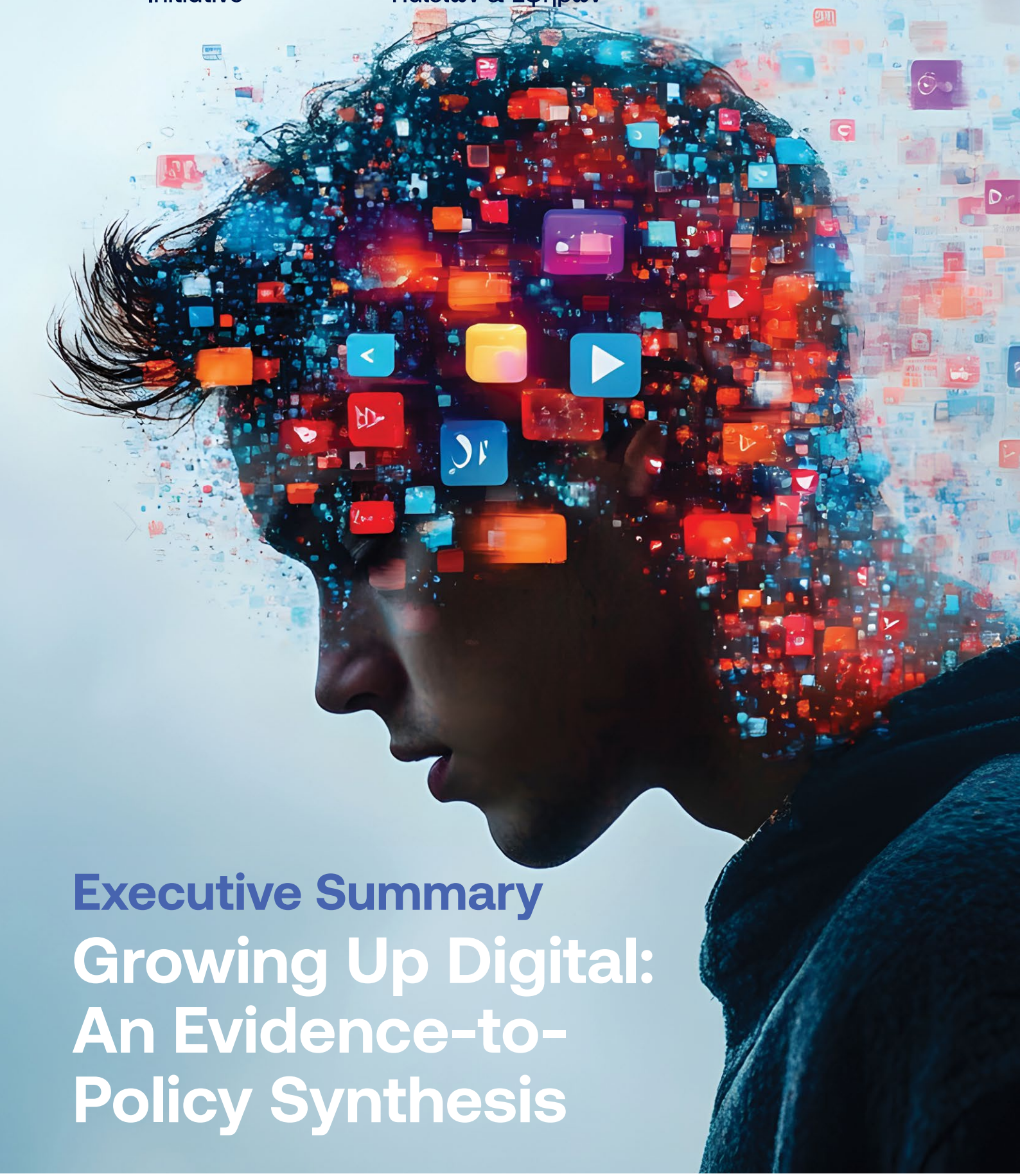
Child & Adolescent Mental Health Initiative

Πρωτοβουλία για την Ψυχική Υγεία Παιδιών & Εφήβων



Executive Summary

Growing Up Digital: An Evidence-to-Policy Synthesis

Διεθνής Πρωτοβουλία για την Υγεία
Global Health Initiative

ΙΣΝ / SNF
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Credits and Contributions

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Activity in the YES programme, Ioannina.

