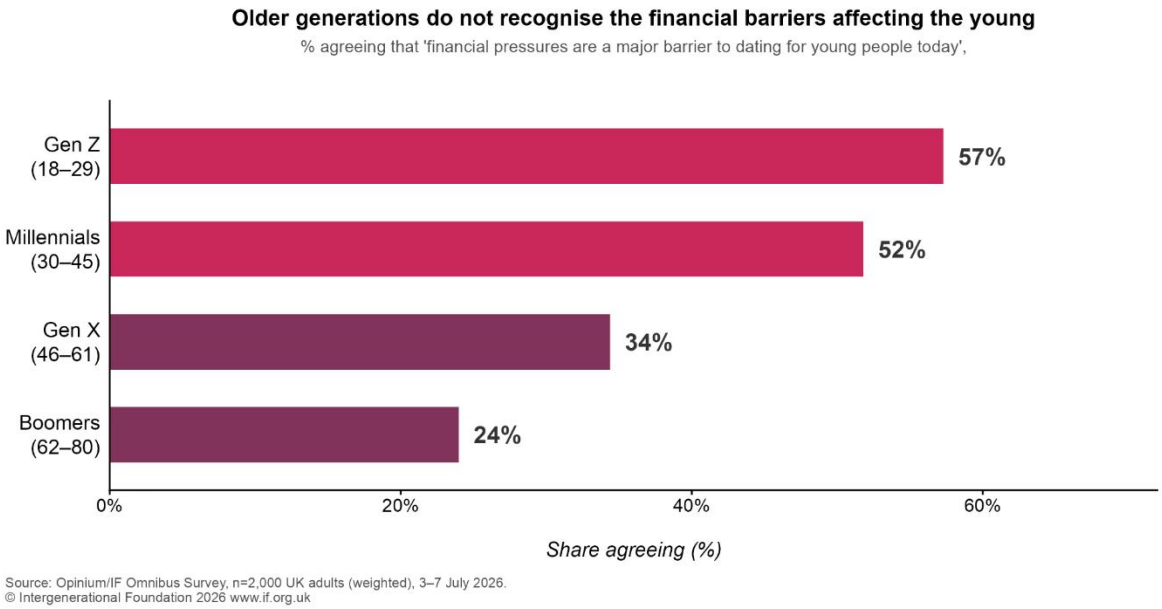
It is important to clarify that this evidence does not distinguish between people who are voluntarily staying with their parents for other reasons such as saving for a housing deposit, studying, etc. However, the data makes choice alone an implausible explanation for this shift. The speed at which this change has occurred indicates it to be a structural component that affects young adults across the nation, outside of any personal lifestyle/choices. Taken together with the survey evidence, we can reasonably infer that a growing share of young adults are living with their parents not because they prefer to, but because the alternatives have moved out of reach. So what is standing in the way?

4. The costs of a relationship

The most immediate barrier is cost. Dating costs money, and building a life with a partner in 2026 costs more than it ever did before. This is certainly the view among younger people themselves. As Figure 8 shows, 57 per cent of Gen Z agree that financial pressures are a major barrier to dating for young people. However, agreement with that statement falls with age: 52 per cent of Millennials, 34 per cent of Gen X, and only 24 per cent of Baby Boomers. This suggests ignorance of the financial barriers to dating among older generations, who likely faced lower costs of going out when they were the same age.

Figure 8:



4.1 Young people would date more if they could afford to

Our survey asked people directly whether money had affected their dating lives. Among those who want a relationship but are not currently dating, 46 per cent agreed that financial pressures had made it harder for them to date, and 42 per cent said they would go on more dates if money were not a factor. Almost half (49 per cent) of Gen Z said they would date more if it weren't for the cost. These numbers, as expected, fall sharply with age, since it is the young who face the burdens of the cost-of-living crisis the most.

