



# SEX LIVES REPORT

2022 THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE SEXUAL  
BEHAVIOUR OF YOUNG CANADIANS

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## Message From Shamin



### **Sex can suck. And, let's not even get started with dating during a pandemic.**

During lockdowns, Canadian youth were having less sex, using less protection, sending more nudes and more worried about their mental health. And no one's researched this until now, until us.

At LetsStopAIDS, for 18 years, we have focused on engaging young people around issues of HIV prevention and safer sex while fostering leadership among youth in often under supported communities. Our experience giving voice to young people, particularly around issues that significantly impact their lives, has led us to this most recent undertaking.

Canadian youth are both the *most economically disadvantaged* and the *most socially vulnerable* demographic in Canada during the pandemic. Despite their large numbers, 3.3 million as of 2021, not much attention is given to youth, and they suffer as the silent majority. Yet, at LetsStopAIDS, our position as Canada's largest Youth-HIV charity, has allowed us to continue to take the pulse on how youth are doing during the pandemic and what we hear is - **the kids are not "alright"**.

We know the years between 18-24 are a time of transition, whether it is graduating from high school, starting university, being hired for their first full-time position or beginning their first serious relationship, but COVID-19 has greatly disrupted those transitions. Instead, young people feel stagnant, and a staggering 74% of them told us that they are worried about their mental health.

They are concerned about their physical health as well and the aggressive spread of STIs and HIV across Canada, as testing and prevention campaigns were halted during the pandemic, impact youth the most. At LetsStopAIDS, we know youth are most vulnerable to STIs and HIV. Indeed, LetsStopAIDS' mission is to reach zero new HIV infections and to promote living positively. We're reimagining what's possible for youth in Canada and around the world.

By conducting this research, we invite you on this re-imagination journey with us so together we can advocate for a focus on youth and their sexual health as we continue our recovery from COVID-19.

Sincerely,

**Shamin Mohamed Jr.**

Founder & President  
LetsStopAIDS

A photograph of a person's legs and feet sticking out from under a white sheet on a bed. The scene is captured from a top-down perspective, showing the white fabric of the sheet and the person's skin. The word "INTRODUCTION" is overlaid in the center in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

# INTRODUCTION

## Introduction

While speculations on the impact of COVID-19 on our sex lives ran wild at the start of the pandemic - ranging from predicted baby booms #Coronials to sex droughts - very little to no, focus was on the impact on young Canadians. As one of the demographics with the least amount of financial income, youth from age 18-24 years old are more likely than ever to insert themselves into dangerous living and working situations.

At the same time, reports<sup>1</sup> emerged in April 2022 that Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) are spreading aggressively in Canada due to testing and prevention campaigns being abandoned during the pandemic. Gonorrhea cases in New Brunswick jumped fivefold between 2020 and 2021 then tripled in the first months of 2022. Saskatchewan saw a 29% increase in HIV cases in 2021 compared to 2020.

Our nationally representative survey found:

The percentage of sexually active youth who never use condoms has doubled during the last 3 months compared to pre-pandemic.

52% of youth continued to have sex with partners from different households during lockdowns.

34% of youth on online dating apps said having sex on the first date has increased during lockdowns.

33% of sexually active youth reported the pandemic has made them more sexually adventurous.

In the last 3 months, 28% of youth diagnosed with STIs did not receive treatment.

And while young Canadians are one of the most susceptible groups to STIs and HIV no one has focused on them - **until now**.

LetsStopAIDS's inaugural Sex Lives Report is taking the temperature on the state of sex among youth in Canada. We undertook a nationally representative survey with 1018 young Canadians age 18-24 years old and initial results are significant and demand our attention and those of our policymakers.

**As an education-focused charity with grassroots activities, we advocate for more research and more educational campaigns aimed at youth to promote safer sex, STI/HIV prevention and treatment awareness, and more mental health support for young Canadians.**

Only 26% of youth have knowledge of PrEP, only 20% know about PEP and only 11% of youth know what U=U is.

64% of youth said the pandemic increased their interest in online dating.

43% of youth on online dating apps reported sending more nudes during lockdowns.

37% of youth on online dating apps reported an increase in "backsliding" with exes/old dates due to lockdowns.

74% of youth reported worrying about the pandemic's impact on their mental health.

# SEX LIVES

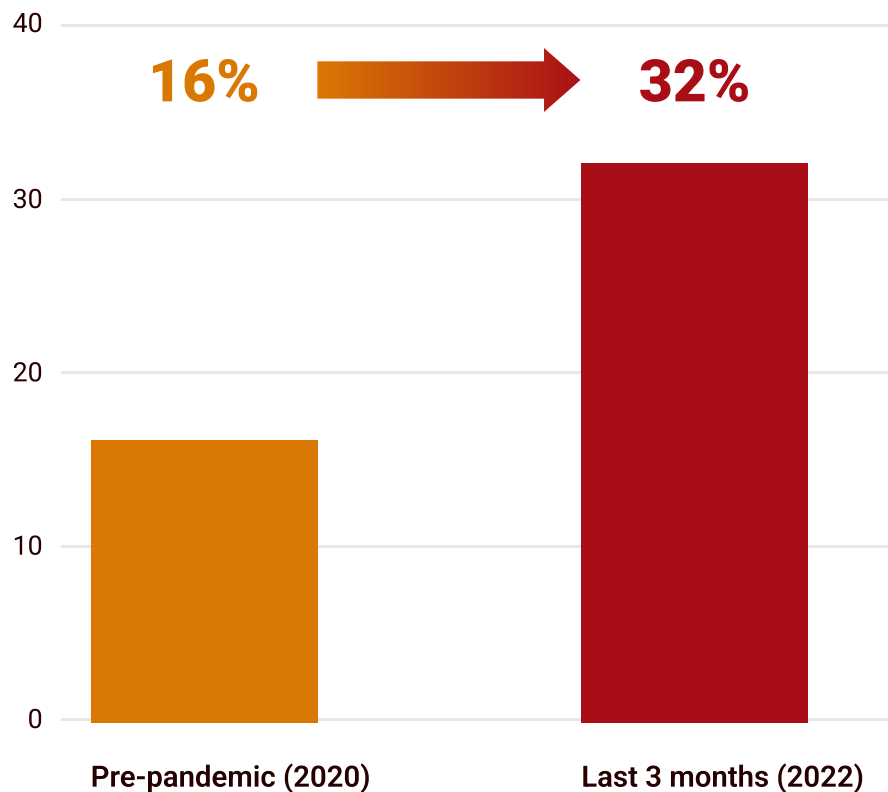


**RISK**

## Risk

The percentage of sexually active youth who never use condoms has doubled during the last 3 months compared to pre-pandemic.

