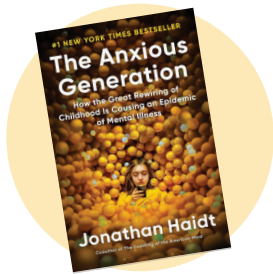




X Is social media bad for teens' mental health? The tl;dr is: maybe. But probably not. It takes some explaining, so let's dig in. We begin with the elephant in the room, which is illustrated by the Vox chart at the bottom of this page showing teen and young adult suicide rates in the U.S. being the highest on record.

Also, #1 New York Times best-sellers like Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* are causing a stir. Haidt sets out to address the difficult topic with a clear, easy-to-understand answer that feels true, and makes sense to any parent who's tried to pry their teenager's eyes away from TikTok just to hear how their day was (#fine).



Not to mention anecdotal evidence, like the author of this tip sheet, who never felt great after looking at Facebook, deleted the account, and found other things to be anxious about. And, of course, the companies themselves, who, if you believe *The Wall Street Journal's* reporting (LINK) have admitted internally that their platforms cause mental harm



Is Social Media Bad for Teens' Mental Health?

to their teen users.

Taken together, one would be forgiven for believing the case against social media was a slam dunk. However, the crusade against social media and the lack of actual evidence supporting its harmful effects carry with them a whiff of moral panic.

Going torch and pitchfork on

social media may seem innocuous except when you consider:

"Policies restricting adolescents' access to new technologies [based on incomplete and often contradictory findings] may be ill advised if new technologies are being used as a valuable source of social support or are required in order to build digital and

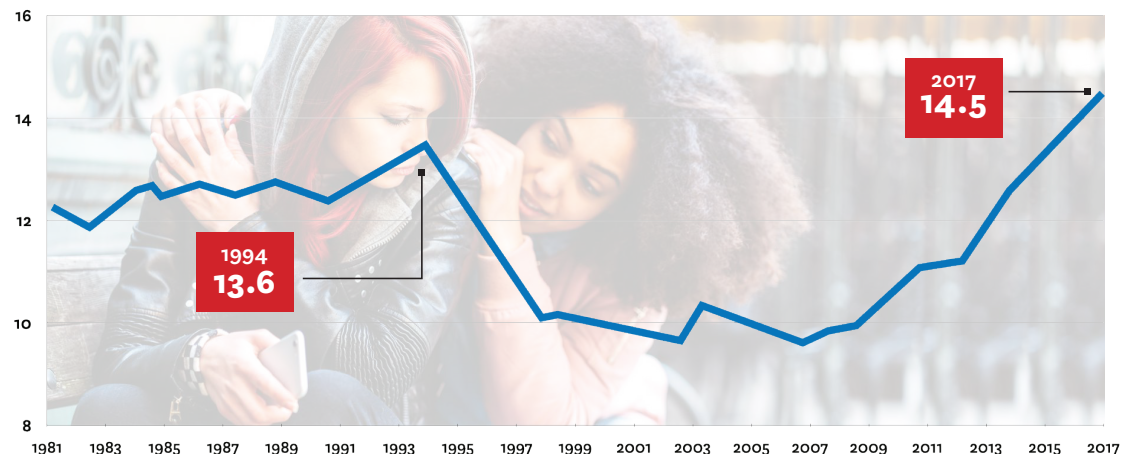
interpersonal (digitally mediated) skills for economies of the future." (LINK)

When we tell stories about teen mental health and social media, it's important to understand the difference between a struggle unique to a specific character and one endemic to modern teens everywhere.



U.S. Teen, Young Adult Suicide Rates Highest on Record

Suicide deaths among people ages 15 to 24, per 100,000 people



Source: WISQARS/CDC

Social Media & Teens' Mental Health

Let's take the above issues in reverse:

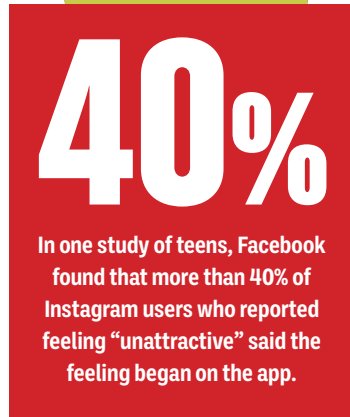
■ In 2021, *The Wall Street Journal* published leaked internal Facebook documents ([LINK](#)) that appear to show company knowledge that their platforms, specifically Instagram, cause mental harm to teenagers, especially teen girls. According to the files:

- a. 1 in 5 teens say Instagram makes them feel worse about themselves.
- b. 32% of teen girls said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse.
- c. Instagram makes body issues worse for 1 in 3 teen girls.
- d. In one study of teens in the U.S. and U.K., Facebook found that more than 40% of Instagram users who reported feeling "unattractive" said the feeling began on the app. About a quarter of the teens who reported feeling "not good enough" said the feeling started on Instagram.

