

# TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION

## BETTER TECH FOR TOMORROW

As minors spend more time online, the danger social media poses to America's children is becoming more apparent. But how bad exactly is social media for our most precious population? The data tells a harrowing story:

### **THERE HAS BEEN A SHARP RISE IN TEENAGE SUICIDE OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS:**

- From 2009 to 2018, suicide rates among 14- to 18-year-olds increased 61.7%.
- 95,000 patients aged 14-18 visited the emergency room for self-harm related injuries in 2018.
- The Social Media Victims Law Center reports that the suicide rate for kids 12 to 16 years old increased 146% from 2007 to 2018.
- BYU research found a correlation between time spent on social media and suicidality risk among teenage girls in what is currently the longest study on teenagers and social media.

### **WHAT'S BEHIND THIS RISE? ONE FACTOR IS SOCIAL MEDIA USE, WHICH IS LINKED TO DEPRESSION AND OTHER MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AMONG CHILDREN:**

- For every additional hour a teenager uses social media, their risk of depression increases 2.3 percentage points.
- Facebook's own internal research shows that Facebook use negatively impacts sleep, stress, work, parenting, relationships, and productivity. Despite this, they have failed to take sufficient action on the issue.
- Researchers believe that social media worsens body image issues. Body image issues now affect children as young as five.
- 80% of 10-year-olds are afraid of failing to live up to body standards.
- Researchers have created a slew of new diagnostic labels for the psychological harms caused by social media, including social network addiction, social media addiction, and social media disorder, along with more specific terminologies of Facebook dependence, Facebook addiction disorder, and Twitter addiction.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVELY ENCOURAGES HARMFUL AND DANGEROUS BEHAVIOR AMONG CHILDREN, AND EXPOSES THEM TO A DELUGE OF ILLEGAL AND DANGEROUS SEXUAL MATERIAL:**

- Multiple children have died after participating in the blackout challenge—a TikTok challenge in which children choke themselves until they lose consciousness.
- More than 50% of teenage girls use unhealthy weight control mechanisms.

Social media also facilitates cyberbullying, which is wider spread than physical bullying and contributes to suicide among victims and perpetrators alike.

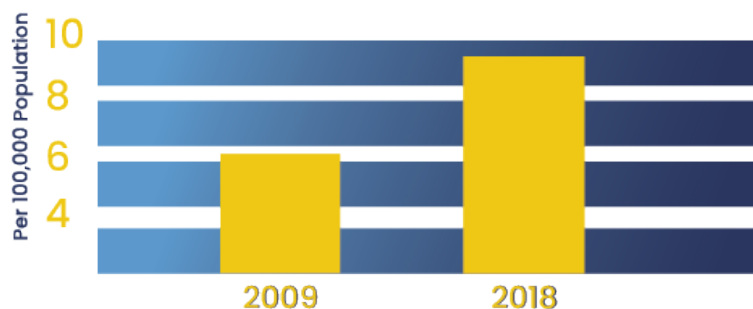
- In fact, some research suggests that cyberbullying is the primary driver of increases in teenaged suicide attempts.
- More than 126 million Child Sexual Abusive Material (CSAM) related posts were removed in the first nine months of 2021 by Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok.
- 54% of teenage girls and 40% of teenage boys will have a harmful online experience related to CSAM.

## THE PROBLEM WILL ONLY GET WORSE; SCREEN TIME AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE ARE BECOMING MORE UBIQUITOUS AMONG CHILDREN:

- Children aged 8-12 spend an average of 4-6 hours per day of screen time while teenagers spend up to 9 hours per day.
- Americans spend an average of 1,300 hours per year on social media—that is more than 3.5 hours per day, up from 90 minutes per day in 2012.
- 46% of teenagers say they are online “almost constantly,” and 35% of teens say they use social media almost constantly.
- Researchers classify excessive social media use as a behavioral addiction which shares common characteristics with substance abuse.
- This increased use presents significant opportunity costs; affects personal, professional, and familial relationships; promotes an unhealthy lifestyle; and increases the risk of depression and other mental illnesses.

It is easy to become lost in the data, but behind it are real stories of people who have had their lives destroyed by social media. One little girl named Lalani, at the age of eight years old, died after participating in TikTok’s “Blackout Challenge” where children posted videos attempting to choke themselves right up to the point of death. She was not alone, as TikTok’s algorithm pushed this content, helping it become a viral challenge. 10-year-old Nylah Anderson was another victim influenced by these viral videos in her feed. This young girl went into her mother’s closet with a clothes hanger and a purse and emulated what she had been watching on the app. Tragically, her mother later found her hanging in the closet, strangulated, and she was unable to be saved.

The data is clear that social media is a clear and present danger to American children. Action is needed to protect America’s future.



\*61.7% increase in suicide rates among 14- to 18-year-olds