Research by Novuna Personal Finance found that the average single adult spends around £1,652, over roughly 15 dates, before finding a partner.[6] With the average take-home income of a 22–29-year-old being £25,015 before rent in 2025, that's about 7 per cent being spent on the search.[7] A 22–29 year-old renting alone nationally in 2025 would be left with around £11,940 after rent, meaning that same £1,652 in dating costs would consume roughly 14 per cent of disposable income after rent.

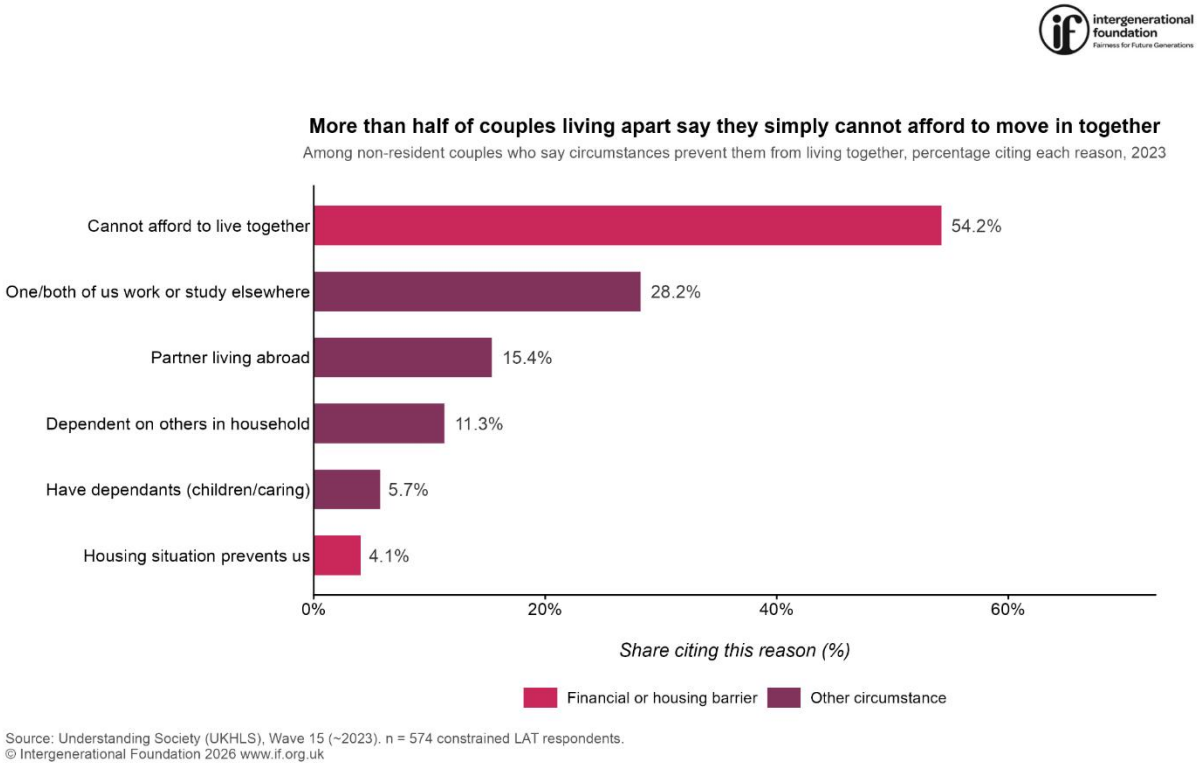
[6] Novuna Personal Finance (2023) *Love does cost a thing – £1,652, to be exact.* Based on an Opinium survey of 1,000 UK adults, 16–20 March 2023.
[7] IF analysis of ONS Price Index of Private Rents and Earnings by region and age data, with post-tax take-home pay calculated using actual income tax and National Insurance parameters for each year.

Finances do not cease to be an issue once young people enter into a relationship. Experian's research found that one in five of 18–35 year-olds have ended relationships because of financial problems.[8]

4.2 Priced out of living together

We can see the impact of financial pressures when we look not only at people looking for a partner, but also at those who already have one. In 2023, 21 per cent of 25–29-year-old couples were couples that lived apart from one another, and when asked why, most pointed to money.