Executive Summary

Growing Up Digital: An Evidence-to-Policy Synthesis

Young people today grow up online. Smartphones, apps, and social media are woven into the fabric of everyday life for most teenagers, as commonplace as school or friendships. Governments are increasingly worried about what this means for their health and wellbeing, and they are starting to act: restricting phones in schools, debating age limits for social media, and introducing measures to hold tech companies more accountable for the design and operation of their platforms.

The assumptions behind these actions matter. What harms are they trying to prevent? How strong is the evidence for those harms? Which responses are most likely to help, and which may create new problems? Above all, how should policy reason when the evidence is real but incomplete, and when digital life brings both risks and benefits?

This report examines those questions. It brings together 32 major evidence-to-policy documents, produced by organizations including the European Commission, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and professional associations, that review what is known about young people's digital lives, their implications for mental health, and the policy responses being adopted and debated around the world. It identifies where these sources converge, where they diverge, and how their findings can inform public decisions under uncertainty.

To situate these international findings in the Greek context, the report draws on national data establishing baseline conditions of digital engagement, online exposure, and adolescent wellbeing in Greece. It also incorporates a qualitative component based on structured discussions with 85 adolescents aged 13 to 17 across five Greek cities, conducted through the Youth Engagement Scheme of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Initiative (CAMHI). These discussions help ground the analysis in young people's lived experiences and clarify how digital environments and policy initiatives are understood and navigated in Greece. Together, these components help assess where broader international patterns are reflected nationally and where local conditions, governance structures, and adolescent experiences call for a distinct response.

About this report

32

major documents reviewed
Published 2017–2026

1,099

individual claims
Compiled, evaluated, and compared

635

policy recommendations
Assessed

Focus on adolescents

aged 10–19

Applied
to the Greek context

Compiled national data and youth dialogue sessions conducted across 5 cities

Why is there concern about digital use and adolescent mental health?

Youth mental health has become a growing public-health concern at exactly the moment digital environments have become a routine part of adolescent social life. The relationship between the two is complex. Digital environments can increase adolescents' exposure to experiences that research already links to poorer mental health: harassment and bullying, disturbing or age-inappropriate content, social comparison pressure, and disrupted sleep. When digital habits cut into sleep, crowd out physical activity and other forms of protective developmental experiences, or expose young people repeatedly to hostility or idealized images, the effects on mood, attention, and daily functioning can be real.

Mirroring broader international trends, digital participation among young people in Greece is widespread, begins early, and already carries measurable risks. Daily internet use among secondary school students has risen from 77% to 86% between 2019 and 2025. More than half of secondary students report spending more than three hours online on weekends. Many young people access social media well before the age that platforms formally require: 41% of primary pupils first used social media between ages 10 and 12, and 66% reported declaring a false age when signing up. Sixty-one per cent of secondary students report encountering harmful or inappropriate content, most of it accidentally. Problematic social media use among 15 and 16-year-olds has risen from 36% to 48% since 2015, with girls significantly more affected than boys.

These figures show that risks are already present in Greek adolescents' everyday lives, and that the question is no longer whether to act but how.

Key figures from Greek national data

Daily internet use is now the norm

39%→49% in primary school and
77%→86% in secondary school between 2019 and 2025

Heavy use is concentrated rather than universal

>3 hours/day is reported by 18% of primary pupils and 39% of secondary pupils on weekdays, rising to 29% and 56% on weekends

Exposure, not just time, is the issue

34% of primary and **61%** of secondary students report harmful or inappropriate content, with most exposure accidental

Contact-based harms are not marginal:

18% reported meeting someone first met online, and
24% reported images shared without consent

Subjective burden is rising:

Problematic social media use among **15–16-year-olds** increased from **36.1%** in **2015** to **48.0%** in **2024**

Source: Greek Safer Internet Centre (FORTH), Panhellenic Survey of 2,500 Students Aged 10–18: Online Habits of Children and Adolescents (2025); ESPAD Greece 2015 and 2024.

What does the research show?