### Percentage of sexually active youth who never use condoms



As lockdown restrictions lifted across Canada between April and June 2022, the percentage of sexually active youth who reported that they **never** use condoms has jumped to 32%, effectively doubling the numbers from pre-pandemic. While 45% of sexually active youth said they used condoms 76%-100% of the time, the steep plummet in condom use is a cause for concern as **youth are more susceptible to STIs and HIV**.

### In the last 3 months, when you had sex what percentage of the time did you use a condom?

<b>32%</b>	Never use a condom
<b>11%</b>	Use a condom 1-25% of the time
<b>9%</b>	Use a condom 26-50% of the time
<b>3%</b>	Use a condom 51-75% of the time
<b>45%</b>	Use a condom 76-100% of the time



## Risk

**“It’s made me less cautious. I still discuss STI/HIV before sex to ensure neither side is positive. Before I used condoms 100% of the time, but now condom use has declined significantly.”**

Natalia\*, Saskatchewan

**“Now I am more aware of potential STIs but still wearing a condom is not the most pleasurable. But I do get tested regularly.”**

Pierre\*, Quebec

**“I was a bit cautious with people I saw since I didn’t wanna get sick. But I realized after seeing some men that I should have used protection. Luckily, nothing negative came of it.”**

Rebecca\*, British Columbia

**“With a lot of time to kill at home and the mountain of erotic media that I can now consume, I just got hornier which makes me want to be riskier and when things really open up I want to try unsafe sex.”**

Alex\*, Manitoba

**“Well I got into a relationship, so we decided to not wear condoms with each other because we normally only sleep with each other and if we have sex with other people we wear condoms and make sure we get tested after every partner”.**

Jamie\*, New Brunswick

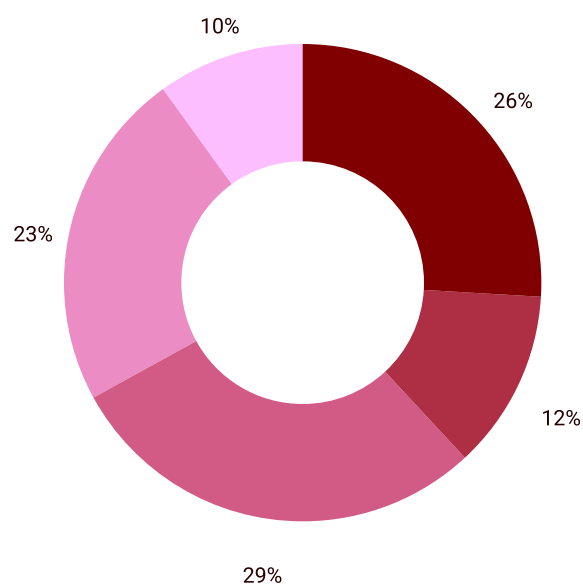


\*Pseudonyms are used

## Risk

# 52% of youth continued to have sex with partners from different households during lockdowns.

**If your partner(s) did not live with you during lockdown periods, how did you have sexual activity with them?**



- 26%** We did not have sexual activity
- 12%** Yes, virtual, online or phone sexual activity only
- 29%** Yes, face to face sexual activity only
- 23%** Yes, both online and face to face sexual activity
- 10%** Prefer not to answer

In the early days of the pandemic, lockdown restrictions in Canada, and across the world, limited interactions between people from different households. This posed a challenge for young Canadians who did not live with their partner(s). While 26% of young Canadians reported not having sexual activity with their partners or only have virtual or phone sex during lockdown periods (12%), 52% said they continued to have sex with their partner(s) from different households. These findings present insights to how future pandemics can be better managed from a public policy perspective as youth often do not live together with their partners.

## Risk

**“I started sexting, and my partners and I would talk in-depth about toys we were interested in using (consuming media with those sex toys used, sending links of purchases, reading reviews). Since all my sexual activity was through sexting, or phone sex, I got more creative with what my partner and I could do in terms of toys.”**

Ava\*, Nova Scotia

\*Pseudonyms are used

## Risk

So you've been chatting up this cutie on Tinder and you think it's time to meet up. But where do you go in lockdown? With limited options for dates, you're forced to ask yours or mine?

Does this situation sound familiar? Youth are sharing that having sex on the first date has increased compared to pre-pandemic. While many would not usually have sex on the first date, 34% of youth said that behaviour has changed **because their dates are taking place in private, not public, spaces during lockdowns**. An examination across the country shows this increase to be highest in the Prairies with a 31% in Alberta and 26% increase in Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

How did lockdowns affect your behaviour on online dating apps with regards to having sex on the first date?

