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Population & Societies

Couples, one-night stands, sexfriends: The varied intimate lives of the under-30s

Marie Bergström,* Florence Maillachon,** and the Envie team***

The intimate lives of young adults can take many forms. What is the nature of their relationships? How do young people meet each other? When do they say they are in love? How many experience a 'crush'? The first results of the Envie survey on the intimate relationships of more than 10,000 young people aged 18-29 are analysed here.

With the postponement of life events such as completing education, finding a first stable job, entering a cohabiting union and becoming a parent, the period of youth has grown longer in recent decades [1]. The early 20s are a time of sexual experimentation in which young people do not necessarily think about 'settling down' with a steady partner. In France, demographers and sociologists call this the period of 'sexual youth' [2]. What forms does it take? What are the romantic and sexual lives of young adults today?

The Envie survey (INED, 2023) is the first in France to focus specifically on the sexuality of the 18–29 age group (see Box 1). It uses an original approach to explore the diversity of respondents' intimate relationships over the previous 12 months.

Four in five young people had at least one relationship in the past year

At ages 18–29, young people experience a diverse range of intimate relationships, ranging from being in a couple (cohabiting or not) to one-night stands, and including other types of relationship that correspond to neither and that they define in various ways (sexfriend, hookup, friends with benefits, fling, affair, etc.). We will refer to these as 'lasting relationships'. In all, four in five of the survey respondents (79%) had experienced

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Table 1. Diversity of relationships by gender (%)

	Men	Women	Non-binary	Overall	
				%	Numbers
At least one relationship:	76	83	62	79	8,369
couple relationship (cohabiting or not)*	60	72	52	66	6,966
one-night stand*	26	16	23	21	2,287
other type of relationship (lasting relationship)*	14	15	22	15	1,610
No relationship	24	17	38	21	1,652
Total	100	100	100	100	10,021

M. Bergström, F. Maillachon, the Envie team, *Population & Societies*, no. 623, June 2024, Ined.

Interpretation: 72% of women versus 60% of men and 52% of non-binary individuals reported at least one couple relationship over the past 12 months.

* non-exclusive categories.

Source: Envie, 2023, INED. Weighted data.

at least one of these three types of relationships in the past 12 months. Some had experienced two types (19%), but the majority only one (60%), i.e. either one or more couple relationships, one or more one-night stands, or one or more lasting relationships. The remaining 21% had experienced none in the past year. This is more the case for men (24%) and especially non-binary respondents (38%) than women (17%).

Couples, one-night stands, and lasting relationships

Being in a couple is the most prevalent type of relationship (Table 1). Two-thirds of young adults reported a relationship

of this kind in the previous 12 months, whether dissolved or still ongoing at the time of the survey. That said, at ages 18–29, these unions are rarely ‘settled’ or formalized. Among respondents reporting a couple relationship in the past year, slightly less than one-third cohabited with their partner, 9% in a PACS civil partnership, and 7% in a marriage. At these young ages, couple relationships rely less on material or institutional foundations than on emotional commitment. Consequently, a large majority of young adults in a couple reported being ‘very much’ (77%) or ‘quite’ (17%) in love with their partner. Only 6% reported being ‘not at all’ or ‘not really’ in love.

Among respondents aged 18–29, 21% reported experience of a one-night stand over the past 12 months, with a high frequency among people who had separated from a partner in the year. The post-separation period is a time of readjustment when casual relationships provide a means to ‘move on from the past’ [3]. One-night stands are rarely experienced only once, unlike the two other types of relationship. Respondents who reported a one-night stand over the past 12 months generally experienced several—two (21%), three to five (27%), or six and more (20%)—rather than just one (32%). Short-lived and numerous, they are also defined by a certain emotional detachment. When respondents were asked about their feelings towards their casual sexual partner, most said that they were ‘not at all’ (65%) or ‘not really’ (21%) in love, with few reporting being ‘quite’ or ‘very much’ in love (13%). For men and women alike, there is little sentimental attachment in such relationships, which in turn is a way to limit their importance.

