EYES ONLY™
ТОЛЬКО ДЛЯ ГЛАЗ

KILO — "I WISH TO COMMUNICATE WITH YOU"

POLICY & COMMENTARY

# The Screwdriver Hypothesis

*Alcohol, Inhibition, and the Fertility Decline*

By Dr.h.c., Eamon Patrick Clune
Tallinn, Estonia · 22 August 2026

*A late-night thought, tested against the research: whether the disappearance of alcohol from young people's social lives has quietly disappeared something else along with it — and what, if anything, governments should do about it.*

## The Question

It was nearly one o'clock on a Saturday morning — Friday night bleeding into it, as these things do — and I was sitting alone with a sandwich and a screwdriver: vodka and orange juice, nothing more complicated than that. I drink rarely these days, so rarely that the glass itself was enough to send my mind backward, to my teenage years and the years just after, when alcohol was not an occasional indulgence but a fixture of ordinary social life. It structured the weekend. It was where you went. My generation, and the ones just before and after it, drank on a regular basis, in venues built for exactly that purpose, and we thought little of it because everyone did.

Sitting there, the thought arrived unbidden: fertility rates across the developed world have been falling for years, and over that same stretch of years, young people have been drinking markedly less than the generations before them. Could the two be connected? My reasoning was simple enough. Alcohol, consumed socially, lowers inhibition. Lowered inhibition was, for a great many young men and women of my era, the difference between watching someone across a room and actually approaching them — the difference between a Friday night that went nowhere and one that became a relationship, a marriage, a family. If that social lubricant has been withdrawn from an entire generation's courtship, it seemed reasonable to ask whether its absence is one of the quieter causes of the fertility decline everyone is currently wringing their hands over.

I decided, sitting there with the glass in hand, to put the question to Claude AI and see what the research actually says — rather than simply trust my own nostalgia for the bars and house parties of my twenties.

## What Claude Found

Claude went looking, and came back with more support for the idea than I expected. The clearest single piece of evidence is a 2021 study by the sociologists Scott South and Lei Lei, published in the Journal of Marriage and Family, which set out specifically to explain why young Americans are having measurably less sex than previous generations did at the same age. Of every factor they tested — economic insecurity, video games, shifting attitudes — two stood out as the most important: a decline in the formation of romantic relationships, and a decline in alcohol consumption. Between them, along with the smaller contributions of falling earnings and rising screen time, these factors accounted for roughly three-quarters of the entire drop in young adult sexual activity. That is not a fringe correlation. It is, at present, one of the leading explanations in the demographic literature.

But Claude was careful to correct the shape of my original theory, and the correction is worth recording honestly rather than glossing over. My instinct was that alcohol matters because it

lowers inhibition in the moment — at the bar, at the party. The research suggests the larger mechanism is different: alcohol and its associated venues functioned as courtship infrastructure. The bar, the party, the pub quiz, the wedding reception — these were places where strangers met, lingered, and sometimes paired off into something lasting. Data on time use bears this out starkly: young adults today spend only about five hours a week socialising in person, down from roughly fifteen hours a generation ago. And the figure that seems to matter most for fertility specifically is cohabitation. Between 2014 and 2024 alone, the share of young American adults living with a romantic partner — married or not — fell from 42 percent to 32 percent. Partnered people have consistently more sex, and more children, than people living alone. If the venues that once produced partnerships are disappearing alongside the alcohol that was served in them, the two declines are not so much cause and effect as two symptoms of the same missing infrastructure.

Here I will add something of my own, which Claude's research prompted me to reconsider. At nineteen, twenty, twenty-one years old, I cohabitated with my girlfriend at the time — an entirely unremarkable arrangement for a young couple in that period. Reading the cohabitation figures above, I am struck by how ordinary that decision felt to me then, and how much less ordinary it apparently is now. What was simply "what you did" at that age for my generation is, for a great many young people today, a path no longer taken — not out of any change in feeling, necessarily, but because the whole social machinery that used to lead two twenty-year-olds into an apartment together seems to have quietly shut down.

Claude was equally clear that alcohol is not the primary driver of the fertility decline itself. The larger forces there are the familiar ones — the cost of housing, the cost of raising a child, delayed marriage, career timing, contraception — and the "sex recession" that alcohol's decline feeds into is better understood as one contributing stream running into that larger river, not the river itself. That is a fair qualification, and an honest paper should carry it rather than overstate the case.

## Something Worth Governments Considering

If the research holds — and it is corroborated, not merely my own late-night speculation — it raises a genuine policy question, and I put it here as a question rather than a settled recommendation. Should governments, at the national, state, or municipal level, take an interest in rebuilding the social infrastructure that once brought young people together, including venues where alcohol is served, as one instrument among several for addressing the fertility decline?

**The case for it:**

Municipal support for public social venues — subsidised community halls, licensing reform that makes it easier to open affordable neighbourhood bars and social clubs, funded

festivals and mixers aimed at unattached young adults — would directly target the collapsed "third places" that the data identifies as missing. It would not require government to endorse drinking as such; it would require government to stop treating the venue itself as socially neutral infrastructure and start treating it as courtship infrastructure worth investing in, the same way it invests in parks or public transport.

**The case against it:**

Any policy that can be described, even loosely, as a government encouraging alcohol consumption among young people sits uneasily beside decades of public health work reducing exactly that consumption — work that has been credited with real declines in adolescent injury, alcohol-related harm, and drunk driving deaths. A state that spent thirty years telling people to drink less would be in an odd position telling them to start again for demographic reasons. There is also the honest possibility that the causal arrow runs the other way in part: young people may be drinking less because the old venues and the old courtship rituals stopped working for them, rather than the venues disappearing because drinking declined — in which case pouring money into bars would not restore what was actually lost. And any such policy would have to reckon with the fact that most of the research above concerns risk-taking and inhibition in ways that public health bodies would rightly insist be handled with care rather than promotion.

My own view, for what it is worth, is that the more defensible version of this policy leaves the alcohol out of the government's hands entirely and focuses instead on what alcohol venues actually provided — affordable, unstructured, recurring places for unattached young adults to meet in person. A subsidised social calendar, a revived tradition of the public dance, the local hall on a Friday night, does not need a liquor licence to do the job the pub once did. But I raise the stronger, more uncomfortable version of the question here because it deserves to be asked plainly rather than smoothed over, and because the data behind it is real.

## A Note on Method

*This piece began as an unstructured thought at one in the morning and was tested, not confirmed, by research I did not do myself. I put the question to Claude AI because I wanted to know whether my recollection of my own youth was actually load-bearing, or simply nostalgia dressed up as sociology. The honest answer sits somewhere between the two: the mechanism I proposed is real but secondary; the larger mechanism — the disappearance of the venues themselves, and of cohabitation along with them — is the one the evidence actually points to. I would rather publish that correction than the cleaner, more flattering version of my own idea.*