The evidence shows that digital environments can increase adolescents' exposure to established mental-health risk factors, and consistently identifies associations between heavy or problematic digital use and poorer mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, sleep problems, and loneliness. However, this relationship is complex and works in both directions. That is, young people who are already experiencing emotional distress may be more likely to engage in unhealthy patterns of digital use, while experiences such as cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content, compulsive use, and disrupted sleep can worsen existing vulnerabilities. Overall, the evidence suggests that digital use and mental health influence one another and are also shaped by wider factors such as family, school, peer relationships, and offline support.

The most common instinct is to ask how many hours online is too many. Total screen time, taken on its own, is too blunt an indicator to carry the weight placed on it. Across the research reviewed, links between total screen time and mental health are weak, inconsistent, and heavily dependent on context. An hour spent talking to friends, being bullied, scrolling late at night, or looking for support are not the same kind of experience.

That said, duration is not irrelevant. Time becomes a meaningful signal when it displaces sleep and crowds out activities that support healthy development and wellbeing, including physical activity, in-person social interaction and community engagement, or when it becomes difficult to control. Recent experimental literature suggests that reducing social media use can produce short-term improvements in loneliness and depressive symptoms, particularly among those already experiencing dis-

Drawing by Eirini Mpakopoulou and Vasileia Liouskou, members of the YES team in Athens.

tress. These studies involve voluntary reduction under specific conditions, and their findings apply more directly to policies targeting problematic or difficult-to-control use.

The evidence is strongest when duration is interpreted alongside what young people encounter, when they are online, how much control they feel they have, and what digital use displaces or intensifies in daily life. The most consistent findings concern specific types of experience.

Bullying and harassment online are strongly linked to anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Digital environments change the scale and persistence of these experiences: a hostile message can reach hundreds of peers, stay visible indefinitely, and follow a young person beyond the school day. In Greece, the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) data from 2022 shows that 9.5% of adolescents experienced cyberbullying in the previous two months, with rates rising since earlier surveys.

Harmful content is another consistent concern. This includes violent material, content that glorifies eating disorders or substance use, and sexual imagery young people were not seeking. Most of the exposure reported by Greek students was accidental, driven by recommendation systems that kept serving similar material.

Social comparison pressure, especially on image-heavy platforms, affects how teenagers see themselves. Greek youth discussions described the relentless visibility of idealized bodies and perfect lives:

> ***"The beauty standards promoted on social media are harmful. You can't really tell the difference between appearances and what is actually real."***

Sleep disruption is among the most consistently identified pathways between digital habits and wellbeing. Late-night use, endless feeds, notifications, and autoplay can delay and fragment sleep, worsening mood and concentration. For some teenagers, the phone at night is bound up with distress rather than causing it:

> ***"At night, the bad thoughts come, and having a video playing in the background helps stop them."***

