

The Impact of Social Media on Adolescent Mental Health

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Good mental health is imperative, but it is especially important for teenagers to feel secure and have a strong mental health as it affects emotional development, relationships, and overall well-being during a crucial stage of growth that affects the rest of their life. A strong mental health helps teens build resilience, cope with stress, and navigate life transitions. Without proper mental health care, teens are more vulnerable to issues like anxiety, depression, and poor decision-making.

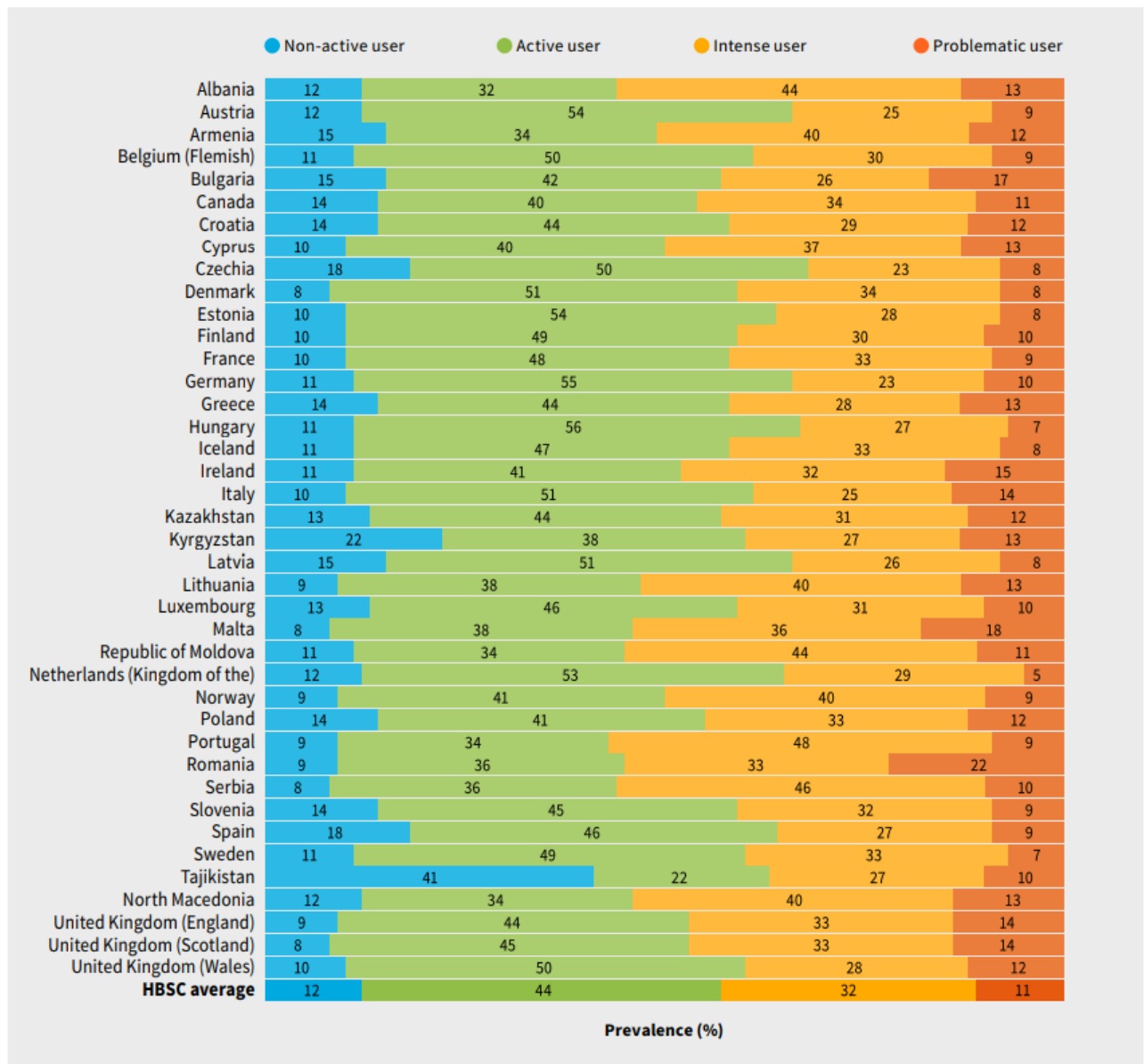
There is an increasing amount of concern for teenagers' mental health and the possibility that social media may be harmfully affecting it. One study, from think tank The New Britain Project and polling firm More in Common surveyed more than 1,600 people aged 16 to 24. It found that three-quarters said stronger rules were needed to protect young people from social media harms, and social media was named as the most negative influence on teens' mental health.

