

A 2026 EVIDENCE REVIEW

Social Media & Mental Health

What the research actually shows about young people,
wellbeing, and the platforms they use.

Social Media & Mental Health

A 2026 evidence review by Cormonity

Contents

Executive summary

- 1 The scale
- 2 The signal in the data
- 3 Correlation, causation, and effect size
- 4 Why it plausibly harms
- 5 The international picture
- 6 What follows from the evidence
- 7 A note from Cormonity
- 8 Glossary of terms
- 9 References & methodology

Executive summary

Whether social media harms young people's mental health has become one of the most consequential — and most contested — questions in public health. This review gathers the current evidence, in the United States, Europe and beyond, and states plainly what it does and does not establish. The short version: the association between heavy social media use and poorer adolescent mental health is real and remarkably consistent across countries; the serious debate is about how large it is and how much is causal, not whether it exists; and the strongest recent evidence points to genuine harm, concentrated in particular groups — adolescent girls above all — and particular patterns of use. Every figure is sourced.

Key findings

- **The association is consistent — and international.** US, European and cross-national studies point the same way; a WHO survey of 280,000 adolescents found problematic social media use rising from 7% to 11% in four years.
- **On average the effect is modest — but averages mislead.** Pooled across all teens the association is small; it is substantially larger for adolescent girls and at specific ages — “windows of sensitivity.”
- **The evidence is no longer only correlational.** When Facebook rolled out across US campuses, anxiety and depression diagnoses rose about two percentage points; trials that cut social media use report measurable improvements in mood.
- **Harm concentrates in problematic use, not use itself.** Intense but non-problematic users often report stronger peer support — the risk is loss of control, not connection.
- **Regulation is moving worldwide — but bans alone fall short.** Australia, France and others have acted, yet most under-16s kept using social media after Australia's ban, having moved to services it did not cover.

36%

of teens report being on a platform “almost constantly”

1 The scale

Use is near-universal and heavy. Around ninety-five per cent of 13-to-17-year-olds use at least one social platform, for an average of roughly three and a half hours a day, and more than a third report being online “almost constantly”^{[1][3]}. The pattern is not confined to the United States: the WHO’s European survey of almost 280,000 adolescents found much the same, with around a third in near-constant online contact with friends^[14]. Adolescence is also a period of heightened neurological and social sensitivity, which is part of why the same exposure can affect a thirteen-year-old differently from an adult^{[1][6]}.

2×

the risk of anxiety and depression symptoms for teens on social media 3+ hours a day

2 The signal in the data

Wherever researchers look, heavier and more problematic use tracks with poorer wellbeing. A 2022 meta-analysis of thirty-nine studies found moderate correlations — in the region of 0.27 to 0.35 — between problematic use and psychological distress^[8]. Longitudinal work in Switzerland found that more than two hours a day predicted a fall in wellbeing for fifteen-year-old girls comparable in size to major life events such as a separation or a new job. The U.S. Surgeon General summarised the pattern directly: adolescents who use social media more than three hours a day face double the risk of anxiety and depression symptoms^[1].

2 points

the rise in anxiety and depression diagnoses when Facebook arrived on campus

3 Correlation, causation, and effect size

This is where the science demands care, and where headlines most often overreach. The most-cited sceptical study — Orben and Przybylski’s 2019 analysis of more than 355,000 young people — found the average association between digital-technology use and wellbeing was tiny, famously “no larger than the effect of eating potatoes.”^[4] Two things complicate that reassurance.

First, averaging across all teenagers hides real variation. Reanalyses that focus on girls, and on social media specifically rather than screens in general, find substantially larger associations^[5], and the same research group later identified “windows of developmental sensitivity” in which effects are much stronger at particular ages^[6]. Second, and most importantly, the evidence is no longer only correlational. When Facebook expanded across US university campuses in the mid-2000s, researchers found a roughly two-percentage-point rise in students meeting the clinical threshold for anxiety or depression — a natural experiment widely regarded as the strongest causal evidence to date^[7]. Controlled trials that ask people to cut back their use report measurable improvements in mood^[9].

The honest summary: the existence of a link is not seriously in doubt; its average size is modest; and for the most affected groups, and under the strongest study designs, the harm looks real and non-trivial. Anyone who tells you the science is fully settled — in either direction — is overstating it.

47 sec

our attention on a single screen — down from about 2.5 minutes in 2004

4 Why it plausibly harms

A correlation becomes more credible when there is a mechanism, and here there are several, all pointing the same way. Displacement: time on feeds is time not spent sleeping, moving, or in face-to-face contact — and disrupted sleep is among the most consistent correlates of adolescent distress. Social comparison: image-driven platforms intensify upward comparison, which lands hardest during the identity-forming years. And design: because most platforms earn from advertising, they are engineered to maximise attention. Dr Anna Lembke of Stanford likens the smartphone to a delivery device for “digital dopamine”^[12], and measured attention on a single screen has fallen to about forty-seven seconds^[11]. None of these mechanisms requires social media to be uniquely toxic; together they explain why an environment optimised for engagement can quietly erode wellbeing.