 **Increase** **34%**

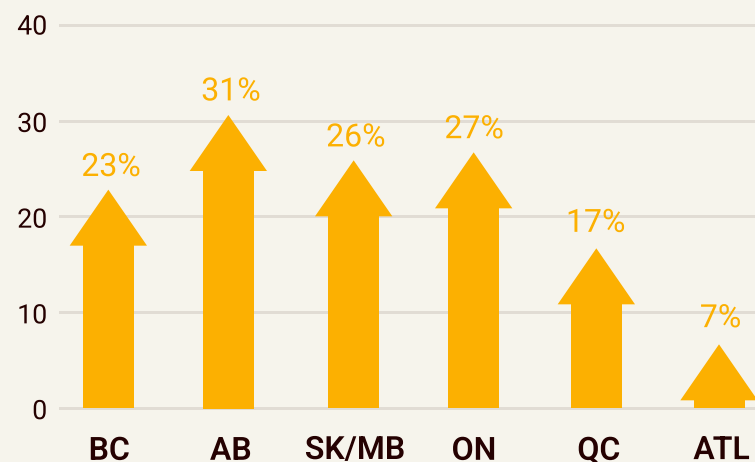
 **Stay the same** **37%**

 **Decrease** **25%**

 **Prefer not to say** **4%**

**34% of youth on online dating apps said having sex on the first date has increased compared to pre-pandemic due to lockdown restrictions.**

Increases in having sex on the first date broken down by region



## Risk

**“I play it safer, meet up with less men and text them for longer periods before deciding to meet them. I’m more likely to say yes to hangouts at peoples’ apartments on the first date compared to before since it means less COVID-19 exposure, but I also think it’s less safe to be at a person’s place.”**

Ryan\*, Newfoundland

\*Pseudonyms are used

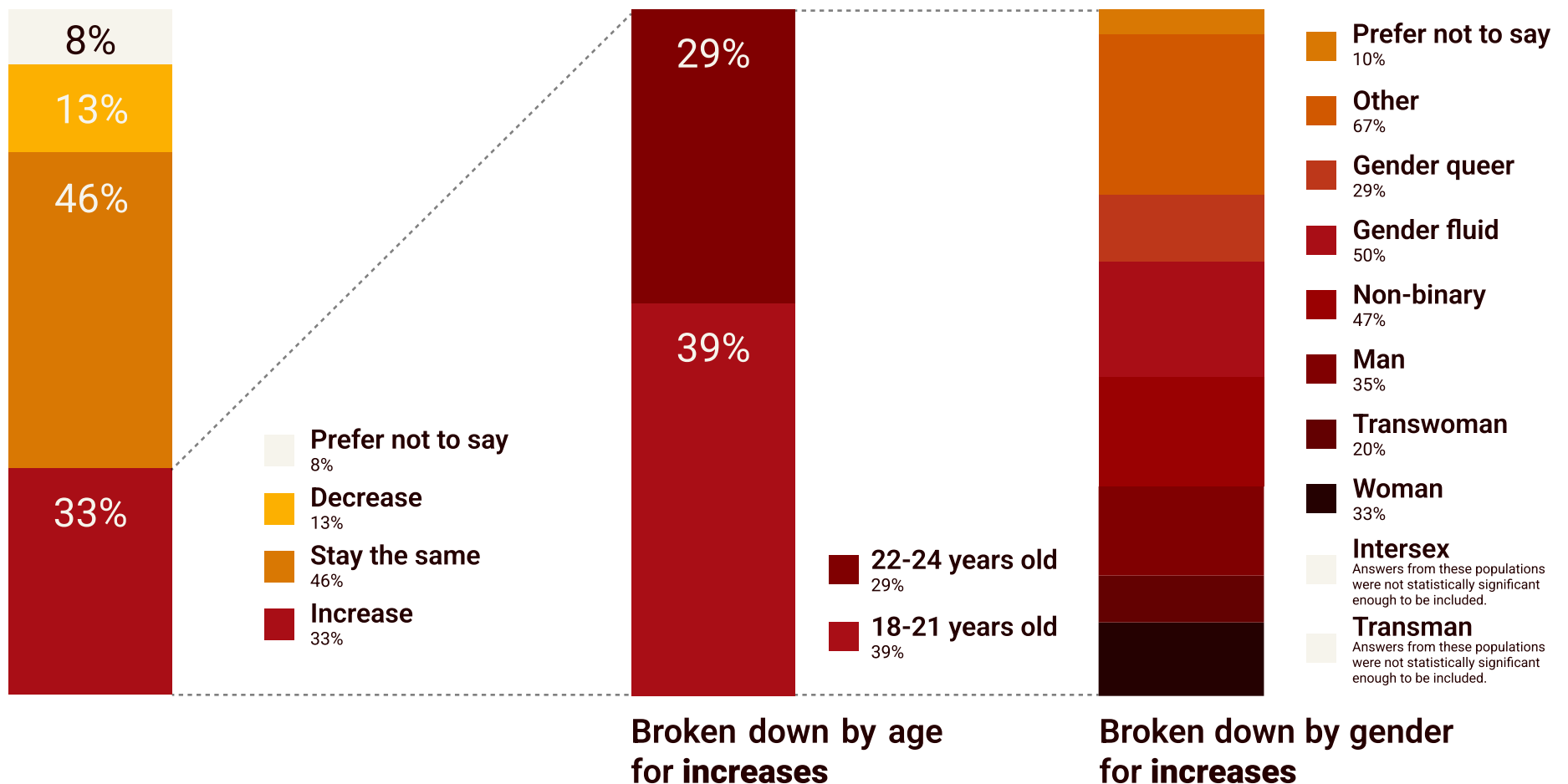
## Risk

While the initial stress of the pandemic has scientists predicting sex droughts and low libido, new studies<sup>2</sup> are showing that the pandemic may have had some positive effects on our sex lives as well. For Canadian youth, 33% of sexually active youth reported the pandemic has made them more sexually adventurous, in terms of **trying new positions, sex toys and kinks.**

Young Canadians who identify as gender fluid and non-binary were more likely to report a high desire to be more sexually adventurous - 50% and 47% respectively. And those aged 18-21 years old were more likely to report a higher desire for adventure (39%) than those aged 22-24 (29%)

### 33% of sexually active youth reported the pandemic has made them more sexually adventurous.

Has the pandemic experience and lockdowns made you want to increase, decrease, or stay the same with regards to how sexually adventurous you are?



## Risk

New things Young Canadians said they tried during lockdowns:

- ✓ New sex toys
- ✓ New sex positions
- ✓ BDSM
- ✓ Sex dolls
- ✓ Bondage
- ✓ Sex with inanimate objects
- ✓ Sexting
- ✓ Anal
- ✓ New styles of porn
- ✓ Phone sex
- ✓ Bottoming
- ✓ Making sex tapes
- ✓ 16-inch dildos

We asked youth: How did the COVID-19 lockdown periods impact your desire to try out new things in person with partner(s), such as new positions and new sex toys?

