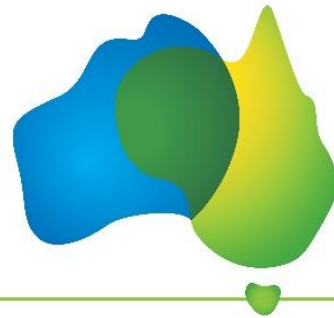


JUNE 2024



**Suicide Prevention
Australia**

Committee Inquiry into the influence and impacts of social media on Australian society

Submission

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Imagine a world without suicide

Recommendations

1. **The Commonwealth Government should invest in the creation and maintenance of an evidence-based online database of suicide prevention services and resources.**
2. **The Commonwealth Government should work with State Governments to implement universal, in-school preventative education mental health and suicide prevention programs for young Australians.**
3. **The Commonwealth Government should make evidence-based “first aid” suicide prevention training more accessible to key members of the community who commonly encounter people at risk of suicide via a learning platform.**
4. **The Commonwealth Government should focus on measures which limit risky additional features of online and social media platforms for under 16s, while avoiding creating barriers to access of the resources and connections these services can provide.**
5. **The Commonwealth Government should invest in help-seeking campaigns through common social media applications.**

Introduction

Suicide Prevention Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. We are the national peak body for suicide prevention, with over 320 members representing more than 140,000 workers, staff, and volunteers across Australia. We provide a collective voice for service provider organisations both large and small, as well as practitioners, researchers, local collaboratives, and people with lived experience.

Social media has been a significant driver for change in recent years, firmly entrenched in our community, especially among young people who have grown up with the technology. It has significant relevance to suicide prevention as social media can be a means to facilitate protective factors against suicide (such as access to mental health resources and social connections and support) and can increase risk factors for suicide (such as bullying and exposure to self-harm content). In a world of immediacy and instant access, this inquiry provides an opportunity to adapt social media to our needs, rather than restrict its use to the point that the positive aspects are diminished.

The good and the bad of social media

The rapid uptake of social media among young people has made it a cornerstone for youth in communication and socialisation, self-image, dissemination of socio-cultural and factual information, and entertainment. This means that it brings with it both risk and opportunity for young people.

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Internationally, the USA Office of the Surgeon General points out both positive and negatives of social media. Research undertaken by the Office has identified benefits such as providing positive community and connection with others who share identities, abilities, and interests, providing access to important information and create a space for self-expression, and the ability to form and maintain friendships online and develop social connections.¹ It points out that marginalised youth, including racial, ethnic, and sexual and gender minorities, can find support among peer groups online.

The report states that 58 per cent of adolescents reported that social media helps them feel more accepted, 67 per cent that they have people who can support them through tough times, 71 per cent who use it as a place to show their creative side, and 80 per cent who feel more connected to what's going on in their friends' lives.² Conversely, it also highlights the harmful impact, especially on adolescent girls for poor mental health, cyberbullying-related depression, body image and disordered eating behaviours, and poor sleep quality linked to social media use.³

Evidence from Australia shows similar results to the above USA study. During consultations for this submission, one member organisation reported their research with young people highlighted a broad range of negative behaviours or experiences online such as bullying, exposure to body image and self-harm content, unwanted contact from strangers, receiving inappropriate material, reputational damage, impacts on sleep, and platform addictiveness.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that in 2020, 44% of young people aged 12–17 had at least one negative online experience in the last 6 months. Negative experiences online impacted 90% of young people through being a victim of negative online behaviours (including bullying, or sending or requesting inappropriate images), and 60% through emotional or psychological impacts associated with encountering risks online.⁴

Cyberbullying is linked to greater rates of self-inflicted damage and suicidal ideation,⁵ while access to online materials, including social media apps that actively promote trends, can result in an increase in the risk of self-harm among adolescents who are already at risk. One international study identified that 14.8% of young people who were admitted to mental hospitals because they posed a risk to others or themselves had viewed internet sites that encouraged suicide in the two weeks leading up to their admission.⁶

