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Why Social Media is the Wrong Mental Health Villain

By Pablo Garcia Quint



Executive Summary

By many estimates, teenage depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation have risen dramatically since the early 2010s,¹ sparking widespread concern among researchers, parents, and policymakers that social media is damaging America's youth. Recent verdicts finding Meta and Google liable for addictive harm accelerated the debate, as state policymakers rush to pass pre-emptive rules and regulations to protect kids online. The haste to regulate will backfire.

At its core, the social media regulation debate relies on inconclusive, misunderstood, and often misapplied academic research. Even when research finds a link between social media and mental health, the effects are often small in magnitude and fail to generalize to the entire population of adolescents. The mixed literature suggests that policymakers and experts understand little about the long-term effects of the platforms and their regulations.

Many other sources—such as lack of sleep, socioeconomic status, and family environment—play more profound roles in the youth mental health problem. Yet social media remains the boogeyman in nearly all regulatory discussions of youth mental health. As policymakers consider kids' online safety regulations, they are grasping for oversimplified, one-size-fits-all solutions for a nuanced and multifaceted problem. Continuing the current path of regulatory activity is likely to leave the concerning mental health trend unaddressed.

¹ Zach Rausch and Jonathan Haidt, "The Evidence," from *The Anxious Generation*, March 2, 2024, <https://www.anxiousgeneration.com/research/the-evidence>.

Introduction

Depression rates among teens aged 12 to 17 increased from 8.1 percent in 2009 to 17.8 percent in 2023.² Meanwhile, suicide rates among adolescents aged 15 to 19 increased 29 percent from 1,669 deaths to 2,156 deaths.³ The troubling mental health trends coincided with widespread social media use, which has led to the conclusion that social media has grown at the expense of youth mental well-being. However, policymakers should understand that the shortcomings of this conclusion fall into three main categories.

- **Lack of consensus:** Research offers little consensus and weak results on social media's impact on mental health. Even in the bellwether court decisions in California where juries found Meta and Google liable for addiction and harmful platform design, the juries struggled with mixed expert testimony.⁴
- **Poorly contextualized research:** The effects of social media are nuanced and a narrow view ignores the interplay of other variables that affect mental health. When accounting for more variables and placing the effects of social media in context, there is a gap between policymakers' proposals and the lived reality of social media and mental health.
- **Nuanced social media benefits:** Regulation overlooks the benefits of social media use, instead presuming it is inherently harmful. Like the rest of the academic literature, the evidence of social media benefits is also mixed and weak. However, the symmetrical weaknesses across the harmful and helpful literature suggest that policymakers who find the harmful evidence convincing must also consider the equally mixed and weak positive evidence.

Social Media and Mental Health: A Weak Literature with Little Consensus

Surgeons General, politicians, and popular academic figures famously bemoan the mental health effects of social media⁵—but this sentiment downplays a nuanced academic literature that varies by method and effect.

² Katharina Buchholz, "More U.S. Teenagers Are Experiencing Depression," *Statista*, April 30, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/chart/20052/share-of-us-teenagers-experiencing-depressive-episodes-and-receiving-treatment/>.

³ Includes Suicide All Injury Deaths and Rates per 100,000 Data Years: 2010 to 2023, United States, 10 to 14 through 15 to 19, Males, Females, All Races, All Ethnicities ICD-10 Codes: X60-X84, Y87.0,*U03. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. "Injury Counts and Rates," WISQARS Fatal Injury Reports, Last visited February 22, 2026, <https://wisqars.cdc.gov/reports/?o=MORT&y1=2010&y2=2023&t=0&i=2&m=20810&g=00&me=0&s=1&s=2&r=0&ry=0&e=0&yp=65&a=5Yr&g1=10&g2=15&a1=0&a2=199&r1=YEAR&r2=AGEGP&r3=SEX&r4=NONE>.

⁴ Erin Mulvaney, Meghan Bobrowsky, and Erich Schwartzel, "Meta Is in Risky Legal Territory after Back-To-Back Court Losses," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 26, 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/tech/do-back-to-back-courtroom-losses-herald-metas-big-tobacco-moment-57e6f227>.

⁵ Vivek H. Murthy, "Surgeon General: Why I'm Calling for a Warning Label on Social Media Platforms," *New York Times*, June 17, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/17/opinion/social-media-health-warning.html>; Keelsey Ables, "New York City Designates Social Media a Public Health Hazard," *The Washington Post*, January 25, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2024/01/25/nyc-social-media-health-hazard-toxin/>; and Ezra Klein, "Our Kids Are the Least Flourishing Generation We Know Of," *New York Times*, April 1, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/01/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-jonathan-haidt.html>.

In 2019, Jonathan Haidt, Jean Twenge, and Zach Rausch began organizing a compendium of studies on mental health and social media, categorizing them into three sections that represent the types of studies in this area of research: correlational, longitudinal, and experimental.⁶ After gathering and analyzing these studies, the researchers concluded that there was a negative association between social media and mental health.

Contrary to that finding, other accounts of the literature reveal the research to be mixed and weak. After analyzing studies from 2019 to 2021, a meta-review published in the academic journal *Current Opinion in Psychology* concluded that research findings on mental health and social media were weak or inconsistent.⁷ Similarly, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) analyzed 301 peer-reviewed articles, finding mixed evidence of the effects of social media on mental, social, and physical aspects of adolescents while highlighting many "theoretical, conceptual, or methodological limitations."⁸ A 2025 meta-analysis from the American Psychological Association (APA) also concluded that the current evidence does not support claims that social media affects the mental health of young people.⁹

The many correlational, longitudinal, and experimental studies often cited as evidence that social media is detrimental to mental health have methodological weaknesses and mixed results. As teenage mental health scholar Amy Orben details in her paper, "Teenagers, Screens and Social Media: A Narrative Review of Reviews and Key Studies": "When examining the reviews, it becomes evident that the research field is dominated by cross-sectional work that is generally of a low quality standard."¹⁰

To demonstrate the weak nature of the evidence of social media use on overall mental health, this report analyzes the existing evidence according to subtopic headings put forward by social media's most ardent critics: correlational studies, longitudinal studies, and experimental studies.¹¹ An additional section is included for addiction, which has become one of the most hotly debated issues in social media regulation since the ruling against Meta and Google in California. Even using the evidentiary structure of its critics, the evidence is inconclusive.

⁶ Jonathan Haidt, Zach Rausch, and Jean Twenge, "Social Media and Mental Health: A Collaborative Review," Ongoing Manuscript, New York University, Last visited February 26, 2026, tinyurl.com/SocialMediaMentalHealthReview.

⁷ Patti M. Valkenburg, Adrian Meier, and Ine Beyens, "Social Media Use and Its Impact on Adolescent Mental Health: An Umbrella Review of the Evidence," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 44 (2022): 58–68, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.08.017>.

⁸ Daniel Kardefelt-Winther, "How Does the Time Children Spend Using Digital Technology Impact Their Mental Well-Being, Social Relationships, and Physical Activity? An Evidence-Focused Literature Review," UNICEF Innocenti Discussion Paper, 2017, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321724817_How_does_the_time_children_spend_using_digital_technology_impact_their_mental_well-being_social_relationships_and_physical_activity_An_evidence-focused_literature_review.

⁹ Christopher Ferguson, Linda Kaye, Dawn Branley-Bell, and Patrick Markey, "There Is No Evidence That Social Media Use Is Correlated With Adolescent Mental Health Problems: Findings From a Meta-analysis," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 56(1), (2025): 73–83, <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2025-31872-001>.

¹⁰ Amy Orben, "Teenagers, Screens and Social Media: A Narrative Review of Reviews and Key Studies." *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 55, no. 4 (2020): 407–414, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-019-01825-4>.

