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Sexual loneliness – a neglected public health problem?

A study published in the *Journal of American Medical Association* (JAMA) found that between 2000–2002 and 2016–2018, the proportion of 18 to 24-year-old individuals who reported having had no sexual activity in the past year increased among men (but not among women).¹ In another recent study, similar results were reported: American men belonging to the youngest birth cohort who entered adulthood were more likely to be sexually inactive than their Millennial counterparts at the same ages just a few years prior.²

While the number of young men who report having no sexual experiences is increasing, there are also men who have more sex partners than ever before.

The National Survey of Family Growth data shows that in 2002 the most sexually active top 20 % of American heterosexual men had 12 lifetime sex partners while the top 5 % had 38 partners.³ Ten years later, in 2012, the most sexually active top 20 % now reported 15 lifetime sex partners and the top 5 % of men reported 50 lifetime sex partners. There was no change in the median number of sex partners.

¹ Ueda, P., Mercer, C., Ghaznavi, C., & Herbenick, D. (2020). Trends in Frequency of Sexual Activity and Number of Sexual Partners Among Adults Aged 18 to 44 Years in the US, 2000-2018. *JAMA network open*, 3(6):e203833.

² Bozick, R. Is There Really a Sex Recession? (2021). Period and Cohort Effects on Sexual Inactivity Among American Men, 2006–2019. *American Journal of Men's Health*, 15(6). doi:10.1177/15579883211057710.

³ Harper, C., Dittus, P., Leichter, J. & Aral, S. (2017). Changes in the Distribution of Sex Partners in the United States: 2002 to 2011-2013. *Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, 44(2):96–100.

The distribution of the number of sex partners among American heterosexual men was skewed already, but in just ten years, the distribution of sex partners among men became even more skewed. During the same time, there was no such change in the number of sex partners for heterosexual women.

Sex is concentrated within a small, yet sexually active, group of people. In one study, it was reported that the 5 % of the population with the highest number of vaginal sex acts (penile-vaginal-intercourse) accounted for more vaginal sex acts than the bottom 50 % of the population with the lowest number of vaginal sex acts.⁴

Using the Gini index, it is found that the distribution of the number of sex partners both for men and women throughout their lifespan is as unequal as the distribution of wealth among the most unequal countries in the world (South Africa Gini 0.63 in 2014 and Namibia Gini 0.59 in 2015). The number of female sex partners is more unequally distributed among single men (Gini 0.60) than the number of male sex partners is among single women (Gini 0.58) although both male and female sex partners are highly concentrated among people.⁵

While sex is not like money or wealth in every aspect, the lack of access to sexual experiences can be seen as a concern for distributive justice⁶ and a problem for public health since an active sex life is beneficial for people's health and well-being.

There are numerous studies that show the link between active sex life and our mental and physical health.⁷ On the other hand, people experience negative emotional effects when being without access to sexual and romantic partners. Sexual loneliness decreases self-esteem and positive mood in both men and women. Especially for men, sexual loneliness might cause anger and aggression, which can manifest violently.

Lack of sex and relationship is related to many societal problems, and loneliness and lack of intimacy predispose men to violent behaviour. Misogyny is prevalent in places

⁴ Leichter, J., Chesson, H., Sternberg, M., & Aral S. (2010). The concentration of sexual behaviours in the USA: a closer examination of subpopulations. *Sexually Transmitted Infections*, 86:iii45-iii51.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Danaher, J. (2020). A Defence of Sexual Inclusion. *Social Theory and Practice*, 46 (3):467–496.