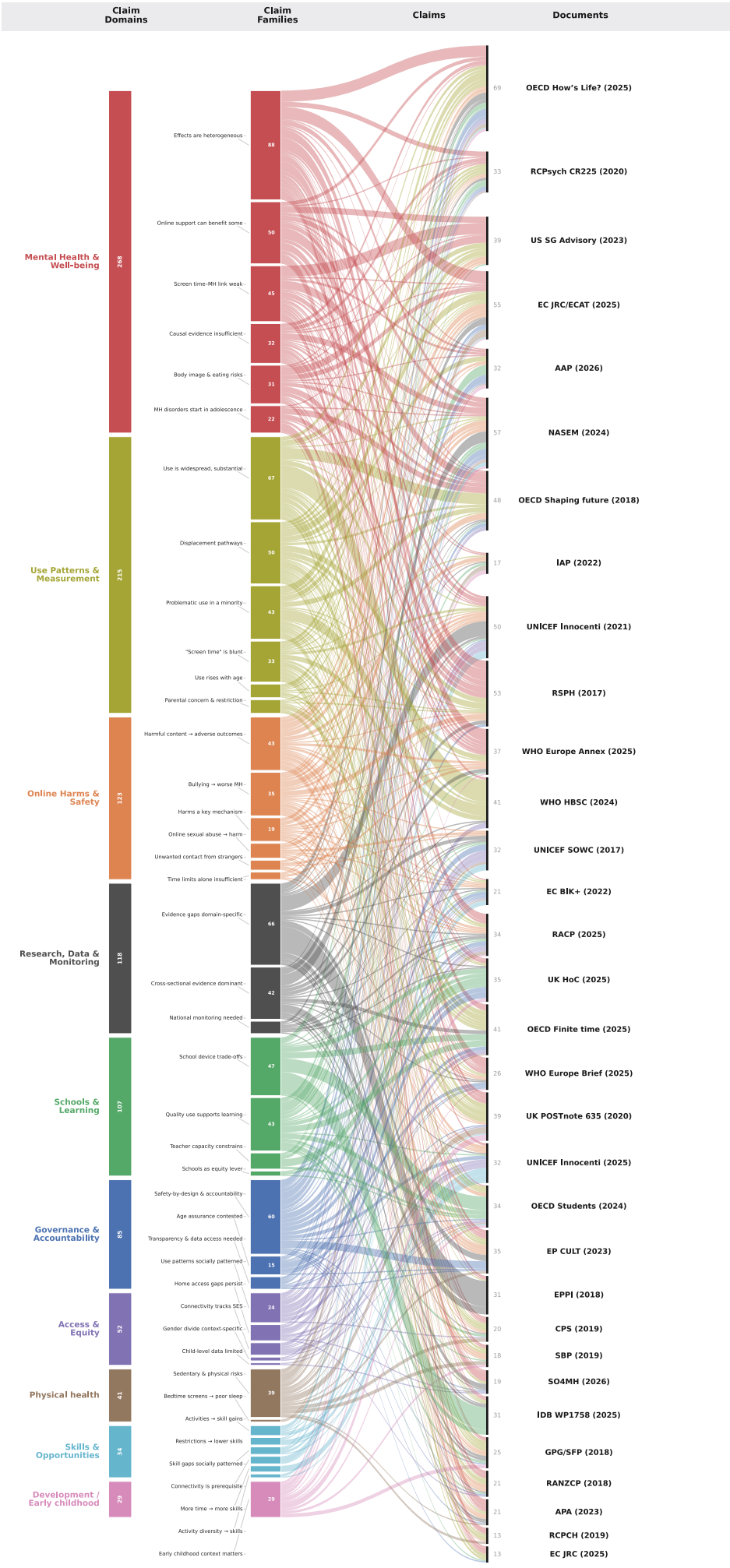
This reinforcing pattern, where existing distress drives late-night use, which then fragments sleep and deepens the original difficulty, is part of why sleep is one of the most consistently identified and practically actionable pathways in the evidence. Greek HBSC data show that difficulties getting to sleep more than once a week have more than doubled among adolescent girls since 2014.

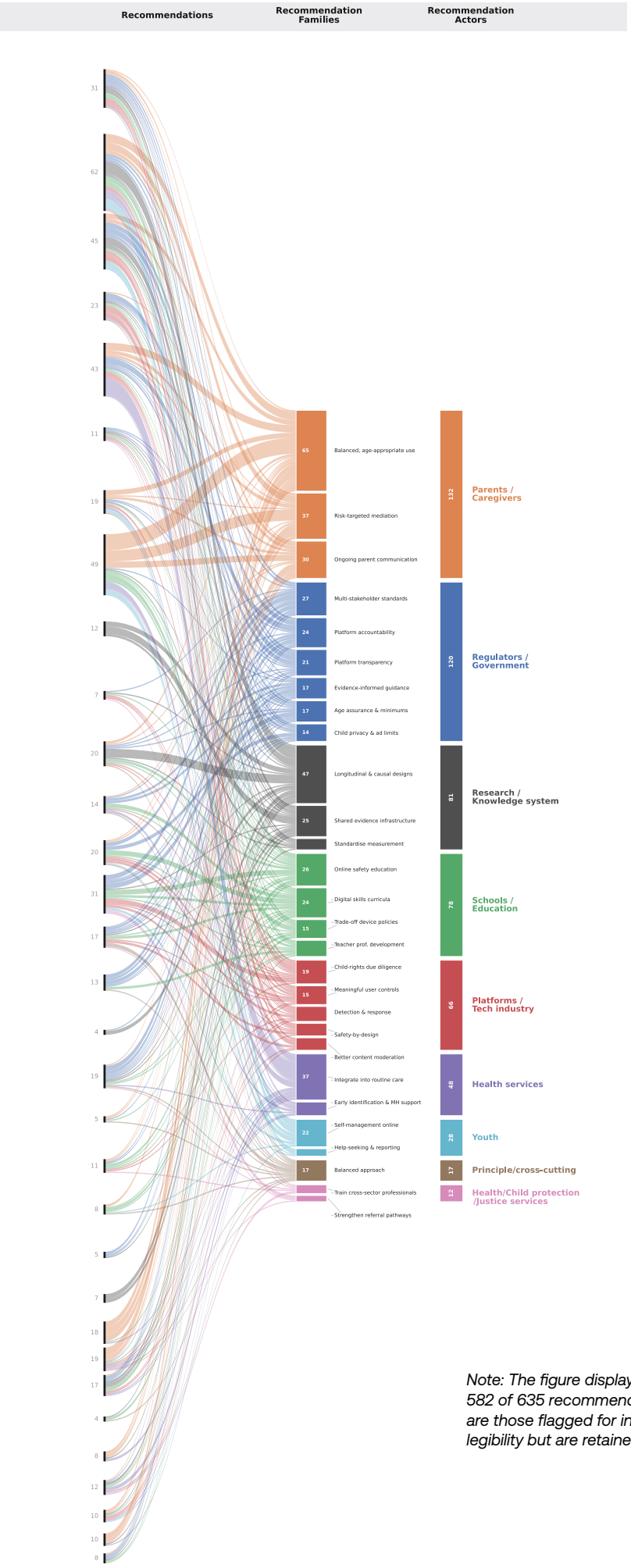
The risk is not evenly distributed. Some harms concentrate among older adolescents and girls, and among young people already dealing with anxiety, depression, or other difficulties. The same digital environment that poses risks for one teenager may be a genuine source of connection, support, and belonging for another, particularly those who are isolated, geographically remote, or part of marginalized groups in unsupportive offline environments. The harms are real and concerning. They coexist, in the existing fabric of adolescent life, with benefits that policy should not simply ignore.