The distresses which are felt by young people are not exclusive to social media but can be exacerbated by its use. For example, news outlets and news reported across social media require short, attention-catching material, which can increase anxiety across issues such as climate change, cost-of-living, housing affordability, employment prospects, and other

¹ Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). Washington (DC): [US Department of Health and Human Services](#); 2023.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2021. Bullying and negative online experiences. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/negative-online-experiences>

⁵ The effects of cyberbullying victimization on depression and suicidal ideation among adolescents and young adults: a three year cohort study from India. Maurya C, Muhammad T, Dhillon P, Maurya P. *BMC Psychiatry*. 2022;22:599.

⁶ Using social media for social comparison and feedback-seeking: gender and popularity moderate associations with depressive symptoms. Nesi J, Prinstein MJ. *J Abnorm Child Psychol*. 2015;43:1427–1438.

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current events. Suicide Prevention Australia's Community Tracker⁷ identifies significant causes of distress for adults, but consultations with sector representatives indicate the weight on young people is equally notable.

However, ethical social media can positively influence opportunities for connection, conversation, self-esteem, health promotion, and access to critical medical information.⁸ Research reported among older teens (16 and over) a "Goldilocks Hypothesis", that both too much and too little time spent on social media can harm mental health, but this was not present for under-16s.⁹

A service provider asked young people open-ended questions about their experiences using social media and community platforms for mental health information,¹⁰ and what they would like to see from platforms and content creators to better support their mental health and wellbeing. As avid users of social and community platforms, many young people acknowledge that 'social media is a double-edged sword that can damage but also help [my] mental health' (Male, 23, regional area). Thematic analysis of these responses revealed that young people are looking for: tools for safety, better mental health content, and safe spaces and communities.

The use of social media and Artificial Intelligence for suicide prevention.

In this research, young people described how viewing information about mental health on social media platforms had increased their awareness about mental health and served to reduce stigma. It was also an easy and accessible way to find information and social support. As one participant put it: "If you are smart with social media it's easy to find other people who share the same experiences as you" (Male, 17, Major city). Being able to learn about the lived experience of others gave young people a sense of being less alone in their experiences and was reassuring, as well as helping them to realise that "seeking help is okay" (Male, 18, Major city).

The research found that 35 per cent of young people with a probable serious mental illness search for mental health information on social media once a week or more, compared to 14 per cent of young people who do not have a probable serious mental illness. More than 50% of young people facing mental health challenges use social media as a substitute for professional support.

Overall, this research found that young people reported using social media and community platforms as much as they use Google to find mental health information. This was particularly true for people who lack access to, or do not want professional help. In some cases, social media is being used as a substitute for professional care.

⁷ Suicide Prevention Australia. 2024. <https://www.suicidepreventionaust.org/community-tracker>

⁸ Khalaf AM, Alubied AA, Khalaf AM, Rifaey AA. The Impact of Social Media on the Mental Health of Adolescents and Young Adults: A Systematic Review. *Cureus*. 2023 Aug 5;15(8):e42990. doi: 10.7759/cureus.42990. PMID: 37671234; PMCID: PMC10476631.

⁹ Orben, A., Przybylski, A.K., Blakemore, S.J. *et al.* Windows of developmental sensitivity to social media. *Nat Commun* **13**, 1649 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-29296-3>

¹⁰ ReachOut 2024. <https://about.au.reachout.com/blog/new-research-from-reachout-on-teens-and-tech-connecting-parents-and-carers-with-insights-and-support>

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The COVID-19 pandemic, associated online learning, and lockdowns, increased reliance on social media for connections, and further embedded the generational dependence on the mode.¹¹

Because the depth of reliance on social media means it can often be an essential avenue to help, it is important that restricting harm does not also deprive young people of the connection and help they may need. Suicide Prevention Australia would recommend actions taken to harness the opportunities provided by social media be taken to increase the help-seeking behaviours of young people, and their ability to recognise and support peers in distress. Simultaneously, small but significant supports and protective changes can be made to younger age social media use which do not restrict access to connectivity and support. It is important that these changes be co-designed with young people to minimise potential unintended consequences, and ensure the vital positive aspects of social media are maintained.