¹¹ Jonathan Haidt, "Social Media and Mental Health," footnote 7.

CORRELATIONAL STUDIES

The academic literature on social media's impact on mental health is full of correlational studies with weak results that are presented as robust evidence of online activity causing poor mental health outcomes. The results do not justify the narrative.

The examples of weak evidence are legion. Consider that leading mental health and social media scholar Jean Twenge finds only weak associations but asserts them as problematic. Correlations are considered weak if the association measure is 0.3 or less.¹² In one of her studies, the correlation coefficient she finds for boys is close to zero, and the one for girls is below 0.3.¹³ Other studies by Twenge point to average correlations of 0.11 and 0.23 for teens with moderate use of digital technologies (less than an hour per day) and heavy use (three hours per day), respectively.¹⁴

A recent study at the Amsterdam Public Health Research Institute found that the correlation between the frequency of social media use and depressive symptoms ranged from 0.07 to 0.10, and the correlation between frequency of social media use and well-being ranged from -0.09 to 0.04.¹⁵

Of key importance, while some of these studies find a positive and statistically significant correlation, that is different than a strong correlation. Mathematically, significance refers to the probability that an event happens, but says nothing about how well that effect explains the relationship or the strength of that effect.¹⁶ A statistically significant correlation between social media and depression of 0.10, for example, shows that the relationship is not random. It also shows the strength and direction of the association. However, given the small correlation (0.10), the findings don't support claims that social media has a strong impact on mental health. Although researchers point to statistically significant results, the findings are so close to zero that they can be considered statistical noise.¹⁷

¹² Haldun Akoglu, "User's Guide to Correlation Coefficients," *Turkish Journal of Emergency Medicine*, 18(3), 91. September, 2028, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tjem.2018.08.001>.

¹³ Jean M. Twenge, Thomas E. Joiner, Megan L. Rogers, and Gabrielle N. Martin, "Increases in Depressive Symptoms, Suicide-Related Outcomes, and Suicide Rates Among U.S. Adolescents After 2010 and Links to Increased New Media Screen Time," *Clinical Psychological Science* 6, no. 1 (2018): 3–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702617723376>.

¹⁴ Jean M. Twenge, and W. Keith Campbell, "Media Use Is Linked to Lower Psychological Well-Being: Evidence from Three Datasets," *Psychiatric Quarterly* 90 (2019): 311–331, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11126-019-09630-7>.

¹⁵ Salim Sametoglu and Dirk H.M. Pelt, and Meike Bartels, "The Association Between Frequency of Social Media Use, Wellbeing, and Depressive Symptoms: Disentangling Genetic and Environmental Factors," *Behavior Genetics* 55 (2025): 255–269, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10519-025-10224-2>.

¹⁶ Stephen Ziliak and Deirdre McCloskey, "The Cult of Statistical Significance," 2009, <https://www.deirdremccloskey.com/docs/jsm.pdf>.

¹⁷ Another way to see the weakness of the correlations found in the social media literature is by calculating the variance explained, which is the square of the correlation. The variance explained shows how much of the total variability in a target variable can be attributed to a specific predictive model, variable, or group. So a correlation of 0.1 would equal a variance explained of 1%. Which means 99% of the variance is explained by other variables.

Other studies also find weak correlational results. German psychologists in the *Psychiatry Research Journal* found the correlational strength of social media use and depression, anxiety, and stress to be only 0.069, 0.098, and 0.11—but still claimed these results to be concerning.¹⁸ Similarly, a study from the University of Amsterdam found correlations ranging from 0.05 to 0.07 when associating social media use with well-being, self-esteem, and friendship.¹⁹

Even studies with stronger associations, often cited by social media critics, have cautioned about the generalizability of some of the strongest results. A study of minors in the United Kingdom found that, for girls and boys using social media for 3 to 5 hours, depressive symptoms were 26 percent vs 21 percent higher; and for girls and boys with more than 5 hours of use, they were 50 percent vs 35 percent higher—all statistically significant.²⁰ The authors of the study, meanwhile, have warned against interpreting the study results too broadly, given the study lacked causal links and identifiable traits about how minors use social media.

Many correlational studies find positive and statistically significant associations. However, their correlational strength is often weak, which undermines the real-world significance of those results. Even though their literature is plagued with these weak results, public figures and some academics frequently evade this shortcoming by noting the volume of studies, rather than their strength or real-world significance. Policymakers should therefore be careful about using correlational studies to argue for specific kinds of social media regulation.

LONGITUDINAL STUDIES

Beyond weak correlational studies, the academic literature relies on longitudinal studies, where many poor research designs and methodological limitations run rampant. Longitudinal studies track the effects of social media on mental health over time. That is preferable to relying on (mostly) weak data correlations. Still, these studies suffer from inconsistent timeframes that obscure the true trajectory of the effect, often varying in duration from days to years. Additionally, many of these studies rely on self-reporting, which means, researchers must contend with the tendency of surveyed users to inconsistently report their results.²¹

¹⁸ Julia Brailovskaia, and Jürgen Margraf, “Decrease of Well-Being and Increase of Online Media Use: Cohort Trends in German University Freshmen Between 2016 and 2019,” *Psychiatry Research* 290 (2020): 113110, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113110>.

¹⁹ Amber Van der Wal, Ine Beyens, Loes Janssen, and Patti M. Valkenburg, “Diverse Platforms, Diverse Effects: Evidence From a 100-Day Study on Social Media and Adolescent Mental Health,” Last edited September 20, 2025, https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/qe9rn_v2.

²⁰ Yvonne Kelly Y, Afshin Zilanawala, Cara Booker, Amanda Sacker, “Social Media Use and Adolescent Mental Health: Findings From the UK Millennium Cohort Study,” *EClinicalMedicine*. 2019;6:59–68. Published 2019 Jan 4. doi:10.1016/j.eclinm.2018.12.005.

²¹ Philip S. Brenner, and John DeLamater, “Lies, Damned Lies, and Survey Self-Reports? Identity as a Cause of Measurement Bias,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 79, no. 4 (2016): 333–354, <https://www.asanet.org/wp-content/uploads/attach/journals/dec16spqfeature.pdf>.

Similar to correlational studies, the evidence is also mixed and weak in longitudinal research designs. Of the 40 longitudinal studies Haidt analyzed in his compendium of studies, 25 showed negative effects of social media on mental health, but 15 showed no effects.²² Of the 25 longitudinal studies showing negative effects, many rely on self-reporting and include time inconsistencies that introduce bias and raise recall errors. After accounting for these limitations, the number of studies demonstrating a clear, reliable association is substantially smaller.

Consider two different results from longitudinal studies both using data from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD). One study in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, over a four-year timeframe, found that elevated screen time in mid-adolescence does not lead to problematic use of social media in later years.²³ Meanwhile, another study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association Psychiatry*, using the same dataset over a three-year timeframe, found that increased social media use leads to increases in depression.²⁴ Comparatively, the studies both deployed longitudinal research types using similar datasets but found different results.

As one longitudinal study acknowledges: “The complexities of measuring social media use present a major challenge to understanding the relationship between social media and mental health in longitudinal data.” Overall, the literature on longitudinal studies, often cited as strong evidence, is generally weak and far from conclusive.

EXPERIMENTAL STUDIES

Experimental studies most convincingly make the case for a causal relationship between mental health and social media use. In these studies, a treatment group is instructed to abstain from social media, which is compared to a control group that continues its use as normal. By comparing these groups, researchers can assess the impact of social media on mental health outcomes.