Figure 9:

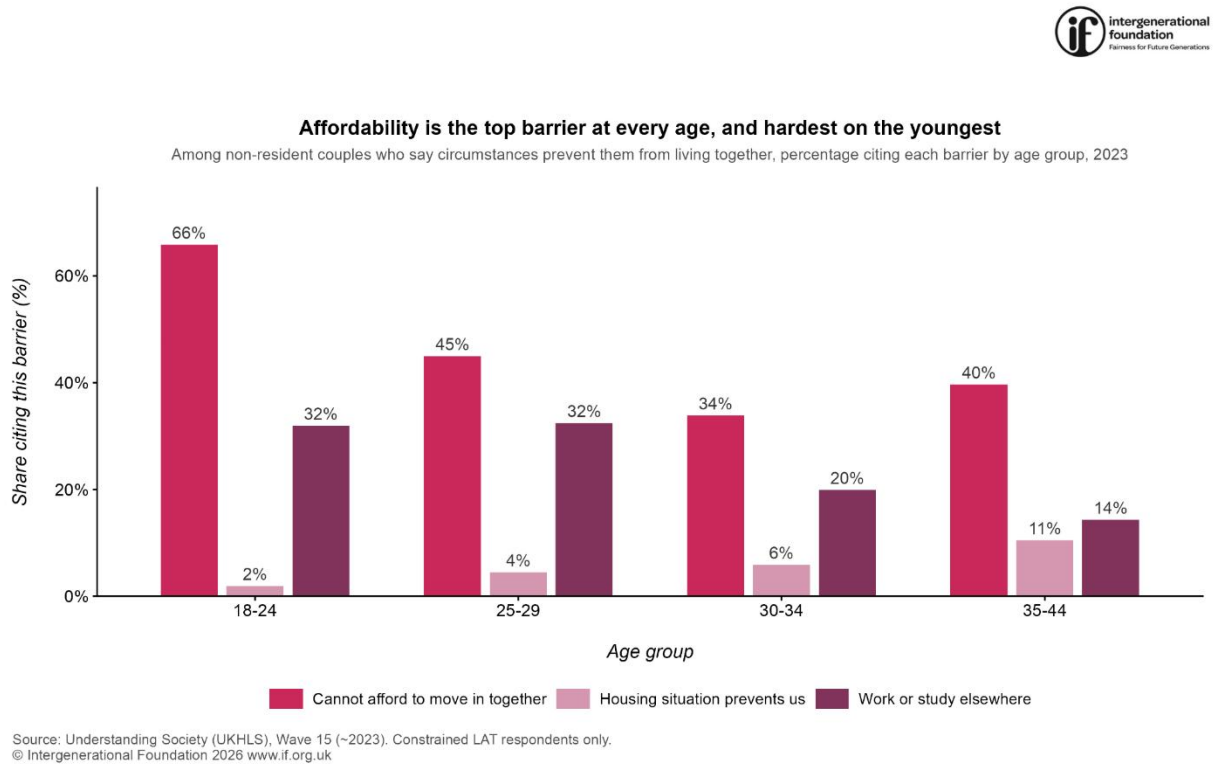


We can see from Figure 9 that, among couples who lived apart because of circumstances, 54 per cent said that they could not afford to live together. This is almost double the second most common reason, which is physical distance from one another (28 per cent). For many young couples, the question is not whether they have found someone, but whether they can afford to build a life with them. The cost of living is not only an initial barrier to dating, but a barrier at every step in the relationship.

[8] Experian (2024) The Cost of Loving. Relationship-debt and relationship-ending figures based on a 3Gem survey of 2,000 18–35 year-olds, January 2024

This becomes even clearer when the data is broken down by age group. As Figure 10 shows, cost is the leading reason couples live apart in every age group. Amongst the youngest couples, aged 18 to 24, two-thirds (66 per cent) live apart due to costs. Amongst 25 to 29 couples, it is almost half (45 per cent). Unlike distance, which accounts for the second most common reason in each age group, many of these couples live in the same areas, in the same cities, and yet are restricted from living together because of costs.