Research also suggests specific developmental windows of vulnerability. Risk is concentrated at particular ages: girls aged 11–13 and boys aged 14–15 appear especially sensitive, according to longitudinal research on life satisfaction. More broadly, early adolescents tend to depend more on adult scaffolding and may be especially vulnerable to disruptions in sleep and peer dynamics. Middle adolescents face stronger pressures around appearance, social comparison, and peer status. Late adolescents have stronger legitimate claims to privacy, autonomy, and digital participation. Policy needs to account for these age differences rather than treating adolescence as a single stage.

The real policy question is not whether digital life is good or bad overall, but who is helped, who is harmed, and through which pathways.

From knowledge to guidance: How the evidence and recommendations of 32 international policy documents are distributed across thematic domains and target actors





Note: The figure displays 1,072 of 1,099 claims grouped into 42 families (of 52 coded) and 582 of 635 recommendations grouped into 28 families (of 35 coded). The families shown are those flagged for inclusion in the main figure; less frequent families were omitted for legibility but are retained in the full dataset.

Activity in YES programme, Ioannina.

How are different countries responding?

Governments are not waiting for the research to settle. Internationally, they are moving toward layered policy approaches that target different parts of the digital environment.

At least 114 education systems now restrict or ban phones in schools. France introduced a national law in 2018. Finland, Italy, and the Netherlands have adopted comparable school-level restrictions, while England moved toward stronger national guidance in 2024. In the United States, restrictions have spread through state-level legislation and district policies across dozens of states. Brazil enacted a national ban in 2025. Greece introduced binding school-device rules in September 2024 through Ministerial Decision 102791/GD4/2024, prohibiting the visible possession or use of phones on school premises. Research most consistently finds that these measures reduce classroom distraction and lower anxiety linked to mobile-device use, with gains depending heavily on consistent enforcement and whether school communities experience the rules as purposeful rather than arbitrary.

Minimum age rules for social media access have become mainstream in the policy debate. Australia has implemented an under-16 rule; Indonesia and Malaysia have passed similar measures. As of May 2026, binding national rules were in force in only about six jurisdictions, while around 35 more countries were at the stage of proposals, announcements, or public debate. The center of debate has shifted upward: the most common inherited platform age threshold of 13 is increasingly being challenged in favor of 15 or 16.