These studies may be more methodologically rigorous, but they still suffer from methodological flaws. First, many experimental studies focus on adults rather than teenagers, weakening the claim that social media disproportionately affects teens. For example, one of the largest experimental studies that Haidt references, a study published in the *American Economic Review*, was done on adults, not teens.²⁵

²² Jonathan Haidt, “Time Lag Study Patterns – Social Media and Mental Health – [Longitudinal] Studies,” Ongoing document, Google Sheets, Last visited February 26, 2025, <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1f30-4iZCZa9Nain3mZTR6jHYzQyyTlma9FJ8S20DKIs/edit?gid=726904786#gid=726904786>.

(Note: Title corrected from “experimental studies” to “longitudinal studies” for accuracy.)

²³ Beatrice A. Grund and Monica Luciana, “Prospective Predictors of Adolescent Screen Time and Problematic Screen Use,” *JAACAP Open* 3, no. 4 (July 3, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaacop.2025.06.007>.

²⁴ Kira E. Riehm, Kenneth A. Feder, and Kayla N. Tormohlen, “Associations between Time Spent Using Social Media and Internalizing and Externalizing Problems among US Youth,” *JAMA Psychiatry* 76, no. 12 (September 11, 2019): 1266–73, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2019.2325>.

²⁵ Hunt Allcott, Luca Braghieri, Sarah Eichmeyer, and Matthew Gentzkow, “The Welfare Effects of Social Media,” *American Economic Review* 110, no. 3 (2020): 629–76, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20190658>.

And even in that case, the results on subjective well-being—depression, happiness, loneliness, life satisfaction, and others—were again very small. Adults (18+) are more likely to have significant life stressors, amplifying any negative traits on social media. In 2025, for example, adults were the age group who reported feeling the loneliest. That overlap blurs the effects and makes distinguishing poor mental health causes difficult to observe.²⁶ It is therefore insufficient to assume that the effects in adults are the same as those in teens.

Furthermore, none of the experimental studies check if there are pre-existing mental health conditions in their sample—introducing bias, overmagnifying results, and risking misattribution of the causal mechanism, especially for users more prone to addiction. Failing to flag participants with existing mental health conditions is a key omission, especially because research demonstrates that individuals with existing mental health issues are likely to spend more time on social media.²⁷

And lastly, like much of the academic literature, many of the experimental studies find either no causal effects or very small ones. A study by the University of California, for example, showed that the effects on people restricting social media use after 8 days were modest and even negative in some cases.²⁸ Another study by the University of Texas found that after 7 weeks of restricting social media to a treatment group, many individuals in this group substituted social media with messaging apps, and the overall effects of the initial restrictions on well-being were minimal.²⁹ Most recently, a meta-study that analyzed evidence from 32 randomized controlled trials pointed to social media restrictions yielding strong but very small effects on mental health.³⁰ Social media critics often use such conclusions as reason for policy action, but here's how the study concludes: "Despite finding a significant, positive effect of social media restriction on subjective well-being, the small observed effect sizes suggest that restriction is likely not the most effective method of improving subjective well-being in today's digital age."³¹

²⁶ American Psychological Association, "Stress in America™ 2025: A Crisis of Connection," Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, November 1, 2025, <https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/stress-in-america/2025>.

²⁷ Luisa Fassi, Amanda M. Ferguson, Andrew K. Przybylski, and Amy Orben, "Social Media Use in Adolescents With and Without Mental Health Conditions," *Nature Human Behavior* 9 (2025): 1283–1299, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-025-02134-4>.

²⁸ Lisa C. Walsh, Annie Regan, Karynna Okabe-Miyamoto, and Sonja Lyubomirsky, "Does Putting Down Your Smartphone Make You Happier? The Effects of Restricting Digital Media on Well-Being," *PLoS ONE* 19, no. 10 (2024): e0306910, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0306910>.

²⁹ Avinash Collis and Felix Eggers, "Effects of Restricting Social Media Usage on Wellbeing and Performance: A Randomized Control Trial Among Students," *PLoS ONE* 17, no. 8 (August 2022): e0272416, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0272416>.

³⁰ Kaitlyn Burnell, Diana J. Meter, Fernanda C. Andrade, Ashley N. Slocum, Madeleine J. George, "The effects of social media restriction: Meta-analytic evidence from randomized controlled trials," *SSM – Mental Health*, Volume 7, 2025, 100459, ISSN 2666-5603, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2025.100459>.

³¹ Ibid; and Jonathan Haidt and Zachary Rausch, "Social Media Is Harming Young People at a Scale Large Enough to Cause Changes at the Population Level," *World Happiness Report 2026*, (March 2026), <https://www.worldhappiness.report/ed/2026/social-media-is-harming-adolescents-at-a-scale-large-enough-to-cause-changes-at-the-population-level/>.

ADDICTION STUDIES

In a recent California trial, a jury found Meta and Google liable for harms caused by addictive features in their social media platform designs.³² Importantly, this product liability case did not require courts to establish clinical or physical addiction to meet the legal negligence standard. Still, evidence of addiction-like symptoms, most notably dopamine response, was used as demonstrative evidence of platform neglect and harm. The California case directly engaged with whether social media platforms influence dopamine responses in teen brains, ultimately creating a harmful, intermittent reward system similar to addictive substance usage. Teens are especially vulnerable to this kind of harm due to ongoing brain development.

However, evidence shows that dopamine release alone is not sufficient evidence of addiction. As neuropsychopharmacologist David Nutt explains in a comprehensive review of dopamine addiction theory, “addiction is a complex mixture of behaviors and attitudes that vary from drug to drug and from user to user, and it is unlikely that a single neurotransmitter [dopamine] could explain every aspect of addiction.”³³ Plaintiffs in the California case against Meta and Google used addiction-like symptoms and dopamine responses to support their claims of negligent behavior that contributed to harm. But dopamine responses are also triggered by non-addictive activities such as playing video games, meditation, and eating, none of which meet clinical definitions of addiction.³⁴

Many social media platforms are clearly designed to sustain engagement through likes, infinite scroll, and notifications, but engagement and clinical addiction are not the same thing. Addiction requires meeting established diagnostic criteria laid out by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, most recently the DSM-5, but that protocol has thus far not extended its criteria to social media use.³⁵ Meanwhile, the causal link between dopamine responses and social media addiction, often compared to substance abuse, remains unestablished.

Much like the rest of the academic literature on social media, the evidence of social media addiction is mixed, limited, and group-specific, which weakens its strength and generalizability, even as more longitudinal and experimental studies since 2020 have strengthened the evidence of certain harms.

³² Cristiano Lima-Strong, “Landmark Verdicts Could Unleash New Legal Playbook over Social Media Harms,” Tech Policy Press, March 25, 2026, <https://www.techpolicy.press/landmark-verdicts-could-unleash-new-legal-playbook-over-social-media-harms/>.

³³ David J. Nutt et al., “The Dopamine Theory of Addiction: 40 Years of Highs and Lows,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 16, no. 5 (April 15, 2015): 305–12, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn3939>.

³⁴ M. J. Koepp et al., “Evidence for Striatal Dopamine Release during a Video Game,” *Nature* 393, no. 6682 (May 1998): 266–68, <https://doi.org/10.1038/30498>; Troels W. Kjaer et al., “Increased Dopamine Tone during Meditation-Induced Change of Consciousness,” *Cognitive Brain Research* 13, no. 2 (April 2002): 255–59, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0926-6410\(01\)00106-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0926-6410(01)00106-9); Nora D. Volkow et al., “Brain Dopamine Is Associated with Eating Behaviors in Humans,” *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 33, no. 2 (February 25, 2003): 136–42, <https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.10118>.

