THE RELATIONSHIP RECESSION

The Problem

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CSJ The Centre for Social Justice

About the Centre for Social Justice

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions.

The CSJ's vision is to give people in the United Kingdom (UK) who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential. The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five 'pathways to poverty', first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report, Breakthrough Britain. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the political landscape by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, the CSJ provided the blueprint for the most significant reforms to welfare in a generation with the introduction of single working-age benefit, Universal Credit. Its research led to the introduction of the first ever Modern Slavery Act, as well as 'cuckooing' becoming a standalone statutory offence in 2026. Legislation in 2026 established the CSJ's Into Work Guarantee in law, allowing disabled people to try work without the fear of this triggering an automatic reassessment. And the CSJ's pioneering model of Family Hubs has grown into a major government programme, with hundreds today bringing family support services together in communities across England.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners and policymakers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises, and other grassroots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2026 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

The Problem

The UK is currently experiencing a persistent and meaningful decline in the relationships between young men and women. 50 years ago, most men were married by their 25th birthday.[1] Today, as a young man approaches 25, he is 26 times more likely to live with his mum than his wife.[2] In England and Wales, there are now around 3.7 million fewer married people under 30 than in 1976, despite the greater number of young people. The number has fallen from 4.5 million to approximately 790,000.[3]

The CSJ's Lost Boys work revealed a growing chasm between the sexes, and while the chasm is deepest in our poorest communities it is a trend being felt right across the country, and indeed the world. The question is, why now, and why does this matter? What material conditions have changed that have influenced these difficult-to-quantify shifts and what is their impact on individuals and society? These questions represent the core of our new work examining the 'relationship recession'.

The Centre for Social Justice exists to put social justice at the heart of British politics. Ultimately, the question of the relationship recession cuts to the core of much of our work. Our research on tackling loneliness, family breakdown, crime, addiction, work, education, fertility, and more, all contain a golden thread – the importance of relationships. Indeed, the greatest predictor of a long, happy, healthy life is the quality of our relationships.[4] If young people are struggling to both make and maintain relationships with the opposite sex, then this is a major cause for concern.

The following numbers help explain how the problem is playing out as we embark on a major new inquiry into Britain's relationship recession.

Homes

More young people (aged 20 to 34) are staying at their parent's homes, and for longer. In 2008, 20 per cent lived with their parents.[5] By 2015 it had risen to 25 per cent, and in 2025 it sat at nearly 30 per cent (28.7 per cent).[6] These numbers also hide a clear gender imbalance: for those between the ages of 20–34 years, fewer than one quarter of young women were still living at home (22.3 per cent), compared to over one-third of young men (34.9 per cent).[7] In 2018–20, nearly half of 25- to 34-year-olds in the bottom income quintile lived with their parents, compared with around 2 per cent to those in the top quintile.[8]

Figure 1 – Half of people aged 24 years did not live with their parents in 2021, compared with half of people aged 21 years in 2011



Source: *ONS.*[9]

Marriages

Marriage has declined remarkably in recent decades. The rate of men and women who are married by the age of 30 is down 90 per cent over the last 50 years.[10] For those in their early twenties it is down over 97 per cent.[11]

Figure 2 – The marriage rate has fallen over 95 per cent for men and women in their early 20s



Source: *ONS, reproduced in CSJ I Do?*[12]

