

# MOLLY ROSE FOUNDATION

## Social media bans – early evidence from Australia and the importance of an evidence-based approach

**Bold and decisive action is needed to tackle the acute and chronic harms caused by social media. However, early evidence from Australia points to a range of unintended consequences and a malign compliance strategy from major platforms, with many under 16 accounts still active.**

**Multiple studies are underway to determine the effectiveness of Australia's ban and gauge the positive and adverse impacts that may result. Until then, we cannot be confident that a ban risks swapping one failed experiment in children's safety and wellbeing for another.**

### Early indications from Australia

After just a few weeks, we clearly cannot determine the long-term impacts of Australia's approach.

However, **there are early indications that adverse impacts are starting to be felt – with a plausible 'worst of all worlds' scenario in which some vulnerable children are being cut-off from support networks while a significant number of under 16s accounts remain in use.**

- Figures from the e-Safety Commissioner state that 4.7 million child accounts were deactivated in the first week,<sup>1</sup> with Instagram claiming it activated 330,000 accounts.<sup>2</sup> Given there are 2.5 million Australians aged between 8 and 15, this suggests that **some platforms may have barely made a dent in deactivating child accounts – in Instagram's case, only removing one account for every eight young people**.<sup>3</sup> E-safety's data found that 95% of teens aged 13-15 used at least one major social media site.<sup>4</sup>
- **Australia's crisis service for young people, Kids Helpline, reports that young people have sought support since the ban took effect, including young people experiencing high levels of distress and suicide ideation.**<sup>5</sup> Highest levels of emotional distress were recorded among younger children, girls and children who are neurodivergent. Contacts reported feeling cut off

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<sup>1</sup> Data from the Office of the e-Safety Commissioner

<sup>2</sup> Data issued by Meta, which claims it removed a further 173,000 accounts from Facebook and 39,000 from Threads

<sup>3</sup> MRF believes this is being driven by malign compliance, rather than fundamental issues with the age-assurance technology being used.

<sup>4</sup> Office of the eSafety Commissioner (2025) eSafety report shows widespread underage use of social media and minimal measures to prevent kids signing up. Published 20/02/25.

<sup>5</sup> The West Australian (2026) 'Distressed' teens turn to Kids Helpline following social media ban, saying they've lost support networks. Published 7/01/26

from support networks, including in one case a young person who had used social media as a support tool to manage self-harm urges.

- **One in ten 12-15 year olds accessing Australia's youth mental health service, Headspace, reports the social media ban has been a factor in them seeking immediate help.** While clearly highly preliminary data, Headspace reports **girls and young people identifying as LGBTQ+ were more likely to seek mental health support.** Headspace's youth participation group reported some users had moved to other platforms while others had found ways to circumnavigate the ban.<sup>6</sup>

## Evidence about bans and other intervention approaches

We currently lack strong scientific evidence on the impact of bans, with no high-quality systematic study that has tested the impact of reducing or wholly eliminating social media use among healthy under 16s and that has systematically evaluated the consequences.

By early next year, multiple evaluations of the Australian ban should be available. Meanwhile, researchers from the University of Cambridge will shortly begin a Randomised Controlled Trial in Bradford to test the impact of a social media curfew and one hour per day limit for teens.<sup>7</sup>

The Government received the results of a large-scale evidence review into the impacts of social media and smartphones last summer, led by the Medical Research Council Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit at the University of Cambridge, but has still not published it.

While some supporters of a ban have invoked the precautionary principle as a basis for action, in public health applications where an intervention has an unfavourable or uncertain harm to benefit balance, the burden of proving that an intervention will not be harmful should fall on those proposing it.<sup>8</sup>

In this case, if we move ahead of the evidence, we simply cannot determine what the harm to benefit balance of such a drastic policy solution, however well-intentioned, would be.

## What should happen?

**Molly Rose Foundation strongly rejects the false binary that the only available policy options are an outright ban or continuing to tolerate the appalling status quo.**

The Government should heed the overriding calls for more to be done, including through:

- The application of risk-based age ratings, which would incentivise platforms to offer lower-risk functionality if they wish their products to be available to teens.

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<sup>6</sup> Wilson, C (2025) One in 10 these seeking mental health support from headspace site social media ban as an issue. Published on Crikey.com.au 16/01.26

<sup>7</sup> Study being led by Dr Amy Orben at the University of Cambridge

<sup>8</sup> Aronson, K (2021) When I use a word... The Precautionary Principle: a definition. British Medical Journal (2021);375:n3111

- Strengthening of the Online Safety Act, recognising that chronic and acute risks are primarily a function of product safety. As in every other part of the economy, we can best address those risks through strong and well-targeted regulation.
- Broadening the focus of the Act so it not only necessitates harm reduction, but proactive improvements in wellbeing-by-design. **The price of admission to the UK market should be an end to addictive design, with a requirement that algorithms serving teens recommend high-quality content from a diverse range of sources, trusted mental health support, and high-quality, age-appropriate content from public service broadcasters.**