³⁵ American Psychiatric Association, “DSM-5-TR™” (Fifth Edition – Revised Text, 2022), [https://www.psychiatry.ru/siteconst/userfiles/file/book/%D0%90%D0%BD%D0%B3%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%8F%D0%B7%D1%8B%D1%87%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%8F%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B0%20%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BF%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%85%D0%B8%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B8/DSM%205%20TR-APA%20\(2022\).pdf](https://www.psychiatry.ru/siteconst/userfiles/file/book/%D0%90%D0%BD%D0%B3%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%8F%D0%B7%D1%8B%D1%87%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%8F%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B0%20%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BF%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%85%D0%B8%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B8/DSM%205%20TR-APA%20(2022).pdf).

Most of the research relies on self-reported data at a single point in time, making it difficult to pinpoint specific causes and eliminate other contributing factors.³⁶ Additionally, many people err in their self-diagnosis of addiction in social media settings. Research from the California Institute of Technology shows that only a very small percentage of people show actual signs of clinical addiction (~2 percent), but many more consumers perceived themselves as addicted (~18 percent).³⁷ This imbalance blurs the line between “habit” and “addiction,” worsening thoughts of lost self-control that feed feelings of self-blame. Although these feelings are harmful, pathological addiction symptoms are indeed rare, but can exist strongly in a very small percentage of cases.³⁸

Separate research in *JAMA Pediatrics* found that habitual social media checking may be associated with changes in brain sensitivity, but the same study also highlights that a deeper understanding of these effects requires further research, especially to assess today’s teens.³⁹ These results mirror a different study in the *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* that tested users for “attentional bias” stimuli as evidence of social media addiction.⁴⁰ It found no attentional bias toward social media stimuli, even among high-severity users. The study therefore recommended more research before social media use can be placed within an addiction framework. Peer-reviewed research in the journal *BMC Psychology* showed that depressive symptoms in Facebook users were only associated with those who already have a problematic use of social media.⁴¹ The study shows that the intensity of Facebook use only becomes problematic, even addictive in some cases, in users with specific traits, such as people with high neuroticism. Since these classifications, important as they may be, do not represent a majority of users, it is therefore misguided to apply these atypical effects to the majority of users.

Much like the role of social media and overall mental health, the research on social media addiction is mixed and developing, but one thing is clear: scholars mostly agree that more research is needed. This messy, inconclusive body of evidence—including its conflicting findings and methodological limitations—was the exact kind of complex evidence the California jury had to weigh amid competing expert testimony in considering product negligence and consumer harm of social media use.⁴² Despite these limitations and mixed findings, some courts have already reached a decision based on the presented evidence and documents of internal review. However, future courtroom deliberation and policymaker decision-making should further consider the weak and mixed evidence of clinical addiction as it relates to findings of negligent product design.

³⁶ Jeffrey A. Singer and Adam Omary, “The Case Against Social Media ‘Addiction,’” Cato Institute, April 16, 2026, <https://www.cato.org/blog/case-against-social-media-addiction>.

³⁷ Ian A. Anderson and Wendy Wood, “Overestimates of Social Media Addiction Are Common but Costly,” *Scientific Reports* 15, no. 1 (November 27, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-27053-2>.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Maria T. Maza et al., “Association of Habitual Checking Behaviors on Social Media with Longitudinal Functional Brain Development,” *JAMA Pediatrics* 177, no. 2 (January 3, 2023): 160–67, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2022.4924>.

⁴⁰ K. Thomson et al., “Social Media ‘Addiction’: The Absence of an Attentional Bias to Social Media Stimuli,” *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* –1, no. aop (April 13, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1556/2006.2021.00011>.

⁴¹ Nino Gugushvili et al., “Facebook Use Intensity and Depressive Symptoms: A Moderated Mediation Model of Problematic Facebook Use, Age, Neuroticism, and Extraversion,” *BMC Psychology* 10, no. 1 (November 28, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-022-00990-7>.

⁴² Mulvaney, “Meta Is in Risky Legal Territory after Back-To-Back Court Losses,” pp 4.

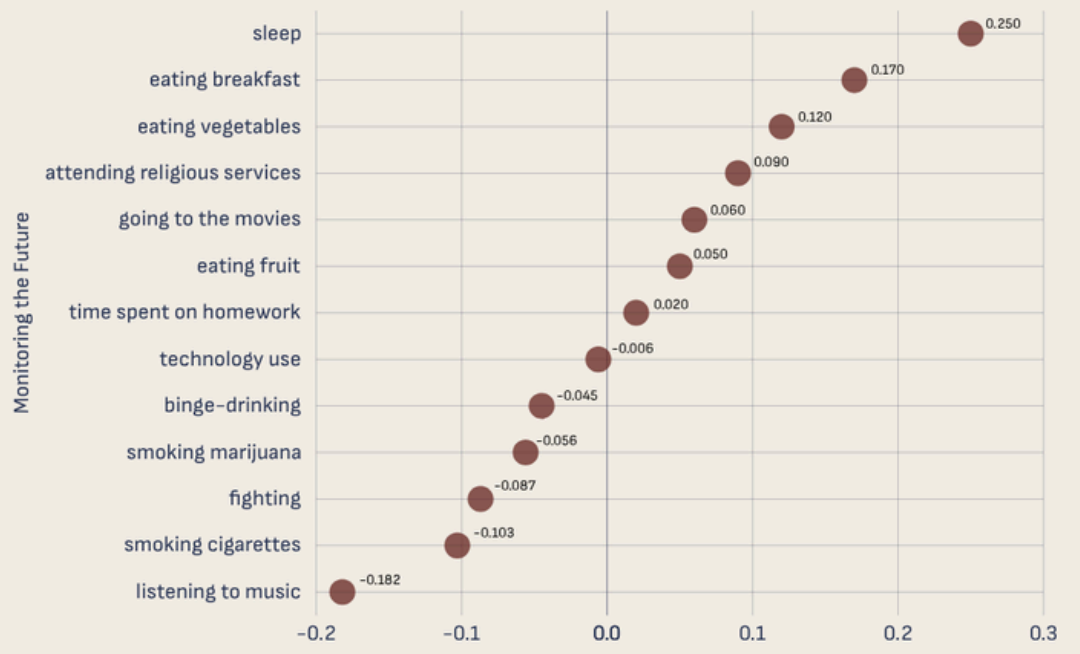
Research Findings in Context

Not only is the research mixed and weak, but it is also poorly contextualized. Many factors contribute to poor mental health, but only a handful of authors have attempted to compare social media with other variables. The most important study to do so was conducted by leading psychology scholars Amy Orben and Andrew Przybylski, established scholars known for their research on experimental psychology and rigorous empirical strategies. To analyze the effects of social media and mental health, Orben and Przybylski applied advanced statistical techniques to analyze the effects of social media use on mental health across multiple datasets. They found that the well-being effects of digital technology were negligible compared with other factors, such as sleep or breakfast (Figure 1).⁴³

Unlike other studies, Orben and Przybylski ran thousands of statistical models on three different data sets, adding new variables and benchmarking the effect size of technology on well-being against other variables (Figure 1). In one dataset (Monitoring the Future), the results show that even if a teen used more technology than average (a full standard deviation more), their well-being score basically did not move (0.006 standard deviations, which is noise). In the other two datasets, the pattern was the same. The effect size of technology use was so small that it was similar to the effect of completely trivial activities, like wearing glasses or eating potatoes. In those datasets, the estimated impact of technology use was 0.042 (Millennium Cohort Study dataset) and -0.049 (Young Risk Behavior System dataset) standard deviation movements for well-being. Considering all these changes, Orben and Przybylski found that technology use accounts for only 0.4 percent of the variation in well-being.⁴⁴