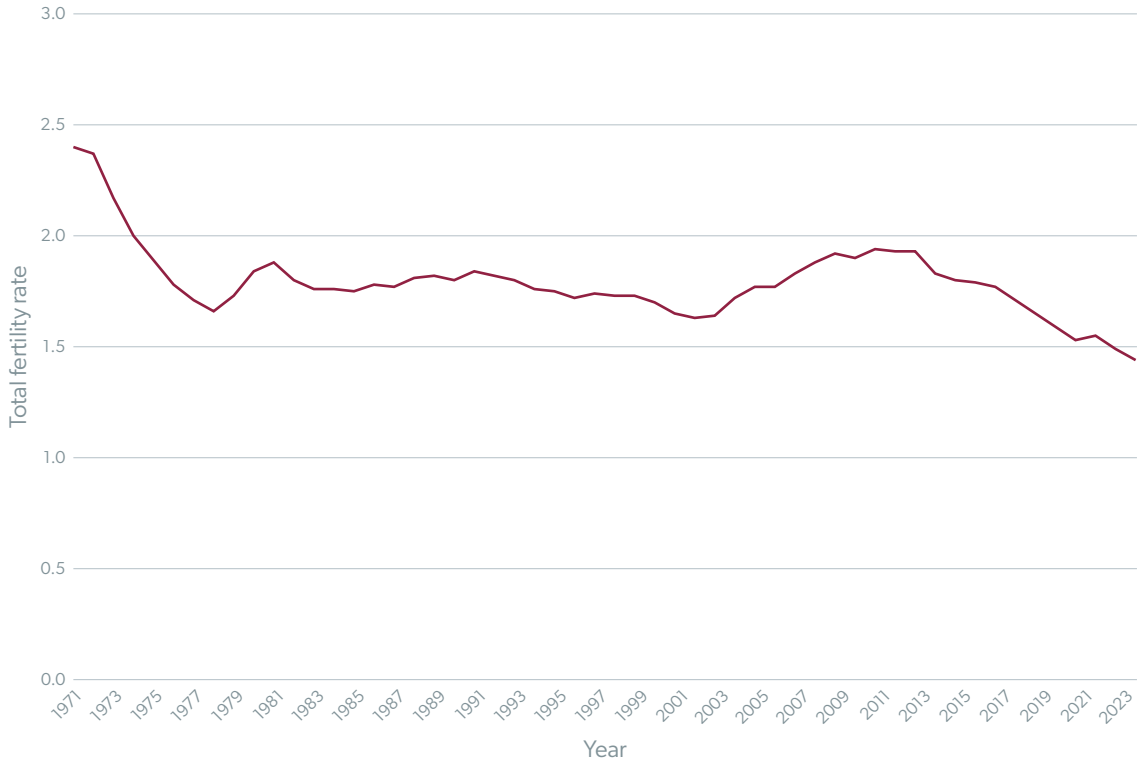
Sex rates

Fewer people are having sex, and those that are having sex are having it less frequently. In October 2019, 68 per cent of 16–24-year-olds described themselves as sexually active.[13] The most recent data puts this number at 44 per cent.[14]

Fertility rates

The Total Fertility Rate in England and Wales is at a record low of 1.39 children per woman.[15] The average age to become a mother has increased from 23 in the 1970s[16] to 31 in 2025.[17]

Figure 3 – Fertility rates have fallen since the 1970s



Source: *ONS.*[18]

Spaces to meet

The environment for meeting others in public is thinning. The number of pubs has fallen by 29 per cent since 1990;[19] over one quarter of late-night venues have disappeared since the pandemic;[20] one in four young people do not drink at all,[21] a figure which was one in seven in 2017;[22] the percentage of young people (aged 16–29) who work from home tripled from 2019 to 2022 (from 6.3 per cent to 21.3 per cent)[23] – with half of them saying that this work makes it harder to build relationships with colleagues;[24] there are 1000 fewer youth clubs today than there were 15 years ago.[25]

Meeting in person

Young couples now meet their partner 'out and about' at a quarter of the rate of their grandparent's generation – from one in five couples to one in twenty. Combining those who met their current partner through work, mutual friends, or while 'out and about', the rate has halved from 60 per cent for those over 60 to 32 per cent for 18–29-year-olds.[26]

Isolated teenagers

In 2001/2, nearly two in five (39 per cent) 15-year-olds spent time with friends in the evenings on most nights of a typical week.[27] This proportion has now halved to just 17 per cent today. The proportion of 15-year-olds spending every evening out with friends was 13.5 per cent in 2002 and is now 1.9 per cent - a decrease of 86 per cent.[28] On the weekend, one quarter of 15-year-olds spend 6+ hours awake in their bedroom.[29] Half of 15-year-olds spend more time in their bedroom than they would like.[30]

Figure 4 – Teenagers are spending fewer evenings out with friends



Lines join the three survey observations.

Source: *HBSC 2001/02 and 2009/10; CSJ / Merlin Strategy.*[31]

Political alignment

Political polarization appears to be rising in younger people.[32] Contrary to some popular belief, this is not due to men shifting right while women shift left. Rather, both have shifted leftwards, though women to a much greater degree than men.[33] A recent study of 32 European countries found that, in the UK, "men are moving towards the left, but women are moving at a faster pace towards the left, causing the gap to grow".[34]

Figure 5 – A wide ideology gap is opening up between young men and women in countries across the world