This is what they had to say:

“The pandemic made me and my sexual partners more freaky.”

“Beaucoup car j'avais le temps de faire plusieurs recherches et avoir de nouvelles fantaisies.” (*A lot because I had time to do more research and to have new fantasies*)

“During the pandemic it's fun to use sex as a distraction and a way to forget about what's going on, so testing out new styles and toys allows you to lose yourself in the experience more.”

“I have been more open to opening up sexually to others when I would have been closed off before.”

“The imagination that was graced upon me in terms of sex positions was truly Aristotelian.”

“I actually have been negatively impacted. With the additional stress of work, health among other things I have no sex drive.”

“It kind of lessened that desire because we were forced to be with each other 24/7 and didn't have as much sexual desire.”

“Nous avons essayé de nouveaux accessoires, nous sommes allé dans un sex shop, mais on se voyait moins souvent en raison du confinement donc moins de rapports sexuels.” (*We tried new accessories, we went to a sex shop, but we saw each other less often because of the confinement so we had less sex.*)

**S**

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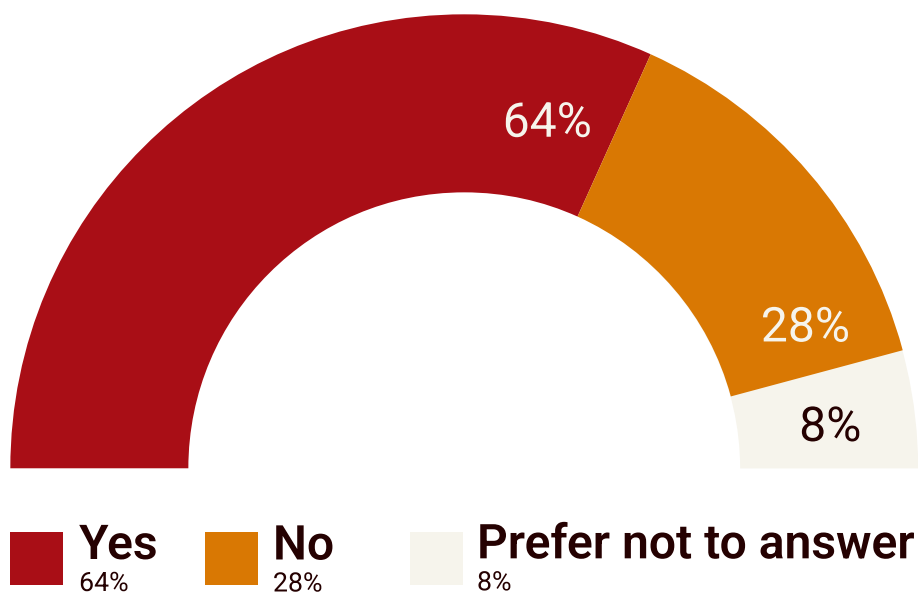
## STI/HIV

# In the last 3 months, 28% of youth diagnosed with STIs did not receive treatment.

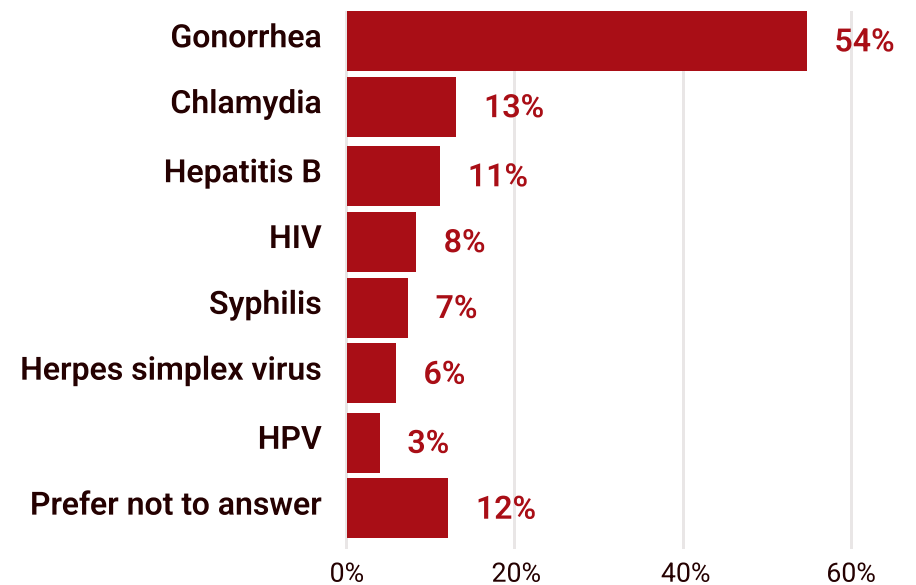
In April 2022, the Globe and Mail reported that STIs were spreading aggressively across Canada as testing and prevention were abandoned during pandemic. There were gonorrhoea outbreaks in the Atlantic provinces and spikes in syphilis cases across the country. Saskatchewan saw a 29% increase in HIV cases in 2021 compared to 2020.<sup>3</sup>

As lockdowns were lifted across the country during April-June 2022, 28% of Canadian youth who were diagnosed with an STI did not receive treatment. This may be due to a variety of factors such as access to treatment as well as stigma against STIs and HIV.

In the last 3 months, if you were diagnosed with any STIs or HIV, did you receive treatment?



Which STI(s) were you diagnosed with?



\*Percentages add up to over 100% as respondents could choose more than one answer.

## STI/HIV

We asked youth “Overall, can you describe how you think the pandemic has affected your views on sex and risk?”

This is what they shared:

“YOLO baby!”

“Avec le manque de rencontre en vrai au cours de dernière année, j'ai comme un besoin de rattraper le temps perdu et d'essayer le plus de chose possible.” (*With the lack of connections in real life over the last year, I have like a need to make up for lost time, and to try as many things as possible.*)

“COVID-19 has made me even more reluctant to meet new people.”

“I got COVID-19 from sex.”

“I am more open to sex now and taking risks with it.”

“More risk averse because I do not want to get pregnant during a pandemic.”

