

Submission from the APPG on Wellbeing Economics

Regulation of social media and phones

We are writing to support

- (a) Restricting social media accounts to people aged 16 and under.
- (b) Banning the use of all phones on school premises.

Some of us favour other restrictions as well but we do not include any further proposals in this submission.

There is ample evidence of the harms of social media. This has been set out clearly by Professor Jonhathan Haidt.¹ While most scholars agree that there are serious dangers, some believe that the evidence is mixed. We believe however that the weight of evidence goes strongly in one direction. Enough harm is caused to require action.

This is a standard situation. We have a practice which is addictive and can be dangerous. So, for young people not mature enough to make well-informed choices, we ban it. We do this for alcohol, tobacco and gambling. We also do it for driving (though this also includes dangers to others). We should do the same for social media.

In what follows we shall first discuss the evidence, and then consider the pros and cons of a ban, and how it would be implemented.

A. Evidence

We shall review seven types of evidence, much of it focused on English-speaking countries.²

1. Statements by young people

In the UK a More In Common survey of people aged 16-24 found that 63% believe social media does more harm than good to people under 16. 55% of those surveyed supported a ban for children under 16, while only 22% opposed a ban.³ In a US Harris Poll of 18-27

¹ See for example Haidt and Rausch (2026) attached.

² This section is heavily influenced by Haidt and Rausch (2026), but also by the rest of the World Happiness Report 2026.

³ More in Common. (2025). *Public attitudes to smartphones, social media, and online safety. More in Common.* <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/media/flrnzo5x/public-attitudes-to-smartphones-social-media-and-online-safety-1.pdf>

year olds, respondents were asked whether they wished the following platforms did not exist.⁴ The percentages saying Yes were as follows.

X	50%
TikTok	47%
Snapchat	37%
Instagram	34%

Clearly the most harmful platforms are those feeding algorithmic content about influencers and other strangers – not social at all.

A 2023 survey of US college students if they would prefer a world without Instagram or TikTok. The following percentages said yes.⁵

TikTok	57%
Instagram	58%

Internal studies done by the media companies confirm that large numbers of users feel that their platforms are reducing their self-esteem, body image and sleep patterns.⁶

We, as the APPG on Wellbeing Economics, are particularly concerned at how social media platforms encourage social comparisons where viewers are exposed to idealised versions of other people’s lives. The result, so often, is feelings of personal inadequacy and reduced mental health.

2. Statements by parents and teachers

Parents also observe these effects. When asked by More in Common about what things most negatively affect their children’s health, the top response (45%) was “social media use/excessive screen time”.⁷

Teachers surveys show similar results. In an NBC survey, only 3% thought smartphones improved their students’ work.⁸

3. Statements by tech companies

In their review Professors Haidt and Rausch quote very many internal reports by the tech companies themselves which confirm their awareness of the harms they are creating. These include not just the extreme cases of grooming, sex-tortion,

⁴ Haidt, J., & Johnson, W. (2024).

⁵ Bursztyn, L., et al (2023).

⁶ Haidt, J., & Rausch, Z. (2026).

⁷ More in Common. (2025).

⁸ NBC (2024).

cyberbullying and self harm, but the more passive effects on social capacity, attention, self-esteem and sleep.

4. Studies relating hours on social media to low wellbeing

We turn now from expressions of opinion (by young people, parents, teachers, and tech executives) to direct statistical evidence. Here there have been hundreds of cross-sectional studies which relate hours on social media to various measures of wellbeing. In English-speaking countries, the majority of studies show a negative relation between hours of use and individual wellbeing. But this does not prove causality. For this one must look at how, when the same person changed their social media use, their subsequent wellbeing changed. This has been done using longitudinal data on US teenagers aged 12-15.⁹ It shows that earlier social media use causes a subsequent reduction in wellbeing – while earlier loss of wellbeing does not cause a subsequent increase in social media use.

5. Experiments with reducing social media use

There have been many randomised experiments where some people have reduced their use of social media. In a meta-analysis of 32 such experiments (with people of all ages), those who reduced their use experienced an extra 0.22 standard deviations of wellbeing – a significant increase.¹⁰ The results were especially strong when the reduction lasted more than a week,¹¹ though Meta’s own week-long randomised trial also showed benefits from not using Facebook.¹²

6. Natural experiments

Finally, we have the time series evidence of the effects of rolling out high-speed access to the internet and social media in five advanced countries including England. These all point to decreased mental health when access improved.¹³

B. Implementation

On implementation, we can begin with the ban on phone use in schools. This has always been found to be beneficial. But there is a collective action problem here. When one school allows phones, it is more difficult for others to forbid it. The state can facilitate what is in the common interest – by banning use in all schools.¹⁴

⁹ Riehm, K. E. et al (2019)

¹⁰ See Table 2 in: Burnell, K. et al (2025).

¹¹ Thurl, J. et al (2025). This was a re-analysis of Ferguson, C. J. (2025).

¹² Horwitz, J. (2025)

¹³ Haidt, J., & Rausch, Z. (2026).

¹⁴ We would also favour measurement of wellbeing in schools. This would quickly tell us whether the ban had worked.

On social media use, there have been influential voices opposing the ban. They use the following arguments (at least):

- i) Social media needs more regulation, and a ban will 'let tech companies off the hook'.
- ii) Social media can provide useful information and social connections (especially for neurodiverse young people).
- iii) A ban will be difficult to enforce. Some people will use VPNs, and others will falsify their ages.
- iv) It is difficult to define social media.

Here is how we would reply.

- i) If more regulation is needed, that should be undertaken in addition to the ban.
- ii) There are countless other sources of information and social connectivity available, that served us well before social media came along. These include the telephone, texts, email and internet search engines.
- iii) All bans are difficult to enforce. But age-related bans on smoking, gambling and drinking have a huge effect on behaviour, even though there are many cases where they are disregarded. They establish the social norm. And they remove the social pressure to practice the addictive behaviour just because others are doing so.
- iv) There are indeed difficulties of definition. For example, it may be necessary to prevent access to pornography by under-16s via AI sites. That may or may not be the case, but AI would not count as social media. On social media we would favour a wide definition (to include YouTube) and we would only exclude channels which are purely for communication, like Zoom.

In each year that passes more young people are harmed. Young people in Britain already have the lowest average wellbeing in Europe, and it is falling. We should not wait to study the effects of Australia's ban, which will take years to become fully apparent. The time to act is now.

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