

Looking back and thinking ahead: reflecting on 50 years of sexual health policy and practice

Kaye Wellings

Health Promotion Annual Conference
Galway. June, 2025

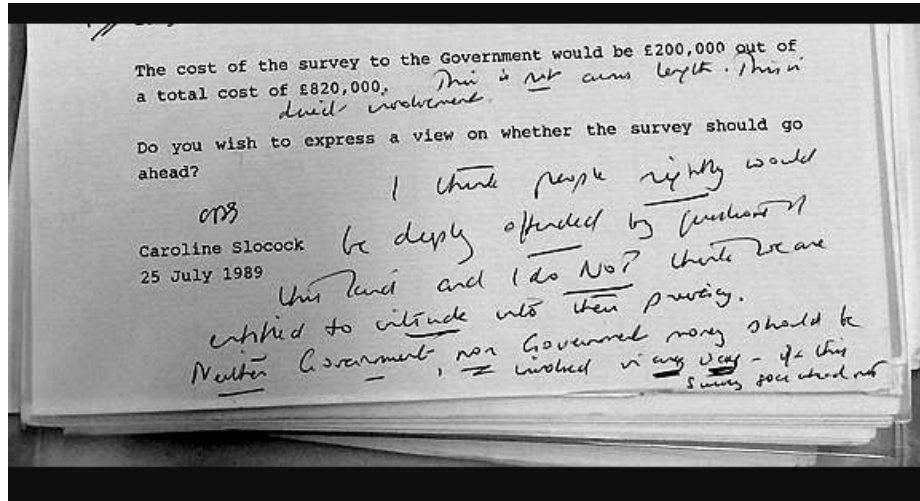


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I. Sexual lifestyles have changed – and so has the ease of investigating them



Thatcher halts survey on sex

THE prime minister has vetoed plans for the biggest-ever official investigation of Britain's sexual habits. She believes the £750,000 government survey would invade the privacy of the 20,000 people due to be questioned.

The decision has angered medical researchers, who say the inquiry would have produced the most comprehensive

by Michael Durham and David Hughes

lives," Kaye Wellings, a research officer at the Health Education Authority, said.

"It is unthinkable that this study should not go ahead. A tremendous amount of hard work and careful preparation

missiveness, homosexuality and abortion; awareness of health education issues; and personal assessments of their risk of contracting HIV or other sexually-transmitted diseases.

Two pilot studies have been carried out. A feasibility study involving 1,000 adults was published in April. The results

man steering group, said yesterday: "I'm very disappointed if the government's scientists have been unable to persuade politicians of the value of this work."

"It is an important survey. It would put us in a better position to assess how the epidemic will spread in coming decades and to see whether

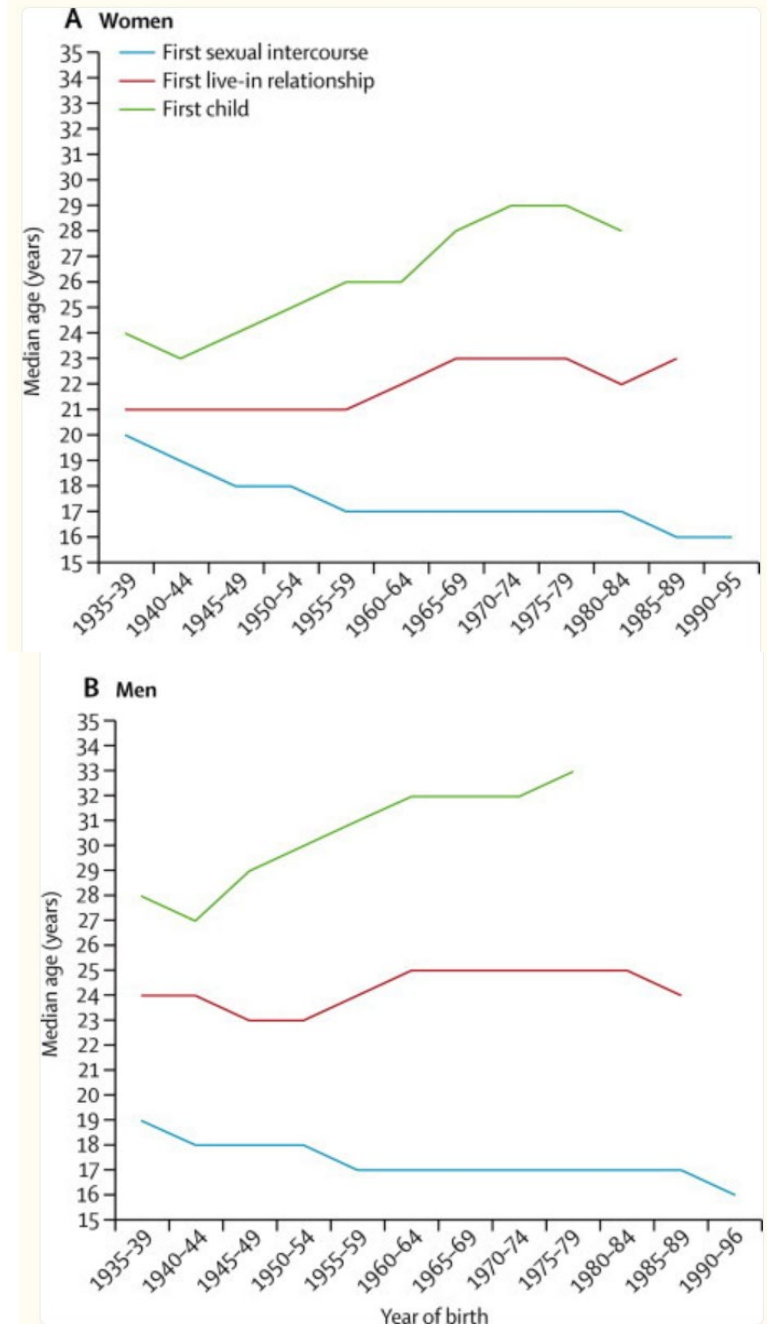
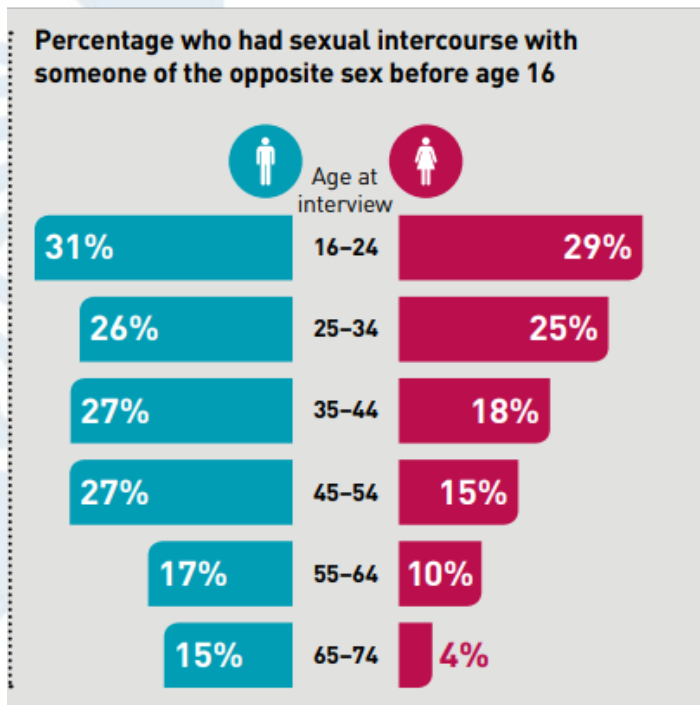
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Changes in sexual lifestyles

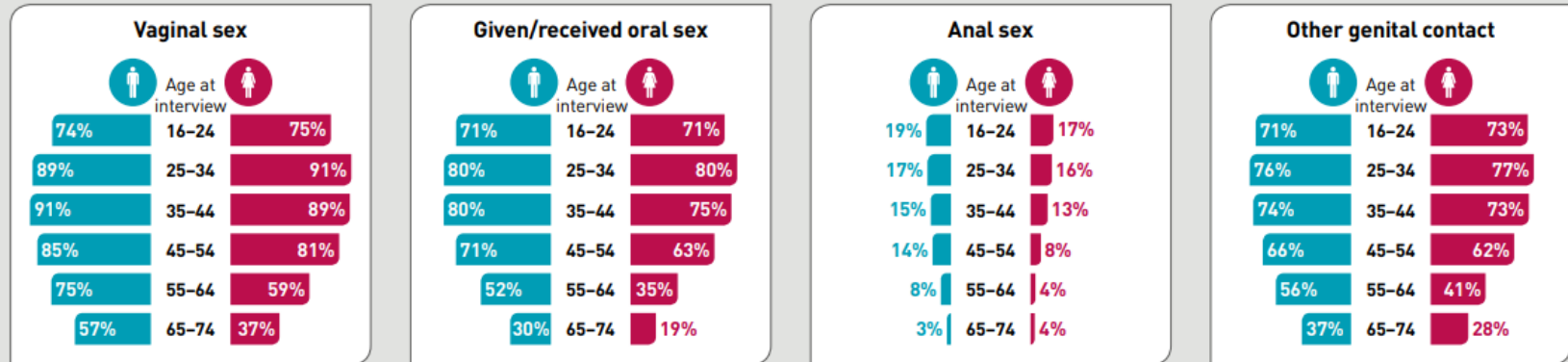
Sex occurs earlier; cohabitation and childbearing later.