“I became more open to different forms of sex but I still practice safe sex.”

“I contracted herpes during the pandemic and I always use a condom now.”

“I have definitely become more reckless during the pandemic. Taking more risks, being more spontaneous, and more dangerous when it comes to sex.”

“The pandemic made me more risky and I took more risks because in life taking risks is a big part because it helps you grow.”

## STI/HIV

While many of us may have felt that we all got degrees in epidemiology at the start of the pandemic, this increased **public health literacy did not translate to knowledge about HIV prevention and treatment.** Only 26% of Canadian youth had knowledge about PrEP aka pre-exposure prophylaxis, a medicine people at risk of HIV can take to prevent getting HIV from sex or injection drug use. Only 20% know about PEP aka post-exposure prophylaxis, a short course of HIV medicines that must be started until 72 hours after possible exposure to HIV to prevent infection. And even fewer, 11%, know about U=U aka Undetectable = Untransmittable which is when people living with HIV who take antiretroviral therapy have an undetectable viral load which means there is no risk of transmitting HIV sexually.

Those with university or higher education are 8%-16% more knowledgeable on those topics than those with less than high school education. Knowledge about PrEP, PEP, and U=U also differed based on people's sexual orientations, with individuals who identified as being part of the LGBTQ2 community having significantly more knowledge than those who identified as heterosexual.

However, even among youth who identified as LGBTQ2 there is still a high level of unfamiliarity with these prevention strategies, which shows the need for more communication policies to amplify awareness about HIV prevention and stigma reduction.

**Have you heard of any of the following: PrEP, PEP and U=U. These are the percentages for yes:**



**Only 26% of youth have knowledge of PrEP, only 20% know about PEP and only 11% of youth know what U=U is.**

### Knowledge of PrEP, PEP and U=U by people's sexual orientation

	Heterosexual	Bisexual	Gay	Lesbian	Two-spirit	Queer	Asexual	Pansexual	Other	Prefer not to say
<b>PrEP</b>	19%	39%	66%	42%	17%	51%	31%	39%	20%	26%
<b>PEP</b>	15%	26%	43%	28%	56%	46%	9%	27%	22%	16%
<b>U=U</b>	7%	12%	33%	15%	46%	10%	3%	8%	18%	15%

 **ONLINE**

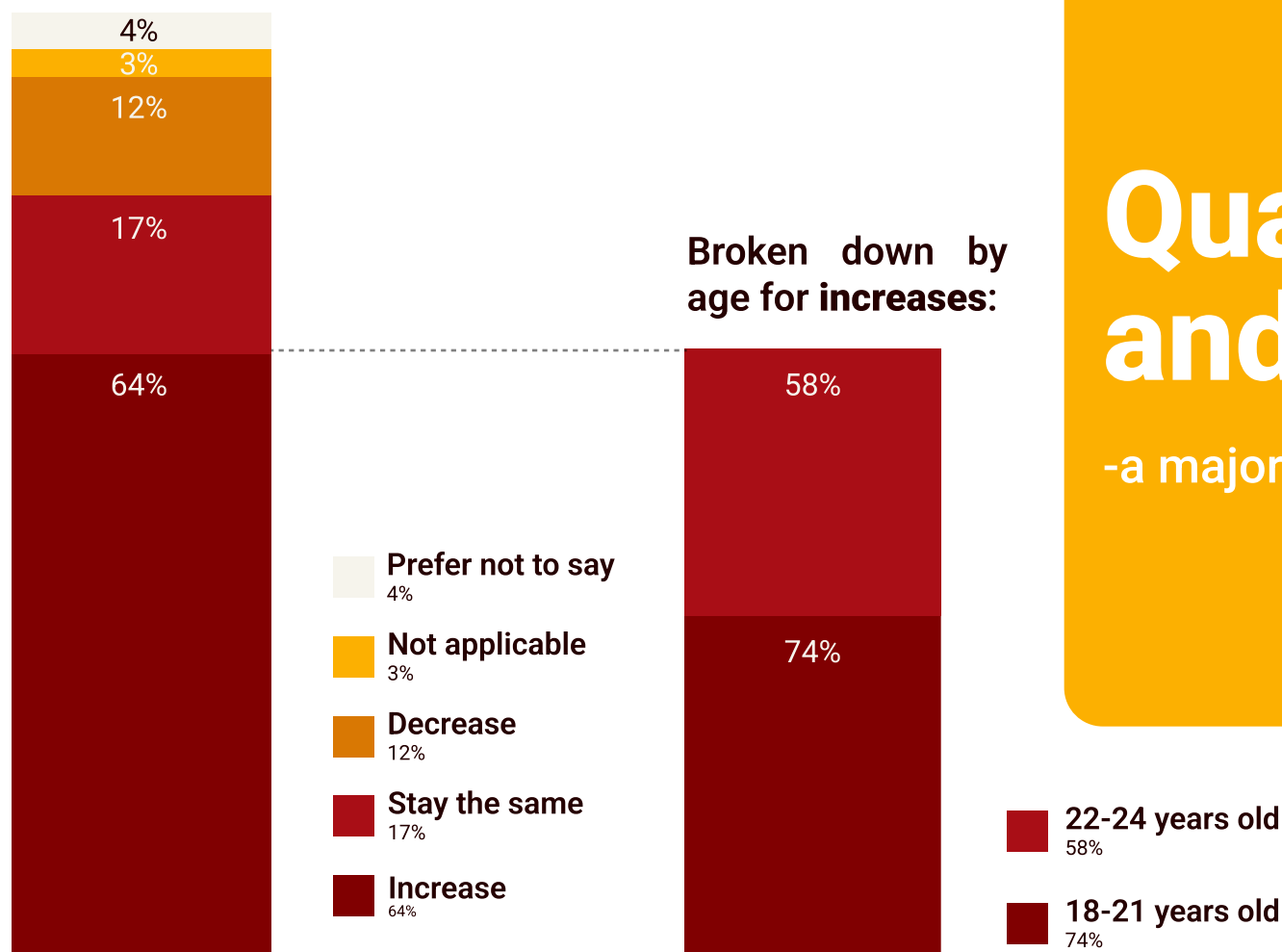
**DATING**

## Online Dating

With lockdowns and in-person stranger danger in the early days of the pandemic, interest in online dating skyrocketed with 64% of youth reporting an increase in interest in dating online. The increase was particularly high among 18-21 year olds with 74% reporting an increase in online dating vs 58% of youth aged 22-24.

