States Are Regulating Youth Social Media at Record Pace, but Evidence Often Lags Behind Policy, Study Finds

George Mason University-led study found state social media laws don't always align with evidence-based strategies to support youth mental health.

FAIRFAX, VA, UNITED STATES, September 4, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- From TikTok bans and age verification requirements to media literacy lessons in schools, U.S. states are exploring a wide range of strategies to protect young people online.

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>
> *Melissa Villodas, associate professor, George Mason University*

The flurry of legislation reflects growing concern about social media's role in youth mental health, as rates of depression and anxiety have increased in recent years. But policy approaches have varied considerably, and the scientific evidence backing their effectiveness is mixed.

To better understand how states are responding, a research team led by social work researcher Melissa Villodas of George Mason University's College of Public Health analyzed 16 enacted laws across 10 states. The study, published in The Journal of Policy Practice and Research, offers one of the first frameworks for organizing and assessing the growing patchwork of state social media laws.

Researchers found the policies generally fell into three broad categories:

1) Limiting access through measures like parental consent requirements, age verification, internet restrictions in school, and, in one case in Montana, an attempted ban on TikTok. This was by far the most common approach, despite relatively limited evidence that many of these measures improve mental health for young people.

2) Reducing harmful exposure by restricting targeted advertising to minors, limiting potentially addictive platform features, and expanding parental controls. Existing research offers somewhat stronger, though still mixed, support for these approaches.

3) Building media literacy by teaching students about topics such as misinformation, cyberbullying, online safety, and social media's effects on mental health. This was the least common approach, even though existing evidence suggests it may be a promising strategy, particularly when it addresses both the risks and benefits of social media use.

"Most research on this topic has focused directly on how social media affects young people's mental health," said Villodas, associate professor in the Department of Social Work and the study's lead author. "We wanted to understand what state governments are actually doing in response, whether those approaches are supported by existing evidence, and where additional research is needed." She also emphasized the study's "person-in-environment" perspective, a fundamental approach in social work that considers how broader forces, including public policy, can influence a young person's experiences and mental health.

The study uncovered one glaring disconnect: the policy approach used most often, limiting young people's access, had the least supporting evidence of its effectiveness. Meanwhile, media literacy training, included in just one enacted law in Florida, appeared to have some of the strongest evidence behind it.

"Many states have focused on measures like parental consent and age verification, but the evidence for those strategies is still limited," Villodas said. "Media literacy has received much less attention, even though it may be one of the more promising approaches when it teaches young people about both the risks and the benefits of social media."

The study captures the policy landscape through November 2024, but Villodas said its findings are designed to help policymakers evaluate future proposals as the evidence continues to evolve.

In addition to Villodas, the study was coauthored by Michael Wheeler and Natalia Acevedo, both recent graduates of George Mason's Master of Social Work program; Fadi Hamati of Columbia Cornell Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at New York-Presbyterian; and Ishita Kapur of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

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MEDIA INQUIRIES: Reporters who wish to speak to Dr. Villodas about youth social media policies, please email media contact Mary Cunningham at mcunni7@gmu.edu.

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