The lengthening of the Interval between first sex, first cohabitation and first births has implications for health promotion.,



Natsal 3 revealed greater diversity in sexual practices...

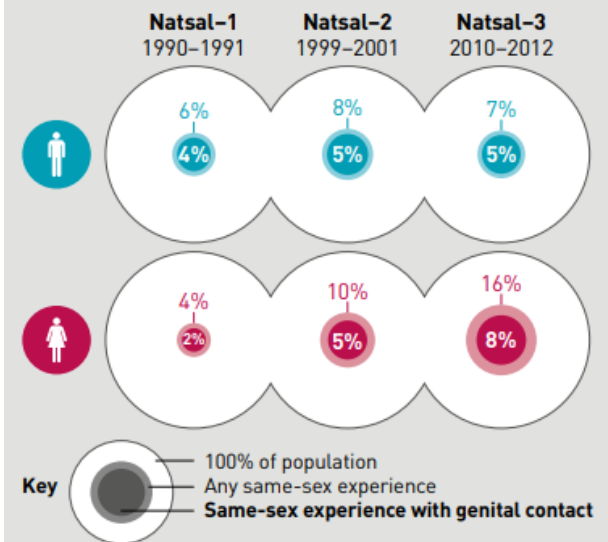
Different types of sex with people of the opposite-sex, past year



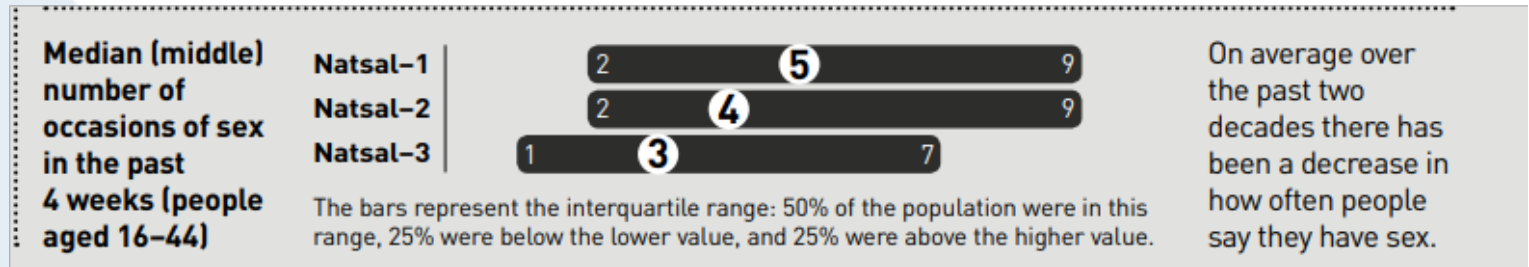
People continue to have sex at all ages, but the frequency and range of sexual practices decrease with age. While most people have had vaginal sex in the past year, other practices are less common, especially anal sex.

- and partnerships, sizeable increase in proportion having same sex experience

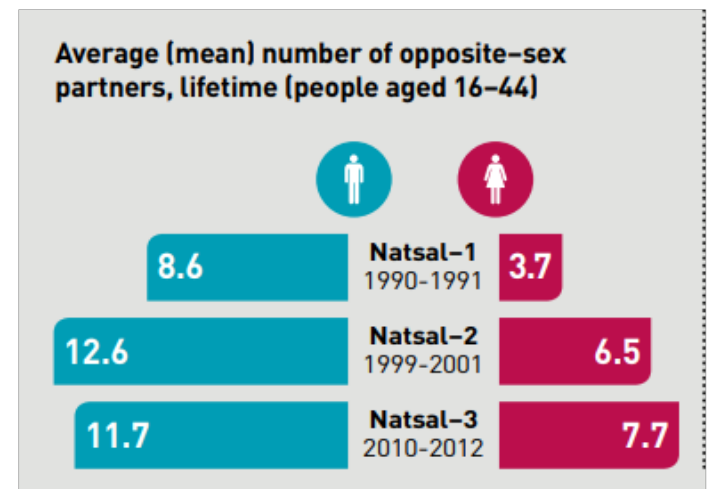
Percentage of the population who have ever had same-sex experience (people aged 16-44)



Natsal 3 revealed an increase in sexual partners but decrease in the frequency of sex



- contradiction? Not necessarily, the those in steady, cohabiting or marital relationships have sex more often than those in more casual partnerships



2. Society has changed

Legislative changes: law relating to sexual health has become more facilitative:

- 1979, Irish Family Planning Act allowed sale of contraceptives under prescription.
- 1985 amendment allowed sale of condoms/spermicides without prescription
- 1993: Same-sex sexual activity decriminalised
- 1998 Sex education made mandatory
- Abortion decriminalized .

Changes to social norms and attitudes

- Me Too movement has raised awareness of sexual abuse
- Social media has transformed landscape of communication
- Social attitudes have softened

Technological changes

- 2008: Introduction of I-Phone

Economic changes

- 2008: Great Recession

Health-related changes

COVID: 2020-2022

Changes to women's status:

increased educational and employment opportunities



3. The conceptualisation of sexual health has changed



1974: WHO urge a positive approach to human sexuality, emphasising pleasure, enhancement of personal relationships, and the right to information.

1994 ICPD position sexual health as a subset of reproductive health.

2006: WHO defines sexual health: ‘...a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence’

2017: WHO convenes a Working Group to operationalise the concept

Stephenson et al, & WHO Working Group for Operationalizing Sexual Health (2017). Detangling and detailing sexual health in the SDG era. *Lancet (London, England)*, 390(10099), 1014–1015. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(17\)32294-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(17)32294-8)

4. Health promotional practice and principles have changed:

Messages

Shift from:

- abstinence to harm limitation
- didactic to interactional and participatory
- doom and gloom, emphasis on the positive

Medium

New opportunities presented by e.g. social media; telemedicine; AI

Scope

- Increased attention to structural influences on health: realisation that individual behaviour change requires change to the social context
- increasing adoption of life course approaches



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Messages moving down the hierarchy

Don't start to have sex until you're (variously): ready/married/16)

Avoid sex outside a monogamous/exclusive relationship

Reduce risk by protecting yourself and partner by using condom/ contraception

Choose to have sexual practices that carry less risk



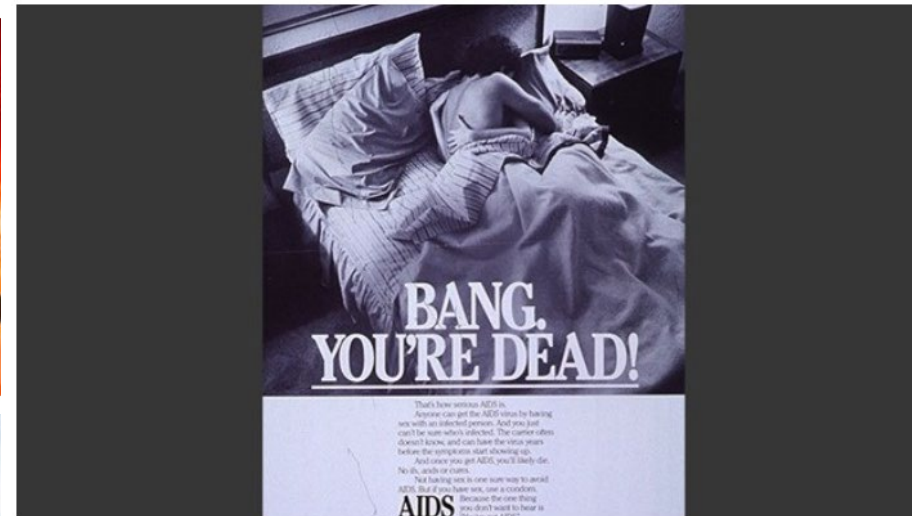
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Abstinence to harm limitation

Once the mainstay of messaging, abstinence campaigns still exist but there is increased realization that they are less effective than harm limitation messages



Bang: You're Dead! from the New York Department of Health.



Mother of 10 fights sex for under-16s

The Appeal Court today hears Victoria
Gillick's plea to stop young girls receiving
contraceptives without parental consent.

Ann Kent reports on the emotive issue



The Times 19.11.84

The 'Gillick' Case 1983-85

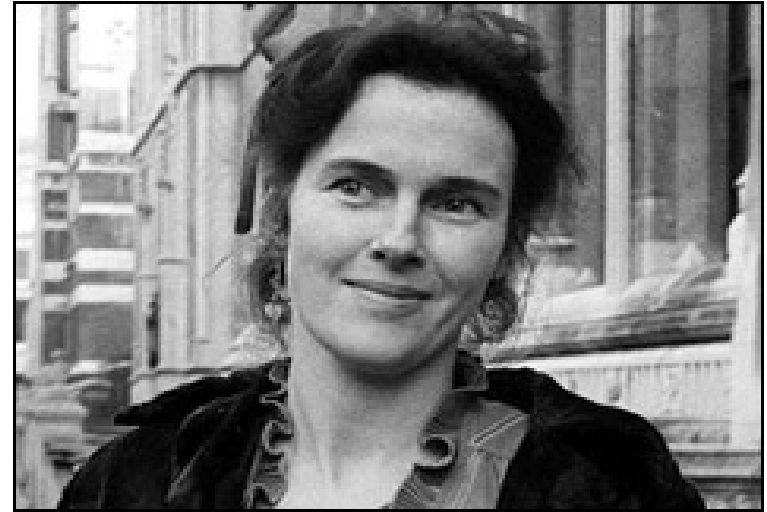
July 1983: Mrs Gillick sought a High Court declaration that none of her five daughters could be prescribed or advised on birth control before age 16.