# 64% of youth said the pandemic increased their interest in online dating.

### How did lockdowns affect your interest in online dating?



## Quarantine and chill?

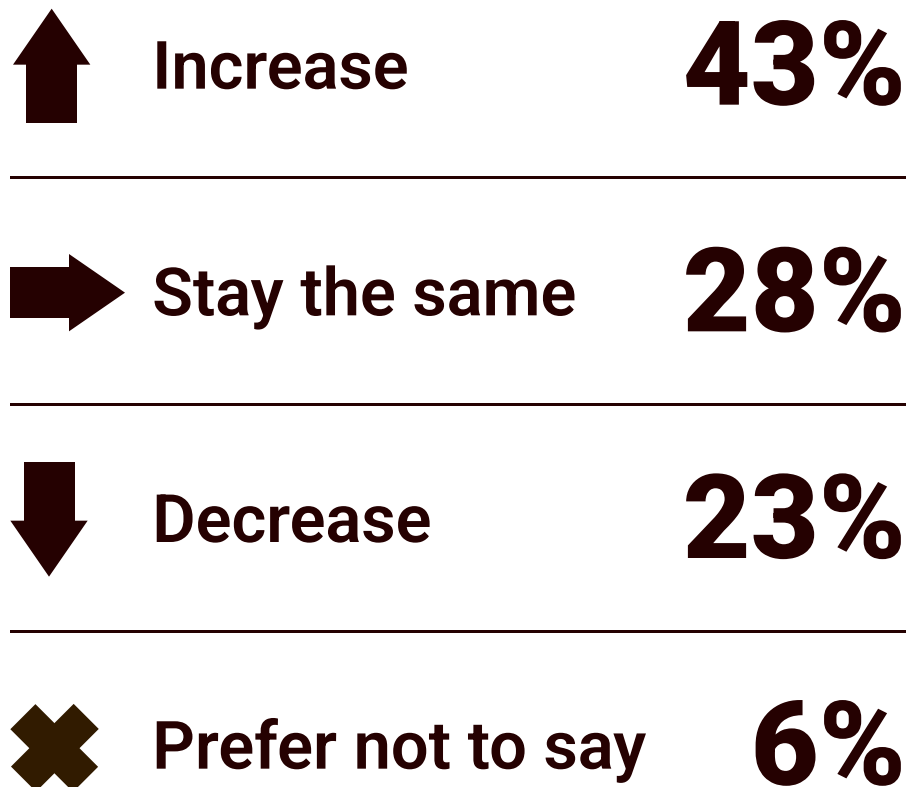
-a majority of youth said yes.

## Online Dating

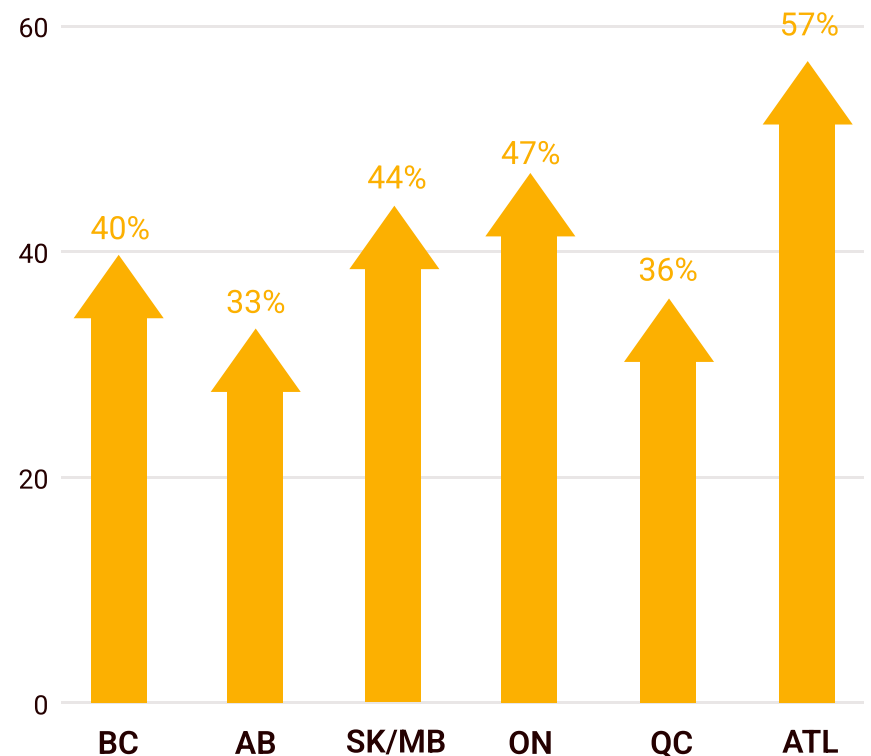
The sharing of intimate photos among young Canadians increased by almost 50% during the pandemic. More men than women reported sending more nudes during lockdowns. Regionally, the Atlantic provinces (57%) reported the biggest increase, followed by Ontario (47%) and Saskatchewan and Manitoba (44%). However, it is not clear if young Canadians understand the risks of this practice, particularly at a time when they feel the most economically vulnerable, socially invisible, sexually regressed and lonely.

**43% of youth on online dating apps reported sending more nudes during lockdowns.**

How did lockdowns affect your behaviour on online dating apps with regards to sending nudes – did they increase, decrease or stay the same?