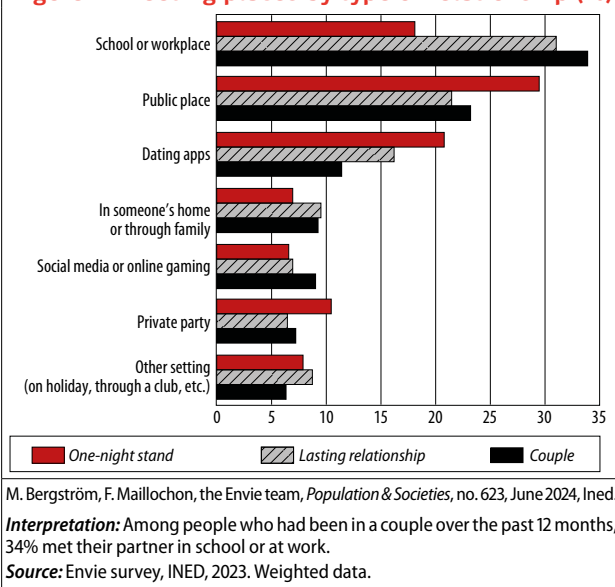
Lasting relationships, for their part, are different from couples, but also from one-night stands. While various terms are used to designate them, they are all more short-lived than the former, but more lasting than the latter. Love is more often absent from these relationships than for couples, but is more frequent than for one-night stands: young people are rarely ‘very much’ (9%) or ‘quite’ (20%) in love, and more often ‘not really’ (33%) or ‘not at all’ (37%) in love with their partner, with little difference between men and women. In all, 15% of young adults had experienced this type of relationship in the past year.

Meeting places: school, bars, dating apps

These relationships are associated with different types of sociability and meeting venues: the settings where couples meet are not entirely the same as those where casual sexual partners meet, for example (Figure 1).

Many encounters still take place in school or at work, for couples especially [4]. Among people having a couple relationship in the past 12 months, 34% met their partner in a setting of this kind. The proportion is similar for lasting relationships (31%) but much smaller for one-night stands (18%). Sharing a classroom or workplace also means having friends in common and crossing paths every day, something that casual sexual partners may wish to avoid.

Figure 1. Meeting places by type of relationship (%)



Encounters are also frequent in public places: bars, night clubs, concerts and festivals especially, but also, to a lesser extent, in the street, in malls, or other public areas. This is often the case for one-night stands. Among people who reported such relationships over the past 12 months, 30% met the partner in question in a public space, often a leisure venue. Among those in a couple or a lasting relationship, the proportions are smaller and similar: 23% and 21%, respectively.

Dating apps are now widely used to find a partner but are not the most common way of meeting, contrary to what is sometimes suggested in the media. Relationships formed in this way are generally casual: 21% of young adults who reported a one-night stand in the past 12 months met their sexual partner via a dating app. The proportion is halved among people in a couple (cohabiting or not), among whom just 11% met their partner that way. Lasting relationships, for their part, are in an intermediate position: 16% of respondents met their ‘sexfriend’, their ‘regular hookup’ or other partner of this type via an app. Relatively discreet and providing access to multiple user profiles, these apps are strongly associated—both in people’s minds and in reality—with ‘one-off’ encounters, although not exclusively so.

Some respondents also reported meeting partners at private parties, via social media and online gaming platforms, in private homes (at their own place, at a friend their partner’s place) through a family member, etc. While these other meeting places were never mentioned by more than 10% of respondents, they illustrate the wide range of settings in which young adults find a partner.

Contrasting experiences

More women than men and non-binary individuals reported being in a couple in the past 12 months, while men and

non-binary individuals more frequently reported one-night stands, more strongly associated with singlehood (Table 1). Lasting relationships were reported equally by men and women, although the terms used to qualify them are different. Men more readily talked about ‘hookups’ (*plans culs*) than women who, for their part, more often call these relationships ‘friends with benefits’ (*amitiés avec un plus*), for example. It is non-binary individuals who most often reported lasting relationships; the questioning of gender identities seems to go hand in hand with a questioning of conjugal and sexual norms.