December 1984: Appeal Court overturned High Court decision.

October 1985: House of Lords overruled Appeal Court's decision

Counsel for Mrs Gillick, Mr Gerard Wright QC, argued that giving contraceptive advice or treatment was "very close" to criminal offence of aiding and abetting unlawful sexual intercourse.

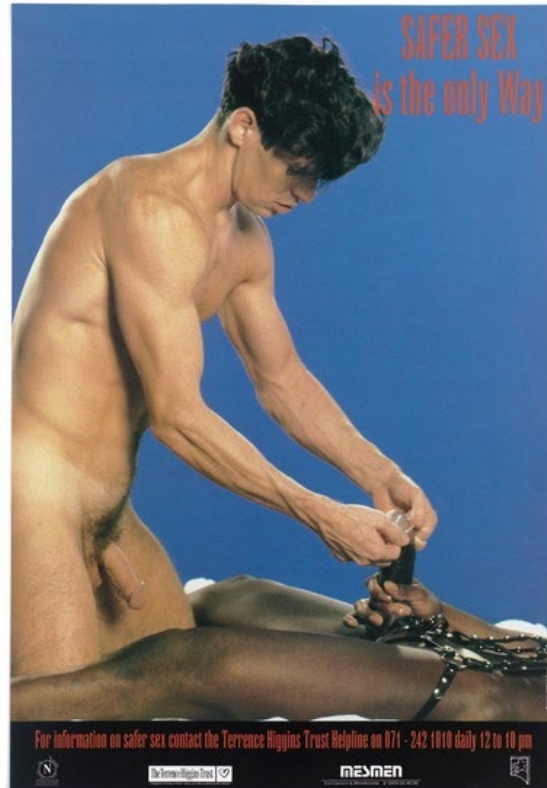
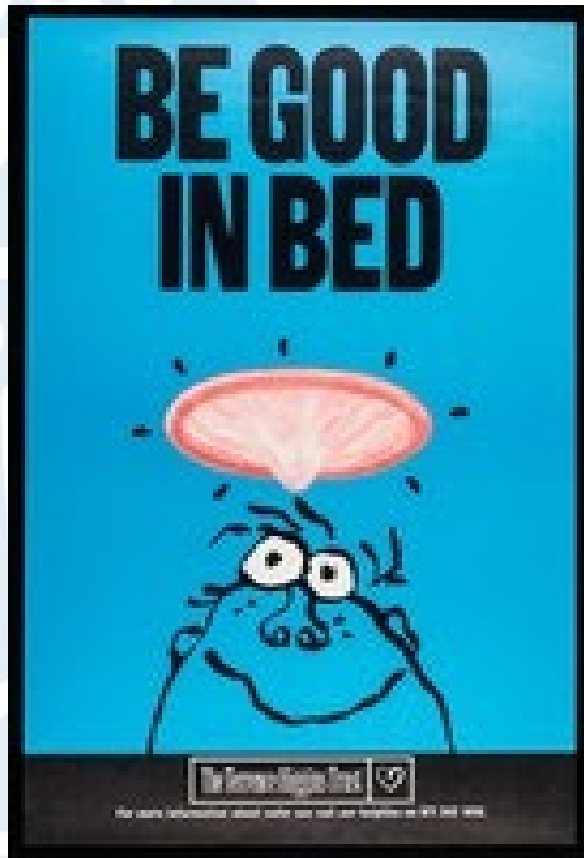
Case resulted in 'Fraser Guidelines' which state that doctors may prescribe the pill to under-16s without parental consent in exceptional circumstances.



Victoria Gillick, mother of 10 from Wisbech, began a campaign against a circular from the Department of Health stating that, in exceptional circumstances, doctors could prescribe the pill to girls under the age of sexual consent without parental permission



Terrence Higgins Trust condom ads 1984-2004



The Trust's early ads for MSM used harm limitation messages featuring both condom use and non-penetrative sexual practices

It took longer to convince the UK's Department of Health

1260

Health Service provision of condoms has so far been largely local and piecemeal. A few authorities have looked at using barrier methods in the prevention of AIDS, and the drug clinics and genitourinary departments of some London teaching hospitals have been distributing free condoms. Efforts will need to be centrally coordinated, and health authorities should be allowed to supply condoms and spermicides to those at risk. The Department of Health and Social Security must decide whether condoms should be provided free of charge for prophylaxis as they are in family planning clinics for contraceptive use. The question should surely no longer be whether to put the case for condoms in the fight against AIDS but rather how.

KAYE WELLINGS

Research Officer,
Family Planning Information Service,
London W1N 7RJ

- 1 Voeller B, Potts M. Has the condom any proved value in preventing the transmission of sexually transmitted viral disease—for example, acquired immune deficiency syndrome? *Br Med J* 1985;iii:1196.
- 2 Conant M, Hardy D, Sernatinger J, Spicer D, Levy JA. Condoms Prevent Transmission of AIDS-Associated Retrovirus. *JAMA* 1986;255:1706.
- 3 Hicks DR, Martin LS, Getchell JP, *et al.* Inactivation of HTLV III/LAV-infected cultures of normal human lymphocytes by nonoxynol 9 in vitro. *Lancet* 1985;ii:1422-3.

BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL VOLUME 293 15 NOVEMBER 1986


potentially fatal disorder that affected unsuspecting consorts and children as well as prostitutes (of both sexes) and their clients. Doctors now approaching retirement can recall the importance of excluding syphilis at an early stage in diagnosis of all patients, and the same is becoming true of AIDS. Experience with syphilis also has important lessons for us in terms of the unproductiveness of punitive public health measures—for example, compulsory blood tests and treatment for prostitutes.

As explained in the previous leading article condoms combined with spermicides seem to give protection against transmission of the HIV virus. The prime task for Lord Whitelaw's committee must be spreading two simple messages to all sectors of society: the high risk activity for AIDS is sexual intercourse, and condoms give some protection. The committee's remit will not, however, be confined to improving public health education. It will need, for example, to formulate policies on screening occupational groups and visitors and immigrants to Britain; to advise building societies, banks, and insurance companies on the extent to which they can insist on their clients being tested for carriage of HIV and the conditions that should be attached to loans made to those who have antibodies; to look at the

and even longer in Ireland....

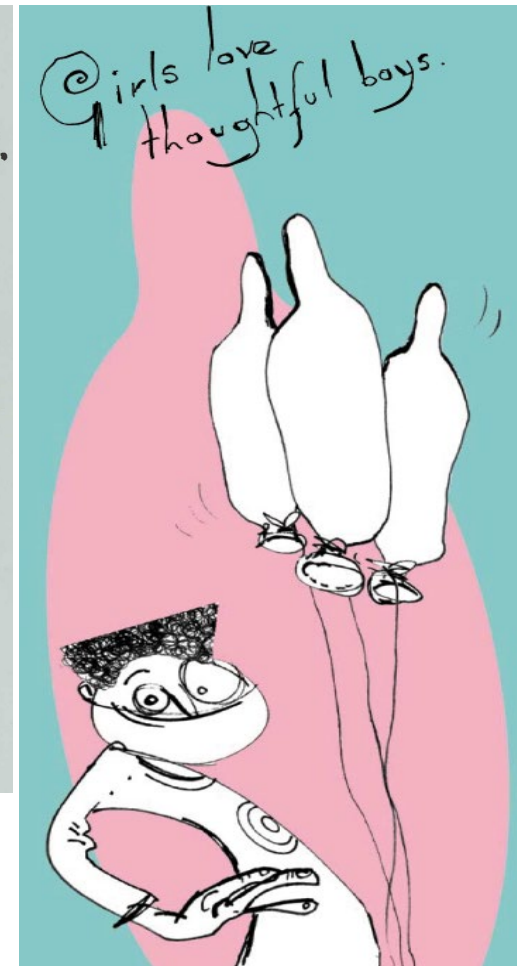
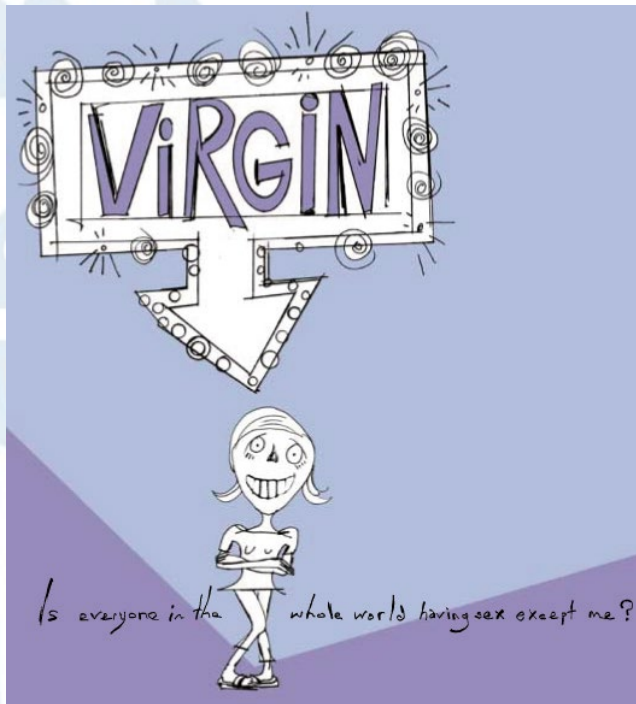
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A middle-aged man with grey hair, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie, is shown from the chest up. He is holding a small, round, gold-colored coin between his lips and teeth with his right hand. He has a surprised or playful expression on his face. The background is a light-colored, textured wall. In the bottom left corner, there is white text overlaid on the image.

