Analog solutions for young people's digital mental health crisis

A call for immediate action to better protect youth mental health online, followed by evidence of the scale and trajectory of this crisis

A call for immediate action

By People vs Big Tech, Panoptykon Foundation, and Council on Tech and Social Cohesion

A broad coalition of researchers, practitioners, and activists has come together in support of immediate EU action to strengthen the protection and promotion of youth mental health by default. They have united around a set of common policy recommendations aimed at improving the safeguarding of youth mental health online.

Their recommendations are as follows:

1. **No addictive design features by default**
   Online platforms should not rely on extensive notifications turned on by default, infinite scroll, autoplay, or other mechanisms designed to keep users hooked.
2. **Invasive profiling off by default**
   Children and young users should not be subject to behavioural profiling that drives emotionally manipulative content. Instead, the default feed should only use as input signals and data actively provided by the user for this very purpose (e.g. interests declared by the user when building their profile), as well as explicit user feedback on specific content (e.g. "show me more/show me less" signal sent by clicking a relevant button).
3. **Optimising for values other than engagement**
   Recommender systems should optimize for societal benefits and long-term user value by learning, curiosity, safety, or rest—not just views, clicks, and time spent.
4. **Facilitating conscious user choice and algorithmic pluralism**
   Platforms should support real user agency and allow them to use independent (i.e. provided by third parties) content curation and content moderation services.
5. **Positive friction to disrupt compulsive behaviour**
   By default, platforms should introduce positive friction, encouraging users to think before posting, commenting, or sharing content. Nudges, pauses, and prompts can help users reflect and disengage—just as we do in other public health domains.

These are not abstract principles. They are concrete design practices, which can be made real by enforcing the Digital Services Act and other existing and forthcoming EU policy instruments. They are a baseline, not a ceiling—offering policymakers and regulators a shared reference point for shaping a healthier digital environment.

Given the priorities of the Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the progress made under the Polish Presidency in bringing digital mental health into the spotlight, the Parliament's cross-party consensus on enhancing online protection for minors, and the Commission's ongoing efforts to strengthen enforcement efforts and strategies, the conditions are ripe for making significant progress.

We call upon EU policymakers, with strong leadership of the Danish Presidency, to seize this rare window of political opportunity to better protect children and young people online.

centre for future generations

Supporting evidence on the scale and trajectory of our digital mental health crisis

By Mehmet Onur Çevik, Maria Koomen & Virginia Mahieu, Centre for Future Generations

It is widely reported that mental health is getting worse across all age groups. According to the European Commission, around 46% of Europeans experienced emotional or psychosocial distress such as anxiety or depression in 2022. And for young people, the picture is particularly alarming, with Glenn Micallef, Commissioner for intergenerational fairness and youth labelling youth mental health "a silent crisis". Other surveys in the UK and US suggest that nearly one in five young people suffer from a diagnosed mental health condition—a number that continues to climb. And the EU's own Future Shocks 2023 report warned of further decline in societal well-being—particularly among the young, citing rising anxiety, loneliness, and an erosion of support systems.

There is no single explanation for this decline. A cascade of crises—including the COVID-19 pandemic, economic stress and the high cost of living, climate anxiety, environmental factors, war and conflict—has put mounting pressure on individuals and communities. But one recurring factor stands out in both public concern and policy attention: the role of digital technologies.

Smartphones and social media in particular have become central to everyday life, with at least two generations alive today that have never known a world without them.

These technologies have created and enabled opportunities for learning and play, communities for belonging and discussion, and long-distance connectivity across borders and regions that have never before been possible. Yet, already a decade ago, researchers began to observe shifts in behaviour, mood, and cognition, particularly among young users, raising questions about early digital exposure. Experts warned that toddlers and infants were engaging with screens before the effects on brain development were even understood, with concerns about their future cognitive skills and emotional resilience.

Today, one prominent voice and author of *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt, has spurred a new wave of public discourse on this topic, arguing that the combination of smartphone use, algorithmic feeds, and changing social norms has created a "perfect storm" for youth mental health. Haidt points to how online platforms exploit the (developing) brain's reward system—particularly dopamine-driven gratification—to drive engagement at the expense of user mental health. For example, empirical studies have shown that prolonged social media use among adolescents—driven by engagement-focused design features—directly reduces the time they spend on healthier activities like sleep. Other studies link excessive screen time and multitasking with impaired executive function, lower academic performance, and delayed cognitive development.