Research indicated that social media itself was a source of information and support, with 73 per cent of young people regularly using it to search for mental health information or having done so in the past.¹²

However, the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) creates another issue in this regard. While AI could be used to help prevent suicide and to facilitate access to suicide prevention resources and support services, this relies on the evidence-base of sources. AI technology could be utilised to redirect a person in suicidal distress to a suicide prevention chat resource to ensure access to helpful resources and timely support, and this is an area that would benefit from Commonwealth Government investment.

Without this attention, development, and investment, there is risk associated with AI generated data, including facilitating the dissemination of inaccurate and harmful content. As an example, Suicide Prevention Australia have found that one generative AI service will, under certain circumstances, provide information about support services that do not exist. A person in suicidal distress who is searching for resources needs to be directed to safe and accurate information, requiring that evidence-based information is consolidated in one location and fact-checked. A national dataset of suicide prevention resources that can be utilised by AI services and general search engines should be established, and its ongoing maintenance for accuracy resourced, to help counter the spread of misinformation.

Recommendation 1: The Commonwealth Government should invest in the creation and maintenance of an evidence-based online database of suicide prevention services and resources.

¹¹ Bozzola E, Spina G, Agostiniani R, Barni S, Russo R, Scarpato E, Di Mauro A, Di Stefano AV, Caruso C, Corsello G, Staiano A. The Use of Social Media in Children and Adolescents: Scoping Review on the Potential Risks. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2022 Aug 12;19(16):9960. doi: 10.3390/ijerph19169960. PMID: 36011593; PMCID: PMC9407706.

¹² ReachOut 2024. <https://about.au.reachout.com/blog/new-research-from-reachout-on-teens-and-tech-connecting-parents-and-carers-with-insights-and-support>

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Recognising distress in young people

Education settings are increasingly utilising technology in upper primary and secondary school with Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) schemes, meaning the same devices are used in the classroom and at home. This continuity of overlap between education and social connection was further entrenched during the lockdowns and online learning of 2020-21.¹³

This use of technology provides the tools for social media connection, as well as the ideal venue for increasing education on recognising distress in self and others, and seeking appropriate help. Equipping children through a national curriculum focus on providing context, contacts, and support to develop awareness of distress would give these children the resources they need to navigate themselves and peers through suicidal risk.

Australian research into the barriers and support young people face seeking mental health support identified 71% of the 3,241 student participants had known someone with a mental health problem and more than half (64%) had known a peer with a mental health problem.¹⁴ Increasingly, young people experiencing suicidality are more likely to seek help from peers than from mental health services,¹⁵ and the significant majority of those experiencing a serious mental illness will seek support from their friends.¹⁶

This forms the ideal environment for equipping those peers with information to recognise and support people in distress, through help-seeking programs. Consultations with young people show a general desire to know more about mental health, but also a strong desire to know more about the services that are available to help and how to access them.¹⁷ Education settings are best placed to deliver this knowledge, and enabling young people to both utilise the positive aspects of social media and combat the more damaging in a responsible and meaningful way.

Recommendation 2: The Commonwealth Government should work with State Governments to implement universal, in-school preventative education mental health and suicide prevention programs for young Australians.

The community's role as gatekeeper

Community gatekeepers are an essential component of ensuring a person in distress is supported by their community. The best way to facilitate this is through provision of suicide

¹³ Bozzola E, Spina G, Agostiniani R, Barni S, Russo R, Scarpato E, Di Mauro A, Di Stefano AV, Caruso C, Corsello G, Staiano A. The Use of Social Media in Children and Adolescents: Scoping Review on the Potential Risks. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2022 Aug 12;19(16):9960. doi: 10.3390/ijerph19169960. PMID: 36011593; PMCID: PMC9407706.

