



Social media restrictions require timely and coordinated evaluation

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Public policy is one of the most powerful tools available to governments to improve public health. Australia's social media minimum-age legislation is a policy with considerable potential for impact in Australia and internationally. It is designed to reduce (or delay) exposure to online harms and support healthier development during adolescence. The legislation requires in-scope social media platforms to take reasonable steps to prevent children younger than 16 years from creating or maintaining accounts, by implementing age verification measures. Evaluations of its impacts are being closely followed by countries considering enacting similar legislation,¹ including in the UK where the government recently announced new social media regulations.²

In Australia, the policy has been divisive. While there is strong support for social media reform within the community,³ an open letter to Australia's prime minister Anthony Albanese signed by 140 academics and representatives of youth and child health groups expressed concerns about the effectiveness and potential unintended consequences of the ban.⁴ Until the evidence regarding the effects of this policy and similar legislative approaches builds, divergent views are to be expected. As with the introduction of public policy such as smoking bans and compulsory seatbelt laws, resistance to legislation often gives way to acceptance, support, and cultural shifts, particularly if evidence of their beneficial impacts becomes apparent.⁵

The world first ban has limited evidence on which to base the design of its provisions or implementation. It is reminiscent of other public health interventions such as tobacco plain packaging or e-cigarette controls implemented in the contexts of an uncertain evidence base or where industry interests are at stake.⁶

Policy must be evaluated robustly to determine whether it achieved its intended objectives or caused unintended harms.⁷ Public health policy is, however, challenging to evaluate. Random assignment of individuals, groups, or populations to policy exposure is typically not feasible or appropriate. While public health policies can take years to develop, the timing of their enactment and implementation is often politically driven and difficult for researchers to anticipate. This can constrain opportunities for well designed prospective evaluations. These challenges may partly explain the limited pool of research evaluating them.⁸

Our independent evaluation of Australia's social media legislation published in *The BMJ* used a regression discontinuity design.^{9,10} This design has potential to provide credible causal estimates of effects when randomised experiments are not feasible.¹⁰ Our study had methodological limitations, including the inherent assumptions of the design.

We also encountered challenges that are common when undertaking evaluations of major public health legislation, including evolving policy details and uncertain implementation timelines. There was also evidence of substandard implementation of the policy provisions such as age verification measures, limiting adolescent exposure and blunting contrasts between groups in our analyses of outcomes.

The impacts of social media legislation are likely diverse, difficult to predict, and will take time to accrue. They are beyond the scope of any individual evaluation or research team. The limitations of our research may be addressed in future evaluations, including those planned by the Australian Commonwealth government.¹¹ To develop a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the policy's positive and potential adverse impacts, we encourage multiple independent evaluations that are free from industry influence and employ diverse designs and methods. This could include qualitative research on adolescents' lived experience of the legislation; using population level survey data to explore effects on health and wellbeing outcomes and across different subgroups; studies from health system perspectives using large, linked datasets examining resource use to support economic evaluation; and research to assess industry practices, innovation, and adaptation.¹² Future evaluations should also look to draw on objective measures of social media use to provide more robust evidence of the effects of such legislative efforts.¹³ Importantly, to better anticipate and assess the impacts of social media restrictions, we need to better understand the mechanism through which such policies exert their effects, enabling findings to be generalised, improving impact prediction, and informing the design of more effective policies in the future.

We have a unique opportunity to create online environments that better support child and adolescent development, health, and wellbeing. Reducing the harms associated with problematic digital media use, including social media, is now a priority for international health agencies, governments, and communities.^{14,15} Digital media policies affecting millions of adolescents globally are being developed, implemented, and debated. Research systems that encourage the rapid generation, synthesis, and dissemination of robust policy relevant evidence are critical for their effective implementation and impact.¹⁶ This will require coordination to identify high priority research questions, share evaluation plans to avoid unnecessary duplication, harmonise key measures to enable comparison and synthesis, and share findings as soon as they are available. Without coordination, policy decisions will continue to outpace the evidence needed to inform them.

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