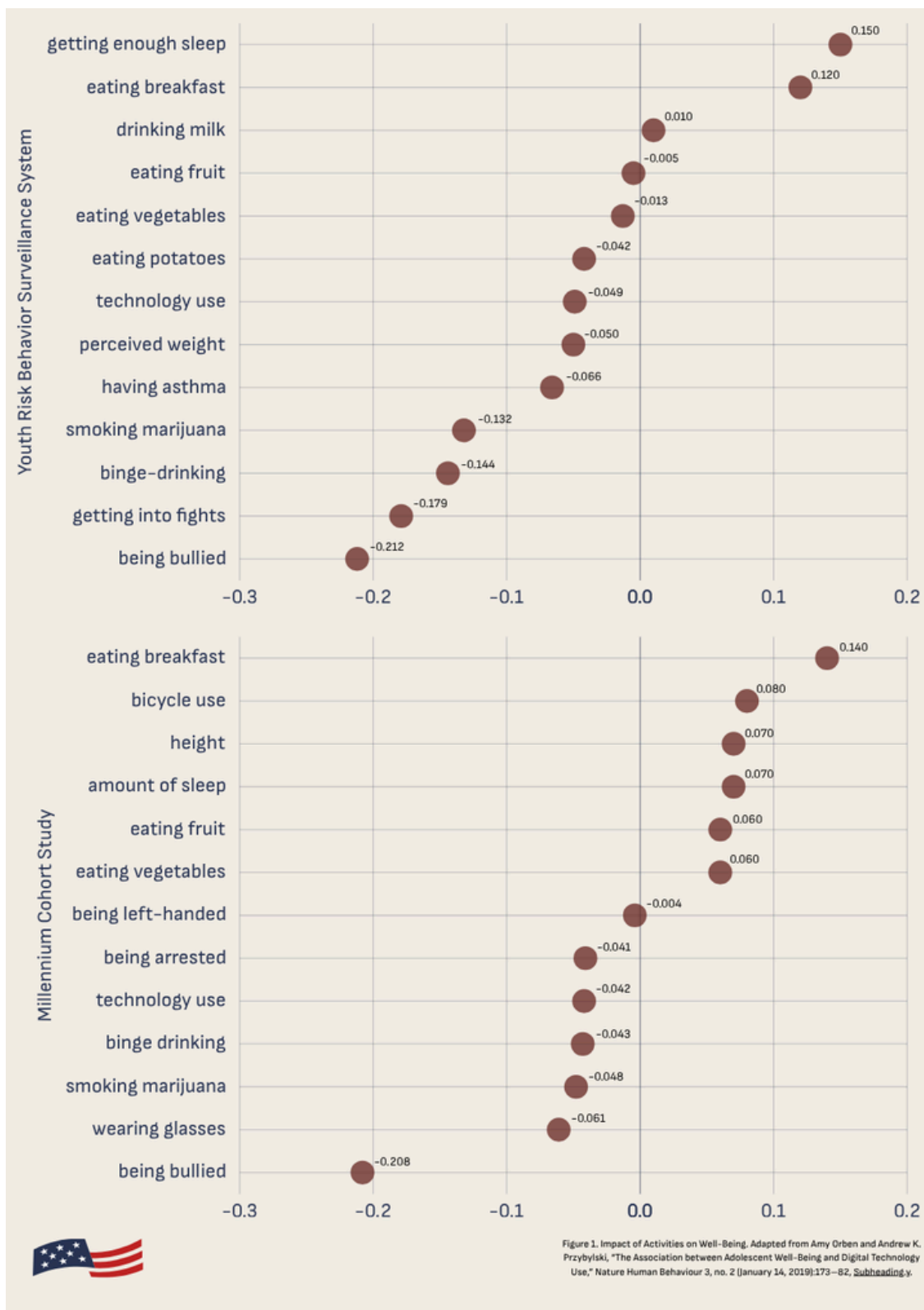
Figure 1. Impact of Activity on Well Being

The table below estimates the total impact of each activity on well-being in three surveys, combining the results with their peers.



⁴³ Amy Orben and Andrew K. Przybylski, "Screens, Teens, and Psychological Well-Being: Evidence From Three Time-Use-Diary Studies," *Psychological Science* 30, no. 5 (2019): 682–696, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797619830329>; Amy Orben and Andrew K. Przybylski, "The Association Between Adolescent Well-Being and Digital Technology Use," *Nature Human Behaviour* 3 (2019): 173–182, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0506-1>; and William Rinehart, "Teens and the Impact of Social Media, A Deep Dive into Recent Work from Haidt," William Rinehart Blog, May 5, 2022, <https://www.williamrinehart.com/2022/teens-and-the-impact-of-social-media/>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.



However, some critics, such as Haidt and Twenge, have observed that these findings are too low because average correlations may obscure meaningful effects among specific groups, particularly adolescent girls and heavy users, and the relationship between social media use and well-being might be non-linear, meaning that harm accelerates at higher levels of use. On top of it, Haidt and Twenge observe that while technology use includes social media, it does not disaggregate it. In addressing these critiques, they employ a different methodological approach by disaggregating technology use into different categories to isolate social media effects and separate girls from boys.

After controlling for sex and other factors, they report an average effect size of their findings, ultimately pointing to a higher, yet still low, real-world significance. The correlation itself was only 0.2, weak and well below the 0.3 threshold.⁴⁵

Besides the weak results, Haidt and Twenge's analysis fails to account for the interplay of different factors with tech use because it focuses more on the precision of their results rather than the real-world significance. Consider a researcher trying to understand what drives changes in teen mental health. Twenge and Haidt examine factors one at a time, asking, for instance, how social media use alone relates to depression in girls, while statistically holding other factors steady, then asking how television relates to depression in girls, then asking how it relates to exercise, and so on with different variables. Orben and Przybylski take a different approach by comparing the association between technology use and well-being against hundreds of other everyday variables simultaneously, such as sleep, diet, exercise, and bullying, running hundreds of thousands of analytical variations. Their goal is not to find the largest possible effect, but to determine whether technology use stands out as meaningfully more important than other factors in a teenager's life.

This broader comparative method is the stronger analytical approach, and it reveals something important: social media's association with teen well-being is real but small, and it does not meaningfully stand apart from the many other factors that shape adolescent mental health. Crucially, studying one variable at a time, while being more precise in analyzing the effects of single variables after controlling for demographic factors, can create a misleading picture, because it treats factors as independent when in practice they are deeply intertwined and sit on the same causal pathway. A teenager who uses social media heavily is also likely to sleep less, exercise less, spend less time interacting face-to-face, or have unhealthy habits. These pressures do not take turns; they are intertwined. In that sense, Orben and Przybylski's method, which maps the full landscape of influences on well-being without assuming independence between them, gives policymakers a more accurate picture of where technology use actually ranks among the pressures teenagers face.

Given the small effects, focusing on social media or technology use diverts attention from variables that produce more significant negative impacts on mental health but are often disregarded when proposing policy. Economic circumstances, for instance, contribute more heavily to mental health status than social media, but such problems are far more difficult to address and improve.

German psychologists from the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry examined how low socioeconomic status affects mental health during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The researchers tested several models that included protective factors like family climate, social support, self-efficacy, migration background, and mental health problems. After controlling for demographic and age variables, the combined model explained 14 percent of the variation in mental health outcomes.⁴⁶ These variations are significantly larger than the 0.4 percent attributed to tech use in Orben and Przybylski, which is why addressing any variable that improves socioeconomic status can have a larger impact in improving poor mental health in teens.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Jean M. Twenge, Jonathan Haidt, Thomas E. Joiner, and W. Keith Campbell, "Underestimating Digital Media Harm," *Nature Human Behaviour* 4 (April 17, 2020): 346–348, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0839-4>.

⁴⁶ Jenny Maurer, et al, "Socioeconomic Status, Protective Factors, and Mental Health Problems in Transition from Adolescence to Emerging Adulthood: Results of the Longitudinal BELLA Study," *Child Psychiatry Hum Dev* 56 (August 26, 2023): 649–660, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-023-01582-1>.