11%

of European adolescents show problematic social media use — up from 7% in 2018

5 The international picture

The strongest single studies are often American, but the pattern is echoed across the world. The WHO Regional Office for Europe, drawing on the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey of almost 280,000 young people aged 11, 13 and 15 across 44 countries, found that problematic social media use — an addiction-like pattern of lost control and negative consequences — rose from 7% of adolescents in 2018 to 11% in 2022, and is markedly higher among girls (13%) than boys (9%)^[14]. Around a third reported near-constant online contact, closely matching the US figure — a rare cross-cultural convergence.

The same study is a useful corrective to alarmism. Heavy use is not automatically harmful: adolescents who were intense but non-problematic users reported stronger peer support and social connection than their peers^[14]. The risk concentrates in problematic use — the loss of control — rather than in social media itself. That distinction should shape any sensible response.

8 in 10

under-16s still using social media after Australia's ban

6 What follows from the evidence

If the harm is real, modest on average, and concentrated by group and by pattern of use, the sensible response is neither panic nor dismissal. It is to change the environment where we can.

For families and schools, the goal is not zero use but healthier use — protecting sleep, delaying the heaviest platforms for the youngest, and favouring spaces designed for connection over consumption. For policy, regulation is moving fast, and no longer only in Australia, which enacted the world's first under-16 ban in December 2025^[13]. France has legislated an under-15 restriction from September 2026; Denmark, Spain and Norway are advancing their own age limits; and the European Commission — building on the Digital Services Act, which already bars under-13 accounts — has proposed bloc-wide rules and launched a privacy-preserving age-verification app that confirms age without handing identity to the platforms^{[15][16]}. The UK's Online Safety Act runs in parallel^[17].

But the early evidence is a caution: more than eight in ten under-16s were still using social media months after Australia's ban, having moved to services it did not cover^[13]. Restriction displaces; on its own, it does not protect. For the platforms and the institutions that choose them, the lever hiding in plain sight is design — and the EU's own approach hints at the direction of travel: verify without surveilling. An environment that does not earn from attention has no reason to maximise it.

7 **A note from Cormonity**

We compiled this review because the evidence shaped what we are building. Cormonity is an ad-free platform for verified communities: because it does not sell attention, it has no incentive to maximise time on screen, and because membership is verified — privately, without collecting identity documents — a community contains the people it says it does.

We are not claiming that any platform can undo what the research describes. But the evidence is consistent on one point — the environment matters — and the environment is a design choice. That is the choice we are trying to make differently.

8 Glossary of terms

Plain definitions of the research and policy terms used in this review.

Correlation vs causation — A correlation means two things move together; causation means one brings the other about. Most social-media research is correlational — which is why the distinction runs through this review.

Effect size — How large an association is, not merely whether it exists. A statistically significant finding can still be small; effect size tells you whether it matters in practice.

Longitudinal study — Research that follows the same people over time, which can show whether earlier use predicts later wellbeing — stronger evidence than a single snapshot.

Natural experiment — A real-world event that mimics an experiment — such as Facebook arriving on some campuses before others — allowing stronger causal inference than correlation alone.

Randomised controlled trial (RCT) — The gold standard: participants are randomly assigned — for example, to cut back social media or not — isolating cause from effect.

Specification curve analysis — A method that re-runs a finding across many reasonable analytical choices to see how robust it is; central to the debate over how large the social-media effect really is.

Windows of developmental sensitivity — Ages at which the same exposure appears to affect wellbeing more strongly — in this research, particular points in early-to-mid adolescence.

Problematic social media use — An addiction-like pattern — losing control over use and experiencing negative consequences from it. Distinct from simply heavy use.

HBSC (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children) — A large, WHO-linked survey of adolescents across dozens of countries; the primary source of the European data in this review.

Digital Services Act (DSA) — European Union law regulating online platforms, including duties to protect minors — the framework beneath Europe's emerging age rules.

Age assurance / age verification — Methods for establishing that a user meets an age requirement, from self-declaration to identity checks and privacy-preserving age estimation.

Verified community — In Cormonity's usage, a community tied to a real-world organisation and checked before it opens, so members join through it rather than anonymously.

Ad-free by principle — A model funded by tools or subscriptions rather than advertising, removing the incentive to maximise attention or to sell user data.

9 References & methodology

This review draws on peer-reviewed research, official advisories and published data current as of 2026. It reports associations as associations and causal findings as causal; where the evidence is contested, it says so. Figures are rounded for readability. Reference numbers correspond to the markers in the text.

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About Cormonity

Cormonity is an ad-free platform for verified learning communities, built in Abu Dhabi. No ads, ever. Your data stays yours. Verified communities. · cormonity.com