But not everyone agrees on the finality of the evidence. Critics point to the lack of established causal linkages between smartphones, social media, and mental health, noting that much of the evidence to date is correlative. A 2024 meta-analysis of 226 studies by Stanford's Jeff Hancock found only "small effects," and others caution that the science is not as clear-cut as public narratives suggest (other academics like Brown, 2023 and McPhillips, 2024, for context). These studies also warn that over-focusing on the risks of digital technologies can downplay some of the possible benefits, like digital health and therapeutics. And further, researchers warn that focusing too narrowly on digital technologies risks ignoring other deep systemic

causes—like poverty, discrimination, emergencies, social isolation and loneliness - all of which have a detrimental effect on mental health.

While academics continue to search for and debate causes of this worsening mental health crisis, a number of key points of academic consensus have formed around the role of digital technologies and young people.

A recent global panel of over 120 experts from 11 disciplines reached several conclusions: heavy use of smartphones and social media is consistently associated with sleep disturbances, attention difficulties, behavioural addiction, and—particularly for girls—body dissatisfaction and increased exposure to mental health risks. They also noted that evidence on social deprivation and the effects of interventions like age limits or school bans remains limited and inconclusive.

Another recent study in the UK showed that the effects of digital environments can be more pronounced during specific developmental windows, highlighting sensitive periods of vulnerability—particularly during puberty (ages 11–13 for girls, 14–15 for boys) and again around age 19.

And yet another meta-study by the Knight-Georgetown Institute (KGI) and the Panoptykon Foundation mapped these alarming patterns to a policy framework, codifying their their contributions to systemic risks related to illegal content, fundamental rights, gender-based violence, public health, and serious negative consequences for physical and mental well-being of adolescents of adolescents.

On the horizon: emerging tech, emerging mental health risks

On top of the already well-documented risks posed by social media and screen time, a new wave of technologies is beginning to reshape how young people engage with digital environments.

One major trend is the rapid rise of AI-generated content. Undeniably troubling are the reports of AI being misused to bully classmates through sexually explicit deepfakes or to recruit minors into extremist networks. More subtly, on platforms like TikTok, so-called brain rot videos—repetitive, overstimulating, and algorithmically optimised for attention—are increasingly common. Early evidence points to associations between brain rot content and reduced brain connectivity, impaired attention, and emotional imbalance. Interestingly, despite the negatively-twinged slang, young people themselves do not seem concerned, instead describing brain rot as welcome relief from doomscrolling news of conflict and global warming.

The second trend is cognitive offloading. While it is not new to outsource mentally burdensome tasks to machines—mental arithmetic to calculators, wayfinding to GPS—what is new is the depth and frequency of this delegation: thinking itself can now be outsourced to AI. While AI is expected to boost efficiency and productivity across society, the consequences of this new level of offloading are as-yet unknown. A widely-shared MIT pre-print study on ChatGPT on "cognitive debt" found that heavy LLM use was linked to consistently lower performance across neural, linguistic, and behavioural measures. Similarly, a study of 666 UK residents showed that the more participants relied on AI tools, the less critical thinking they exhibited. Experts warn that, to protect the rights of children, the rapid rise of AI must not go unchecked.

A third trend is the sycophantic tendency of AI chatbots. They tend to flatter and agree with us, to keep us engaged and talking, even if it is not helpful or accurate. This tendency at one point became so overt that it led to OpenAI rolling back one of their models due to complaints. The optimisation of AI chatbots for user engagement undoubtedly raises concerns, the most extreme perhaps are reports of real-world psychotic episodes triggered by talking to chatbots like ChatGPT— termed "ChatGPT psychosis." Some users develop intense obsessions with AI chatbots, spiraling into severe mental health crises characterised by paranoia, delusions of grandeur, and breaks with reality, and some have even been jailed or involuntarily detained. This

trend raises ethical concerns and questions about how AI chatbots are—and to what extent they should be—used to replace human social interactions and even clinical therapies.

At the same time, neurotechnologies—devices that sense or influence the brain—are becoming increasingly cheap and portable, and could soon be embedded into mainstream consumer wearables like headphones, glasses, and watches. In theory, they could support mental well-being, reduce anxiety, and improve focus. But there is an ironic risk that these novel tools could also be used as a digital bandaid for mental health disorders, while the underlying root causes go unaddressed—particularly outside of clinical contexts. Worse, neuromarketing practices—using brain-derived insights on how content is perceived—could amplify the same harmful dynamics already seen with social media algorithms, if used to create hyper-compelling content tuned to emotional vulnerabilities, perhaps even in real-time at the individual level.

