

More Lonely, Fewer 'Friends', Less Sex – Have Smartphones Destroyed A Generation?



by Tyler Durden

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More comfortable online than out partying, post-Millennials are safer, physically, than adolescents have ever been. ***But they're on the brink of a mental-health crisis...***



The Atlantic's Jean Twenge asks the most crucial question of our age... ***"have smartphones destroyed a generation?"***

...Unlike the teens of my generation, who might have spent an evening tying up the family landline with gossip, [teens today] talk on Snapchat, the smartphone app that allows users to send pictures and videos that quickly disappear. They make sure to keep up their Snapstreaks, which show how many days in a row they have Snapchatted with each other. Sometimes they save screenshots of particularly ridiculous pictures of friends. "It's good blackmail," Athena said. (Because she's a minor, I'm not using her real name.) She told me she'd spent most of the summer hanging out alone in her room with her phone. That's just the way her generation is, she said. ***"We didn't have a choice to know any life without iPads or iPhones. I think we like our phones more than we like actual people."***

I've been researching generational differences for 25 years, starting when I was a 22-year-old doctoral student in psychology. Typically, the characteristics that come to define a generation appear gradually, and along a continuum. Beliefs and behaviors that were already rising simply continue to do so. Millennials, for instance, are a highly individualistic generation, but individualism had been increasing since the Baby Boomers turned on, tuned in, and dropped out. I had grown accustomed to line graphs of trends that looked like modest hills and valleys. Then I began studying Athena's generation.

Around 2012, I noticed abrupt shifts in teen behaviors and emotional states. The gentle slopes of the line graphs became steep mountains and sheer cliffs, and many of the distinctive characteristics of the Millennial generation began to disappear. **In all my analyses of generational data – some reaching back to the 1930s – I had never seen anything like it.**

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What happened in 2012 to cause such dramatic shifts in behavior? It was after the Great Recession, which officially lasted from 2007 to 2009 and had a starker effect on Millennials trying to find a place in a sputtering economy. But **it was exactly the moment when the proportion of Americans who owned a smartphone surpassed 50 percent.**

The more I pored over yearly surveys of teen attitudes and behaviors, and the more I talked with young people like Athena, the clearer it became that theirs is a generation shaped by the smartphone and by the concomitant rise of social media. **I call them iGen. Born between 1995 and 2012, members of this generation are growing up with smartphones, have an Instagram account before they start high school, and do not remember a time before the internet.**

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More comfortable in their bedrooms than in a car or at a party, **today's teens are physically safer than teens have ever been.** They're markedly less likely to get into a car accident and, having less of a taste for alcohol than their predecessors, are less susceptible to drinking's attendant ills.

Psychologically, however, they are more vulnerable than Millennials were: Rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed since 2011. It's not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones.

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There is compelling evidence that the devices we've placed in young people's hands are having profound effects on their lives – and making them seriously unhappy.

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You might expect that teens spend so much time in these new spaces because it makes them happy, but most data suggest that it does not. The Monitoring the Future survey, funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and designed to be nationally representative, has asked 12th-graders more than 1,000 questions every year since 1975 and queried eighth- and 10th-graders since 1991. The survey asks teens how happy they are and also how much of their leisure time they spend on various activities, including nonscreen activities such as in-person social interaction and exercise, and, in recent years, screen activities such as using social media, texting, and browsing the web. **The results could not be clearer: Teens who spend more time than average on screen activities are more likely to be unhappy, and those who spend more time than average on nonscreen activities are more likely to be happy.**

There's not a single exception. All screen activities are linked to less happiness, and all nonscreen activities are linked to more happiness. Eighth-graders who spend 10 or more hours a week on social media are 56 percent more likely to say they're unhappy than those who devote less time to social media.



The allure of independence, so powerful to previous generations, holds less sway over today's teens, who are less likely to leave the house without their parents. The shift is stunning: 12th-graders in 2015 were going out less often than eighth-graders did as recently as 2009.

Today's teens are also less likely to date. The initial stage of courtship, which Gen Xers called "liking" (as in "Ooh, he likes you!"), kids now call "talking"—an ironic choice for a generation that prefers texting to actual conversation. After two teens have "talked" for a while, they might start dating. But only about 56 percent of high-school seniors in 2015 went out on dates; for Boomers and Gen Xers, the number was about 85 percent.

The decline in dating tracks with a decline in sexual activity. The drop is the sharpest for ninth-graders, among whom the number of sexually active teens has been cut by almost 40 percent since 1991.