In Greece, the government presented draft legislation in April 2026 to prohibit social media access for under-15s, with age-verification requirements expected to take effect from January 2027. These rules are gaining political momentum, but evidence on their real-world effectiveness is still developing. They are better understood as precautionary measures than evidence-settled interventions. Their success depends not only on whether age can be reliably verified — which remains technically and practi-

cally difficult — but also on whether restrictions reduce harm or simply displace use toward less regulated services, and whether they protect adolescents who depend on digital spaces for connection, support, or help-seeking.

A major regulatory trend internationally is platform governance: requiring technology companies to assess and mitigate the risks their systems create or amplify, rather than simply removing illegal content after it appears. The European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA), the United Kingdom's Online Safety Act, Brazil's Digital Statute for Children and Adolescents, and frameworks in Australia and Singapore all move in this direction, placing responsibility on recommendation systems, notification structures, default settings, and engagement mechanics instead of only on individual behavior.

What is Greece doing?

Greece already has substantial legal and policy architecture in place to protect children and adolescents online, while safeguarding their rights to access, participate in, and benefit from digital environments. This framework combines European Union regulation on platform accountability and data protection with national laws on media regulation, consumer protection against harmful content and commercial communications targeting children, and mobile-phone use in schools. It also includes recent initiatives aimed at promoting safer digital environments for young people, such as the National Strategy for the Protection of Minors from Internet Addiction and the Kids Wallet parental-control and age-verification tool.

Responsibility for implementing these protections is shared across several institutions. The Ministry of Digital Governance and the Ministry of Education each play important roles in policy development, coordination, and implementation, including initiatives related to online safety, digital literacy, and school-device use. Regulatory and supervisory responsibilities are exercised by a number of independent authorities, including the Hellenic Telecommunications and Post Commission, which serves as Greece's Digital Services Coordinator under the Digital Services Act; the Hellenic Data Protection Authority, which supervises privacy and data-protection rules; and the National Council for Radio and Television, which oversees audiovisual media regulation.

The central challenge is ensuring that this already extensive legal architecture functions as a coordinated system and that rules work effectively in practice. Key considerations include sufficient enforcement capacity, clear coordination among authorities, practical guidance for schools and families, and accessible mechanisms through which children can seek support and report harms. As concerns about problematic social media use continue to grow among Greek adolescents, the effectiveness of the system will depend on how recently announced measures will be enacted and on whether the different legal, institutional, and policy measures operate as a coherent whole, while adapting to a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

How effective are current measures?

The evidence on effectiveness is more limited than the evidence on harm, but it is not silent. School phone restrictions have the most consistent support. Cross-national analyses show that enforced bans, as distinct from declared ones, are associated with lower classroom distraction, reduced peer-related disruption, and in some contexts modest gains in academic performance, particularly among lower-achieving students. The critical word is enforced. Studies show that where bans exist on paper but phones remain in pockets or bags, the measurable benefits largely disappear. In Greece, PISA 2022 data show that 38% of students reported being distracted by their own device use in most or all mathematics lessons, before school-device rules were introduced in 2024. The gap between having a rule and changing behavior is primarily a gap in implementation: in

storage arrangements, consistent enforcement, staff capacity, and whether students and families understand the purpose.

For age-based access rules, the evidence is considerably thinner. There are no large-scale natural experiments yet showing that minimum-age legislation reduces harm at population level. The concern is not only enforcement, but displacement: adolescents may shift to less regulated platforms or use older accounts. The evidence is stronger for the underlying rationale that age is a real vulnerability variable, than for the specific instrument.

Platform governance duties under the Digital Services Act represent the most structurally well-targeted approach within the European Union framework, because they address the systems that generate risk rather than individual behavior. Their effectiveness depends on enforcement capacity that is still being built, and on regulators being willing to act against the largest platforms.

What the evidence says clearly is that measures aligned with specific pathways of harm, such as harassment, sleep disruption, and harmful content amplification, are more likely to produce change than measures focused on reducing total time online or restricting access in isolation. Time limits and access restrictions have a genuine role, particularly as a first step while more refined mechanisms are developed, but their effectiveness depends heavily on what sits alongside them: credible enforcement, digital literacy education, family guidance, and platform-level change. Acting proportionately on the strongest evidence, while evaluating whether measures are working in practice, is more defensible than treating any single instrument as sufficient.

Drawing by Yannis Iskenderidis, member of the YES team in Thessaloniki.

A framework only protects young people if it is enforced, and enforcement requires coordination, institutional capacity, and the willingness to hold large platforms accountable.