More new data from the WHO Regional Office for Europe reveals a sharp rise in problematic social media use among adolescents, with rates increasing from 7% in 2018 to 11% in 2022. One key finding was that more than 1 in 10 adolescents (11%) showed signs of problematic social media behaviour, struggling to control their use and experiencing negative consequences. Girls reported higher levels of problematic social media use than boys (13% vs 9%).

The rise in problematic social media use among adolescents raises significant concerns about potential impacts on young people. Previous research has found that problematic social media users also reported lower mental and social well-being and higher levels of substance use compared to non-problematic users and non-users. While the report highlights the risks, it also underscores the benefits of responsible social media use. Adolescents who are heavy but non-problematic users reported stronger peer support and social connections. "This study reveals both the promise and the pitfalls of digital engagement for our young people," said Dr Natasha Azzopardi-Muscat, Director for Country Health Policies and Systems, WHO Regional Office for Europe. "It's crucial that we take steps to protect youth to allow them to navigate the digital landscape safely and equip them to make informed choices about their online activities, maximizing the benefits while minimizing the risks to their mental and social well-being. In short, they should rule social media, and not have social media ruling them."

The chart below shows countries and their amount of problematic, intense, active and non-active users.

Fig. 3. SMU four categories by country/region



Different countries are taking varied steps to ensure adolescent’s strong mental health with respect to social media use. One example of this is in Australia, where the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024 introduced a mandatory minimum age of 16 for accounts on certain social media platforms.

The United States is taking different steps towards protecting adolescent’s mental health. In spring of 2023, United States Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, MD, MBA, released an advisory called [Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#), in which he says there is growing evidence that social media is causing harm to young people’s mental health. Soon after, the American Psychological Association (APA) issued its own [health advisory](#). A year later, in June 2024, Dr. Murthy called for a surgeon general’s warning label on social media platforms, which would require an act of Congress to implement.

California Attorney General Rob Bonta issued the following statement in response to a U.S. Court's decision to deny the attempt to stop the "Protecting Our Kids from Social Media Addiction Act" Senate Bill from going into effect: "There is mounting evidence showing the devastating toll that social media addiction can have on our children's mental health and well-being. This addiction is not an accident; it is fed by algorithms deployed by Big Tech. California's landmark law allows young people to intentionally develop the relationship they want with social media, rather than the relationship that is most profitable for companies using tricks and traps to glue young people's eyes to their screens. We are pleased the court understands the importance of giving California families this choice."

The Protecting Our Kids from Social Media Addiction Act Bill interrupts the ability of social media companies and other website operators to use addictive algorithmic feeds, notifications, and other addictive design features to trick and hook children and teens to spend hours and hours on their platforms.

The British government is also expressing concern on the matter. Peter Kyle, the British technology secretary announced further research into the impact tech such as smartphones and social media was having on young people, claiming there was currently "no firm, peer-reviewed evidence". Also, The Safer Phones Bill is calling for:

- chief medical officers to put out guidance on the use of smartphones and social media use by children within 12 months
- the education secretary to come up with a plan for research into the impact of use of social media on children within 12 months
- the government to come back within a year to say whether it will raise the digital age of consent from 13 to 16.

Data Protection and Telecoms Minister Chris Bryant said the bill's recommendations "very much chime with what we intend to do". Bryant said his department had asked the University of Cambridge to run a feasibility study into the impact of smartphones and social media - and that it would work to "roughly the same timetable" as the bill was calling for.

Alongside government restrictions, social media apps have recommended restrictions themselves. The recommended age restrictions for many social media websites are 13 including Whatsapp, Youtube, Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, X, and Pinterest. Other websites such as Tumblr and Telegram recommend an age of 16+. It is important to note that the restrictions the apps recommend are significantly lower than the ones that many governments are beginning to put into effect.

Social media's impact on adolescent mental health is a growing concern for the general public and government and many different governments are taking different steps to secure and protect adolescents during an important time in their development. Many platforms are being forced to adjust their policies and features in order to address concerns about mental health and addiction. As social media continues to shape the lives of adolescents, ensuring they have the tools and support to navigate these platforms responsibly will be key to protecting their mental well-being.

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