Even driving, a symbol of adolescent freedom inscribed in American popular culture, has lost its appeal for today's teens. Nearly all Boomer high-school students had their driver's license by the spring of their senior year; more than one in four teens today still lack one at the end of high school. For some, Mom and Dad are such good chauffeurs that there's no urgent need to drive. "My parents drove me everywhere and never complained, so I always had rides," a 21-year-old student in San Diego told me. "I didn't get my license until my mom told me I had to because she could not keep driving me to school."

The number of eighth-graders who work for pay has been cut in half. These declines accelerated during the Great Recession, but teen employment has not bounced back, even though job availability has.

At the generational level, when teens spend more time on smartphones and less time on in-person social interactions, **loneliness is more common.**

So is depression. Once again, the effect of screen activities is unmistakable: The more time teens spend looking at screens, the more likely they are to report symptoms of depression.

Teens who spend three hours a day or more on electronic devices are 35 percent **more likely to have a risk factor for suicide**, such as making a suicide plan. Since 2007, the homicide rate among teens has declined, but the suicide rate has increased. In 2011, **for the first time in 24 years, the teen suicide rate was higher than the teen homicide rate.**

This trend has been especially steep among girls. Forty-eight percent more girls said they often felt left out in 2015 than in 2010, compared with 27 percent more boys. Girls use social media more often, giving them additional opportunities to feel excluded and lonely when they see their friends or classmates getting together without them. Social media levy a psychic tax on the teen doing the posting as well, as she anxiously awaits the affirmation of comments and likes.

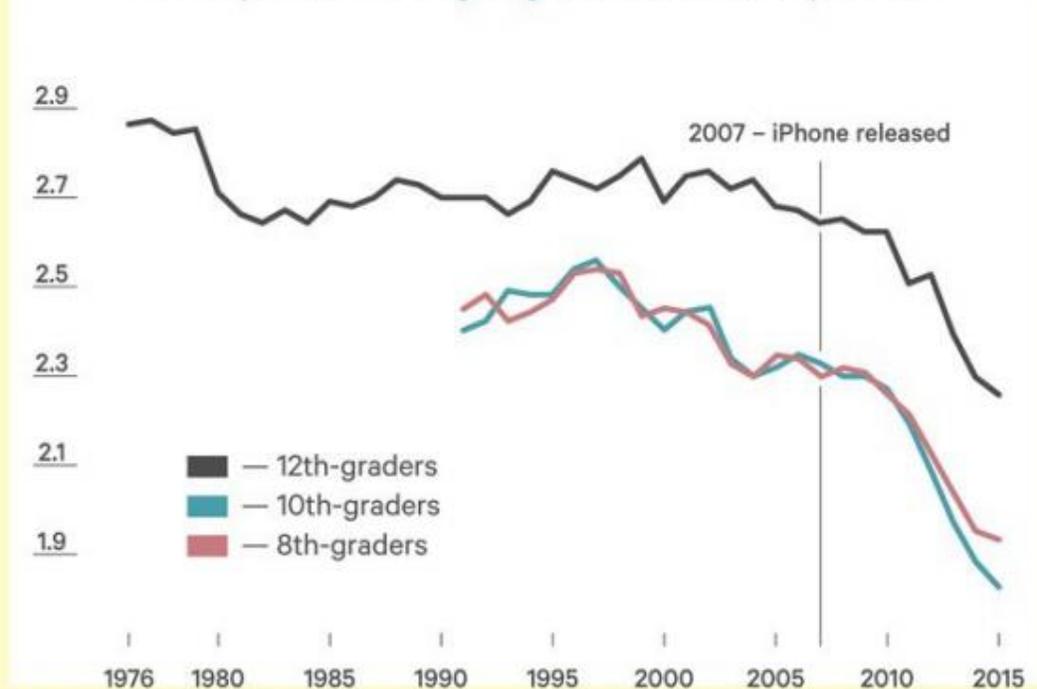
THE SMARTPHONE GENERATION: A STATISTICAL PORTRAIT

The constant presence of the internet, particularly social media, is changing the behavior and attitudes of today's teens.