Figure 10:



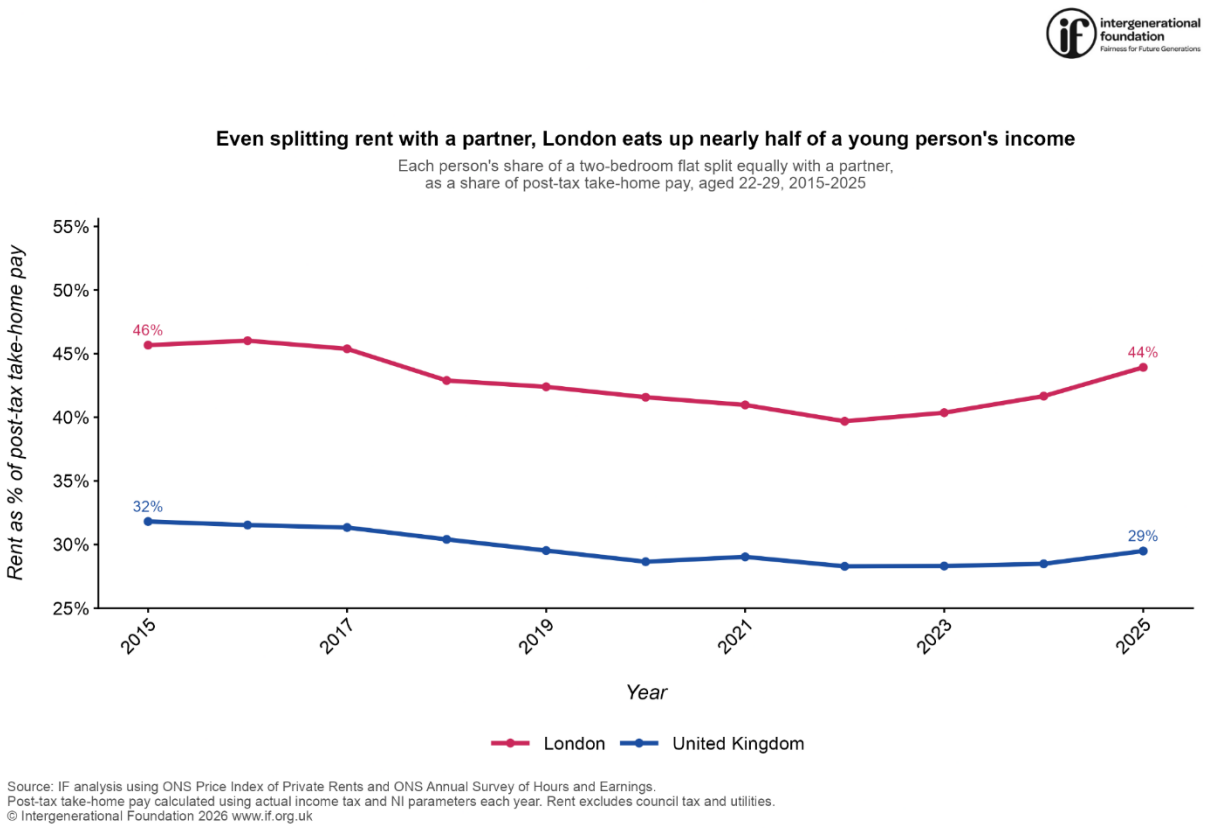
4.3 The numbers behind the rent

As Figure 11 shows, a 22–29-year-old splitting the cost of an average two-bedroom flat in the UK equally with a partner would spend almost 30 per cent of their post-tax income on rent in 2025.[9] In London, it becomes much more severe, with an average two-bedroom flat consuming 44 per cent of their post-tax income. That is almost half of one's take-home pay spent on rent alone, before looking at anything else. For many young couples in the capital, the concept of living together in their own place is not a financially viable option, with the costs sitting well outside what should be affordable. And this has been the case, though less

[9] IF analysis of ONS Price Index of Private Rents and Earnings by region and age data, with post-tax take-home pay calculated using actual income tax and National Insurance parameters for each year

severely throughout the country, for the past decade, with only a slight decrease until the pandemic brought the levels back up.[10]

Figure 11:



This explains the data seen in Section 3.2, where young adults have been remaining in their parental homes where the cost of rent is usually far lower, if anything. It is, in many cases, the only arrangement that allows a young person to save, to build financial stability, and eventually to reach the point where independent life becomes viable. For those in London who do leave home, the financially rational decision is often not to move in with a partner but to live with three, four, or five flatmates. While this spreads the cost, it leaves less room in which a relationship can develop.

