



# **Evidence supports the need to protect adolescents from social media harms**

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# Summary

Social media use is nearly universal among adolescents in Aotearoa. The weight of scientific evidence in systematic reviews suggests it contributes to depression, anxiety, psychological distress, sleep disruption, eating disorders, and low self-esteem in young people.

While there are also likely benefits of social media (eg, connecting with like-minded people online), these benefits are greatly outweighed by the risks for many young people, especially for those under 16, who are developmentally more vulnerable. Political decision-makers now have a strong enough evidence base for action: delay access and support youth and whānau through a coordinated public health response.

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The Government of Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) has [launched an Inquiry](#) into the online harms experienced by young people, which provides a critical opportunity to shape healthier digital environments for the nation's youth. This Briefing summarises the growing body of evidence around online harms, particularly with respect to social media, and outlines population-level solutions, including stronger regulation of social media and better support mechanisms.

Young people in Aotearoa are facing greater mental health challenges than ever before. Over the past 14 years, rates of psychological distress among 18–24-year-olds have more than quadrupled (Figure 1). Today, more than one in five report experiencing high levels of distress within the past four weeks.<sup>1</sup>

## Figure 1. Youth psychological distress is increasing in Aotearoa

Percentage of 18-24 year olds reporting high or very high levels of psychological distress in the last four weeks.



Source: NZ Health Survey Explorer

Adult respondents (aged 15+ years) are categorised as experiencing high or very high psychological distress if they have a score of 12 or more on the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10). This is the New Zealand Health Survey's most commonly used indicator of psychological distress.

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While multiple factors contribute to this trend, mounting research points to social media as a potentially significant (and modifiable) driver. Over the past decade, studies consistently reveal correlations between social media use and poorer mental and physical health outcomes. More recently, evidence inferring a causal relationship is beginning to emerge.<sup>2</sup>

## The evidence is clear and growing

When it comes to making decisions about young people and online harms, it is ideal we rely, wherever possible, on the highest level of evidence available to us. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses are considered the gold standard in evidence synthesis.

While input from young people, families, and youth organisations is an important component of the Inquiry, providing firsthand insight into both positive and negative experiences with social media, effective policymaking should be based on more than individual stories and opinions. To understand the true scale and nature of harm, we need to rely on robust, large-scale research that synthesises the experiences of thousands of young people.

Evidence from systematic reviews and meta-analyses investigating the impact of social media on young people consistently demonstrate significant negative effects on mental health. These include increased rates of depression<sup>3-5</sup>, anxiety<sup>6</sup>, psychological distress<sup>7</sup>, sleep disruption<sup>8</sup>, eating disorders and disordered eating<sup>9,10</sup>, and low self-esteem.<sup>11</sup> Social media can also amplify harm from other industries, through exposure to advertising of tobacco, alcohol, and unhealthy foods and drinks.<sup>12</sup>

While Aotearoa-specific research is limited, available studies suggest that some groups may be disproportionately affected. For example, rangatahi Māori report spending significantly more time on social media than NZ European youth.<sup>13</sup> Other research suggests that Māori and Pacific youth are more likely to be exposed to harmful content online.<sup>14</sup>

A comprehensive summary of this research [is available in a linked submission](#) to the Inquiry from the lead author.

## **What can be done?**

Concrete actions are recommended as part of a [coordinated public health response](#).<sup>15</sup> Three of these are summarised below, with further detail and additional recommendations available in [the linked submission](#).

### **Raise and enforce the minimum age for social media access to 16 years**

- An age restriction that delays access to social media is the only comprehensive measure that addresses the full range of social media harms to young people, including social comparison, social exclusion, echo chambers, fear of missing out, misinformation, and impacts on brain development.
- While not foolproof, this approach may also empower parents to set boundaries and shift social norms in a positive direction.
- While there are several common critiques of a minimum age policy and various alternative proposals, these are contradicted by research — and in many cases, by data and statements from the social media companies themselves (as detailed in the [linked submission](#)).

### **Develop public health campaigns that align with teen values**

- Age restrictions may provoke psychological reactance in teens, increasing their desire to use social media if they feel their freedom is threatened.
- Effective campaigns should empower young people, drawing on successful models like the Truth anti-tobacco campaign<sup>16,17</sup> by framing reduced social media use as a form of independence.
- These campaigns should amplify the youth voice, highlight how platforms manipulate users, and promote safer, teen-led alternatives that prioritise real connection and autonomy over corporate profit.

### **Create supportive and regulated online and offline environments**

- The places where young people spend their time, online and offline, are fundamental to their wellbeing.
- Compliance of smartphone-free policies in schools is necessary to shift norms and build healthier habits.
- Schools should avoid social media as a communication channel with students and reconsider how much they rely on device-based homework to encourage a balanced approach to technology.
- Vulnerable youth should have access to safe, regulated online spaces that offer community and support without the risks posed by mainstream social media.

These recommendations collectively aim to reduce harm, support youth wellbeing, and foster healthier digital environments for all young people in Aotearoa.

The Education and Workforce Select Committee has opened an inquiry into the harm young New Zealanders encounter online, and the roles that the Government, business, and society should play in addressing those harms. [The committee is seeking submissions](#) from young internet users, the parents and carers of young New Zealanders, and from organisations and experts, particularly in the fields of education, health, and technology. Submissions close 30 July.

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## What this Briefing adds

- There is a strong and growing evidence base from systematic reviews and meta-analyses, and experimental and longitudinal studies, showing social media has a range of harmful effects on young people's health and wellbeing.
- While social media may offer some benefits for some young people, these are very likely greatly outweighed by the harms.

## Implications for policy and practice

- The NZ Government should move forward with implementing age restrictions (eg, under 16 years) for social media.
- To ensure these measures are supported by young people, they should be accompanied by empowering, youth-focused communication campaigns.
- The NZ Government also needs to invest in the development of safe, well-regulated online and offline environments that provide meaningful support for young people.

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## Appendix

A more comprehensive outline of research and policy options can be found in an abridged version of [Dr Marsh's submission to the Inquiry into the harm young New Zealanders encounter online](#).

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