The issues with each of these data points is the issue we run into with most research that purports to show a correlation between social media use and mental health: excessive weight given to a minority of self-reported results.

Self-reported data is prone to inaccuracy because people's perceptions of their own behavior can be inaccurate. ([LINK](#))

Along those lines, Pew Research ([LINK](#)) found that teens are more likely to report positive than negative experiences in their social media use, and teens are more



likely to say social media has had more of a negative effect on others than on themselves.

Yet, because tech companies are not inclined to share data with researchers, scientists are left with methods wholly reliant on self-reported data. Even so, the best studies ([LINK](#)) have difficulty finding clear evidence that social media is related to mental health decline.

Nor are the leaked internal Facebook documents the "smoking gun" they are purported to be. "1 in 5 teens say Instagram makes them feel worse about themselves" = "80% of teen Instagram users report no ill effects!" #eating



Teen Girls Are More Likely Than Teen Boys to Say Social Media Makes Them Feel More Supported but Also Overwhelmed by Drama, Excluded by Friends

Percent of U.S. teens who say that, in general, what they see on social media makes them feel **a lot or a little ...**

POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

	Boys	Girls	U.S. teens
More connected to what's going on in their friends' lives	76%	83%	80%
Like they have a place where they can show their creative side	64	77	71
Like they have people who can support them through tough times	62	72	67
More accepted	54	61	58

NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE

Overwhelmed because of all the drama	32	45	38
Like their friend are leaving them out of things	24	37	31
Pressure to post content that will get lots of comments and likes	27	32	29
Worse about their own life	18	28	23

Note: Teens are those ages 13 to 17. Those who did not give an answer or who gave other responses are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted April 14–May 4, 2022.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER



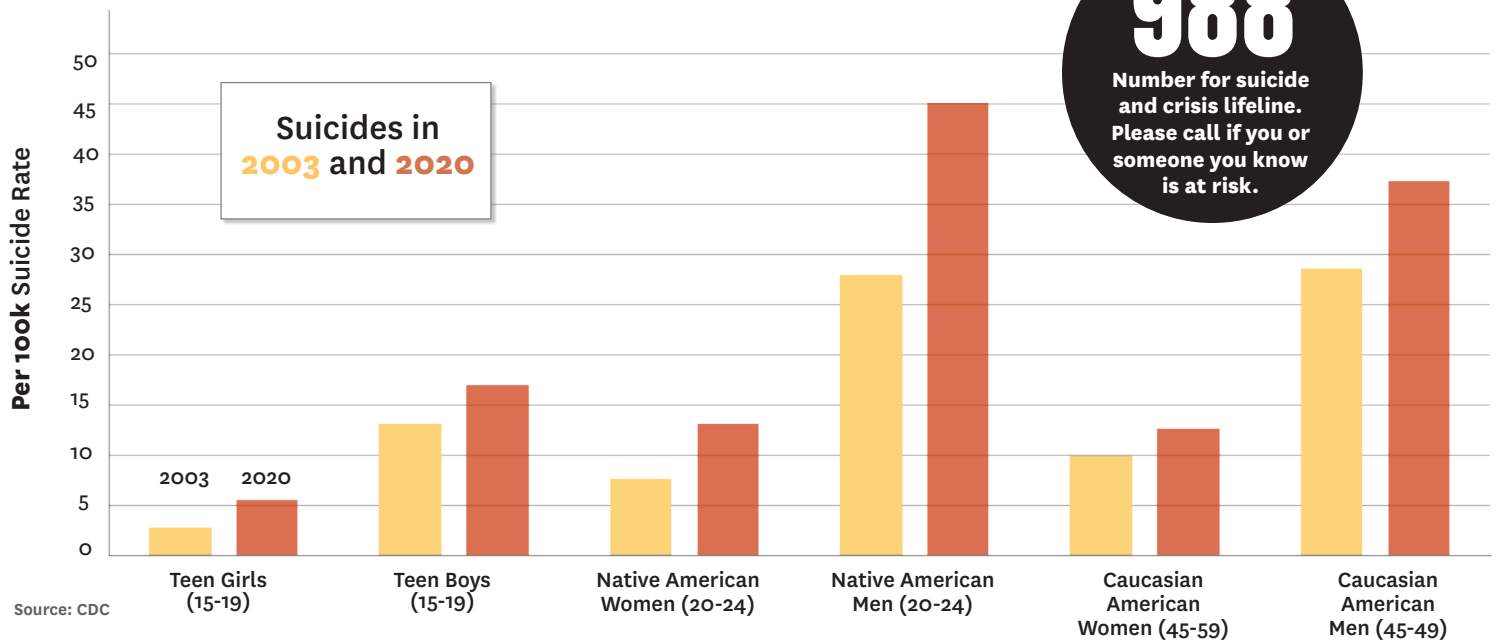
Of course, your character can absolutely suffer from their social media usage, because some kids do suffer.