TCR 00:29:12:08
UBR 96:00:07:73

Teenage pregnancy campaign ads



Emphasised the positive aspects of risk reduction practices



The Sun, 10-10-2000

**£60m MESSAGE:
VIRGINS ARE OK**

The Evening Standard, 9-10-2000

**Being a
virgin's
so cool**

The Daily Star, 10-10-2000

PAGE 4 **THE MIRROR**, Tuesday, October 10, 2000
**IT IS COOL TO BE A
VIRGIN TEENS TOLD**

The Mirror, 10-10-2000

**£60M TO
TELL GIRLS
THAT IT'S
OK TO BE
A VIRGIN!**

The Daily Express, 10-10-2000

**VIRGIN ON
THE RIDICULOUS**

The Sun, 10-10-2000

**Chaste teens are
new chased vote**

The Times, 10-10-2000

**Nanny state uproar
as Labour declares
war on teenage sex**

The Sun, 10-10-2000

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH TUESDAY OCTOBER 10, 2000
**Children to be
given 'facts not
fibs' about sex**
Government launches £2m advertising campaign

The Daily Telegraph, 10-10-2000

**Minister
defends
teenage
sex advice**

The Guardian, 10-10-2000

DAILY EXPRESS TUESDAY OCTOBER 10 2000 www.express.co.uk
**You can't tell a girl
it's OK to be a virgin**

The Daily Express, 10-10-2000

**Campaign to make young
'think twice' before sex**

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The Independent 10-10-2000



The tone of messages has also changed: from didactic to interactional



FPA's pregnant man poster
1970: instructed men to
take responsibility



If I were Jack, 2018. encouraged
young men to discuss with women,
to consider options.

,,, to interactive approach to communication

Articles 

If I were Jack

Comprehensive sexuality education programme designed to prevent teenage pregnancy and address masculinities. Takes a 'gender-transformative' approach and is interactive.

Proven success in helping avoid unintended pregnancy. Showed significant increase in contraceptive use, increased sexual health knowledge and improved gender-equitable attitudes.

Effects of gender-transformative relationships and sexuality education to reduce adolescent pregnancy (the JACK trial): a cluster-randomised trial



Maria Lohan, Aoibheann Brennan-Wilson, Rachael Hunter, Andrea Gabrio, Lisa McDaid, Honor Young, Rebecca French, Aine Aventin, Mike Clarke, Cliona McDowell, Danielle Logan, Siorcha Toase, Liam O'Hare, Chris Bonell, Katie Gillespie, Aisling Gough, Susan Lagdon, Emily Warren, Kelly Buckley, Ruth Lewis, Linda Adara, Theresa McShane, Julia Bailey, James White



Summary

Background The need to engage boys in gender-transformative relationships and sexuality education (RSE) to reduce adolescent pregnancy is endorsed by WHO. We aimed to test an intervention which used a gender-transformative approach to engage adolescents in RSE to prevent unprotected sex.

Lancet Public Health 2022; 7: e626-37

Methods This cluster-randomised trial with process and economic evaluations tested a school-based intervention entitled If I Were Jack versus standard RSE (control) for students (aged 14–15 years) in UK schools. Schools were randomly allocated (1:1) and masked to allocation at baseline. The primary outcome was self-reported avoidance of unprotected sex (sexual abstinence or use of reliable contraception at last sex) after 12–14 months. We analysed the data using intention-to-treat mixed effects regression models.

School of Nursing and Midwifery (Prof M Lohan PhD, A Brennan-Wilson PhD, A Aventin PhD, A Gough PhD), School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical Sciences (Prof M Clarke DPhil), School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work (L O'Hare PhD, K Gillespie PhD), School of Psychology (T McShane PhD), Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK;

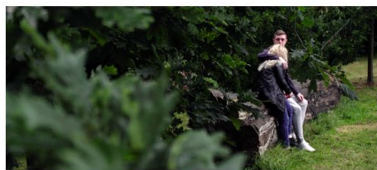
Findings Of 803 schools assessed for eligibility, 263 schools were invited by letter, of which 66 schools agreed to be randomly assigned, of which 62 schools completed follow-up. The trial was done between Feb 1, 2018, and March 6, 2020. 8216 students participated at baseline in 2018. 6561 (70.95%) provided 12–14 months follow-up. There

ifiwerejack.com/ni_scotland/about.html

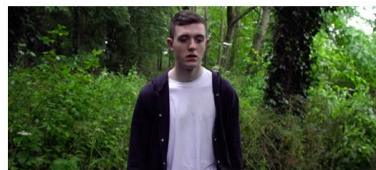
If I were Jack

Play all About Resources Scenes

Select Scene | If I Were Jack



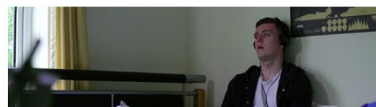
Breaking the news



Deep in thought



What will my friends think?



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Changes to the medium



Check for updates

OPEN ACCESS

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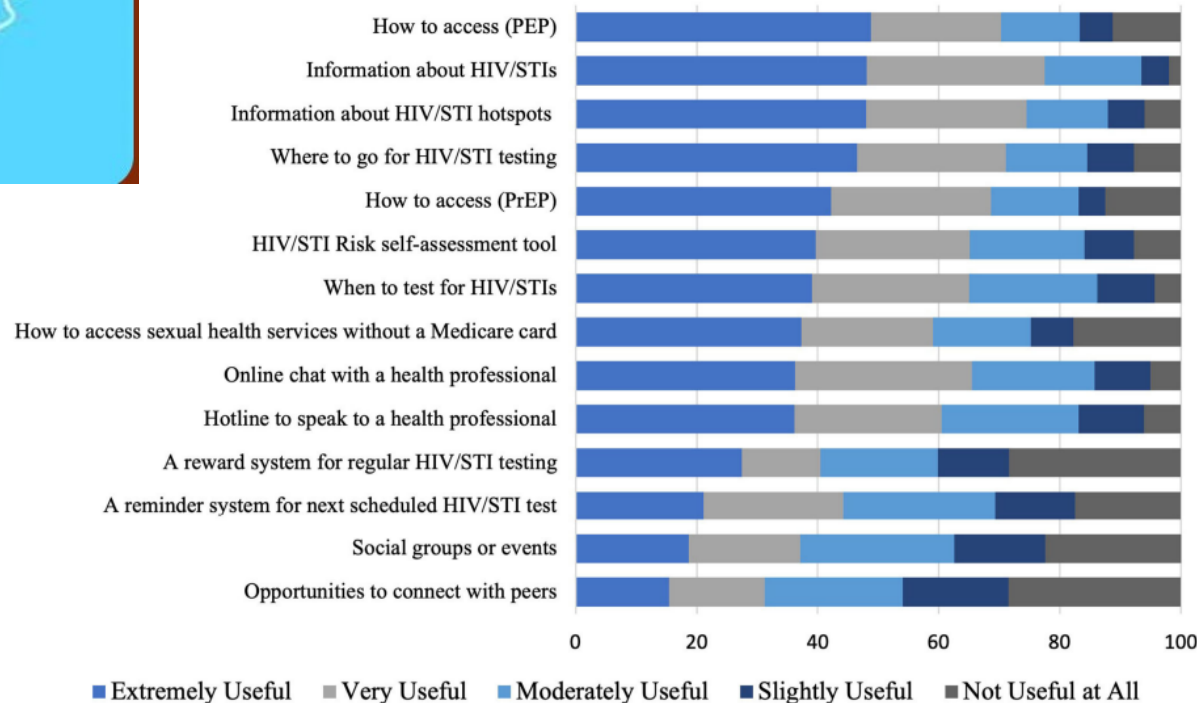
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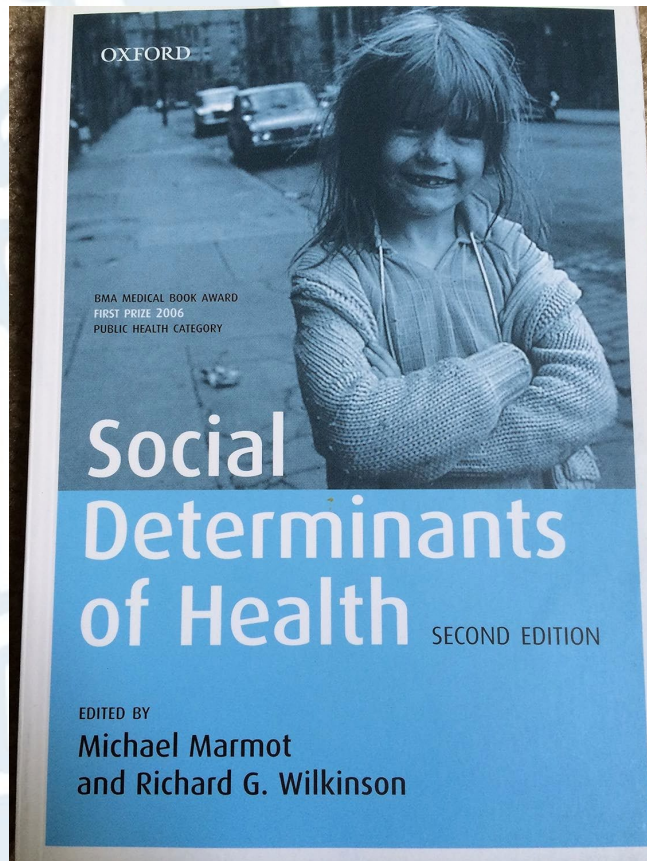
eSexualHealth: Preferences to use technology to promote sexual health among men who have sex with men and trans and gender diverse people

