Disability and Sexual Health of Young Adults*

ANNE NOLAN, EMER SMYTH

GUI ANNUAL RESEARCH CONFERENCE

DUBLIN, 5TH NOVEMBER 2026

* Please do not cite as research findings are preliminary

Background

- Adolescence and young adulthood are critical periods in the development of positive sexual health and relationships, as patterns of behaviour that develop during these life stages shape outcomes throughout the life course
- Disabled young people may face particular challenges in achieving positive sexual health as they navigate the transition to young adulthood
  - They may be more socially isolated from their peers, more reliant on sexual health information from their parents (which may be overly focused on risk reduction), may have fewer opportunities for sexual experiences, and face social stigma in developing their sexual identity (Baines et al., 2018; Houtrow et al., 2021; O'Connell et al., 2026)

Existing Evidence

- In general, previous research has shown that disabled young people are more likely to have poorer sexual health and wellbeing, including being at higher risk of unsafe sexual behaviours, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and sexual violence (Holdsworth et al., 2018; Houtrow et al., 2021; Sturrock et al., 2025)
  - Some evidence that poorer outcomes are more prevalent among girls/young women with a disability than young men (Holdsworth et al., 2018; Young et al., 2018)
- Little research on use of condoms/contraception by disability status
  - Research from the 2010 HBSC study shows no difference in the probability of condom use between those with and without a LLC/disability (Young et al., 2018)
  - Some evidence from the US that young people with a chronic illness/disability are more likely to use contraception/discuss birth control prior to having sex for the first time than those without a chronic illness/disability (Shandra et al., 2012, 2016)

Research Questions

- Does age of sexual initiation differ for young people with and without a disability?
  - Does the type of disability matter?

- Among those who have had sex, how do sexual health behaviours (i.e., use of contraception, use of condoms, STI) vary by disability status?

Data and Methods



- GUI ‘98 Cohort Wave 5 (age 25)
  - n=3,380 (50 per cent response rate)
- At age 25, data collected from young person only (i.e., no parent interview)
- Mixed mode of data collection
  - Web: 86 per cent; in-person interview: 14 per cent
- Multivariable cross-sectional models used to examine how disability (and other characteristics) are associated with:
  - Sexual initiation
  - Relationship status
  - Condom use
  - Contraception use
  - STI diagnoses

Disability definition and measurement

- Disability is defined in the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as comprising 'those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others'
- In recent years, the focus has shifted away from the use of diagnostic categories towards an emphasis on the impact of the condition on day-to-day lives (Smyth and Russell, 2024)

GUI question	Response options
'Do you have any chronic physical or mental health problem, illness or disability?	No Yes
If **yes**, 'what is the nature of this problem, illness or disability?'	10 options + other (tick all that apply)
If **yes**, 'Are you hampered in your daily activities by this problem, illness or disability?'*	Yes, severely Yes, to some extent No

* For those who tick multiple conditions, they are asked to answer in respect of the condition they consider to be the most severe