⁴⁷ Orben and Przybylski, "Screens, Teens, and Psychological Well-Being: Evidence From Three Time-Use-Diary Studies," pp. 1.

Studies with a longitudinal design have also found that low socioeconomic status (LSES) is an important factor in understanding the decline in mental health among teens. The University of Hamburg carried out a preliminary study spanning from 2017 to 2024 that examined the development of mental problems in teens with relation to their family's socioeconomic status and found that teens from LSES saw a greater decline in mental health, especially after the global pandemic.⁴⁸ Different studies convey similar results, pointing to a consensus much stronger than the role of social media.⁴⁹

Environmental factors should also be considered. In many cases, social media becomes a coping mechanism rather than the main cause of distress. An evident example was that during the pandemic, characterized by a change in social interactions, many teens' mental health was affected.⁵⁰ With fewer social interactions and declining mental health, kids had fewer activities available to them. Especially kids from low socioeconomic status (LSES) turned to screens, resulting in higher use of digital devices and increased screen time.⁵¹ When analyzing the role the environment plays, the evidence shows that social inequalities affect screen time-related behavior and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress among teens.⁵² Lower-income households are both more likely to face pre-existing mental health issues and to use social media apps like Facebook or TikTok than teens from higher-income households, blurring the causal effects.⁵³ The effects of social media are less clear when considering the interplay between environmental settings, making the assessment of poor mental health incomplete and misleading when approached by addressing one factor while ignoring the rest.

It's not just environmental factors. Sleep duration is an important contributor to mental health and overall well-being, and its decline among teens has been persistent over the past decade.⁵⁴ As Orben and Przybylski point out in their study, sleep deprivation is one of the greatest contributors to poor mental health. While the causes for sleep deprivation are multivariate, teens with poor sleep quality are more likely to be anxious, have a higher risk of substance abuse, unhealthy eating habits, and suicidal thoughts.⁵⁵ Among the most detrimental variables for total sleep time, a meta-analytic review on teens and sleeping habits found that tobacco, computer use, evening light, negative family environment, alcohol, caffeine, and then phone use, in that order, were the most problematic.⁵⁶

⁴⁸ Franziska Reiss, et al, Tracing socioeconomic inequalities in children's and adolescent's mental health: Longitudinal study findings from 2017–2024, April 2025, <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-6423003/v1>.

⁴⁹ Scarlett Mac-Ginty, et al, "Association Between Socioeconomic Position and Depression, Anxiety, and Eating Disorders in University Students: A Systematic Review," *Adolescent Research Review* 9 (2024), 435–451, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-023-00230-y>.

⁵⁰ Ian H. Gotlib, et al, "Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health and Brain Maturation in Adolescents: Implications for Analyzing Longitudinal Data," *Biological Psychiatry: Global Open Science* 3, no. 4 (2023): 912–918, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bpsgos.2022.11.002>.

⁵¹ Jeff Grabmeier, "Screen Time for Some Kids Eclipses Six Hours Per Day," *Ohio State University*, 2021, <https://ehe.osu.edu/news/listing/screen-time-some-kids-eclipses-six-hours-day>.

⁵² Maria Eugenia Visier-Alfonso, et al, "Does Socioeconomic Status Moderate the Association Between Screen Time, Mobile Phone Use, Social Networks, Messaging Applications, and Mental Health Among Adolescents?" *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 27, no. 11 (2024): 824–834, <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2024.0064>.

⁵³ Pew Research Center, "Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024," December 12, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/12/12/teens-social-media-and-technology-2024/>.

⁵⁴ Alexander J. Scott, et.al. "Improving Sleep Quality Leads to Better Mental Health: A Meta-analysis of Randomised Controlled Trials," *Sleep Medicine Review* 60 (2021): 101556 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smrv.2021.101556>; and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "FastStats: Sleep in High School Students." CDC, May 15, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/sleep/data-research/facts-stats/high-school-students-sleep-facts-and-stats.html>.

⁵⁵ Kavya Johri, et al, "Effects of Sleep Deprivation on the Mental Health of Adolescents: A Systematic Review," *Sleep Science Practice* 9 (2025): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41606-025-00127-w>.

⁵⁶ Kate Bartel, "Protective and Risk Factors for Adolescent Sleep Health." PhD dissertation, School of Psychology, *Flinders University*, July 2017, https://flex.flinders.edu.au/file/4adb82ef-de22-4718-a694-5fd8a838aac9/1/THESIS_Bartel_2017.pdf.

The study analyzed three factors in sleep time: Bedtime, sleep latency, and total sleep time. After weighing the impact of phone use, the results showed associations of 0.13, -0.039, and -0.10, respectively. Alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine were among the most problematic variables. A literature review also pointed out that sleep insufficiency is usually associated with factors like a bad diet, stress, housing and food insecurity, and social and behavioral predictors.⁵⁷

The problem with focusing on social media alone is that it ignores the evidence that negative effects on mental health come from other variables that many parents would consider routine daily activities. Social media has, at most, marginal effects in explaining changes in mental health among teens. Of course, every case is different. Some teens will experience more drawbacks from social media use than others. But before generalizing these effects for every teen, it is important to realize that many underlying conditions might be at fault or making the underlying issue worse. The overlap of social media use with variables like socioeconomic status, sleep time, or family environment, to mention only a few, will influence the magnitude of the effect, yet these context-dependent results are hardly distinguished by policymakers. As the APA concluded last Fall: “the effects of social media likely depend on what teens can do and see online, teens’ preexisting strengths or vulnerabilities, and the contexts in which they grow up.”⁵⁸ Everyone is different.

Social Media Benefits: A Nuanced Literature with Similar Issues

To understand the full effects of social media on mental health, the downsides must be weighed against equally important consumer benefits. Unfortunately, research on the positive impacts of social media is far less studied. Mental health outcomes tend to be measured in terms of depression, anxiety, or suicidal ideation, not happiness, new friendships, and greater social connectivity. And the limited research that does examine positive effects shares similar shortcomings to the broader literature: methodological issues, self-reporting bias, inconsistent time measures, and generally weak associations.

A meta-analysis of 78 studies by mental health researchers measured well-being in adolescents and adults across four key dimensions of social media use: hedonic (enjoying positive emotions and life satisfaction), eudaimonic (experiencing a sense of purpose and meaning), social well-being (maintaining healthy relationships), and positive well-being (encompassing physical and mental health).⁵⁹ Across those four dimensions, social media enhanced different measures of well-being, improving physical and mental health, and strengthening relationships. Unsurprisingly, the researchers found that positive online experiences were associated with positive emotion and life satisfaction.

⁵⁷ Vijay Kumar Chattu, et al, “The Global Problem of Insufficient Sleep and Its Serious Public Health Implications,” *Healthcare* 7, no. 1, December 20, 2018, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6473877/>.

⁵⁸ American Psychological Association, “Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence,” Last visited February 26, 2026, <https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/health-advisory-adolescent-social-media-use>.

⁵⁹ Laura Marciano, et al, “Does Social Media Use Make Us Happy? A Meta-analysis on Social Media and Positive Well-being Outcomes,” *SSM – Mental Health*, Volume 6 (December 2024): 100331, ISSN 2666-5603, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2024.100331>.

Negative outcomes emerged only among users who showed problematic use patterns or engaged in heavy social comparison. However, the beneficial associations ranged from correlations of 0.1 to 0.2, a similarly weak correlation as compared to the associations on the negative effects of social media.