Esha Abraham^{1,2}, Eric P. F. Chow^{1,2,3}, Christopher K. Fairley^{1,2}, David Lee², Fabian Y. S. Kong³, Limin Mao⁴, Jane L. Goller³, Nicholas Medland⁵, Benjamin R. Bavinton⁵, Budiadi Sudarto¹, Stefan Joksic⁶, Jessica Wong⁶, Tiffany R. Phillips^{1,2†} and Jason J. Ong^{1,2,7*}



E and M health interventions particularly favoured as vehicles for sensitive messages aimed at hard to reach and marginalised groups

The scope has changed: Increasing emphasis on the structural and environmental factors determining sexual health



Following emergence of a large body of research on the social determinants of health, from e.g. Michael Marmot, and others

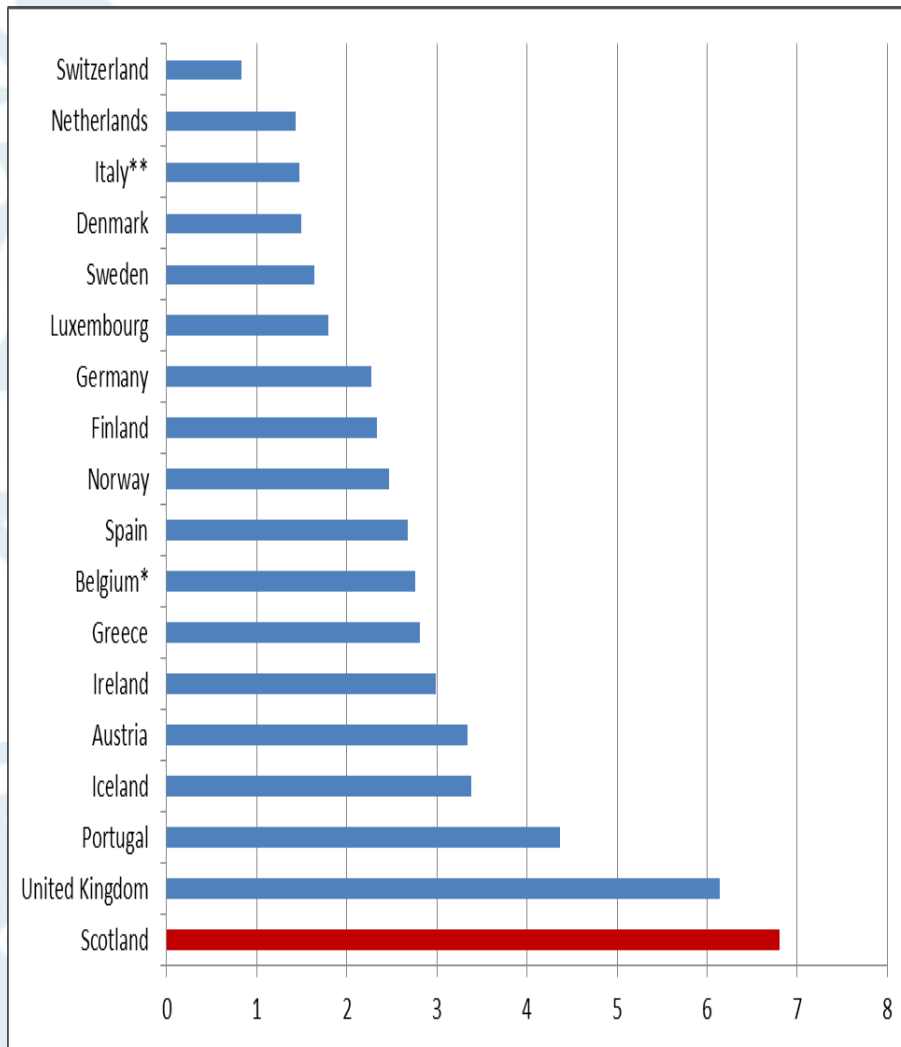


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Case study: England's Teenage Pregnancy Strategy

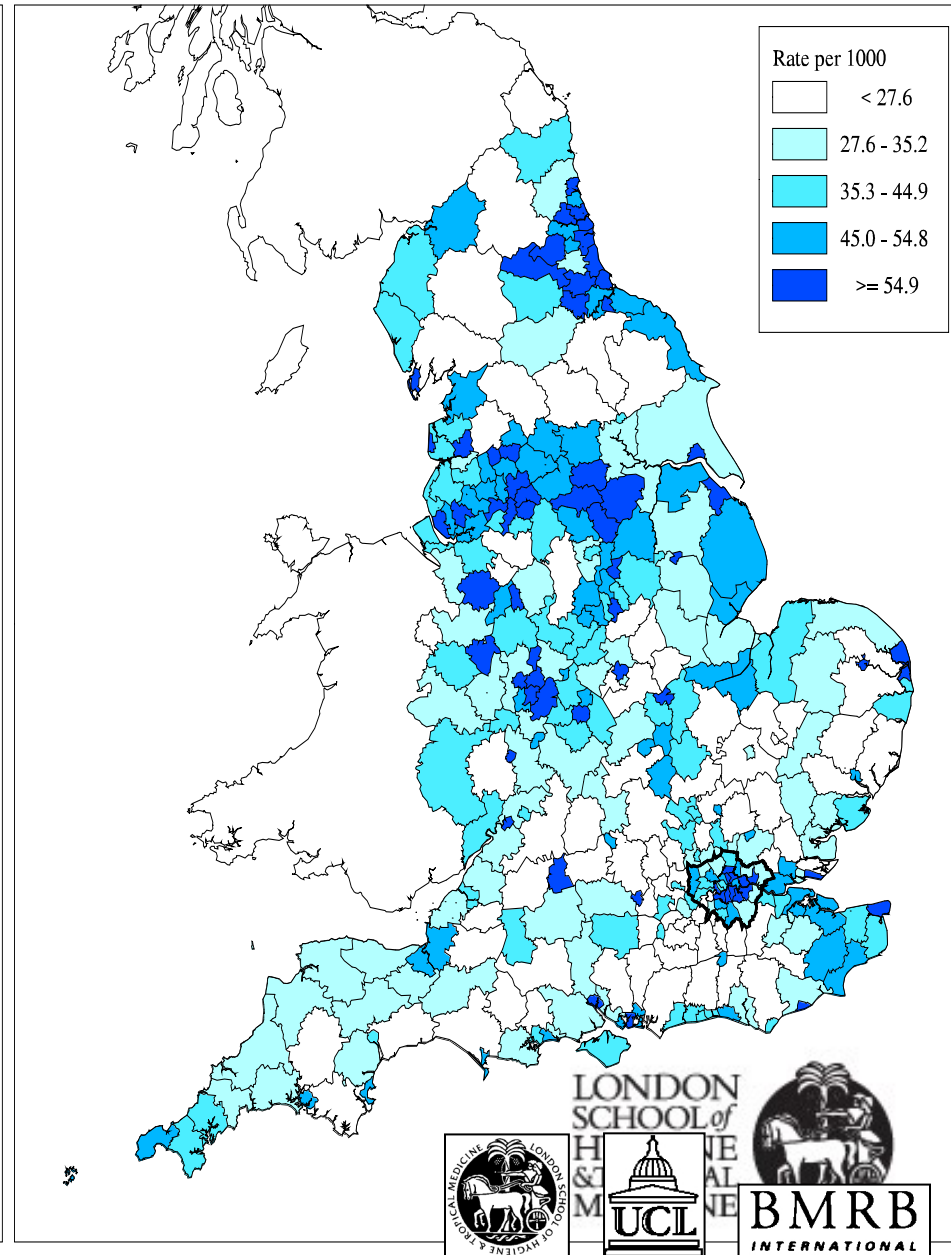
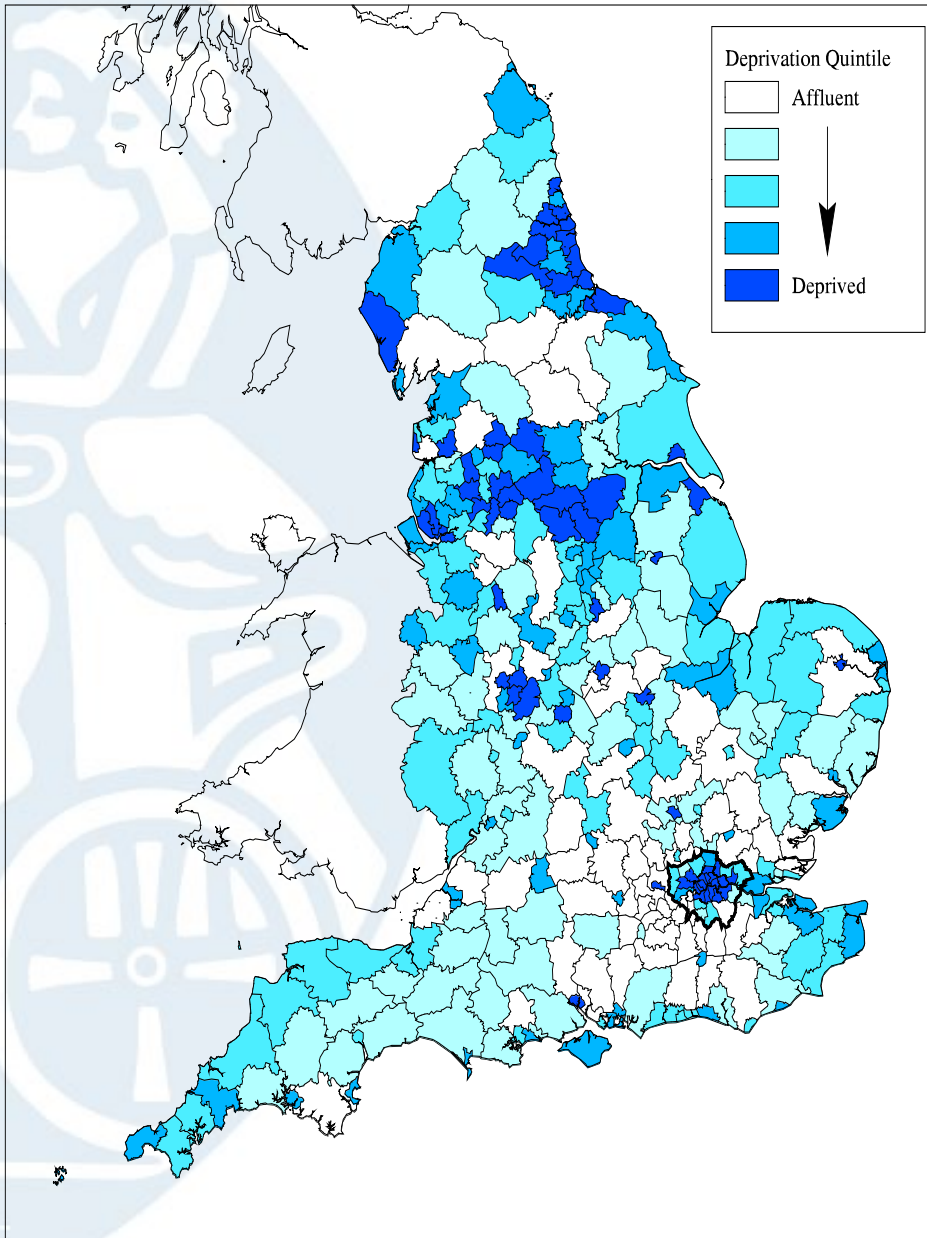