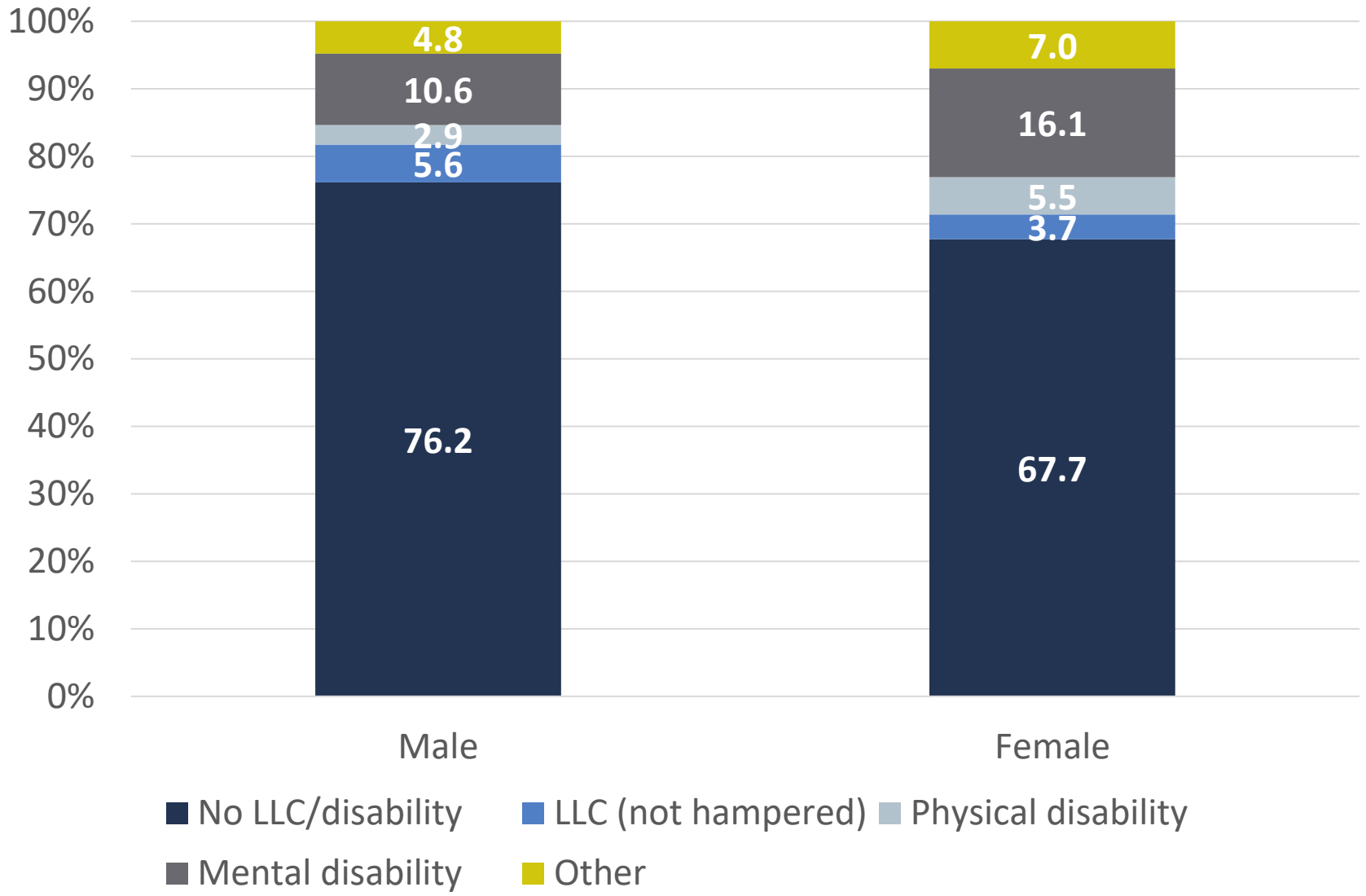
LLC/Disability

Definitions and summary statistics

AN INSTITIÚID UM THAIGHDE EACNAMAÍOCHTA AGUS SÓISIALTA
ESRI ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Variable	Definition	%
LLC/Disability	=0 if does not have a LLC/disability	71.9
	=1 if has a LLC/disability	28.1
LLC/Disability_status	=0 if does not have a LLC/disability	71.9
	=1 if has a LLC (non-hampered)	4.6
	=2 if has a disability (i.e., severely/to some extent)	23.5
LLC/Disability_type	=0 if does not have a LLC/disability	71.9
	=1 if has a LLC (non-hampered)	4.6
	=2 if has a physical disability	4.2
	=3 if has a mental disability	13.4
	=4 if has an 'other' disability	5.9

LLC/Disability prevalence by sex



Outcome variables

Definitions and summary statistics

AN INSTITIÚID UM THAIGHDE EACNAMAÍOCHTA AGUS SÓISIALTA
ESRI ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Variable	Definition	Men (%)	Women (%)
Sexual Initiation	=0 if has not had sexual intercourse	12.0	7.9
	=1 if has had sexual intercourse	88.0	92.1
Relationship status*	=0 if single or casually dating	46.4	35.8
	=1 if has a partner (incl. married/cohabiting)	53.6	64.2
Condom use*	=1 if always uses a condom when having sex	25.0	20.7
	=2 if sometimes uses a condom	39.3	31.6
	=3 if never uses a condom	35.7	47.8
Contraception use*	=1 if always uses contraception when having sex	61.2	72.2
	=2 if sometimes uses contraception	28.0	17.0
	=3 if never uses contraception	10.8	10.7
STI	=0 if never had an STI	88.7	88.7
	=1 if ever had an STI	11.3	11.3

* Indicates that difference between men and women is statistically significant ($p<0.05$)