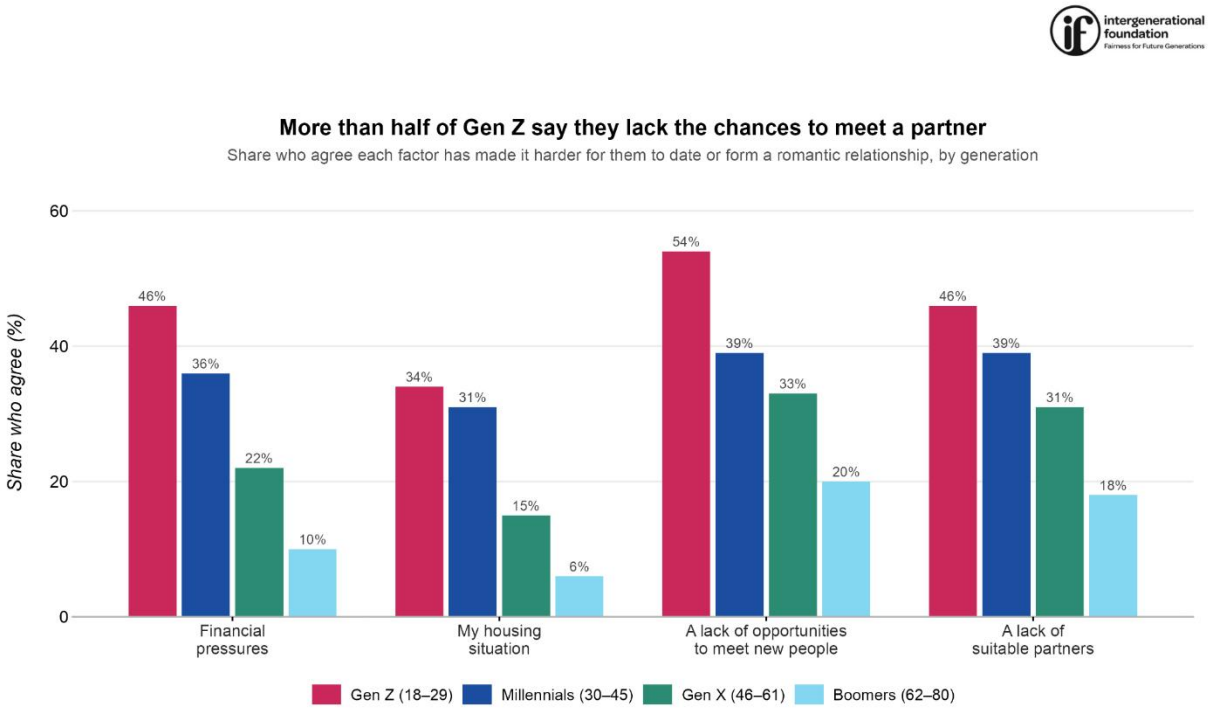
[10] IF calculations used ONS data available back to 2015. The historical series goes back to 2005 and would likely show a significant decrease in affordability since the early 2000s

5. Nowhere to meet

5.1 The barrier young people report most often

Interestingly, when asked about their own dating experiences, young people pointed to a lack of opportunities to meet new people as the largest obstacle to finding a romantic partner. As seen in Figure 12, 54 per cent of Gen Z cited it as making dating harder, higher than all other generations.