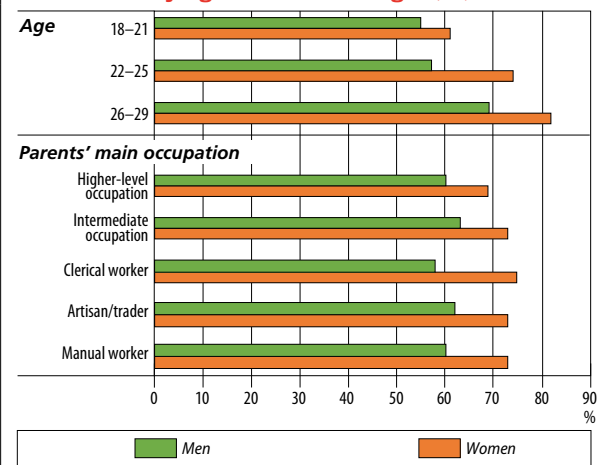
Experience of relationships also differs by age. The proportion of young people reporting at least one relationship in the past year increases gradually with age, and the relationship types also vary. Having been in a couple in the past year is more frequent among people nearing their thirties than among those in their early twenties (Figure 2). This difference is especially pronounced for experience of cohabitation, reported by a majority of young adults nearing 30 (55% of those aged 26–29) versus a small minority of 18- to 21-year-olds (9%). These figures illustrate the progressive increase in age at first cohabitation observed over the last 30 years. Young people still aspire to living with a partner, however: 76% of young adults in a non-cohabiting couple reported intending to move in with their partner in the future. Women’s younger age at union formation is partly explained by the age difference between different-sex partners, still observed in this young generation [5]. In contrast to couple relationships, one-night stands and, to a lesser extent, lasting relationships were more often reported by respondents aged 18–25 (Figure 3).

Social origin plays a variable role across types of relationships and genders. Among men, the share reporting a couple relationship in the past 12 months remains similar across all social backgrounds while among women, only those with parents in a higher-level occupation less frequently reported being in a couple during the past 12 months than women from all other backgrounds. A clearer trend, among women especially, is seen in the proportion of young adults reporting a one-night-stand or a lasting relationship in the past 12 months, which increases progressively with social class. Sexual norms play out differently by gender, but also by social background [6].

Between desire and disappointment: projected relationships

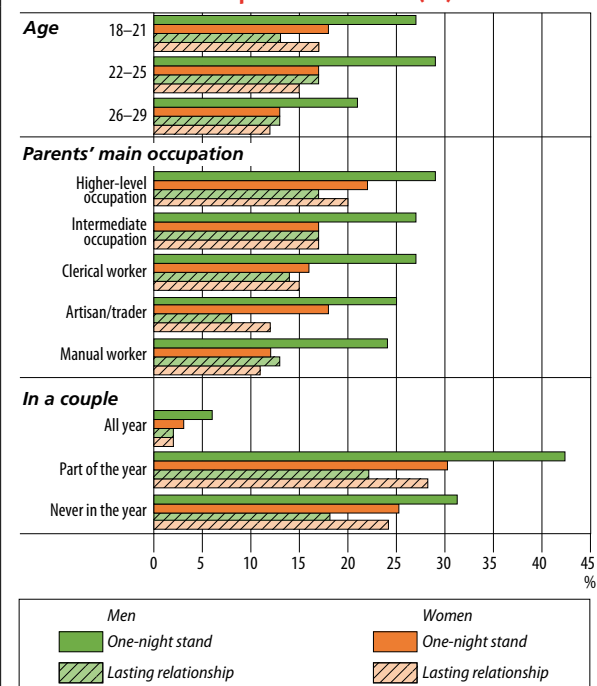
A person’s emotional life is also punctuated by hope and disappointment, aspirations and hesitations. Almost a third of the 18- to 29-year-olds reported experience in the past 12 months of being ‘in love or attracted to someone’ with whom ‘there was never any physical intimacy’. The majority of these people (62%) were only in love with or attracted to one other person in the year, suggesting that this attraction was more often elective rather than a ‘crush’, i.e. a secret, short-lived, and substitutable infatuation [7]. These are ‘projected’ relationships. They involve

Figure 2. Being in a couple over the last 12 months by age and social origin (%)



M. Bergström, F. Maillachon, the Envie team, *Population & Societies*, no. 623, June 2024, Ined. Source: Envie survey, INED, 2023. Weighted data.