Broken down by region for increases:



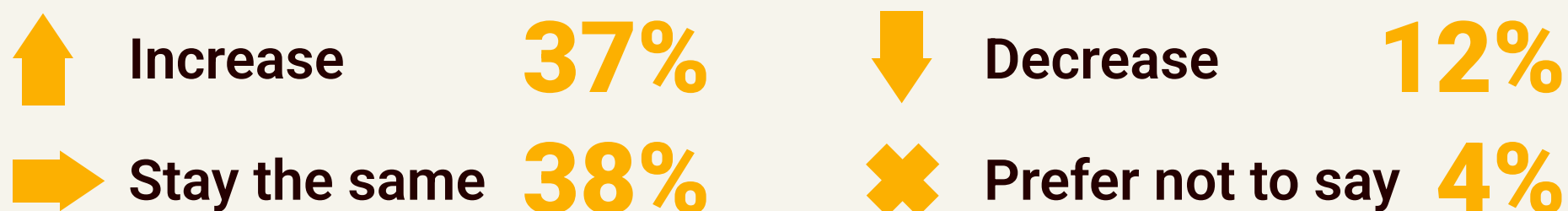
## Online Dating

# 37% of youth on online dating apps reported an increase in “backsliding” with exes/old dates due to lockdowns.








At the start of the pandemic, the term “backsliding” became popular as being locked down meant people had time to reflect and become nostalgic about exes and old dates, leading them to reach out and reconnect. 37% of young Canadians on online dating apps reported an increase in “backsliding” during lockdowns - with men more guilty of this behaviour than women.

But experts<sup>4</sup> warn that such practices may be more harmful than helpful as you may often not get the response you want (aka silent treatment or an ex has totally moved on), or it digs up bad memories from the past. But most importantly, this activity is taking place out of boredom - and we should not be toying with others' emotions (especially old exes and dates) just for entertainment.





How did lockdowns affect your behaviour on online dating apps with regards to backsliding?



Broken down by sexual orientation for increases:

Heterosexual	 42%
Bisexual	 25%
Gay	 42%
Asexual	 50%
Pansexual	 38%
Other	 13%
Prefer not to say	 33%

Broken down by gender for increases:

Woman	 33%	Transman	x
Man	 45%	Intersex	x
Non-binary	 50%	Gender queer	x
Gender fluid	 67%	Other	x
Transwoman	x	Prefer not to say	x

\*Answers from these populations were not statistically significant enough to be included.

## Online Dating

**“During the COVID-19 lockdown period, I reconnected with my ex-boyfriend online. We couldn't meet, so we tried long distance. We used sex toys and tried new things like watching porn together on Google Meet.”**

Aisha\*, British Columbia

\*Pseudonyms are used



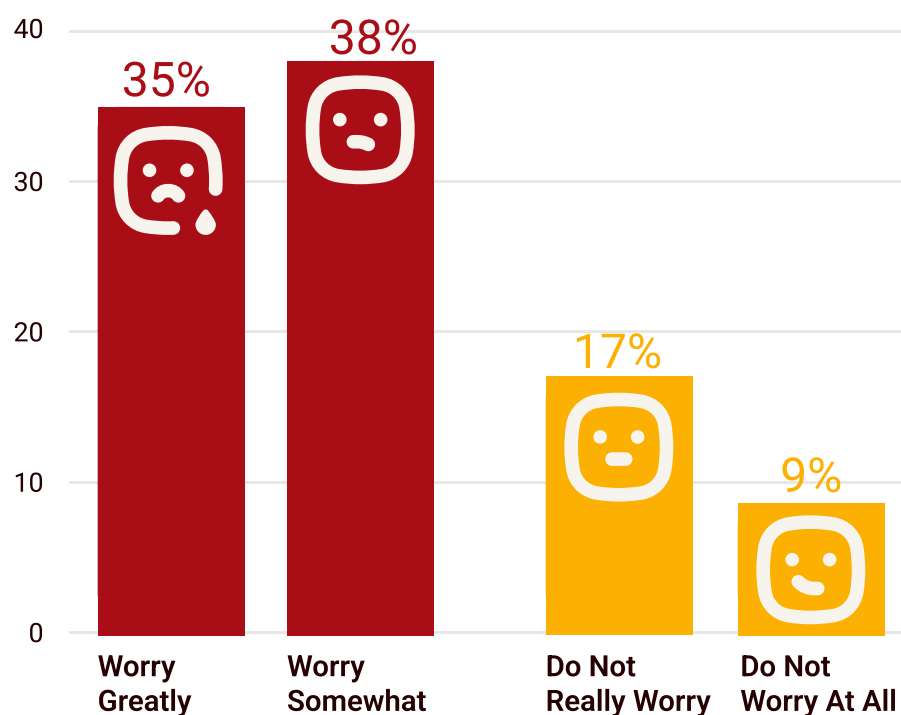
**MENTAL**

**HEALTH**

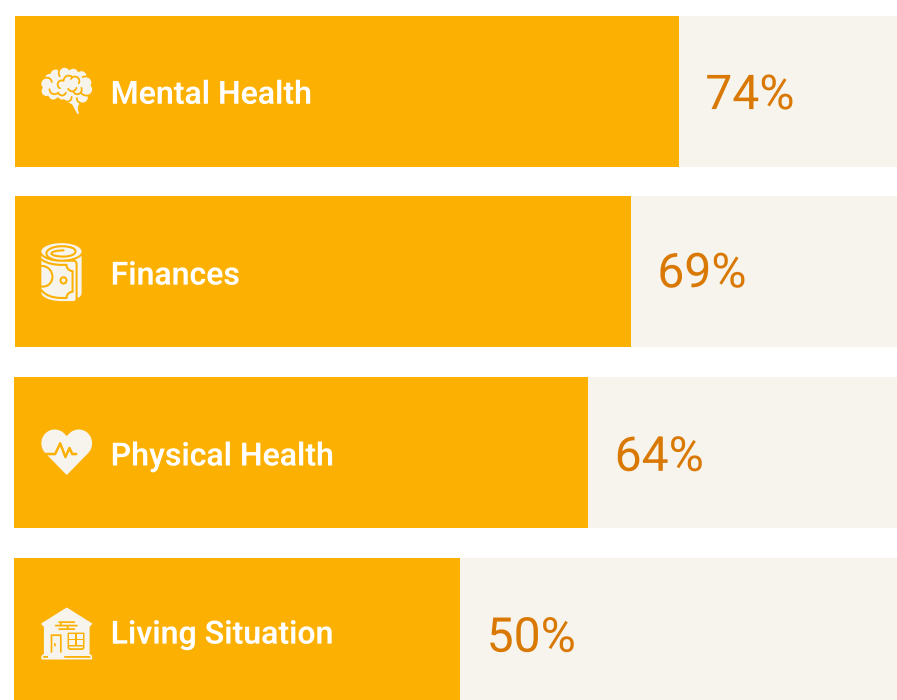
## Mental Health

# 74% of Youth reported worrying about the pandemic's impact on their mental health

To what degree do you worry about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has on your mental health?



