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# Reactions to the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Social Media & Youth Mental Health

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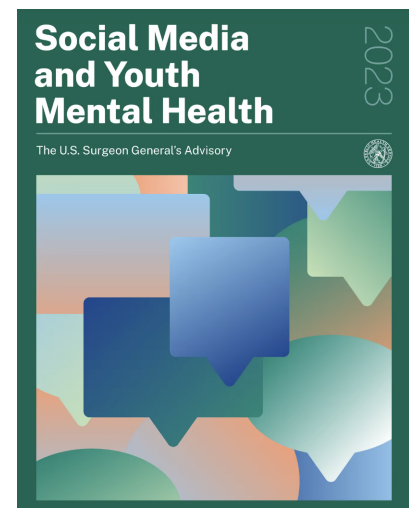
# Reactions to the U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on Social Media & Youth Mental Health

Susannah Stern, Ph.D, University of San Diego

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## Introduction

On May 23, 2023, the United States Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, issued an *Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health*, officially highlighting concerns about the impact of social media on youth. Warnings by the Surgeon General are infrequent, but have the potential to influence the course of history (Tumin, 2023). Given the large and growing number of youths suffering from a mental health issue, social media have received considerable scrutiny as a potentially contributing factor. This survey captures awareness of and reaction to the well-publicized Surgeon General’s Advisory, which encourages the public to “acknowledge the growing body of research about potential harms, increase our collective understanding of the risks associated with social media use, and urgently take action to create safe and healthy digital environments that minimize harm and safeguard children’s and adolescents’ mental health and well-being during critical stages of development.”



## The Advisory

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Surgeon General is “the Nation’s Doctor, providing Americans with the best scientific information available on how to improve their health and reduce the risk of illness and injury.” A Surgeon General’s Advisory is “a public statement that calls the American people’s attention to an urgent public health issue and provides recommendations for how it should be addressed. Advisories are reserved for significant public health challenges that require the nation’s immediate awareness and action” (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023).

The [Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#) begins by describing the pervasiveness of social media use among children and adolescents, and the rising concern that social media may be problematic for their mental well-being. The document describes evidence of both positive and negative impacts of social media use, focusing at length on particular areas of concern including exposure to inappropriate and harmful content as well as excessive and problematic use. The Advisory explicitly highlights the gaps in existing evidence which preclude a full understanding of how, when, for whom, why, and in what contexts social media influences youth mental health. As such, the Surgeon General states, “ Our children have become

We cannot conclude that social media is sufficiently safe for children and adolescents

unknowing participants in a decades-long experiment.” The Advisory concludes by providing “actionable recommendations” for policymakers, technology companies, parents and caregivers, youths, and researchers.

Both the full 25 page Advisory and a 2 page Executive Summary were posted on the website of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of the Surgeon General. In addition to issuing a press release about the Advisory, the Office of the Surgeon General publicized the Advisory via the Surgeon General’s Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other social media accounts. Virtually all major media outlets covered the Advisory in the weeks following its release, and many health organizations issued a public response endorsing the Advisory (e.g., the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association).



## Main Research Questions

- What was the reach and impact of the Surgeon General’s Advisory in the month following its release?
- Is the Surgeon General a credible communicator about this topic?
- To what extent do respondents agree with the Surgeon General that more research is needed?
- Do respondents believe the “actionable recommendations” identified in the Advisory would be effective if they were implemented? Which action items do they think would be most impactful?

## Brief Description of the Study and Respondents

Survey respondents completed a 15 minute self-administered online survey designed to answer the research questions. Partway through the survey, participants were asked to read the Executive Summary of the Surgeon General’s Advisory in case they had never encountered it or needed to refresh their memory if they had. This allowed them to respond to questions about specific content within the Advisory.

The final nonprobability sample of 199 American adults captures much of the wide diversity present in the United States in terms of race and ethnicity, geographic location, education level, income level and political leaning. Two thirds of respondents had children or youth under 21 living in their household. One fifth of these households indicated that a young person in their household was struggling with their mental health, and another tenth of respondents indicated they were unsure.