Multivariable Regression Results

	Men		Women	
	LLC (not hampered)	**Disability**	**LLC (not hampered)**	**Disability**
Sexual initiation	- *	ns	- *	ns
Relationship status	- **	ns	- *	- ~
Condom use	ns	ns	ns	ns
Contraception use	ns	ns	ns	ns
STI	ns	ns (but physical disability - ***)	ns	ns (but physical disability - ***)

Separate models are estimated for outcome for men and women (n=8 models in total)

The reference category is those who do not report a LLC or disability at age 25

All models also control for age, sexual orientation, living arrangements, employment status, educational attainment and family socioeconomic background (and for condom and contraception use, an additional control for relationship status is included)

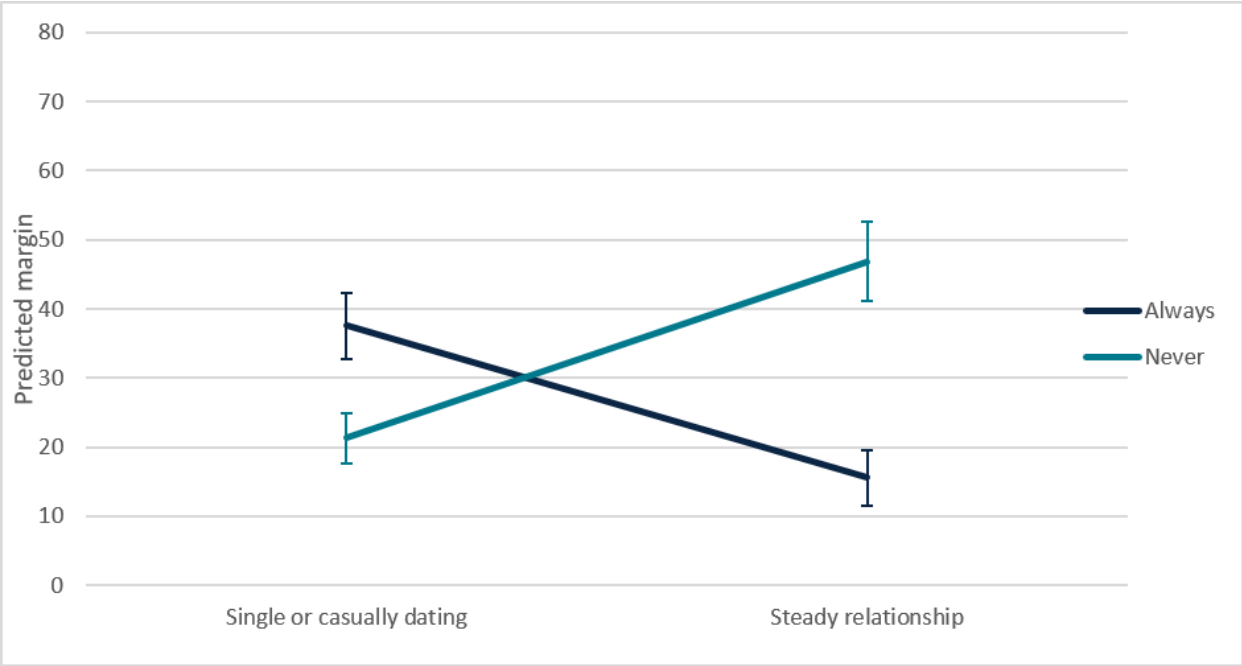
*** p<0.001 ** p<0.01 * p<0.05 ~ p<0.10

Predicted margins of condom use

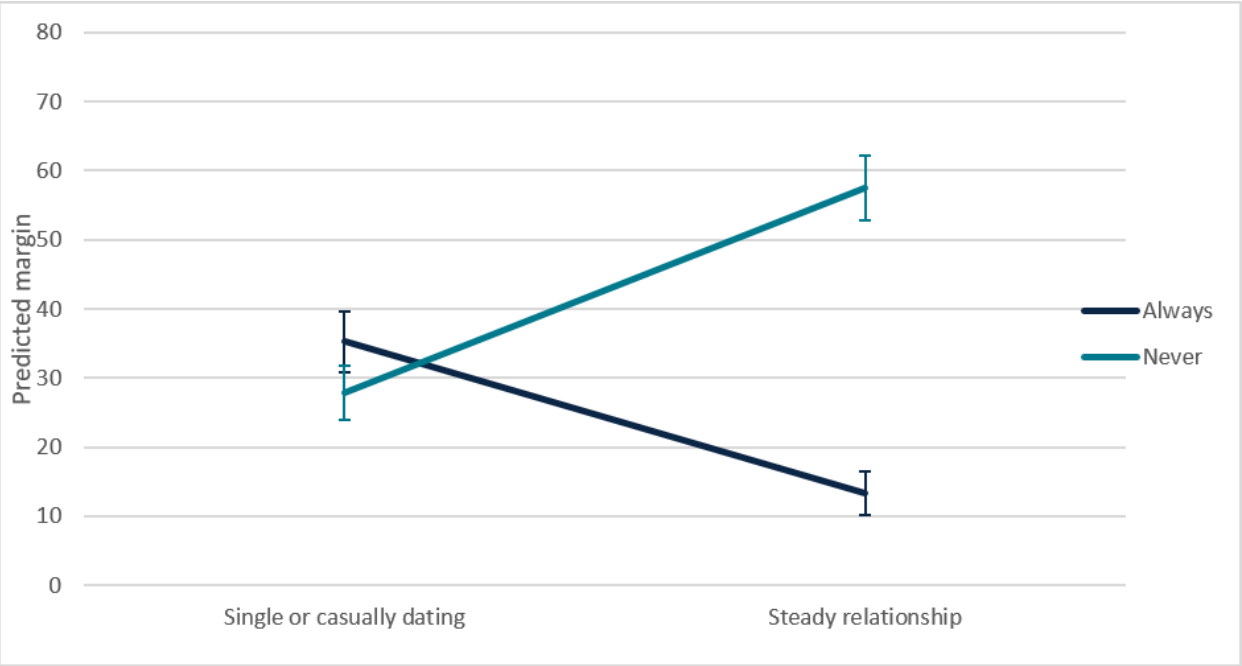
Relationship status

AN INSTITIÚID UM THAIGHDE EACNAMAÍOCHTA AGUS SÓISIALTA
ESRI ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Men



Women



Summary

- Disability
  - Nearly one quarter of 25-year olds report a disability (largely mental/emotional nature)
  - Higher prevalence of disability among young women (29 vs. 18 per cent)
- Sexual initiation/relationship status
  - No association between disability and sexual initiation or relationship status
  - However, those with a LLC (i.e., not hampered) are less likely to have had sex and to be in steady relationship by age 25
- Sexual health behaviours
  - Little variation in condom or contraception use by disability
  - Men and women with a physical disability are less likely to have been diagnosed with an STI
  - Relationship status is strongly associated with condom and contraception use

Discussion/policy implications

- Caveats
  - Measurement of disability and discussion over how best to measure disability in population surveys (forthcoming Census of Population 2027 and Irish Disability Survey 2028)
  - Self-reported data on sensitive behaviours