1

Not Hanging Out With Friends

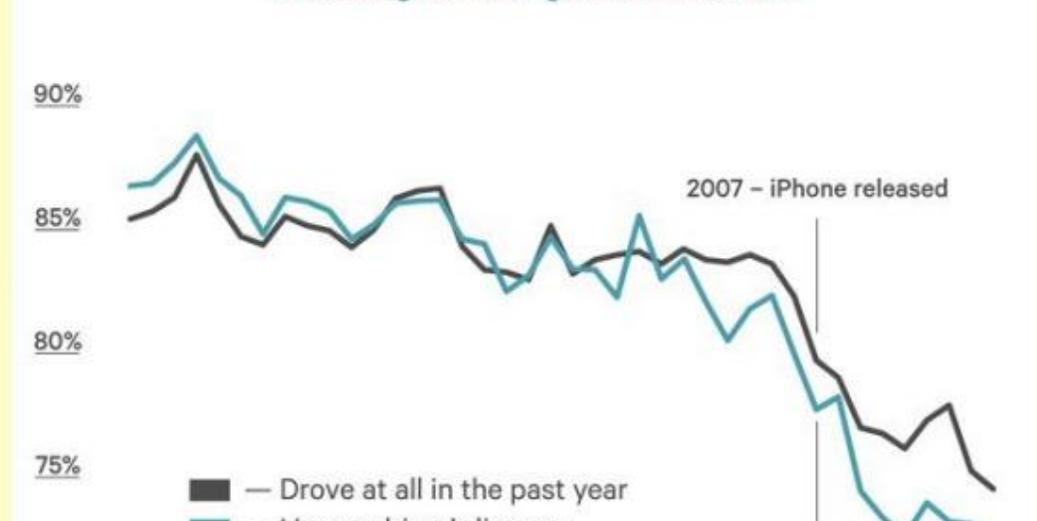
Times per week teenagers go out without their parents

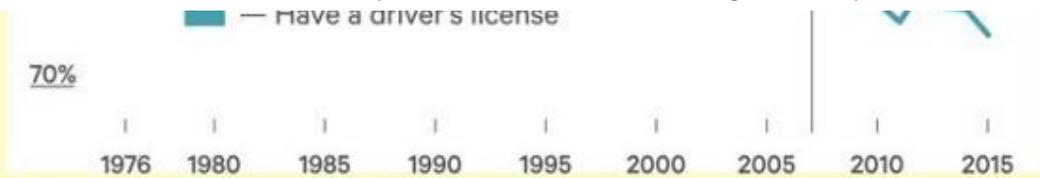


2

In No Rush to Drive

Percentage of 12th-graders who drive

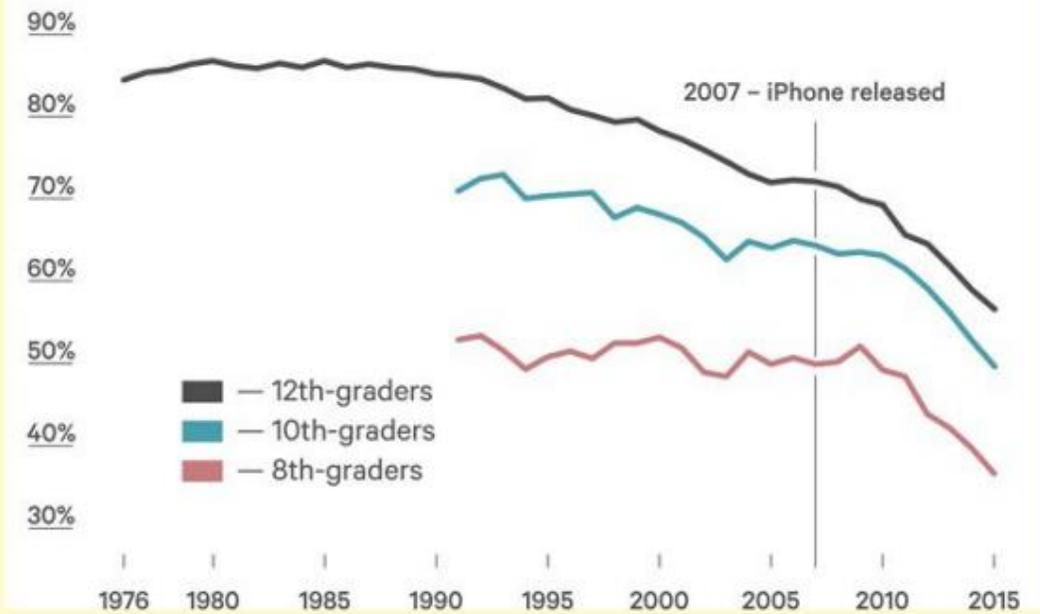




3

Less Dating ...