Under 18 pregnancy rate high in the UK compared with other Western European countries

Teenage pregnancies per 100 women, 1999

Deprivation by area

Under 18 conceptions by area



Teenage pregnancy contributes to the cycle of deprivation

- ☐ Poverty associated with early childbearing is further increased by having a child early in life
- ☐ Poorer educational prospects linked with early pregnancy worsen after having a child early in life
- ☐ The children of teenage mothers are more likely themselves to be mothers at an early age



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Teenage Pregnancy Strategy in England: 2000-2010:

- ❑ Poverty begets early childbearing and is further increased by it
- ❑ Poorer educational prospects linked with early pregnancy worsen after having a child early in life
- ❑ The children of teenage mothers are more likely themselves to be mothers at an early age

AIMS

- To halve the rate of conceptions among under 18s by 2010
- To reduce the social exclusion experienced by teenage parents and their children

Launched in 1999, comprising:

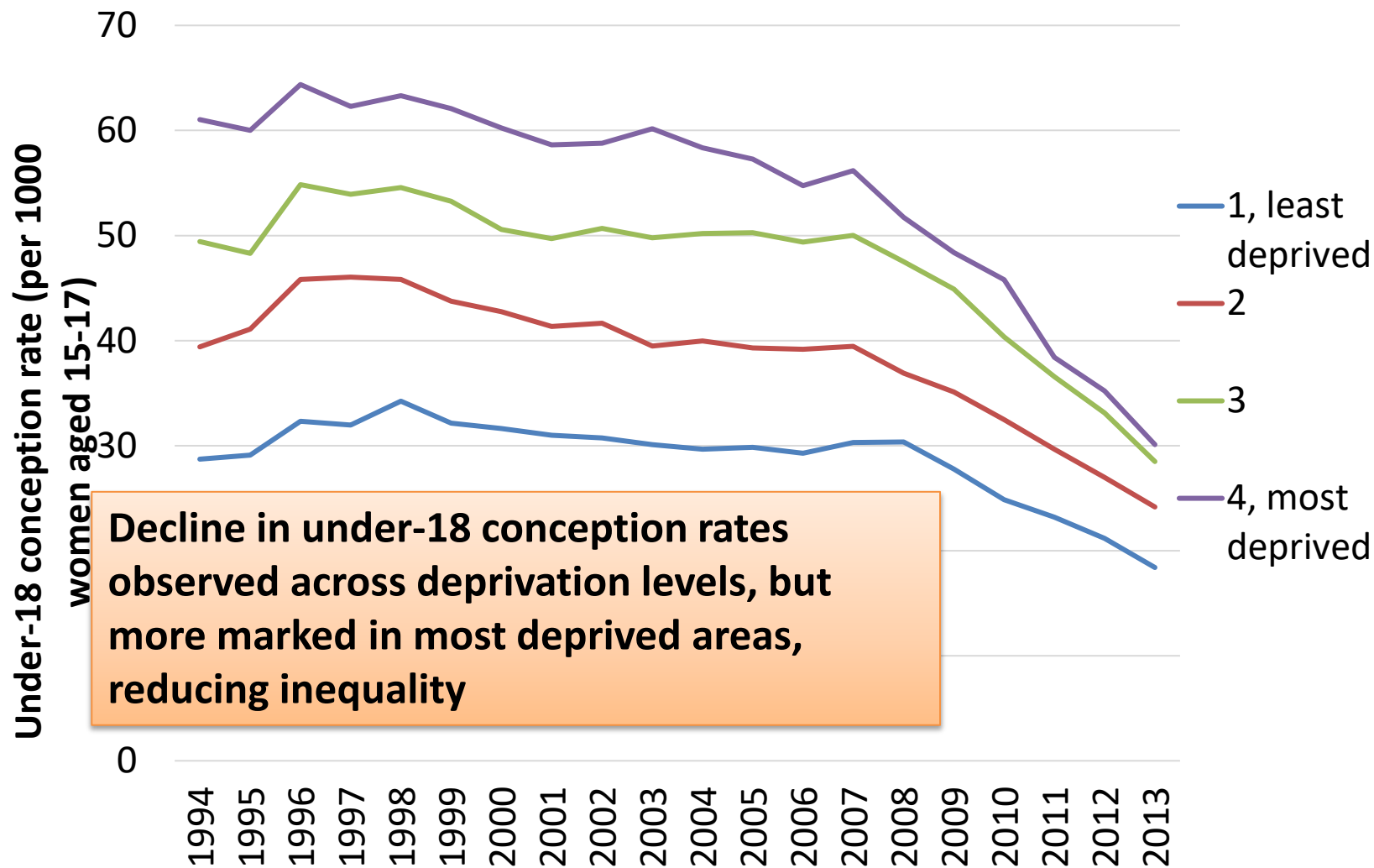
- National media campaign
- Improvements to SRE and YP's sexual health services
- Support for young parents
- Joint action at local and national level + high level commitment
- Emphasis on the need for a long term, 10 year plan of action



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Trends in under-18 conceptions by deprivation



Maternities to under 18 women in 28 EU countries, 2012



	2004	2013	2014
EU28	7.7	6.1	6.0
Belgium	4.3	3.2	3.0
Bulgaria	30.9	35.7	35.5
Czech Republic	4.9	5.1	5.3
Denmark	1.9	1.2	1.1
Germany	4.9	3.5	3.6
Estonia	9.7	7.8	6.7
Ireland	7.2	3.6	3.2
Greece	5.9	5.8	6.4
Spain	5.9	4.8	4.6
France	4.8	4.3	4.4
Croatia	5.2	4.3	4.3
Italy	3.2	2.4	2.4
Cyprus	2.7	1.9	2.2
Latvia	8.2	9.3	8.9
Lithuania	8.1	6.6	6.1
Luxembourg	4.8	2.3	2.4
Hungary	13.2	13.6	15.4
Malta	19.3	7.2	6.5
Netherlands	2.3	1.4	1.3
Austria	5.9	3.3	3.1
Poland	4.6	5.6	5.5
Portugal	12.0	6.0	5.3
Romania	23.8	27.7	29.2
Slovenia	1.9	2.0	2.0
Slovakia	11.3	13.9	15.9
Finland	3.4	1.9	1.8
Sweden	2.2	1.8	1.5
United Kingdom	13.6	8.0	6.8

