# Social media warning labels and school cell phone bans: Do they unlock better youth mental health?

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This week, the U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy called for health

warnings on social media for younger users. This recent call follows an earlier Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health, also published by the Surgeon General.

Health warnings on social media would be analogous to the ones seen on cigarette packages, serving as reminders to parents and youth of the mental health risks of social media. The Surgeon General also called for schools to become phone-free environments. Although in his op-ed, Murthy acknowledged that research on these topics is not yet conclusive, he also noted that we "don't have the luxury to wait for perfect information."

Concerns over smartphone use and social media's impact on child and adolescent mental health are far from new. But they have been reignited because new warnings are being suggested and put into place to limit their use. Smartphone bans or restrictions have been enacted in countries around the world although how these restrictions work in practice varies. Several Canadian provinces are also implementing such restrictions.

Although these efforts are well intentioned, and seek to support youth, research supporting these practices is still unsettled. As researchers in child development and psychology, we feel it is essential to review related research and discuss the benefits and drawbacks of smartphone bans and social media health warnings.

## The impacts of smartphones and social media

Our research shows that greater screen time is associated with negative physical, behavioral and cognitive outcomes. One reason why screen time may be problematic is it interferes with other activities that are associated with well-being, such as physical activity, interactions with family and friends, and academic pursuits.

Some, but not all studies show that social media use is associated with [more anxiety and depressive symptoms](#) in adolescents. The pressure for social validation and gaining likes and followers can increase stress and anxiety in youth. Moreover, social media can result in cyberbullying and negative social interactions, which are in turn associated with poor mental health.

Social media use in adolescents has also been associated with [body image issues](#), particularly in girls. Social media can present filtered and unrealistic beauty standards that lead to dissatisfaction with one's own body.

It is important to note that these studies are correlational, and do not imply causal evidence.

In terms of the impact of smartphones on attention, usage can be distracting to youth. For example, research shows that students can [take up to 20 minutes to refocus](#) after being distracted by their smartphones.

## The benefits and drawbacks of cell phone bans

Banning smartphones from classrooms will likely lead to fewer student distractions, particularly for youth who are experiencing more difficulties in school. Without the need to police smartphone usage, teachers can also focus the classroom more on academic learning.

Smartphone bans may also help protect youth against cyberbullying that can happen during class hours. However, smartphone bans in schools will not eliminate cyberbullying, which can occur in off school hours, so it remains critical to educate students, parents and teachers about recognizing, preventing, and addressing cyberbullying.

In contrast, banning smart phones in school could have detrimental

impacts for some youth. For example, LGBTQ+ youth use social media to [form a community](link) where they can get support, share information, and develop their identity. Limiting access to a space where they can feel safe and feel like they belong could exacerbate their mental health difficulties.

## Could social media health warnings be the solution?

The efficacy of warning labels depends on the form they take. Research suggests that warning labels that [promote safe use are more effective](link).

In the case of social media, this means improving social media literacy. For example, warning labels could remind users that what they see on [social media is not always representative of real life](link), and this reminder may help reduce the negative effects of online social comparisons.

Social media warning labels also [hold the media platforms more accountable](link). Platforms create and design features to maximize usage, profiting from user engagement. Warning labels can help users be more aware of how these platforms profit from their usage, highlighting the potential risks of excessive use.

Although social media labels might not directly dissuade young users from high consumption, they may do so indirectly, via greater parental oversight. Indeed, parents might be more likely to set limits knowing that there is evidence that the product their child or adolescent is using is associated with some risks.

In contrast, warning labels focused on moderating or stopping social media use could be less efficient. They may foster a negative self concept in users, such as thinking "I know I shouldn't be using social media, but I can't stop because I lack self-control." This does not represent a good starting point to motivate change.

# Other contributors to youth mental health and learning issues

Given the lack of causal evidence on the effects of social media on mental health difficulties, it is important to remember that banning smartphones in classrooms is not a panacea.

Importantly, it doesn't address many root problems of mental health difficulties in youth, such as cyberbullying.

Social media is one factor, among many, for why youth are currently experiencing high rates of mental health difficulties. Other factors include structural discrimination, economic hardship, and social isolation made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing exclusively on social media will not fix the mental health challenges currently faced by youth.

Therefore, comprehensive initiatives such as increasing school funding for mental and digital health literacy alongside bolstering availability of extracurricular activities may serve as effective ways of supporting youth.

It is encouraging that policymakers are paying more attention to youth mental health and its causes, but it is important to act at multiple levels to support youth mental health and learning.

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