¹⁴ NSW Commission for Children and Young People & Mental Health Commission of NSW. (2014). Support in tough times: encouraging young people to seek help for their friends, NSW Commission for Children and Young People, Mental Health Commission of NSW, Sydney.

¹⁵ Michelmores, L. & Hindle, P. (2012). Help-seeking for suicidal thoughts and self-harm in young people: A systematic review, *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behaviour*, 42(5).

¹⁶ Mission Australia & Black Dog Institute. (2017). Youth mental health report: Youth survey 2012-2016, available online at https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2017-youth-mental-health-report_mission-australia-and-black-dog-institute.pdf?sfvrsn=6

¹⁷ NSW Advocate for Children and Young People (2019) Mental health and wellbeing needs of children and young people: ACYP consultation and polling findings, available online at

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prevention “first aid” training to people in the community most likely to encounter distress in young people.

The interaction of children with educational staff, sports coaches, community groups, young leaders, and frequent contacts in the community, both in person, and through social media (such as WhatsApp groups) lends opportunity to providing tools to deal with first disclosures of distress meaningfully and compassionately.

With appropriate evidence-based suicide prevention training, these connectors within communities are capable of having a conversation with a young person and providing a vital connection with assistance to help reduce their risk of suicide. Suicide Prevention Australia has designed and piloted an online suicide prevention learning platform to help upskill and equip the community.

The learning platform, Learnlinc, is an ongoing and supported learning-based platform, bringing together resources and training from a range of providers. This allows individuals to identify learning needs, fulfil learning goals, and apply that learning to suicide prevention. This platform contains more than 140 evidence-based learning resources, including training courses, research papers, reports, and factsheets.

Learnlinc was created in collaboration with experts in suicide prevention and suicide prevention training to provide a space for individuals and organisations to identify and access a variety of learning resources.

Recommendation 3: The Commonwealth Government should make evidence-based “first aid” suicide prevention training more accessible to key members of the community who commonly encounter people at risk of suicide via a learning platform.

[The dangers of age verification and underage use of social media](#)

Age verification can be counterproductive if it denies a child in distress access to resources and support.

Some of our members host online support communities that include, or may be specifically for, children and young people. Such forums provide a supportive and safe space where young people are able to read what others are saying about similar situations, ask questions, and connect. As such they potentially fall under the definition of “social media services”.

The requirements to verify the age of individuals who use the service, or obtain parental consent for those under 16, may result in young people not using the service. There is often stigma around seeking help for mental health or suicide concerns, and questions about personal data such as age, or requiring parental consent, can be a barrier to service usage which results in young people not accessing the important support these online communities can provide.

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Rather than limit access to social media for young people, and the positive aspects it provides, the Government could focus on limiting only aspects of social media to under 16s. For example, open chatrooms that allow random contacts to initiate chats or location identifiers, could have these features disabled for young people.

Recommendation 4 – The Commonwealth Government should focus on measures which limit risky additional features of online and social media platforms for under 16s, while avoiding creating barriers to access of the resources and connections these services can provide.

Using technology to provide avenues to access help

Social media is a vital help-seeking pathway for young people, especially those who cannot rely on traditional methods for help-seeking.

If social media is a young person's first point of contact in dealing with distress, it is important that there is support available easily, accessibly, and in a mode consistent with the young person's expectations. Making help-seeking available through links in common applications on social media allows the information to be delivered in the same format as usage, and in a practical manner, linking the young person immediately to support.

Recommendation 5 – The Commonwealth Government should invest in help-seeking campaigns through common social media applications.

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Acknowledgements Statement

Suicide Prevention Australia acknowledges the unique and important understanding provided by people with lived and living experience. This knowledge and insight is critical in all aspects of suicide prevention policy, practice and research. We drew from existing policy positions which were developed with our members and people with lived experience to prepare this submission.

As the national peak body for suicide prevention, our members are central to all that we do. Advice from our members, including the largest and many of the smallest organisations working in suicide prevention, as well as practitioners, researchers and community leaders is key to the development of our policy positions. Suicide Prevention Australia thanks all involved in the development of this policy position.

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