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Social Media and Teenagers: A Closer Look at the Evidence

Most American teenagers spend more than three hours a day on social media (Anderson and Jiang). Parents, schools, and lawmakers have all expressed concern about whether this level of use is harming young people, and several states have proposed laws to limit teen social media access. The research, however, is more complicated than the news coverage suggests. This paper argues that social media use is associated with negative outcomes for some teenagers but not for others, and that a one-size-fits-all policy response is likely to do more harm than good.

The most cited evidence in support of restricting teen social media use comes from Jean Twenge's research on what she calls the "iGen" generation (Twenge 5). Twenge's books and articles point to a sharp increase in teen depression and anxiety beginning around 2012, the year smartphone ownership crossed 50 percent among American teens. The correlation between rising smartphone use and rising mental health problems is striking, and Twenge has argued that the relationship is causal.

Other researchers have pushed back. Andrew Przybylski and Amy Orben re-analyzed many of the same datasets Twenge used and found that the actual effect size of social media use on adolescent well-being is small (Orben and Przybylski 175). They compared the effect to the negative effect of regularly eating potatoes, suggesting that the alarmist framing of teen smartphone use may not be supported by the evidence at the population level.

The most recent research has tried to resolve this disagreement by looking at which teenagers are affected rather than the average teenager. The pattern that emerges is that teenagers who already have anxiety or depression tend to be made worse by heavy social

media use, while teenagers without these vulnerabilities are not significantly affected (Hartanto et al.). This finding has clear policy implications: blanket restrictions miss the population that is actually at risk.

The debate over teen social media use is not a simple one. The evidence does not support the claim that all teen social media use is harmful, but it also does not support the claim that it is harmless. The most defensible reading of the research is that some teenagers are at risk and others are not, and that the policy response should focus on identifying and supporting the at-risk group rather than restricting access for everyone.

This is a less satisfying conclusion than either side of the public debate would prefer. It does not let parents off the hook, and it does not provide a simple talking point for lawmakers. It does, however, reflect what the research actually shows, and that should be the starting point for any serious policy conversation.

Works Cited

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