Source: to Eurostat data, compiled by the Office for National Statistics



Conclusions

- Under-18 conception rate fell by 60% in 15 years
- Decline greatest in areas where there was greater TPS financial investment
- Relationship between deprivation and teenage pregnancy weakened
- Circumstances of young mothers improved: x2 as likely to be in work education or training
- Teenage Pregnancy Strategy can be credited with some of the success but helped by favourable secular trends



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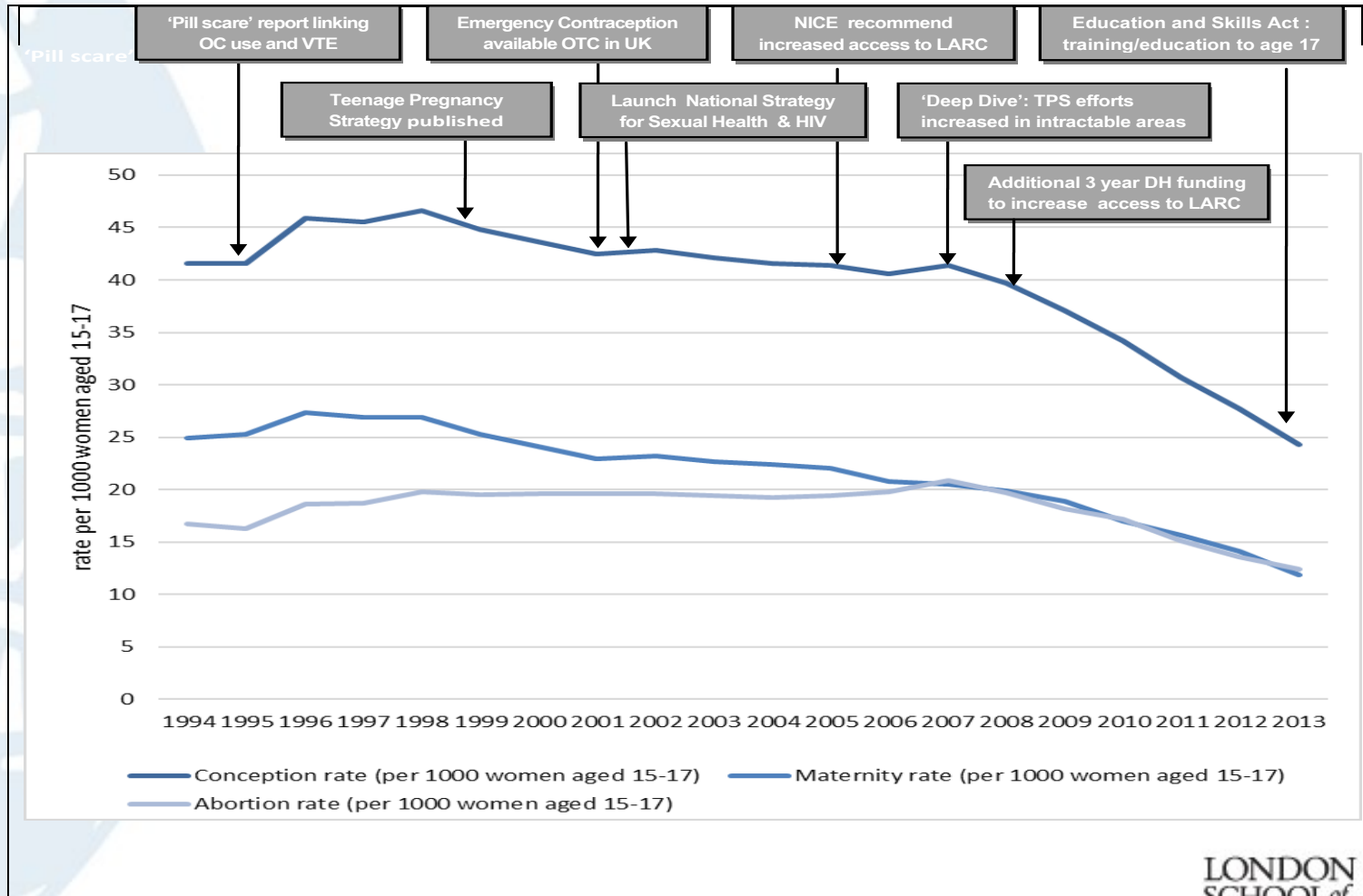


What else was going on? Background noise

- ❑ Changes in young people's attitudes towards teenage pregnancy
- ❑ The 2008 recession: 'generation sensible'
- ❑ Housing crisis: more young people living at home
- ❑ Increase in time spent in education



Importance of social contextual changes: other events possibly affecting <18 pregnancy rates



The scope has changed: Increasing focus on life-course approaches

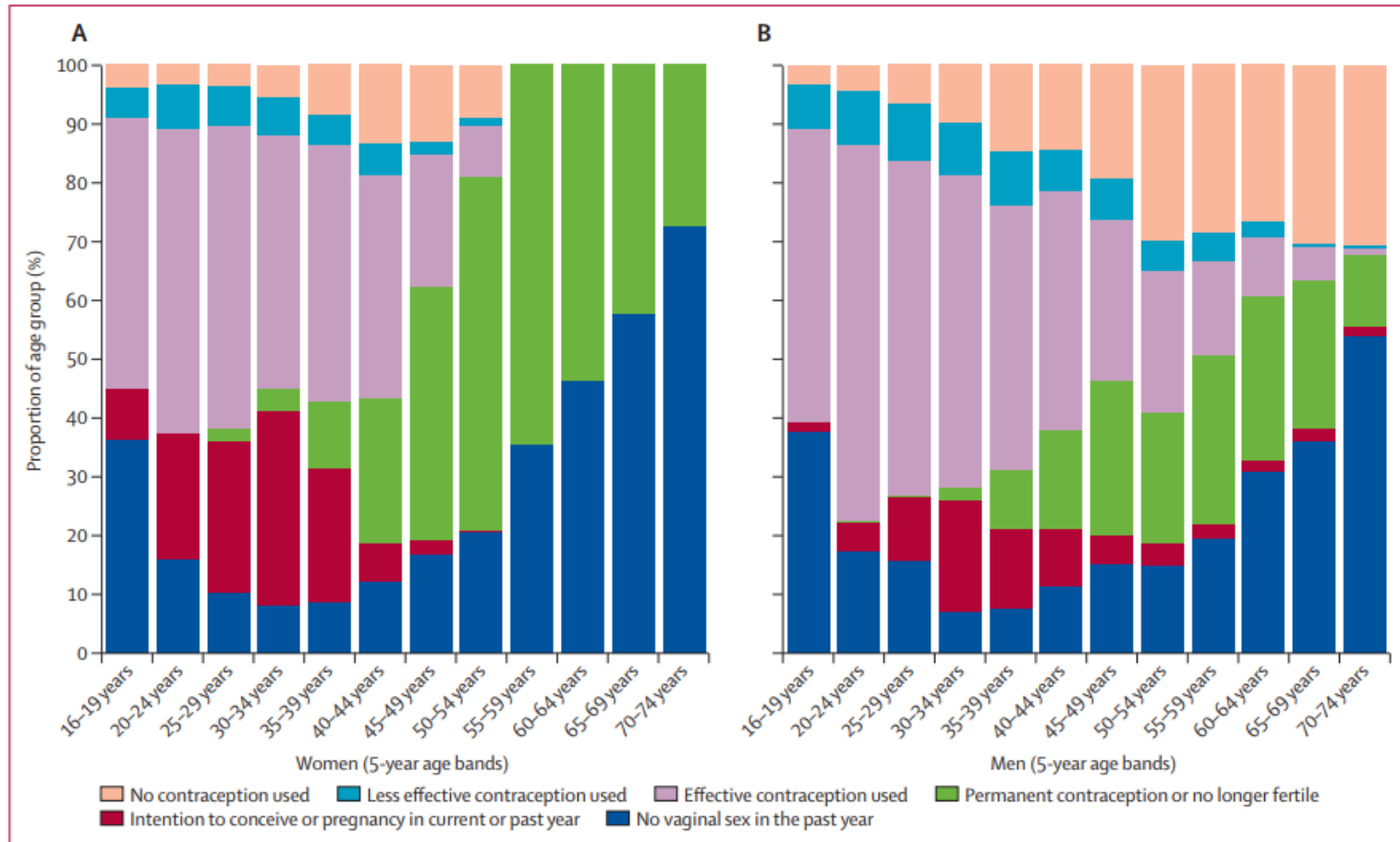


Figure 2. Behavioural data on contraceptive use and fertility intentions by age group

The menopause has come out of the closet

Celebrities talk about menopause

From sources across the web



Gwyneth Paltrow

Age: 52 years (27 September 1972)



Oprah Winfrey

Age: 71 years (29 January 1954)



Michelle Obama

Age: 61 years (17 January 1964)



Gillian Anderson

Age: 56 years (9 August 1968)



Kim Cattrall

Age: 68 years (21 August 1956)



Naomi Watts

Age: 56 years (28 September 1968)



Angelina Jolie

Age: 50 years (4 June 1975)



Drew Barrymore

Age: 50 years (22 February 1975)



Julie Walters

Age: 75 years (22 February 1950)




Important NB. The power of prominent people to change the conversation. (Taylor Swift for ?)



