



## **Report: Only 1 in 3 Young Adults Actively Dating**

*“State of Our Unions 2026” finds many young adults struggle with barriers to initiating dating and pursuing their desire to one day marry and have a family*

February 10, 2026, Provo, Utah – A new research report sheds light on the dating experience of young Americans, finding that many young adults are experiencing a “dating recession,” with only one in three actively dating and many struggling with a lack of confidence in their dating skills. Titled “The Dating Recession: How Bad is It and What Can We Do?,” the report states that young adults today are living in a depressed dating economy even though a large majority expect to marry.

The State of Our Unions report is an annual report by the Wheatley Institute at Brigham Young University and the Institute for Family Studies (IFS) on the health of marriage and family life in America. The 2026 report examined contemporary dating trends using the 2025 National Dating Landscape Survey, a nationally representative sample of 5,275 unmarried young adults ages 22–35 in the United States – 86% of whom said they expect to marry someday. It found that nearly three-quarters of women (74%) and nearly two-thirds of men (64%) who expected to marry someday had not dated or dated only a few times in the last year.

“Overall, we found evidence that many young adults are experiencing a dating recession during their prime dating years,” said Alan Hawkins, lead author of the report and an affiliated scholar of the Wheatley Institute. “Most young adults are not dating much, and many are struggling with significant barriers to initiating dating relationships and pursuing their desire to one day marry and have a family.”

The researchers found that a lack of self-assurance may at least be partly to blame for this recession, with only about one-in-three young adult men and one in five young adult women expressing confidence in being able to approach someone they were romantically interested in. Young adults also reported significant financial barriers to dating. The biggest was not having enough money, endorsed by more than half (52%) of respondents (58% of men and 46% of women).

Past experiences with dating also played a role in negative dating attitudes, with only about a quarter (28%) reporting that they can stay positive after a bad date or relationship setback. More than half (55%) agreed that their past breakups have made them more reluctant to begin new romantic relationships.

Yet despite a common narrative that young adults are only interested in casual dating and unattached hook-ups, young adults – both women and men, younger and older – strongly endorse a dating culture focused on forming serious relationships (83% of women and 74% of men) and creating emotional connections (83% of women and 76% of men).

“What the 2026 State of Our Unions report tells us is that most young adults across America endorse relatively traditional purposes for dating and do not express an overt fear of commitment, but many lack the needed skills for dating and the resilience to handle the natural ups and downs of relationship starts and stops along the journey of dating,” said Brian Willoughby, an author of the report and a Fellow at the Wheatley Institute.

Additional findings from the report include:

- Only about 30% of respondents reported that they were dating, either casually or exclusively. About half (51%) of respondents reported they were single but interested in starting a relationship, although this was much more the case for men (60%) than for women (43%).
- Respondents reported a median of three exclusive romantic dating partners in their lifetime. Only 15% reported no exclusive dating partners. Another third (32%) reported 1–2 lifetime dating partners. But more than half (52%) have had significant dating experience in the past (three or more exclusive relationships)
- In addition to creating emotional connections and forming serious relationships, respondents ranked exploring potential romantic partners (69%); enjoying romantic experiences (69%); personal growth (67%); and learning about myself and what I want in a future partner (63%) as some of primary reasons for dating
- Not surprisingly, engaging in physical intimacy as a purpose for dating produced the largest gender difference (males – 55%; females – 35%)
- Nearly two-thirds (64%) reported that marriage was an important life goal for them, although less than half (47%) said marriage was a top priority for them at this time in their life. Nearly half (46%) reported that they would like to be married now.
- Most young adults do not subscribe to an ideal age for marriage. Of those who do subscribe to an ideal age to marry, however, 30 was by far the age most nominated
- When asked what age they expected to marry (if they desired marriage), the overall median age of expected marriage was 33 for women and almost 35 for men.

One straightforward implication of the study’s findings is that young adults could use some help in building basic dating skills. They want to build real human connections, form serious relationships, explore what they want in a future long-term partner, and desire the personal growth that comes from forming serious romantic relationships. And contrary to common beliefs, most report that they are not afraid of long-term commitment or losing personal freedom, and few fear that dating will interfere with their educational and career plans.

“This study shows that there is a marital-expectations vs. dating-skills gap for most young adults today,” said Brad Wilcox, an author of the report and a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Family Studies. “This gap calls for a concerted effort to teach young adults healthy dating skills, something that does not receive enough attention.”

The authors of the report conclude that young adults need healthy dating skills and an effective road map that guides them to and through the dating experiences that will connect their marital expectations to actual dating relationships. Such an approach would teach dating skills like how to approach someone you’re interested in, how to make smart dating choices, and how to improve communications skills. Additional lessons on how to deal with bad dating experiences and painful breakups, and creative dating options with cheaper price tags would also be beneficial.

“Relationship education is almost entirely dedicated to married couples, but not enough is directed towards the dating experiences of young adults,” said Jason Carroll, co-author and the Family Initiative Director at the Wheatley Institute. “We believe this dating education space is ripe for a creative, hands-on approach that ultimately leads to healthy relationships and, one day, marriage.”

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**The full report is available at:** <https://wheatley.byu.edu/the-dating-recession>

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