Figure 12:



Source: Opinium for the Intergenerational Foundation, 3–7 July 2026. Base: all UK adults (n=2,000).
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5.2 Fewer places to meet

Meeting people has always depended on different spaces that allow for different groups of people to interact. Typically, these have been physical spaces such as bars, concerts, cafes, clubs. However, these physical spaces have contracted. The number of pubs in the UK has been falling for decades now, with a drop of 22 per cent from 2000 to 2019.[11] A study by YMCA also found that local authorities' spending on youth services has fallen 76 per cent

[11] House of Commons Library (2021), Pub Statistics

since 2010-11, resulting in over 1,000 council-run youth clubs shutting down.[12] With these reductions, there is no surprise that younger generations find it increasingly difficult to socialise and meet new people.

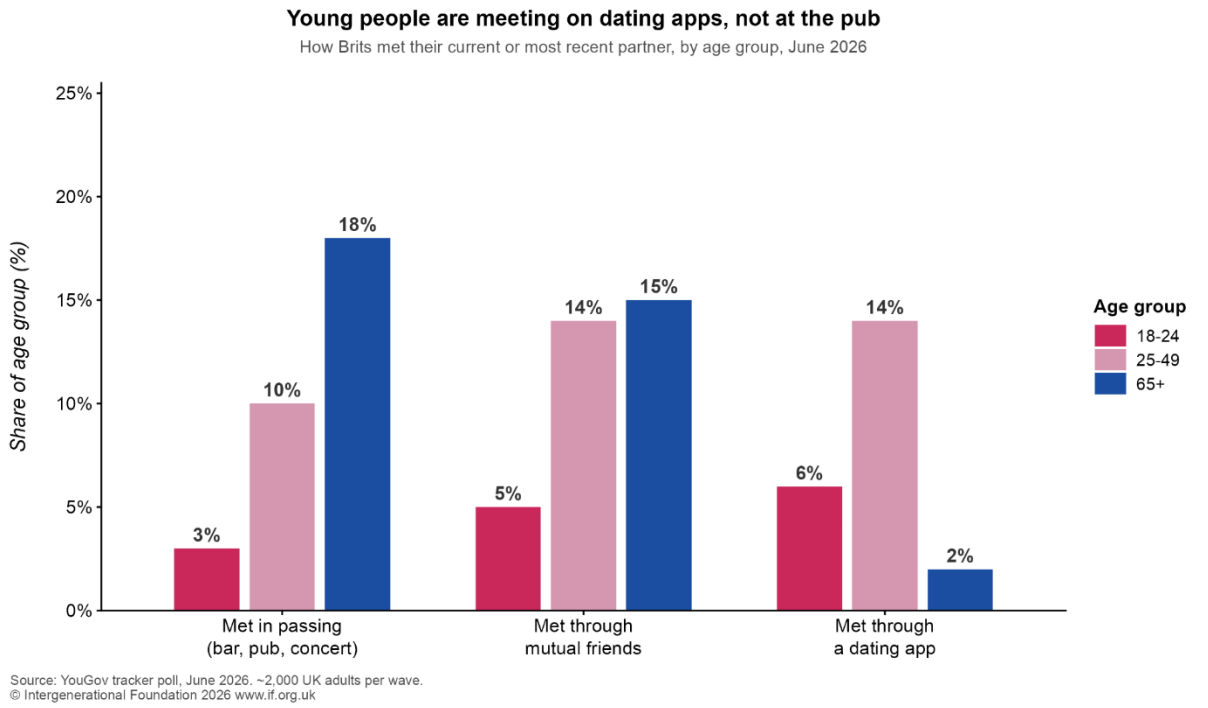
Meanwhile, the physical spaces that remain are more expensive. The price of a pint has gone up 423% since 1987, from 92p to £4.83 in 2025.[13] Concert tickets have skyrocketed,[14] and a night out in London in 2025 costs at least £20 more than it did in the 1990s, even when adjusted for inflation.[15] For young people whose necessities are eating up larger shares of their incomes, discretionary spending on these kinds of activities becomes much more difficult. Across the board, the increase in prices squeezes young people out of social interactions and pushes them further away from meaningful connections.