Looking forward, focus not on *whether* but *how* technology shapes young minds

With a view to today's state of play and the emerging problems on the horizon, the question should not simply be *whether or not* digital technologies are causing mental health decline, but rather *how* digital technologies shape the environments in which young people live and grow: how they learn, and how they build relationships, their identity and sense of self.

Online platforms and digital services that mediate social interaction, drive compulsive use, and moderate content all influence how young people experience the world, making them some of the most consequential actors shaping future generations. As such, public oversight is essential to ensure these digital environments support, rather than erode, mental health of young people.

Policy is catching up—but must look forward and move faster

The good news is that alarm bells are ringing inside our political institutions.

World Health Organization (WHO) experts called last year for tobacco-style warning labels on social media platforms, citing growing concern over compulsive use, comparison anxiety, and mood disorders. The WHO also warned that current mental health systems are not equipped to meet the scale or urgency of today's needs. In the U.S., the former Surgeon General urged public action, stating "the risk of not acting could be someone's life."

In Europe, political momentum is clearly building. In addition to its 2023 conclusions on mental health, the Council of the EU adopted new conclusions in June 2025 stressing the urgent need to act. Members of the European Parliament's committee to protect consumers (IMCO) unanimously agree that Europe's online protections must be strengthened. Last year, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre noted that effective governance requires more than a single solution, calling for coordinated action across caregivers, educators, tech companies, policymakers, researchers, and youth themselves—through improved content systems, proportionate age assurances, enhanced media literacy, and better accountability for design choices that shape user behaviour. And pushing for speed, the Swedish Minister for Digitalisation warned the Commission to "act fast," noting that delays could lead to long-term harms that are harder to reverse.

EU institutions have already taken important steps to integrate mental health and youth protection across governance frameworks. The 2022 Better Internet for Kids strategy, the 2023 Commission Communication on a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health, and the 2024 Political Guidelines for the Next Commission all recognise that digital safety is a public health issue—not just a consumer protection or digital policy matter.

Today, much of the necessary legal architecture is already there. More than ten existing EU regulations govern how social media and online platforms operate—from the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Unfair Commercial Practices Directive, to the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Artificial Intelligence Act.

Together, these laws are an important toolbox for lawmakers and regulators to use for addressing these systemic risks online.

Although many useful laws are in place, their enforcement remains uneven and unsteady. Without causal evidence, case law, or tested standards, concerns persist about the speed, consistency, and political vulnerability of their application.

Looking forward, there are concrete opportunities to build on the existing legislative framework toward a more proactive, comprehensive governance protecting and promoting mental health in the digital age, especially for youth.

First, the European Commission launched a public consultation on draft guidelines for better protection of minors under the DSA, which are expected to include new standards, requirements, and controls for putting youth safety first.

Second, the Commission is preparing a proposal for the Digital Fairness Act (DFA), which is expected to fill gaps not addressed by existing digital policy—particularly around addictive platform design, harmful default settings, and persuasive user interfaces. For youth mental health online, this new legislation could mark a turning point, from reactive content moderation to proactive design accountability.

And third, to better address youth mental health across governance frameworks—and generations—the Council Conclusions adopted in June 2025 gave the European Commission a clear mandate for more ambitious action. As the Polish Deputy Minister of Health urged, "the time has come for universal standards to help us understand how to respond to challenges and find our way in this new reality."

With this, EU policymakers must step up on all fronts – enforcing existing policies, and ensuring that policy action is forward-looking and fit for all generations. In particular, the Danish Presidency of the Council of the EU has an opportunity to ensure that protecting children and young people online is high on the EU's political agenda. Indeed, this would be in line with its stated priorities, which include "protecting children and young people from harmful online content, addictive algorithms, screen consumption, unethical business models and extensive data harvesting and profiling".[1] The Danish Presidency must also ensure that the EU Strategy for Intergenerational Fairness and the EU Mental Health Strategy called for by the European Parliament adequately address existing and emerging technologies.

[1] Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Programme: A strong Europe in a changing world Programme July 1 – December 31 2025, https://danish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/programme-for-the-danish-eu-presidency/programme-of-the-danish-eu-presidency/