Another study in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* found that social media is positively associated with bonding social capital, enhancing well-being by fostering social connections, overcoming communication barriers, providing emotional support, building social networks, facilitating connections when face-to-face interactions are difficult, and predicting positive psychological well-being.⁶⁰ Importantly, the study found a much more significant association between the effects of social media on bridging social capital and psychological well-being ($\beta = 0.561$) than smartphone addiction and psychological well-being ($\beta = -0.068$). The β explains how a one standard deviation increase in bridging social capital was associated with a 0.561 standard deviation improvement in psychological well-being. The interpretation is the same for the other coefficient. However, the study was done exclusively on Mexican students during COVID and only covered a 6-month time span, both factors that dampen how the research could be applied in other contexts. Still, accounting for all variables the model considered, the model explained 45.1 percent of the variance in psychological well-being, with the strongest positive effects driven by bridging and bonding social capital.

Similarly, a study from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health examined how routine social media use and the degree to which users feel emotionally connected to what they see online relate to social well-being, positive mental health, and self-rated health. The researchers found that routine social media use was positively associated with social well-being, positive mental health, and self-rated health. However, emotional connection to social media was negatively associated with all three. The research offers nuanced results that depend on demographic, income, and education variables, but most importantly, social media use accounted for less than 2 percent of the differences in participants' overall well-being, suggesting its real-world impact may be quite limited despite realized benefits and harms.⁶¹

But the benefits that teens get from social media are more evident in survey data. Although, similar to the research on the downsides of social media use, polling is inherently subject to self-reporting bias, where users over- or under-report their true feelings. Pew Research Center polling reveals that a majority of adolescents report that social media allows space for connection, creativity, and support.⁶² Importantly, 32 percent of surveyed teens perceived benefits, far more than the 9 percent that reported negative experiences. More recently, Pew Research also found that the strongest aspect of social media for many teens is how favorable they see it for their friendships, and how it makes them feel more connected to their friends' lives. The report showed that teens have mostly positive experiences from using platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram, with very few people saying it's negative.⁶³ Over 70 percent of teens feel that social media makes them closer to their friends' lives, and only 7 percent feel otherwise.

⁶⁰ Dragana Ostic, et al, "Effects of Social Media Use on Psychological Well-Being: A Mediated Model," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (June 21, 2021): 678766, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.678766>.

⁶¹ Amy Roeder, "Social Media Use Can Be Positive for Mental Health and Well-being," *Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health*, January 6, 2020, <https://hsph.harvard.edu/news/social-media-positive-mental-health/>.

⁶² Pew Research Center, "Connection, Creativity, and Drama: Teen Life on Social Media in 2022," November 16, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/11/16/connection-creativity-and-drama-teen-life-on-social-media-in-2022/>.

⁶³ Pew Research Center, "Teens, Social Media, and Mental Health," April 22, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2025/04/22/teens-social-media-and-mental-health/>; Pew Research Center, "Teens' Experiences On TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat," April 15, 2026, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2026/04/15/teens-experiences-on-tiktok-instagram-and-snapchat/>.

Consumers who spend significant time on social media to maintain connections with distant family and friends will have more positive experiences compared to those who passively engage in online activities like mindless or doom-scrolling. The benefits even extend to disaffected groups of teens with a lack of support offline, who experience isolation and stress, who belong to marginalized groups, or even those with long-term medical conditions. The APA aligned with these claims when a 2023 report suggested that teen use of social media should be encouraged in ways that create opportunities for social support, online companionship, and emotional support, especially in cases where kids are isolated offline or belong to marginalized groups.⁶⁴ Social media breeds healthy socialization skills in these cases.

As Brown University Psychologist Amy Novotney explains in a report for the APA, “Teens (and adults) obviously get something out of social media. We have to take a balanced view if we want to reach teens and help them use these platforms in healthier ways.”⁶⁵

Summing Up the Evidence

Despite what the critics may say, social media is not the key determinant of America’s mental health challenges. In recent years, teen suicides have declined, not increased, and fewer, not more, adults are expressing mental health challenges, even as smartphones and social media remain ubiquitous.⁶⁶ A complete evaluation of the many studies on social media and mental health reveals mixed and weak results on the positive and negative effects of social media use, both of which are plagued by methodological weaknesses that make it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about their relative impact. Even when comparing the results of the positive and negative studies, the effect magnitudes are similar. Users experience—mostly mild—positive and negative effects. The general panic around social media use is, therefore, misplaced and overhyped. For this reason, policy demands a balanced response reflective of a nuanced literature.

Policy Recommendations

Despite mixed and weak evidence, policymakers have treated social media as responsible for poor mental health among teens. Policies built around restrictions or bans are unlikely to deliver meaningful improvements while also causing significant downsides. Instead of resorting to outright bans or ham-fisted restrictions, policymakers should change their approach in four key ways:

⁶⁴ American Psychological Association, “Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence,” May 2023, <https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/health-advisory-adolescent-social-media-use.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Amy Novotney, “Protecting Teens on Social Media.” *Monitor on Psychology* 54, no. 7 (September 2023), <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2023/09/protecting-teens-on-social-media>.

⁶⁶ Boston University School of Public Health, “Severe Depression, Anxiety, Suicidal Thoughts Continue to Decrease Among College Students,” September 19, 2025, <https://www.bu.edu/sph/news/articles/2025/college-students-reports-of-depression-anxiety-suicidal-thoughts-continue-move-in-positive-direction>; and Rhitu Chatterjee, “Teen Suicide is on the Decline, New Federal Data Shows,” *NPR*, August 4, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/sections/shots-health-news/2025/08/04/nx-s1-5490050/nsduh-depression-suicide-federal-statistics-teens>.

RECOMMENDATION 1: DRAWING LINES AROUND WHAT POLICY CAN AND CANNOT DO

Policymakers should recognize that other important contributors, such as sleep deprivation, socioeconomic status, and broader environmental factors, can be more influential than social media on mental well-being. Because many of these drivers are difficult to address with regulations, parents should play a more active role, especially during adolescence, when daily habits and routines are still highly shaped at home. Sleeping habits, for instance, are often observable, reinforced, and directly influenced by parents through consistent expectations and boundaries. Parents are typically in the best position to detect changes in mood, behavior, and routine, and to correct unhealthy patterns before they escalate. At the same time, some environmental pressures, particularly those tied to socioeconomic hardship, are not primarily within a family's control. In those cases, policymakers should focus less on blanket restrictions and more on education and strengthening support systems, including improving access to mental health services and community-based resources. It would be misguided to keep emphasizing social media regulation as the main driver of poor mental health when, in reality, mental health is a multifaceted problem.

RECOMMENDATION 2: APPLY COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS TO STATE SOCIAL MEDIA REGULATION

Many social media regulations will do more harm than good—and that is mostly because policymakers wrongly assume social media is a one-way negative ratchet. Putting kids in a bubble and coddling them with policies that restrict and ban them from social media is something that even Haidt himself points out as a contributing factor to higher mental health issues among teens.⁶⁷ Instead, the role of policymakers and parents should be to educate teens on the concerns that parents have, while leveraging the tools that social media companies have developed to give parents more control. Doing so will not only prepare kids for what they will encounter in the future, but it can also shape how they decide to use social media.

RECOMMENDATION 3: REGULARLY RE-EVALUATE ASSUMPTIONS

In 2026 alone, 40 states have considered more than 300 social media regulation bills.⁶⁸ Yet the narrative driving this legislative surge rests on mixed and weak evidence, particularly given the recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data on the decline in teen suicide, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, New York: Penguin Press, 2018.

⁶⁸ National Conference of State Legislatures, "Social Media and Children 2026 Legislation," [Ncsl.org](https://www.ncsl.org/technology-and-communication/social-media-and-children-2026-legislation), 2026, <https://www.ncsl.org/technology-and-communication/social-media-and-children-2026-legislation>.