What should be done?

The report organizes its policy directions across actors and across three time horizons, reflecting the reality that the measures with the most immediate reach are not always those with the greatest long-term leverage.

In the short term, the most immediately available measures are school-day phone restrictions and age-based social media access rules. These are imperfect tools, but they address real concerns and may help limit harm while broader systems of protection are built. School-day phone restrictions target classroom distraction, fragmented attention, and the spillover of online conflicts into school settings, with evidence strongest where rules are consistently enforced and experienced as purposeful. Age-based access rules may also play a precautionary role, although the evidence supporting their effectiveness remains more limited and their impact depends heavily on how they are designed, enforced, and evaluated.

Age-based social media access restrictions are

What teenagers in Greece are saying

As part of this review, around 85 teenagers aged 13–17 took part in discussion groups in Athens, Thessaloniki, Alexandroupolis, Ioannina, and Heraklion.

They described being online as simply normal, not a problem to be solved. Most said they experienced real benefits: staying close to friends, finding communities, accessing information.

They were frank about the harms too. Online risks, including bullying, harassment, and the creation of fake profiles targeting peers, came up repeatedly. Participants described how conflicts that begin offline migrate online and change character: negative comments accumulate and stay visible, and group chats can become spaces where hostility escalates. Several spoke about the impact on sleep, describing night-time phone use as something that extends unconsciously, and for some as a way of managing anxiety or avoiding unwanted thoughts. On body image, they noted how exposure to idealized images and influencer content fosters feelings of inadequacy, and that failure is simply never shown on social media.

They generally recognized the need for some form of protection and guidance online, particularly for younger children, but expressed scepticism about blanket restrictions that are easy to bypass or fail to address underlying issues. Instead, they emphasized the importance of digital literacy, meaningful dialogue, supportive family relationships, engaging school-based education, and opportunities for offline social connection, sport, and community participation.

Their perspectives suggest that effective policy should combine safeguards and regulation with broader efforts to support adolescent wellbeing, resilience, and healthy development.

now part of the mainstream international repertoire, and the precautionary rationale for acting is coherent even where the evidence remains weaker than political momentum suggests. In Greece, draft legislation proposing to prohibit social media access for under-15s from January 2027 represents this kind of precautionary measure. Whether this approach works fairly and effectively will depend on age-assurance mechanisms that go beyond self-declaration, safeguards for adolescents who depend on digital spaces for connection and support, and evaluation frameworks designed to determine whether harm is actually reduced as a result.

In the medium term, the priority is building the capacity and infrastructure through which protective norms become embedded in everyday practice. This means treating digital literacy as a substantive curriculum intervention in schools, delivered through ongoing structured dialogue instead of one-off awareness campaigns. It means accessible guidance for educators and families, designed for unequal resources rather than ideal conditions. It means clinical training so that mental health professionals treat digital life as one dimension of adolescent context. It also means active enforcement of existing DSA and GDPR obligations — the competent institutions

in Greece can prioritize safer defaults for minors and usable reporting and redress tools, and enforce privacy-by-default and parental consent requirements for under-15s. These obligations already exist in law; the practical challenge is translating them into consistent practice.

In the long term, the greatest structural leverage lies in platform governance. Many of the mechanisms most directly linked to harm — harassment amplification, harmful content delivered through recommendation systems, notification-driven sleep disruption, appearance-based comparison, and privacy-invasive profiling — are generated at the platform level. Addressing them requires risk assessment duties, safer design requirements, transparency reporting, and enforcement sustained over years. Sequencing matters: transparency requirements and platform-accountability duties may be less politically visible than age bans or device restrictions, but they build the institutional infrastructure that makes later interventions more effective.

For Greece specifically, a significant governance challenge is that supervisory responsibility is distributed across several institutions, each covering part of the broader landscape. A targeted coordinating body with a specific mandate and time-bound mission could bring existing efforts together under a shared framework. Such a body would coordinate existing institutions under a shared mandate and provide a consolidated escalation and implementation infrastructure, while leaving their legal responsibilities intact.

The short and medium-term measures above require parallel action from education systems, families, and health services — responsibilities that extend across the full strategy and into the long term.