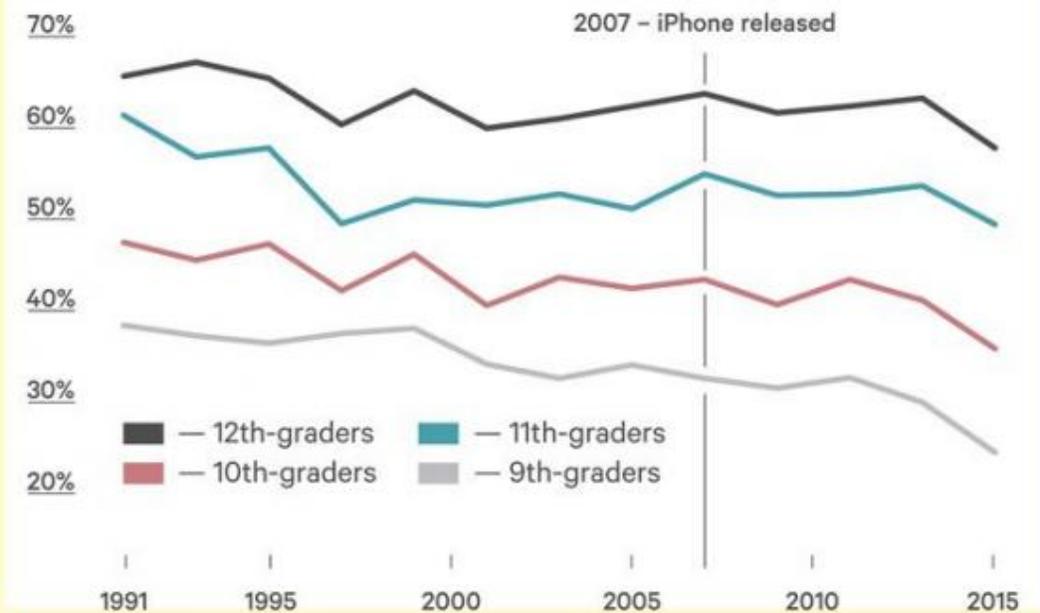
Percentage of teenagers who ever go out on dates