- What they're spending their time on and how much time they're spending are all important variables.
- i. One study ([LINK](#)) found that depictions of self-harm acts on social media normalize self-harm behavior, concealment, and suicide ideation.

- ii. Problematic video game use, online gambling, online bullying, and pornography addictions are all issues that need to be addressed as they can be symptoms of even more serious mental health issues. ([LINK](#))
- iii. Some teens are known to post all night long, a habit that gave rise to the term "Vamping." Due to their tech addiction, these teens already have a disrupted circadian rhythm and are at greater risk of declining

school performance and loss of self-control. The good news is that replacing screen time with physical activity showed a positive effect on associations with mental health. #touchgrass

■ Just as relevant, this study ([LINK](#)) found that 81% of students attested that social media boosted their sense of connectedness and acceptance and helped them find community.



Finally, the most concerning issue is the rise in suicide in America.

a. Importantly, suicide rates are up across all demographics in America, not just teens. In fact, middle-aged men commit suicide 3-5 times more often than teen girls according to CDC data.

b. Meanwhile, data from European studies (LINK) show a decrease in teen suicide across a majority of countries during the social media decade 2011-2019.

c. For that matter, an increase in suicide attempts in the U.S. coincided with hospital coding changes (LINK) that started in 2015, suggesting that rather than an increase in suicide attempts, such attempts were previously being undercounted.

One important observation that seems true across multiple studies (LINK) is that teens already expressing symptoms of depression tend to use social media more than their peers. "This suggests that social media may be an indicator rather than a risk factor for symptoms of mental ill-health." (LINK)

Conclusion

The state of mental health among teens in America is concerning.

The rate of suicides in America is even more so, among all demographics.

And while social media may exacerbate anxiety, depression, or low self-esteem, it's also important to remember that there's an opioid crisis, frequent school shootings, a climate crisis, multiple wars, widespread racial and sexual discrimination and violence, and 1 in 6 children live below the poverty line. (It's no coincidence that social media usage is higher among teens in low-income families [LINK]).

Yet, in the United States there is, on average, one school psychologist for every 1,119 students!

Our teens don't need social media to feel depressed about the world, but the research does seem to show that excessive social media use might be a symptom, not necessarily a cause, of deeper underlying mental health issues.

As adults, the best we can do is talk, listen and observe. As writers, there's no rule or principle; there is, however, nuance that matters for audiences trying to understand how to shape a world for their children. It's probably not the social media. Then again _(ツ)_/

Is Social Media Rewiring Childhood?



By his own admission (LINK), Jonathan Haidt, author of "The Anxious Generation," concedes the data that he uses shows only a 15% correlation between social media use and mental health variation, meaning that such variation is caused by 85% of other stuff.

b. Haidt's claims that increased internet usage coincided with decreased mental health was also debunked by this study (LINK) which looked at broadband subscription changes (and, intrinsically, social media access) in 202 countries over 19 years and found no discernible connection

to negative psychological outcomes.

c. This meta study (LINK) by Christopher Ferguson looked at 33 separate studies published between 2015 and 2019.

"Across studies ... there was no evidence that screen media contributed to suicidal ideation or other mental health outcomes. This result was also true when investigating smartphones or social media specifically. Overall, as has been the case for previous media such as video games, concerns about screen time and mental health are not based in reliable data."