We can visualise the shift by looking at a YouGov poll on how Brits met their partners.[16] As shown in Figure 13, survey responses from June 2026 show only 3 per cent of 18–24 year-olds had met their partners in passing (in a bar, a pub, a concert, etc.). Compare this to 10 per cent amongst 24–49 year-olds and 18 per cent for those 65 and above.[17] Younger generations are struggling to meet people in the same way that previous generations did.

Instead, young people are increasingly turning to dating apps. 6 per cent of 18–24-year-olds met their most recent partner through an app, double the share who met in passing. Notably, the 25–49 age group shows the highest dating app usage at 14 per cent, also higher than meeting in passing, and reflects the impact of the rise of apps like Tinder and Hinge. Meeting through mutual friends has also dropped to 5 per cent for 18–24-year-olds compared to 14% of 25–49 year-olds highlighting the rapid decrease in dating through social circles and organic interactions.

[12] YMCA (2026), State of Play: Local Authority Funding of Youth Services in 2024-25
[13] ONS (2026), RPI: Ave price - Draught lager, per pint
[14] The Guardian (2025), The best gig I ever saw cost £4. Spiralling concert prices are a cultural disaster
[15] Time Out (2025), How much the cost of a night out in London has changed over 30 years
[16] YouGov (2026) How Brits meet their partners (quarterly tracker, 2019–2026). Base: c.1,900–2,000 GB adults per wave. Question: "How did you meet your current, or most recent, partner?"
[17] 40 per cent of 18–24 year-olds reported never having had a partner at all, compared to 13 per cent of 25–49year-olds and 10 per cent of over-65s. Remaining responses include meeting through work, school, university, family and other routes

Figure 13:



5.3 Dating on the apps

The rise of dating apps has, on the surface, made meeting people easier than ever: millions of potential partners, available at any hour, without the need to leave the house. Dating apps are now used by around one in ten UK adults, rising to almost one in five of those aged 18 to 24.[18] But, in many ways, dating apps give the illusion of choice. The ability to judge someone within seconds of their appearance has skewed the dating scene, and made incredibly high standards and fast-paced dating the norm among the young. One public-health analysis argues that the apps have shifted from helping users meet offline to encouraging them to accumulate matches, because a successful relationship removes two paying users from the platform.[19]

These apps also use a system called “match throttling”, which limits the number of matches a user gets in order to encourage them to move to a paid model. The inherent flaw is that

[18] Ofcom (2024) Online Nation: 2024 Report
[19] Balki, E. (2025) "Are Dating App Algorithms Making Men Lonely and Does This Present a Public Health Concern?"

these apps rely on this continued user engagement for their business model, not user well-being. The result is that people choose to stay in rather than go out, a choice that may feel like their own, but is instead incentivised by how these apps are designed. These endless matches rarely result in long-term relationships, with lower relationship satisfaction recorded from couples who met online.[20] The apps instead push unrealistic perceptions of dating that deepen isolation and increase levels of loneliness.

6. The result: a lonelier and more anxious generation

Loneliness is usually imagined as an affliction of old age. However, the data suggests otherwise. Young people in Britain today are lonelier and more anxious than any other age group. According to the ONS's Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, amongst 16–29-year-olds, 9 per cent report feeling chronically lonely. This falls consistently as age increases: 6 per cent of 30–49, 5 per cent of 50–69, and 4 per cent for those 70 and over. On average, 16–29 year-olds report anxiety levels of 4.6 out of 10, against an average of 4.0 across the population as a whole.[21]

While these figures alone cannot be directly attributed to the lack of relationships, it is a compounding product of the reduction in relationships and the increasing self-isolation driven by social media. This results in a self-reinforcing cycle. A person who is isolated finds it even harder to go out to meet new people and date, which deepens that isolation and loneliness.