To what degree do you worry about the impact of COVID-19 pandemic has on your:



**The kids are not alright.** While a significant amount of societal focus has been on the mental health impacts of the pandemic on children and their regression due to the ever changing rules around in-person or online schooling, young Canadians have often been left out of that conversation.

But a staggering 74% of young Canadians report worrying about the pandemic's impact on their mental health. In addition, 69% are worried about their finances, 64% are worried about their physical health and 50% are concerned about their living situation.

**Needless to say, the concerns of Canadian youth need more attention both on the societal as well as policy level.**

## Mental Health

**“COVID-19 and the stress of potentially losing my job has caused my anxiety to worsen making it hard to meet with sexual partners.”**

Mohamed\*, Manitoba

**“I wasn’t able to go out and see my partner - it was almost a year later until we saw each other due to the drive (we are 2 hour drive apart). It was saddening and I was worried for our relationship.”**

Evelyn\*, Saskatchewan

**“I feel more vulnerable now around opening up emotionally and sexually to others, even to my partner of two years, and I think this is largely due to the overall anxiety, stress and isolation of the pandemic.”**

Daniella\*, Prince Edward Island

**“I feel I wasted so much of my early twenties in lockdown and I am so depressed that my university experience has been ruined due to online learning. So when I get the chance to have sex, I’ll do it without any consideration regarding safe sex rather base it only on my attraction to that person.”**

Dave\*, Ontario

\*Pseudonyms are used

A photograph of a person in a shower, with water spraying over their body. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter. The word "METHODOLOGY" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font across the lower portion of the image.

**METHODOLOGY**

## Methodology

### What is the LetsStopAIDS Sex Lives Report?

It is LetsStopAIDS' inaugural report that looks at the sex lives of Canadian youth. Using data from a nationally representative survey conducted by LetsStopAIDS, the Sex Lives Report is taking the temperature on the state of sex among youth in Canada. In 2022, the survey and report focus on understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sexual behaviour of young Canadians.

### How and with whom was the survey conducted?

This online study was conducted by LetsStopAIDS among a representative sample of 1,018 Canadians 18-24 years who are members of the Angus Reid Forum. The sample was balanced and weighted on gender and region. The survey was conducted in English and French.

For comparison purposes only, a randomized sample of  $n=1,018$  would yield a margin of error of  $\pm 3.1$  percentage points, 19 times out of 20. All sample surveys and polls may be subject to other sources of error, including, but not limited to coverage error, and measurement error. The Angus Reid Forum is Canada's most well-known and trusted online public opinion community consisting of engaged residents across the country who answer surveys on topical issues that matter to all Canadians.

### How were respondents' data protected?

LetsStopAIDS and Angus Reid Group are committed to protecting the privacy and confidentiality of personal information collected. To ensure anonymity, Angus Reid Group assigned each respondent a unique panelist ID. The survey captured the IDs of the panelists who completed the survey and appended it to the data file shared with LetsStopAIDS. All survey data is stored on secured servers located in Canada.

### Additional Questions?

If you have additional questions about the methodology, or if you'd like to request the LetsStopAIDS Sex Lives Report for precise data manipulation and survey question wording, please contact [info@LetsStopAIDS.org](mailto:info@LetsStopAIDS.org)

## Endnotes

1. Zosia Bielski, "Stis Spreading Aggressively in Canada as Testing, Prevention Abandoned during Pandemic," The Globe and Mail (The Globe and Mail, April 8, 2022), <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-stis-rise-across-canada-after-limited-access-to-testing-and-treatment/>.
2. Eharmony Editorial Team, "Eharmony Happiness Index Study 2022," eharmony (eHarmony, February 23, 2022), <https://www.eharmony.ca/study/happiness-index-2022/>.
3. Zosia Bielski, "Stis Spreading Aggressively in Canada as Testing, Prevention Abandoned during Pandemic," The Globe and Mail (The Globe and Mail, April 8, 2022), <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-stis-rise-across-canada-after-limited-access-to-testing-and-treatment/>.
4. Rasha Ali, "No, It's Not a Good Idea to Text Your Ex during the Coronavirus Pandemic," USA Today (Gannett Satellite Information Network, May 3, 2020), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/2020/04/23/coronavirus-stop-texting-your-ex-its-not-good-idea/2996449001/>.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS





As a charitable organization built by the hands of thousands of volunteers around the world, our special thanks to these people who are dedicated to pursuing our purpose and values.

We also want to thank Dr. Yvonne Su for her support with the 2022 LetsStopAIDS Sex Lives project and to Dr. James Orbinski, Dr. Lori Brotto, and Victoria Yang for assisting with the survey questions.



Publication date: 25 July 2022

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Citation: LetsStopAIDS. (2022). LetsStopAIDS Sex Lives Report: The Impact of the Pandemic on the Sexual Behaviour of Young Canadians 2022. LetsStopAIDS.

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**LetsStopAIDS is Canada's youth-HIV charity that focuses on HIV prevention and knowledge exchange by engaging young people and fostering leadership. Founded in 2004, we are a global network of over 400 youth-HIV leaders in over 20 countries. LetsStopAIDS focuses on providing meaningful virtual and in-person opportunities that motivate volunteers to share knowledge, resources and support to youth affected by HIV.**

**To learn more about LetsStopAIDS' work or make a charitable donation to support our activities, please visit [LetsStopAIDS.org](https://LetsStopAIDS.org) or contact us at +1 (416) 231-2333.**



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