For education systems, meaningful engagement alongside restrictions matters as much, if not even more, than the existing rules alone. Teenagers across Greece described their experience of school-based safe internet sessions as performative and often disconnected from how digital life actually works. Digital literacy built into the school curriculum, dialogue that takes students' real digital experiences and concerns seriously, and accessible support when online experiences become harmful are more likely to produce lasting change.

Activity in the YES programme, Heraklion.

Activity in the YES programme, Alexandroupolis.

For families, early conversation about digital life matters alongside practical routines. Monitoring tools can help some households, but adolescents often experience them as intrusive or easy to circumvent. Device-free periods before sleep are among the most actionable household-level protections. Families with fewer resources, lower digital literacy, or less time cannot carry this responsibility alone: guidance designed for ideal household conditions will miss the families that need it most.

For mental health and health systems, digital life should be treated as part of the ordinary assessment of adolescent wellbeing, not as a separate or secondary issue. Clinicians, school counselors, and primary-care professionals need practical fluency in how online conflict, sleep disruption, body-image pressure, harmful content exposure, and difficult-to-control use can appear in clinical presentations. Services should be able to respond when digital experiences become linked to anxiety, depression, loneliness, self-image concerns, school avoidance, or family conflict. This requires referral pathways that reach beyond urban centers, guidance for schools and families on when to seek help, and clinical approaches that ask what function digital use serves for the young person: connection, avoidance, reassurance, coping, belonging, or distress regulation. The aim is to recognize when digital life has become part of a wider pattern of vulnerability requiring support — and to respond with the same clinical attention given to any other contributing factor.

What this report concludes

The science is consistent enough to show that digital environments matter for adolescent mental health, but not complete enough to settle every policy question satisfactorily. It justifies action, while also leaving important uncertainty about which measures work best and under what conditions.

A governing principle runs through the analysis: doing no harm does not mean doing nothing.

The status quo already distributes risks and benefits in particular and often unequal ways, and delay has costs that fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable adolescents.

The most consistent findings point toward experience alongside duration, mechanisms of harm over averages of use, and system design over individual behavior. Harmful experiences, including bullying, unwanted contact, and disturbing content, are the clearest links to poor mental health. Sleep is one of the most actionable pathways. Platform design choices shape exposure in ways that individual teenagers and their families cannot easily control.

The policy challenge is not simply to distinguish good digital experiences from harmful ones. It is to find the right balance between protecting young people from demonstrable harm and preserving their autonomy, their access to information, and the genuine benefits that digital participation provides, especially for adolescents who are in geographically remote areas or who rely on digital spaces for connection and support that is unavailable offline.

Digital technologies and platforms are evolving faster than the research base can keep pace with; therefore, continued investment in evidence generation is essential. Longitudinal studies, standardized measurement of specific exposures, and rigorous evaluation of interventions already being implemented are among the most urgent research priorities. The emergence of AI as an increasingly influential part of adolescents' online experience adds particular urgency: how conversational AI tools interact with social development, emotional support, loneliness, and help-seeking is still poorly understood. Strengthening the evidence base on adolescents and digital environments sits alongside the importance of acting timely on what is already known.

The policy task is layered across time

- **In the short term:** use school-day phone rules as a bounded but real intervention on classroom distraction, and proceed with age-based access restrictions provided they are accompanied from the outset by rigorous age-assurance, equity safeguards, and evaluation.

- **In the medium term:** embed digital literacy in schools as a substantive curriculum intervention; enforce existing Digital Services Act and GDPR obligations consistently; build clinical fluency in digital environments across health and mental health services; and make guidance accessible for families with fewer resources.

- **In the long term:** require platforms to assess and mitigate the risks their systems generate, change harmful defaults, restrict engagement-maximizing design features, and build the institutional coordination capacity, including a dedicated coordinating mechanism for Greece, that allows the existing legal framework to function as a coherent system instead of a set of parallel obligations that rarely intersect.

What this report provides is a map of where the evidence is strongest, where it is still developing, and where good judgment rather than settled science has to lead the way. That uncertainty calls for disciplined action: mechanisms over slogans, safeguards over delay, coordination over fragmentation, and evaluation over assumption.

Readers can access and download the full report in English or Greek by scanning the QR code below:

Detailed methodological documentation, including the extraction framework, coding materials, and a complete information-source list, is available in the project's Open Science Framework repository, accessible via the QR code below:

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