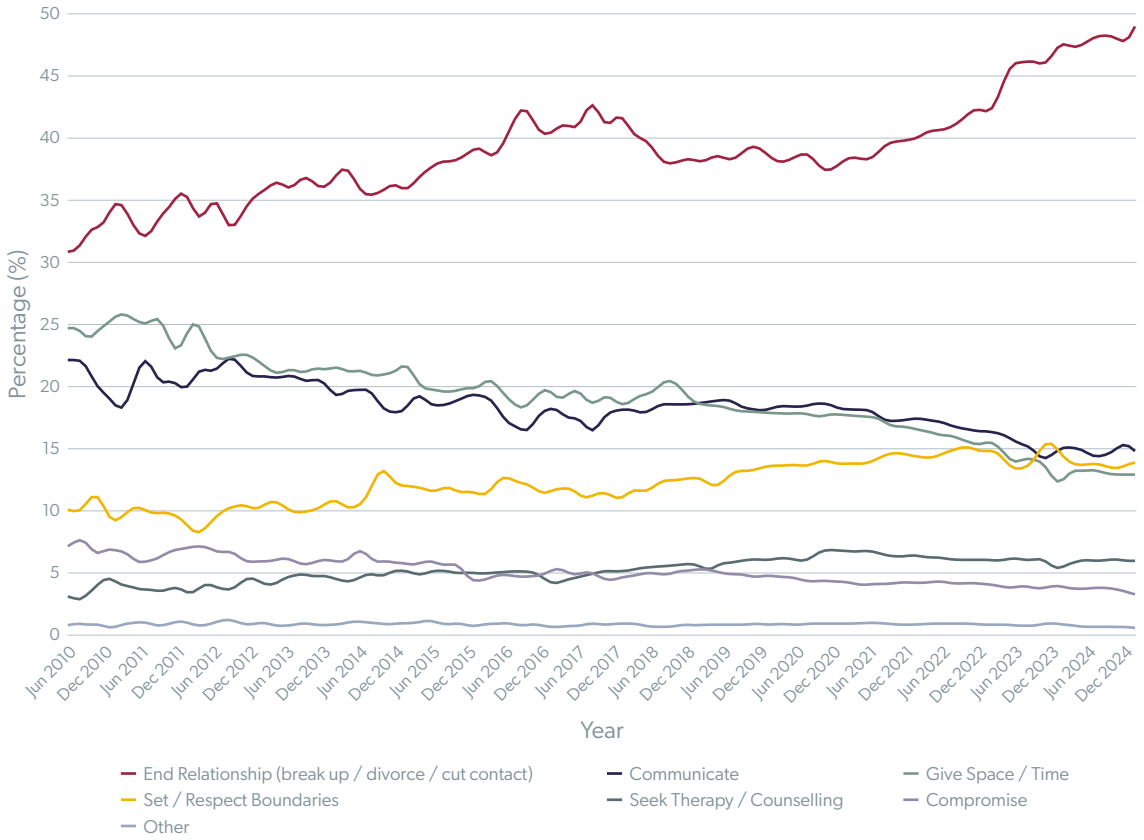
US data show respondents' stated ideology. Other countries show support for liberal and conservative parties. All figures are adjusted for the time trend in the overall population. Curves traced from the original graphic; values are approximate.

Source: *Financial Times*.[35]

Breakup advice

Analysis of over 1.1 million pieces of relationship advice on Reddit over 15 years showed an increase of advice to end the relationship from 31 per cent to nearly 50 per cent. Most of the corresponding decline came from the categories of "Communicate", "give time / space", and "compromise" which went from a combined total of 55 per cent to 31 per cent.[36]

Figure 6 – Advice to end the relationship has become more common



Source: *Reddit, dataisbeautiful.*[37]
"End relationship" includes breaking up, divorce and cutting contact. Curves digitised from the original graphic; plotted values are approximate.

Diverging online experiences

The online dating market is incredibly lopsided and breeding discontent. The overall ratio of online daters is two men for every one woman.[38] Over half of women (54 per cent) feel overwhelmed by the volume of messages they get. All the while nearly two thirds (64 per cent) of men feel insecure from a lack of them. [39] Algorithmic silos continue to feed men and women different content bubbles, another barrier to shared experiences.

Worsening wellbeing

One quarter of 17–19-year-olds in the UK had a probable mental disorder in 2022, compared to one in ten in 2017.[40] 43 per cent of 16–29-year-olds reported high levels of anxiety.[41] Taking courage, making yourself vulnerable, and instigating a relationship is more difficult for young people who have these additional barriers.

This is not meant as fearmongering nor moralising. It is a sober reflection of the state of the current relationship landscape for young adults. We do nobody any favours by sticking our head in the sand and pretending all is well; this is being felt by people and will have long term impacts ranging from individual health and happiness to the future shape of our economy. Being clear-eyed about the challenges facing

young people brings both catharsis and opportunity: it is a recognition of genuine struggle, and a diagnosis of the underlying symptoms that give space to provide a proper cure.

Modern life is more complex than ever. Housing, social media and technology, political ruptures, spiritual disenfranchisement, a climate crisis, the cost of living, even the instability of old institutions such as marriage and the family seem to be creaking under the pressure of the modern world. All these and more undoubtedly play a role in why it feels hard for young people today.

But we will look at four areas that we think are of particular concern and are currently under-priced:

- pornography
- online dating
- relationship expectations
- learning and earning

This will inevitably mean we do not talk about other important elements. This is not because they are not relevant. Rather it is because these four categories encompass a significant amount in influence themselves and because they are more likely to fly under the radar than issues such as housing or physical spaces, which we continue to explore elsewhere in the CSJ portfolio.

The first report – The Relationship Recession: Porn – will be released shortly.

Endnotes

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The Centre for Social Justice
Kings Buildings
16 Smith Square
Westminster, SW1P 3HQ

www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk
@csjthinktank