

Facebook's Own Data is Not as Conclusive as You Think About Teens and Mental Health

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On Tuesday, Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen testified before a Senate panel. The hearing's focus was advertised as "protecting kids online."

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Researchers have worked for decades to tease out the relationship between teen media use and mental health. Although there is debate, they tend to agree that the [evidence we've seen so far](#) is complex, contradictory and ultimately inconclusive. That is equally true of Facebook's internal marketing data, leaked by Haugen, as it is of the validated studies on the topic.

Opinion versus fact

The leaked Facebook research consists of opinion surveys and interviews. Facebook asked teens about their impressions of Instagram's effect on their body image, mental health and other issues.

That reliance on self-reporting — the teens' own opinions — as a single indicator of harm is a problem, says Candice Odgers, a psychologist who studies adolescence at University of California, Irvine and Duke University. That's because teenagers are already primed by media coverage, and the disapproval of adults, to believe that social media is bad for them.

Odgers was a [coauthor of a study](#) conducted in 2015 and published in 2020 that found exactly this. "If you ask teens if they are addicted/harmed by social media or their phones, the vast majority say yes," she tells NPR. "But if you actually do the research and connect their use to objective measures ... there is very little to no connection." With the exception of a small increase in behavior problems, her study found no real world connections between smartphone or social media use and several different measures of psychological distress and well-being. "At the population level," the paper concluded, "there was little evidence that digital technology access and use is negatively associated with young adolescents' well-being."

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