  - Small numbers mean that specific categories (e.g., ID) cannot be separately identified

- Policy implications
  - LLC/disability group is not homogenous → tailored supports and services
  - Role of relationship status; as young people transition to longer-term relationships, condom use declines → continued public health messaging around importance of condoms for STI prevention
  - Importance of additional data collection and analysis → blend of data sources and methods to capture experiences of those not currently covered by GUI

"Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) is funded by the Government of Ireland. GUI is managed as a partnership between the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE) and the Central Statistics Office (CSO). The CSO are responsible for the survey element of GUI. Results in this report are based on analyses of data from Research Microdata Files provided by the CSO. Neither the CSO nor DCDE take any responsibility for the views expressed or the outputs generated from these analyses."

ESRI.ie

Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI)

Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI)

@ESRIDublin

Sign up to our Newsletter

AN INSTITIÚID UM THAIGHDE EACNAMAÍOCHTA AGUS SÓISIALTA
ESRI ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Disability

- Information in GUI at age 25 on disability generated from three questions:
  1. Do you have any on-going chronic physical or mental health problem, illness or disability? Y/N
  2. If answer Y, asked: What is the nature of this problem, illness or disability? Tick all that apply (with a list of 11 conditions specified)
     a. Also asked which condition they consider to be the most severe (* >=30 cases)

1. Respiratory system
2. Endocrine diseases
3. Nervous system
4. Digestive system * (females only)
5. Musculoskeletal
6. Mental health *
7. Intellectual disability
8. Physical or sensory disabilities
9. Autism spectrum disorders
10. Emotional or behavioural disorders
11. Other (specify) * (females only)