



7 February 2022

Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety  
Department of the House of Representatives  
Via email: [smos.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:smos.reps@aph.gov.au)

## **Response to question on notice – National Mental Health Commission**

### **1. What research has the Government conducted into:**

The National Mental Health Commission (the Commission) has identified a need to undertake analysis of what is causing increased rates of anxiety and psychological distress in young people, an increase which was evident prior to the pandemic but which has continued to increase.

#### **a) Why youth mental health is getting worse?**

In September 2021, the Commission began exploring what may be contributing to increased mental ill health for children and young people aged 0-25 years. Trends indicate that mental health has been declining over approximately two decades, according to measures including self-reported distress,<sup>1</sup> emergency department presentations, rates of anti-depressant use and MBS mental health service usage.<sup>2</sup>

Over a period of four months in late 2021, the Commission met with two groups to inform research into what might be driving a trend in increased mental ill health of children and young people:

- A Technical Advisory Group (TAG) comprising individuals with a range of expertise in child and youth mental health issues.
- A Young People's Group (YPG) comprising members of the headspace Youth Reference Group which is made up of a diverse group of young people of varying ages, gender identities and cultural backgrounds. This group provided advice from the perspective of lived experience on the drivers of mental ill health.

Desktop research was also undertaken to ensure the best available evidence was explored, however we found there was often insufficient data to fully unpack what may be driving trends, particularly in relation to the experiences of Australian children under 12 years of age.

The Commission's research to-date indicates that large scale shifts in society and culture are key drivers of increased distress. Young people and mental health experts agreed that increased distress could be attributed to changes happening across all spheres of a young person's life,

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<sup>1</sup> Available through resources such as Mission Australia surveys and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data collations, see: <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/youth-survey>; <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/mental-illness>

<sup>2</sup> Data obtained through Health departments and publicly available data such as from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, see: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/mental-illness>

including in their experiences of family, in education and employment settings, and their physical health. Uncertainty about the future was also highlighted as a contributing factor. It was noted that population-level experiences such as the COVID-19 pandemic, inequity and digitalisation may amplify and exacerbate experiences of distress.

The factors contributing to distress are multi-faceted and intersectional, with each young person having a unique experience. There is unlikely to be a simple answer or policy response to increased distress. The Commission is undertaking further work to understand the outcomes of our initial research, and to develop advice on how children and young people's mental health and wellbeing can be best supported.

#### **b) The impact of social media on youth mental health?**

The Commission is exploring digitalisation<sup>3</sup> as one of the societal shifts that may have contributed to changes in mental health for children and young people. Social media is a key component of this. Early findings indicate that social media, and digitalisation more broadly, do not drive increased experiences of mental ill health. However, digitalisation may amplify the effects of other drivers, or intensify the feelings of an individual who is already distressed.

In summary, to-date the Commission has formed the view that:

- There is no conclusive evidence to suggest social media causes mental ill health
- Impacts of social media on mental health are highly specific to the individual
- Attempts to mitigate the risks of social media should not undermine the benefits of its usage.

In consultation with members of the Young People's Group, it was noted that young people are aware of, and concerned about, some problems with social media. These include the prevalence of harmful content, the difficulties in having harmful content taken down, and concern about young children not being well equipped to participate online. On balance, young people were also quick to identify numerous benefits of social media and emphasised that living online is not a choice – children and young people are required to use technology daily for activities such as education. Therefore, discussing social media as if it is opt-in does not accurately represent their experiences. Their usage of social media will also be different to other demographics. Children and young people should be consulted on any proposed tools, resources, or regulatory changes to ensure they will achieve intended outcomes.

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<sup>3</sup> The Commission defines digitalisation as the increased availability and use of technology in daily life.