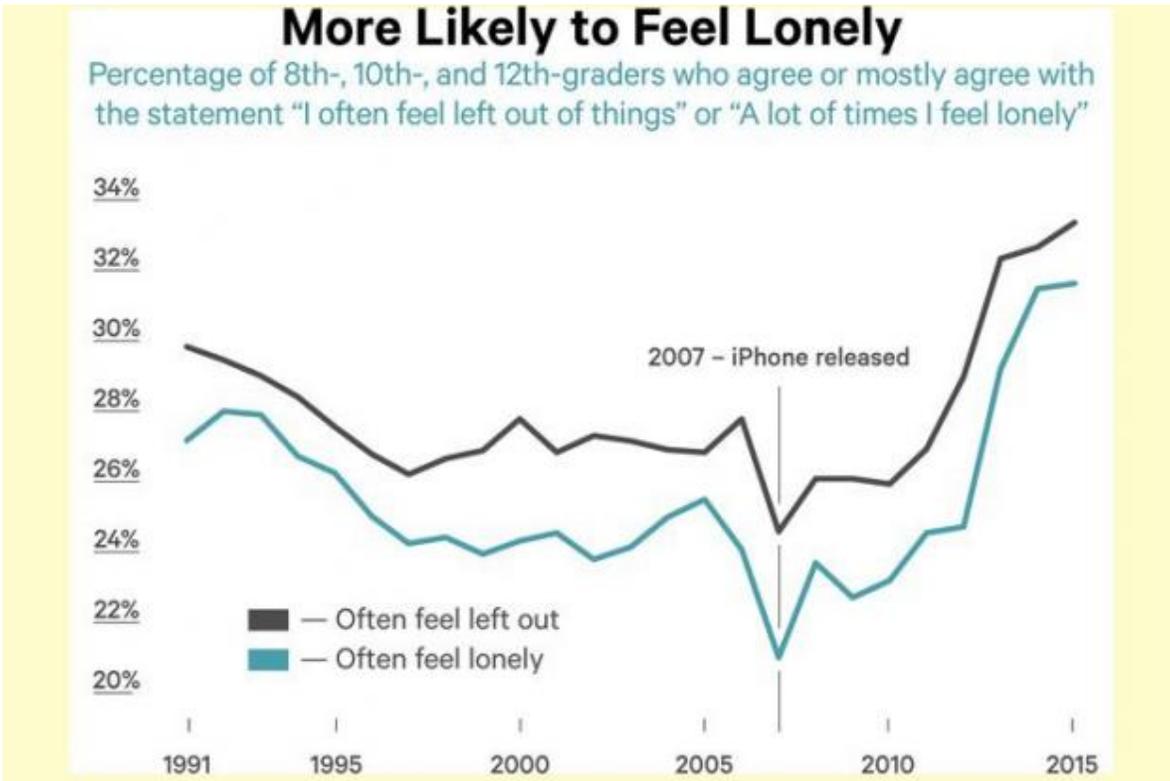
4

... And Less Sex

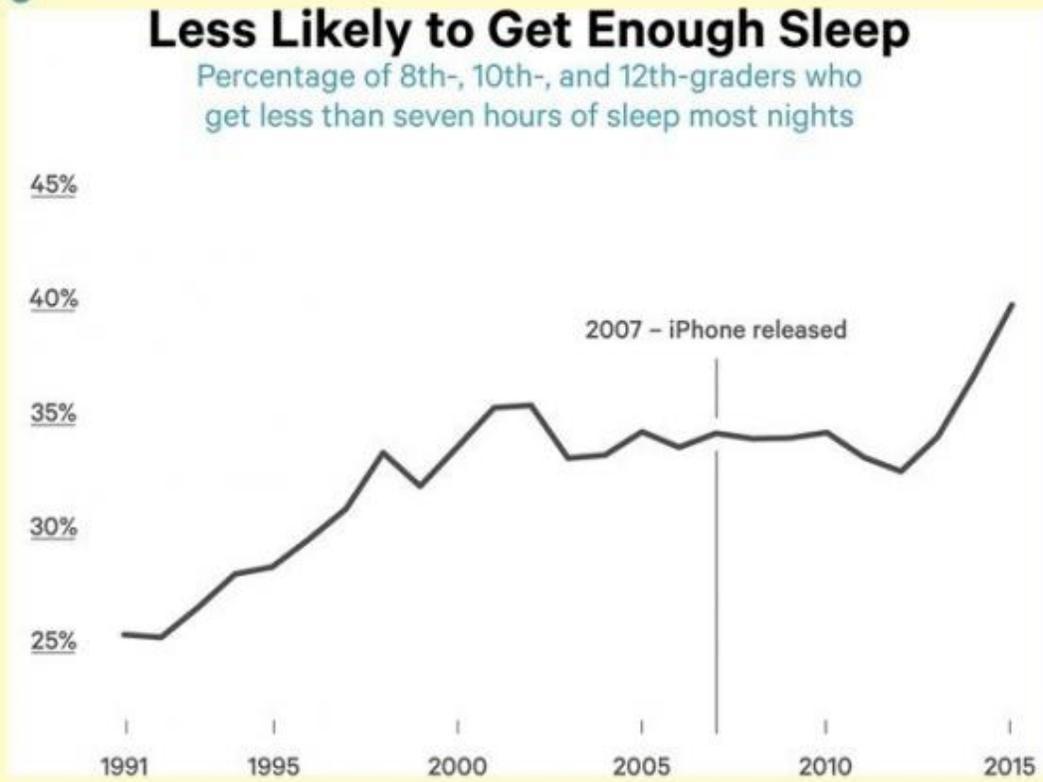
Percentage of high-school students who have ever had sex



5



6



1-3, 5-6: MONITORING THE FUTURE. 4: YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEILLANCE SYSTEM.

The correlations between depression and smartphone use are strong enough to suggest that more parents should be telling their kids to put down their phone. As the technology writer Nick Bilton has reported, it's a policy some Silicon Valley executives follow. Even Steve Jobs limited his kids' use of the devices he brought into the world.

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If you were going to give advice for a happy adolescence based on this survey, it would be straightforward: Put down the phone, turn off the laptop, and do something—anything—that does not involve a screen. Of course, these analyses don't unequivocally prove that screen time causes unhappiness; it's possible that unhappy teens spend more time online. But recent research suggests that screen time, in particular social-media use, does indeed cause unhappiness. One study asked college students with a Facebook page to complete short surveys on their phone over the course of two weeks. *They'd get a text message with a link five times a day, and report on their mood and how much they'd used Facebook. The more they'd used Facebook, the happier they felt, but feeling unhappy did not subsequently lead to more Facebook use.*

I realize that restricting technology might be an unrealistic demand to impose on a generation of kids so accustomed to being wired at all times. Prying the phone out of our kids' hands will be difficult, even more so than the quixotic efforts of my parents' generation to get their kids to turn off MTV and get some fresh air. But more seems to be at stake in urging teens to use their phone responsibly, and there are benefits to be gained even if all we instill in our children is the importance of moderation. Significant effects on both mental health and sleep time appear after two or more hours a day on electronic devices. The average teen spends about two and a half hours a day on electronic devices. **Some mild boundary-setting could keep kids from falling into harmful habits.**

[Read the full report here...](#)

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