Figure 3. One-night stands and lasting relationships by age, social background, and being in a couple in the past 12 months (%)



M. Bergström, F. Maillachon, the Envie team, *Population & Societies*, no. 623, June 2024, Ined. Interpretation: 42% of men and 30% of women who were in a couple for a part of the year reported having a one-night stand over the past 12 months. Source: Envie survey, INED, 2023. Weighted data.

quite strong feelings of love, reported in almost half of all cases. School and the workplace are the main meeting places (46%), followed by public spaces (21%), with dating apps accounting for just 5% of the total. In other words, these desires and feelings are directed mainly towards people that young adults meet in their everyday lives, including acquaintances and friends to whom they cannot always confess their attraction.

Projected relationships are much more frequent among the youngest respondents (37% of the 18–21 age group vs. 24% of the 26–29 age group). They more often concern non-binary individuals (51%) and men (36%) than women (24%). These differences are linked to the fact that single people more often report this type of experience than those in a couple. Moreover, these projected relationships do not mean the same thing whether already in a relationship or not. For people in a couple, they are very rarely associated with feelings of love, while for those claiming to be single such feelings are more frequent. What corresponds to fantasy for the former is experienced more by the latter as an unfulfilled desire, or in some cases, a failed attempt to build a couple relationship.

Before settling down with a partner and starting a family—an aspiration now postponed but by no means rejected—young adults experience different types of intimate relationships. This diversity contrasts with the clichéd notions that ‘the couple is dead’ or that a prudish and cautious ‘no sex’ generation is emerging. On the contrary, young adulthood today is a period of intense sexual and amorous experimentation. Couples still occupy a central position but exist alongside short-lived encounters and relationships that blur the boundaries between friendship and sexuality.

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Box 1. Methodology

The Envie survey questionnaire on young adults' intimate relationships (Enquête sur la vie affective des jeunes adultes, INED, 2023) was administered by phone to a representative sample of 10,021 individuals aged 18–29 living in mainland France.⁽¹⁾ It fills a knowledge gap on sexuality at this time of life: other surveys conducted over recent decades (the 1994 ACSJ survey on minors aged 15–18 and the 2006 CSF survey of people aged 18–69) do not provide data on the specific behaviours of young adults. The sample was created through random generation of mobile phone numbers and the survey was conducted by Ipsos (see Online Appendix <https://doi.org/10.34847/nkl.13936341>).

The Envie survey adopts a ‘relational’ perspective, focusing not only on regular partners but also on more casual relationships. It asks young adults about their experiences over the last 12 months and describes three different relationship types: couples (cohabiting or not), one-night stands, and lasting relationships. It also asks about projected relationships, i.e. having been in love or attracted to someone but without reaching any physical intimacy. The survey takes account of the recent broadening of gender identities, comparing people who identify as male or female with those who define themselves differently, and who are grouped here under the term ‘non-binary’ (when sample size is large enough). Differences by social origin are studied via the parents’ occupational category (using a revised version of the ‘PCS ménage’; see Online Appendix <https://doi.org/10.34847/nkl.13936341>). This indicator provides an element of comparison common to all respondents, whether working or still in education.

(1) The survey is part of the LifeObs (ANR-21-ESRE-0037) research infrastructure headed by INED. It was financed by ANR, INJEP, Santé publique France, CNAF and DGCS-SDFE, and obtained a CNIS declaration of public interest (no. 160/H030) and CNIL approval (no. 2226211). <https://envie.site.ined.fr/>

Abstract

Four in five young adults (aged 18–29) taking part in the Envie survey reported at least one romantic or sexual relationship over the past year. A majority reported a couple relationship (66%), but many had also experienced a one-night-stand (21%) or various lasting relationships that they defined in different ways (15%). Couples still tend to meet in school or at the workplace, while partners for a one-night stand are often encountered in public spaces or on dating apps. Couples are equally prevalent across different social backgrounds, but the other types of relationship are more frequent among young people, women especially, with parents in higher-level occupations.

Mots-clés

Couple, love, youth, intimate relations, couple relationships, meeting, sexuality, gender



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