When the cost of living applies additional pressures to the youth, narrowing their ability to go on dates and find opportunities to meet people, screens help fill that gap. According to OfCom, UK adults aged 18 to 24 spend an average of six hours a day online. This compares to under 5 hours for those aged 25 to 34, and only 3 hours for those 65 and above.[22] Of course, spending more time online and on social media may not directly cause an increase in loneliness. But it is clearly a poor substitute for in-person contact, especially in the context of meeting new people, forming new relationships, and finding a romantic partner.

7. What could be done

No government can legislate love. There is no single policy lever available to the government that can ensure more young people today will be able to find a partner and build loving and

[20] University of Stirling (2025), Couples who meet online are less happy in love according to new study
[21] ONS (2026), Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: March 2026
[22] Ofcom (2024) Online Nation: 2024 Report

long-term relationships. However, the government can shape the conditions in which young people search for partners and build relationships. This report has demonstrated how high housing costs, squeezed incomes, and the disappearance of shared spaces have narrowed the young's ability to form relationships. Fortunately, these are policy areas in which the government does have some influence. It can make policy changes that reduce the burdens on young people and improve their opportunities to flourish.

7.1 Housing

Housing is one of the biggest barriers preventing young people from forming and sustaining relationships. High rents and house prices make it harder to leave the parental home, live independently or move in with a partner. Making housing more affordable is therefore essential if young people are to have the freedom to form relationships and establish households of their own.

To do so, Britain must build more homes, including more social and affordable housing. The government should continue to reform the planning system, unlock land for development and support investment in new supply. But increasing supply alone will not be enough. Britain must also make better use of its existing housing stock. Under-occupation is increasingly concentrated among older homeowners, while many younger people struggle to find suitable housing. Reducing the financial and practical barriers to downsizing would help free up larger homes, improve mobility within the housing market and allow the existing stock to be used more efficiently.

7.2 The Spaces Where People Meet

The second barrier is opportunity. As we discovered, just 3 per cent of 18–24 year-olds say they met their current or most recent partner "in passing", in places such as pubs, bars and concerts. These "third places", outside the home and workplace, create opportunities to meet people beyond existing social circles. However, in the first three months of 2026, 161 pubs closed across Britain, almost two a day.[23] The British Beer and Pub Association also estimates that £1 in every £3 spent in a pub goes to the taxman.[24] The government's decision to cut business rates for pubs, social clubs and live music venues in England by 20 per cent from April 2027 is therefore welcome. The typical pub is expected to save around £1,100 a

[23] BBC (2026), British pubs closing at a rate of almost two per day in 2026
[24] BPPA (2025), Britain set to see a pub close every single day in 2025, BBPA warns

year.[25] But wider reform should also support cafés, restaurants and other everyday social spaces.

Existing spaces could also be used better. Councils should support temporary uses of vacant high-street units and open libraries, schools and community halls outside normal hours where practical. The Community Right to Bid currently gives local groups time to prepare a bid when a listed asset is put up for sale, but no guaranteed right to buy it. Communities should be given a genuine first chance to save threatened pubs, halls and social venues.

7.3 What other countries have done

This relationship recession is not only found in Britain, but is being seen across the developed world. Different governments have directly intervened with sometimes unusual and surprising policies targeting relationship formation.

In 2024, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government launched Tokyo Enmusubi, an AI-assisted matchmaking service. Applicants must verify their identity, income and single status. By June 2026, it had 16,000 registered members and 265 couples had married after meeting through the service.[26] Some South Korean local authorities have instead offered cash incentives. Busan's Saha District has offered payments for dating and engagement expenses, as well as up to 20 million won (£10,337) for couples who marry after attending a council-run matchmaking event.[27]

These schemes are eye-catching, but they remain small and do little to address the underlying barriers to relationships. Britain should not try to subsidise romance directly. It should make relationships easier to form by reducing housing costs and protecting affordable places to meet. That would be less intrusive, more durable and more likely to make a difference.

[25] BBC (2026), Burnham says 20% business rates cut for English pubs 'a first step'
[26] France 24 (2026), 'Appy marriages: AI helps hundreds of Japanese wed
[27] The Korea Herald (2024), Cash subsidies offered to singles who date, marry in Busan's Saha-gu