⁷ Levin, R.J. (2007). Sexual activity, health and well-being—the beneficial roles of coitus and masturbation. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 22:135–148.

where competition for women is tough and men struggle to find a partner. Sex offenders, serial killers, terrorists and mass murderers have, likewise, often given sexual frustration as a reason for their actions. Lately, the U.S. Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center released a report, stating that there is a growing terrorism threat from men who call themselves “involuntary celibates.”⁸

However, it is not only people in the U.S. that should be worried about the risk of such violence. Sexual loneliness among young men is increasing in many countries. For instance, in my native Finland, the number of men who have trouble finding a sex partner doubled from 1992 to 2015, and the number of young men who have not had intercourse has increased.⁹ Yet, at the same time, Finnish men want more sex than they did before.¹⁰

While bioethicists, clinicians and public health experts have recently gained interest in loneliness and its relation to our well-being¹¹ – especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when people were forced to stay at home¹² – sexual loneliness is still a neglected topic in bioethics and related fields.

One possible aid for sexual loneliness might come from online dating apps such as Tinder. In theory, online dating could provide an efficient way to find a partner. However, online dating divides people heavily into winners and losers – perhaps even more so than traditional dating. While women can get attention from thousands of men online in just a few hours, men are lucky if anyone is interested in them.¹³ Because online

⁸ *Hot Yoga Tallahassee: A Case Study of Misogynistic Extremism*. Department of Homeland Security, United States Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center. March 2022.

⁹ Kontula, O. FINSEX: Miesten yleisimmät seksuaaliongelmät. Helsinki: Väestöliitto (the Family Federation of Finland), Väestötutkimuslaitos (The Population Research Institute). Accessed: <<https://www.vaestoliitto.fi/artikkelit/finsex-miesten-yleisimmat-seksuaaliongelmät/>>

¹⁰ Kontula, O. (2016). Yhdyntätrendit. Tietovuoto-artikkeli 2/2016. Helsinki: Väestöliitto (the Family Federation of Finland), Väestötutkimuslaitos (The Population Research Institute). Accessed: <<https://www.vaestoliitto.fi/artikkelit/finsex-yhdyntatrendit/>>

¹¹ Lederman, Z. (2021). The bioethics of loneliness. *Bioethics*, 35(5):446-455.

¹² Lederman, Z. (2022/forthcoming). Loneliness at the age of COVID-19. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, Published Online First: 09 December 2022. doi: 10.1136/jme-2022-108540.

¹³ Tyson, G., Perta, V.C., Haddadi, H., & Seto, M.C. (2016). A first look at user activity on tinder. *Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining (ASONAM)*, 2016 IEEE/ACM International Conference on, IEEE. pp. 461-466.

dating apps are visual, rejections can be especially hurtful. It is no surprise that being unsuccessful on Tinder is associated with an increase in sadness and anxiety.¹⁴

Technology does not provide a solution to loneliness, in general,¹⁵ and will unlikely solve sexual loneliness either. Sexual loneliness has nevertheless become a pressing public health problem that needs serious bioethical analysis and thoughtful solutions. These bioethical analyses could include (but perhaps should not be limited to) critical evaluations of claims made by opposing ideological camps.

For instance, consider the following claim, raised by Jordan Peterson: societies should alleviate sexual loneliness by enforcing socially-promoted and culturally-inculcated monogamy.¹⁶

Philosophical bioethicists could make valuable contributions to the discussion by analyzing claims like the one above and evaluating whether they are logically consistent and conceptually coherent with the agent's other commitments.¹⁷ The results could remain conditional: "If you want this-and-this, you ought (not) to do that-and-that." However, since these conditional claims would stand or fall based on group preferences, attitudes, background assumptions and ideologies, disagreement on what to do would surely remain.

¹⁴ Her, Y-C., & Timmermans, E. (2021). Tinder blue, mental flu? Exploring the associations between Tinder use and well-being, *Information, Communication & Society*, 24:9:1303-1319.

¹⁵ Lederman, Z. (2022/forthcoming). Technological solutions to loneliness—Are they enough? *Bioethics*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bioe.13096>.

¹⁶ Bowled, N. Jordan Peterson, Custodian of the Patriarchy. *The New York Times*, 18 May 2018. Accessed 22 Dec 2022. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/18/style/jordan-peterson-12-rules-for-life.html>>

¹⁷ Räsänen, J., & Häyry, M. (2022). The Role of Philosophers in Bioethics. *The American Journal of Bioethics*, 22(12):58–60.