Increasing attention to the sexual health of older adults

Previously:

- Sexual health not mentioned in policy documents relating to aging
- older adults didn't feature in sexual health policy documents 

Now:

- Recognition that older adults are sexually active (TILDA study: 59% > 50 adults in Ireland had sex in past 12 months)
- + that sexual activity is related to health; those who see themselves as in better health are more likely to be sexually active (TILDA study, Natsal and others)

Derbyshire Community Health Services 'Jiggle Wiggle' campaign

Metro's 'SHIFT' project



DERBYSHIRE
County Council

NHS
Derbyshire Community Health Services
NHS Foundation Trust



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Health issues affecting sexual function and well being

Health conditions

- CVD and diabetes: Sexual function affected by vascular impairment.
- Cancer and other health conditions: stress, pain, disfigurement, impact on perception of sexual attractiveness
- Arthritis: pain during sexual activity
- Bi-directional relationship between depression and sexual dysfunction.

Medications

- CVD medications may affect erectile function
Cancer treatments such as radiotherapy and chemotherapy may impact sexual well being



Older adults: not all the same, not all sexually active, and not all worried by it

A diverse age cohort ‘

In terms of:

- *age categories and health status*
 - *sexual activity*
 - *demographics*

People in their 50s? I'm one of them - it's very different to people in their 70s who are moving into the physical health problems.. We can't treat them as one group

Sexual frequency and satisfaction among older adults

Age group	% sexually active (last month)	% satisfied with sexual life
Women		
55-64	43.2	58.8
65-74	22.7	39.3
Men		
55-64	54.3	54.8
65-74	53.9	48.9

We need to be careful not to create another stereotype ...there's a lot that choose not to be sexually active. You can just hear NHS England, developing a new campaign... saying you've got to have sex twice a week.

Source: Field et al, Lancet, 2013

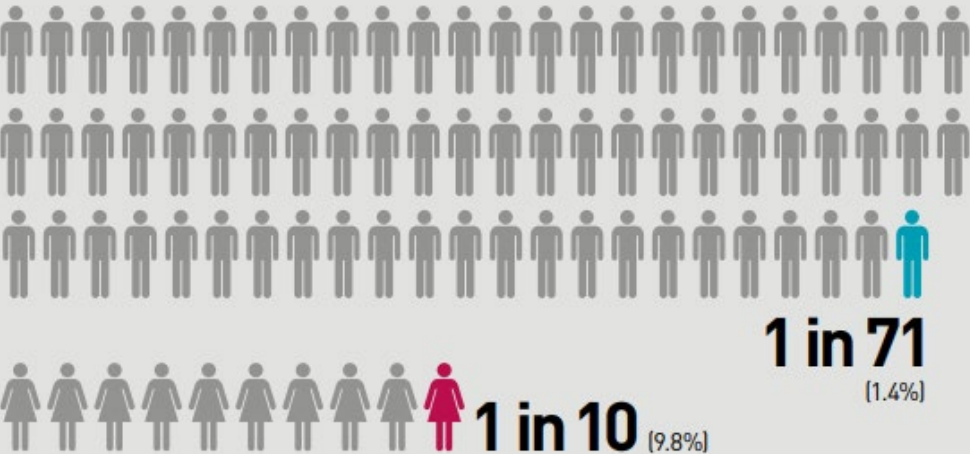
Current challenges

- **Rise of social media:** costs as well as benefits: can be used to promulgate myths and misinformation negatively affecting sexual health
- **Growing prominence of AI:** may convey inaccurate or misleading sexual health information; trigger non-consensual sexual content leading to trauma, especially for women.
- **Increased use of pornography:** may help to normalise unacceptable behaviours; may lead to sexual exploitation and abuse
- **Austerity, cost of living crisis, lack of affordable housing:** poses a threat to sexual health services; may contribute to fall in fertility rates



Rape and sexual violence: a growing problem

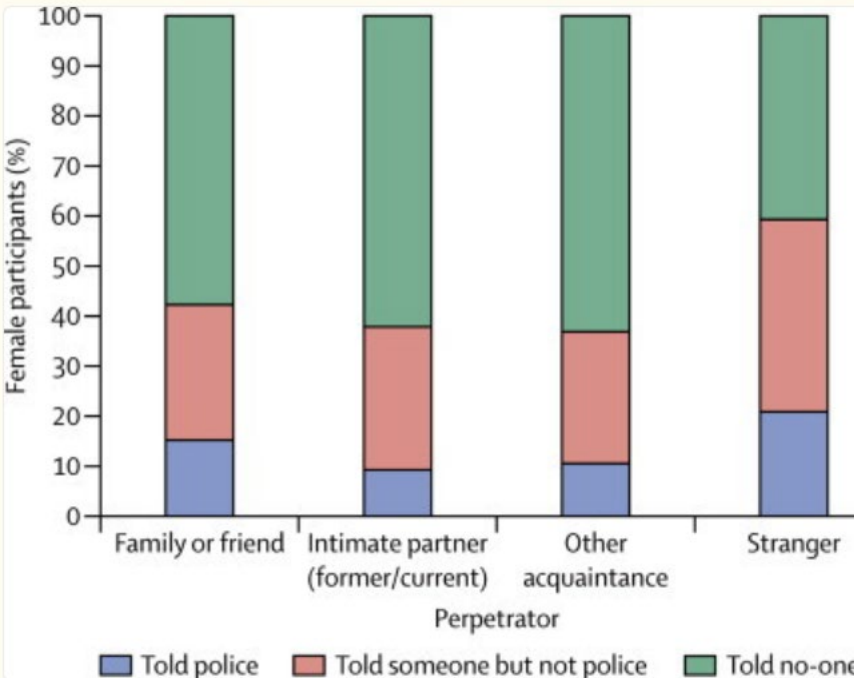
Proportion of men and women who have experienced non-volitional sex



Experienced by one in 10 women but reported by only a minority



Dublin Rape Crisis Centre CEO Rachel Morrogh Credit: Andres Poveda LTD



Rates of condom use declining

THE IRISH TIMES

Health

Almost half of sexually active 15-year-olds in Ireland do not use condoms, WHO finds

New research shows high rates of unprotected sex among adolescents across EU which has 'significant implications for health and safety'

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Dr Hans Henri P Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, said the report's findings are 'dismaying' but 'not surprising'.

 **Irish Examiner**

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More than 30% of young Irish men and women don't always use contraception during sex



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Rates of use of long-acting contraception decreasing

Grassroots social media have stronger influence on uptake and continuation than do public health interventions.

Social media campaign had no impact on use.




Contraception
Volume 100, Issue 2, August 2019, Pages 116-122





Original research article

Can a social media campaign increase the use of long-acting reversible contraception? Evidence from a cluster randomized control trial using Facebook ☆, ☆☆

Tanya Byker^a, Caitlin Myers^{a,1} , Maura Graff^b

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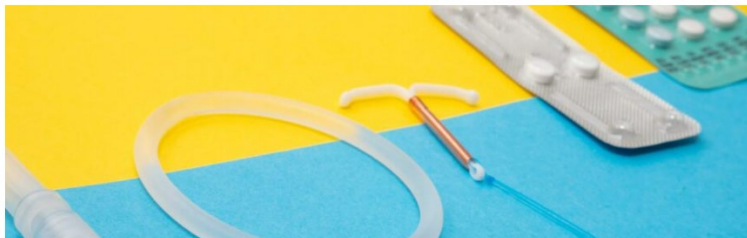
HEALTH, MEDIA, POLITICS & GOVERNMENT, RACE & GENDER

How influencers and content creators discuss birth control on social media: What research shows

TikTok, YouTube and X are full of unsubstantiated claims about the side effects of hormonal contraceptives. Researchers are concerned about the effects of this misinformation.

by Naseem S. Miller | May 15, 2024 |

women's health



Reduced uptake and increased discontinuation attributed to mentions on Twitter (X)

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Sexual health messages have still not got to the bottom of the hierarchy



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Oral sex drive for teenagers

By Liz Hull, Daily Mail

Schoolchildren under 16 are being encouraged to experiment with oral sex as part of a Government drive to cut the rates of teenage pregnancy.

The advice is being offered to more than 100,000 pupils nationwide in a new sex education course, backed by the Departments of Education and Health, called 'A Pause'.

But family campaigners believe the scheme is having the opposite effect to what it intends, by encouraging children to experiment with sex.

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In a nutshell

Changes have taken place in the past half century, in sexual lifestyles, in the way we think about sexual health, in society and in the way we deliver health promotion.

To an extent, the changes have been positive for sexual health. They have often facilitated the means by which we address challenges. Progress has been made in reducing 'adverse outcomes' of sexual behaviour: HIV, STIs, unplanned pregnancy.

Challenges remain however, many stemming from technological and economic change. Some of the successes of the recent past are in danger of being reversed. At the same time, new challenges present themselves especially, but not exclusively, in relation to the promotion of non-consensual sex, sexual satisfaction and pleasure, and sexual well being.

Additional reading

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