

Executive Summary

The Impact of Social Media on Young People – A Public Health Issue

Depressive and anxiety disorders are now among the most common causes of distress among adolescents and young adults. Belgian and international data point in the same direction: at the end of 2025, 26% of people aged 18 to 29 reported an anxiety disorder; antidepressant use among 12 to 18-year-olds increased by 43.6% between 2019 and 2023; and between 2018 and 2024, the number of new cases of work incapacity due to burnout more than doubled among members of the Independent Health Insurance Funds aged 18 to 34. These developments are part of a global trend in which each new generation now reports poorer mental health than the previous one.

At the same time, social media use has intensified and is starting at a younger age. According to the 2021-2022 HBSC survey conducted among adolescents aged 11 to 15, 11% of them display problematic social media use, compared with 7% in 2018, with a higher prevalence among girls. In Belgium, 65% of students in the first and second years of secondary school use Snapchat, 54% use TikTok and 48% use Instagram. Social media use is already widespread among primary school children.

This policy report, based on a review of scientific and grey literature, highlights several findings.

First, excessive use of screens, and social media in particular, is associated through a dose-response relationship with sleep disorders, increased sedentary behaviour, depressive and anxiety symptoms, impaired self-image and problematic eating behaviours. A meta-analysis reports an increase of approximately 13% in the risk of depression for each additional hour spent on social media, with a particularly pronounced effect among girls. Around 70% of studies also establish a link between social media use and adverse effects on sleep, mainly due to later bedtimes and longer sleep onset times. Adolescent girls are a particularly exposed group.

Second, the age at which a person receives their first smartphone and creates their first social media account appear to be major determinants of their subsequent mental health. The earlier the access, the greater the risk of depression, suicidal thoughts, poor family relationships and exposure to cyberbullying. By the age of 12, smartphone owners already face an increased risk of depression, obesity and insufficient sleep.

Third, the impact depends less on exposure time alone than on the type of use, the architecture of the platforms, the content consumed and the user's pre-existing vulnerability. Social media is therefore not uniformly harmful. Prosocial uses, such as communicating with peers, accessing support communities or engaging in creative expression, can contribute to well-being. However, addictive mechanisms such as infinite scrolling, autoplay, push notifications, personalised algorithmic recommendations and streaks expose young people to disproportionate risks, especially when a psychological vulnerability already exists.

The case of TikTok illustrates the scale of the phenomenon. A French experiment showed that a fictitious account belonging to a 13-year-old could be exposed to content referring to sadness in less than five minutes and to videos referring to suicide in less than one hour. The French parliamentary commission of inquiry into the psychological effects of TikTok on minors, conducted in September 2025, held 178 hearings and received 31,000 responses from members of the public. Several clinicians who gave evidence described forms of clinical care similar to those used for substance addictions. They also reported a marked decrease in the age of patients admitted for psychiatric emergencies.

These findings are supported by several recent institutional reports. They converge on the identification of a public health issue and call for a combination of education, prevention and structural regulation of platforms. At European level, the Digital Services Act and the July 2025 guidelines on the protection of minors now provide a legal basis. However, there remains a considerable gap between the obligations established and their practical implementation.

Based on these findings, the Independent Health Insurance Funds consider that the response cannot rely solely on the individual responsibility of young people and their families. Asking adolescents to self-regulate when faced with systems optimised by teams of engineers amounts to shifting the burden of protection onto those who have the fewest means to shoulder it. Six areas of recommendation are proposed:

- **Strengthen the regulatory framework:** make minors' access conditional on compliance with binding requirements, including reliable age verification by a third party, protective default settings, explicit consent for algorithmic recommendations, the removal of infinite scrolling and the deactivation of the most addictive features. Until such a framework is effectively implemented, introduce transitional measures such as banning access for children under 16 and setting daily and night-time usage limits for 16 and 17-year-olds.
- **Enforce 'safety by design':** reverse the burden of proof by requiring platforms to demonstrate that their features are safe before deploying them to minors.
- **Strengthen digital media literacy, prevention and support from primary school onwards.**
- **Support families without transferring all responsibility to them:** inform parents about the issues associated with giving children a connected smartphone and access to social media, and preserve screen-free spaces and times.
- **Develop accessible offline alternatives,** including sports, cultural and community activities, with particular attention to vulnerable families and young people whose mental health is already fragile.
- **Support independent research and establish interfederal public governance of young people's digital health,** including an observatory and secure access to data from platforms.

As long as platform architecture remains optimised to capture attention and maximise emotional engagement, marginal adjustments to content moderation will not be sufficient to protect young users.

The full policy report is available only in French and Dutch :

French : <https://www.mloz.be/fr/documentation/limpact-des-reseaux-sociaux-chez-les-jeunes>

Dutch : <https://www.mloz.be/nl/documentatie/de-impact-van-sociale-media-op-jongeren>