⁶⁹ Jed Foundation, "New CDC Data Show Youth Suicide Rates Are Declining — but Our Work Is Far From Over," March 6, 2026, Last visited March 9, 2026, <https://jedfoundation.org/new-cdc-data-show-youth-suicide-rates-are-declining-but-our-work-is-far-from-over/>.

Social media policy decisions should be routinely re-evaluated as more quality evidence accumulates. Sunset clauses and mandatory evidence reviews should be implemented with each new social media bill that passes. And since research is still developing and many other factors play much larger roles in the decline of teen mental health, policymakers must remain flexible in their governance approaches.⁷⁰ The debate is changing—and so should policymaker’s opinions. Rather than defaulting to restriction under uncertainty, resources and attention should be better directed toward interventions with stronger evidentiary support.

RECOMMENDATION 4: BEWARE USING LEGAL RULING AS GENERALIZABLE HARM

State policymakers have used trial verdicts finding Meta and Google (YouTube) liable for addictive harm to minors to push regulatory proposals unlikely to solve the problem. For instance, Texas State Representative Jared Patterson, who filed a bill that would have banned social media access for minors, praised the jury decisions, saying that the rulings “prove the harm social media companies cause on our children.”⁷¹ This is not an isolated case. Many social media regulations, amplified by the recent court decisions, have gained momentum at the state and federal levels.

A recent Senate Judiciary Subcommittee hearing urged Congress to advance the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA), a federal proposal that has been amended multiple times following concerns over privacy, age-verification requirements, and potential First Amendment implications. During the hearing, lawmakers pointed to the recent California verdict against Meta and Google as evidence that stronger federal action on youth online safety is necessary.⁷²

At the state level, the California Senate proposed a bill that would restrict social media access to kids under sixteen because of the “addictive” features of social media.⁷³ Another age verification bill in Idaho, passed this past April, reflected the same arguments for addiction as were used in California social media trials.⁷⁴ This is on top of the many other bills that were proposed before the trial, where the verdicts will be used as evidence to regulate.

⁷⁰ Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, “Evidence to Support State Policies Regulating Teen Use of Social Media Is Limited,” *Columbia Public Health*, May 30, 2024, Last visited February 26, 2026, <https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/news/evidence-support-state-policies-regulating-teen-use-social-media-limited>.

⁷¹ Paul Livengood, “Texas Lawmaker Praises Landmark Ruling Holding Instagram and YouTube Liable in Social Media Addiction Trial,” *wfaa.com* (WFAA, March 26, 2026), <https://www.wfaa.com/article/news/national/social-media-meta-verdict/287-50c05378-fdff-49cc-a517-ad79ad991348>.

⁷² U.S. Committee on the Judiciary, “From the Courtroom to Congress: Why Landmark Social Media Verdicts Demand Federal Action to Protect Kids Online | United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary,” *Senate.gov* (United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary, May 13, 2026), <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/committee-activity/hearings/from-the-courtroom-to-congress-why-landmark-social-media-verdicts-demand-federal-action-to-protect-kids-online>.

⁷³ Sophia Bollag, “California Bill to Ban Social Media for Teens under 16 Passes Assembly,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 28, 2026, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/politics/article/california-social-media-ban-16-22280765.php>.

⁷⁴ LegiScan, “Idaho House Bill 542,” Regular Session, 2026, <https://legiscan.com/ID/bill/H0542/2026>.

But rather than adopting universal restrictions, policymakers should focus on identifying the circumstances under which problematic use is most likely to emerge. This is important because many of the policy proposals, in their current form, are likely to backfire. Bans on social media, as Australia is implementing, are proving to be ineffective because kids find workarounds or alternative apps;⁷⁵ age verification has had several data breaches because of the sensitive information it has to collect,⁷⁶ creating more problems than solutions; and limits on certain social media features become difficult to accomplish without the need to verify the ages of every user.

Instead, interventions should target populations and circumstances where risks are most likely to occur. For instance, as research consistently shows, children from lower-income households spend significantly more time on screens, not because social media is inherently more harmful to them, but because structural conditions such as reduced access to extracurricular activities, fewer alternative enrichment opportunities, and greater unsupervised time create the conditions under which problematic use is more likely to develop.⁷⁷ Policies targeting these structural factors, such as investment in after-school programming, digital literacy education in under-performing schools, and access to mental health screening through pediatric care, would address the actual drivers of risk more effectively than platform-wide bans that affect all children equally, regardless of their circumstances. But most importantly, the concerns over addiction should prompt more educational programs that make parents and teens aware of problematic signs, not immediate bans or restrictions.

Conclusion

Social media regulation has become a boogeyman for declining teen mental health. Despite claims of growing causality, the evidence remains mixed and weak. The nuanced evidence, mixed results, weak findings, and strong social benefits from the literature mean policy proposals deserve careful evaluation. A better policy would account for other outside variables such as sleep status, socioeconomic conditions, and environmental factors. Research suggests these contributors have more significant effects and more consensus. A policy pivot is in order.

Policymakers should also be realistic about what regulation can accomplish in practice. The strongest restrictions face major implementation barriers—legal challenges to age verification, easy consumer workarounds, and uneven enforcement—meaning many laws will change compliance on paper more than behavior in reality.

⁷⁵ Gary Hill, "More than 60% of Australian Children Still Using Social Media despite Ban for Under-16s, Research Shows | Molly Rose Foundation," Molly Rose Foundation, April 13, 2026, <https://mollyrosefoundation.org/more-than-60-of-australian-children-still-using-social-media-despite-ban-for-under-16s-research-shows/>; Joanna Williams, "The Dangerous Lesson from Australia's Social Media Ban," The Spectator, April 15, 2026, <https://spectator.com/article/the-dangerous-lesson-from-australias-social-media-ban/?edition=us>.

⁷⁶ Logan Kolas and Pablo Garcia Quint, "Discord Leak Exposes the Limits of Age Verification Technology – the American Consumer Institute Center for Citizen Research," Theamericanconsumer.org, October 24, 2025, <https://www.theamericanconsumer.org/2025/10/discord-leak-exposes-the-limits-of-age-verification-technology/>.

⁷⁷ Yue-Yue You et al., "Factors of Heavy Social Media Use among 13-Year-Old Adolescents on Weekdays and Weekends," *World Journal of Pediatrics* 19, no. 4 (February 20, 2023): 378–89, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12519-023-00690-1>; Jeff Grabmeier, "Screen Time for Some Kids Eclipses Six Hours Per Day;" Maria Eugenia Visier-Alfonso, "Does Socioeconomic Status Moderate the Association Between Screen Time;" Sangha Lee, "Relationship between Screen Time among Children and Lower Economic Status," footnotes 58–60.

Rather than doubling down on broad bans that are unlikely to deliver measurable gains, lawmakers should adopt a more evidence-based approach: treat social media rules as provisional, evaluate them transparently over time, and prioritize interventions with clearer pathways to impact. Some options include strengthening mental health access, improving school-based support, and empowering parents to address sleep and other daily habits that are more directly tied to teen well-being. Policymakers must also remain realistic about the track record of their existing legislative approaches. Given weak and mixed evidence, everyone should expect the effects of different legislation on social media to be minimal, as research is already showing.⁷⁸

The world as it exists today will not be the world that exists tomorrow. Everyone—policymakers, academics, and think tanks included—must remain flexible and open to emerging research that will change prudent policy responses. It is possible that new and different types of social media will cause significant consumer harm. On the other hand, it is also possible—maybe even likely—that the evidence linking social media and mental well-being will not change much. If policymakers want to meaningfully address this issue, the boogeyman must pass, and current policies must change. That is the only way to truly protect kids online.

⁷⁸ Christopher J. Ferguson, "Smartphone Bans in Schools Remain Unproven," *World Journal of Pediatrics* 21, no. 8 (2025): 769–774, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12519-025-00951-1>.

