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the latest CDC teen mental health report

The report reveals that teens' use of social media is more complicated than the simplistic campaigns to restrict access

By **Mike Males**

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Research suggests that abusive behavior from adults and living in troubled households contributes more to the poor mental health of teenagers than social media use

The Centers for Disease Control's latest biannual survey of 20,000 teenagers reveals that teens' use of social media is much more complicated and intertwined with outside life than recognized by simplistic campaigns to restrict access or impose warning labels.

The CDC analysis associates two-thirds of teens' poor mental health and 89% of suicide attempts with parents' and household adults' violence, abusive behaviors, "severe" mental health problems, drug and alcohol abuse, and jailings. Serious family troubles are "common," with "approximately three in four students (76.1%) experiencing one or more" and "one in five students (18.5%) experiencing four or more," the CDC reports.

CDC data shows girls from severely troubled homes are four times more likely to be depressed, 11 times more likely to harm themselves and 13 times more likely to attempt suicide compared to girls from non-troubled families. The realities teenagers face in troubled homes include soaring drug and alcohol overdoses among ages 25-64 (their parents, parents' partners, relatives, etc.), whose fatalities tripled across California from 2010 to 2023 — the period teens became more depressed.

CDC numbers also implicate school issues, including student alienation, grades, bullying, fear and sports injuries, in around 10% of teens' depression.

What impact does social media have on teen mental health?

New analyses — even by psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Zach Rausch, and Jean Twenge, who blame social media for teenagers' mental health problems — confirm findings by skeptics like psychologist Christopher Ferguson that “screen media plays little role in mental health concerns” and avoiding screens brings little improvement.

Online and real-world lives are strongly connected, positively and negatively. For example, the CDC survey shows that 5 in 6 cyberbullied teens are also emotionally and violently abused at home by parents and grownups. Teenagers from abusive, troubled families are far more likely to be depressed and more likely to use social media than non-abused teens.

Among girls 15 and younger, 45% of those from abusive and disturbed families use social media frequently, compared to just 28% from healthy families. Younger girls who frequently use social media are less likely to attempt suicide or harm themselves than those who don't use social media.

Teens “are embracing online mental health tools — from social media to therapy and mental health apps — as resources for seeking support and managing their own mental health and well-being,” the conservative Common Sense Media's 2024 study of 1,254 young people concluded. Pew Research's 2022 study of 1,316 teens And a majority use social media to make personal connections, including “to help them get through troubled times.”

Meanwhile, a 2023 University of Manchester study of 12,000 teens found that “social media use is one of the least influential factors of adolescent mental health.” And a four-year Stanford Medicine and Data study released in 2022 that tracked 250 7-to-15-year-olds found no relationship between even younger teens’ online/phone use and “their well-being and adjustment outcomes.”

For many teenagers, social media use enhances offline life. As with any endeavor, there are exceptions. The 2024 National Academy of Sciences committee’s literature review found social media does not cause “changes in adolescent health at the population level” although some individuals find heavy internet use troublesome. That fraction deserves individual attention.

Certainly, institutions should restrict social media and phone use where it is disruptive, such as in classrooms and workplaces. But today’s crusades against teens using social media, such as Australia’s ban on social media accounts for those under 16 and proposed bans in the U.S. (spearheaded by California officials) on teen smartphone use at school are not scientifically justified.

“Linking smartphones and social media to youth well-being distracts us from the real difficulties faced by young people,” a 2024 report by Princeton University’s multi-university research team warned. “Poorly formulated legislation will eliminate important sources of information for vulnerable teenagers and wipe out anonymity on the social web.”

“Research does not definitively show that excessive screen time causes teen anxiety or depression,” a 2024 review in the prestigious journal Nature concluded. However, more restrictions on teens were significantly associated with problematic internet use.”

Popular “save the children!” crusades surround every new media and cultural phenomenon, from dime novels, jazz and comics to voice telephones, television, rock ‘n’ roll, video games, rap music, and on and on. Unfortunately, politicians discover sensational youth issues just as advancing research debunks outmoded concerns. Let’s not repeat California’s past panics and policy mistakes with social media.

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