See Appendix 1 for greater detail about the method and sample.

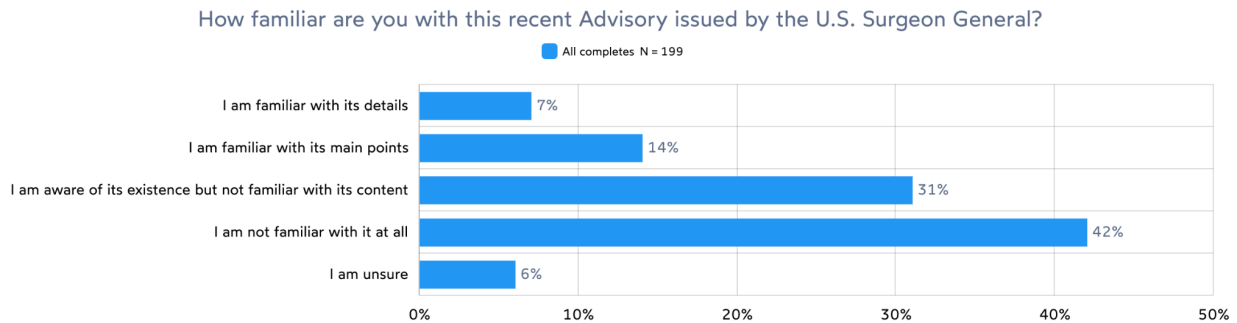
# Key Findings

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## The Surgeon General’s Advisory reached half of all respondents, and prompted a third of those to take action.

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A fifth of respondents were familiar with the details or main points of the Advisory, and about a third knew the Advisory had been released. Digital news media (43%) and social media (36%) were the main ways that respondents learned about the Advisory. A considerable number of respondents had no familiarity with the Advisory at all.



**One out of three respondents (32%) who were aware of the Advisory said it prompted them to take action.**

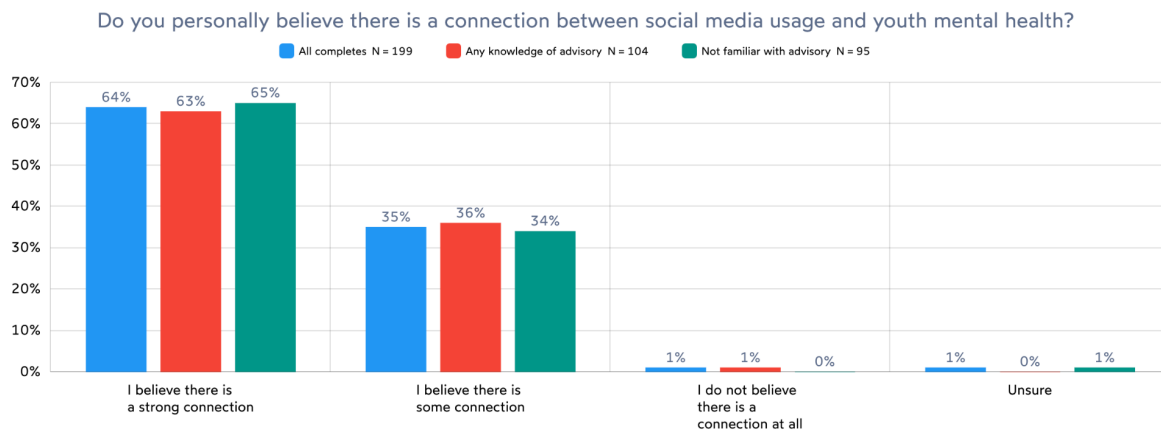
The top actions mentioned included:

- ❖ **Limiting screen time and monitoring content**
  - “I started monitoring my children's social media feed”
  - “I set time limits for my children's online activities”
- ❖ **Engaging youth in conversations about social media**
  - I made sure to speak to my own teen about his feelings
  - “I talked with my grandchildren about their thoughts on social media”
- ❖ **Promoting exercise and non-screen activities**
  - “I made sure he is getting out of the house, away from the internet at least once a day”

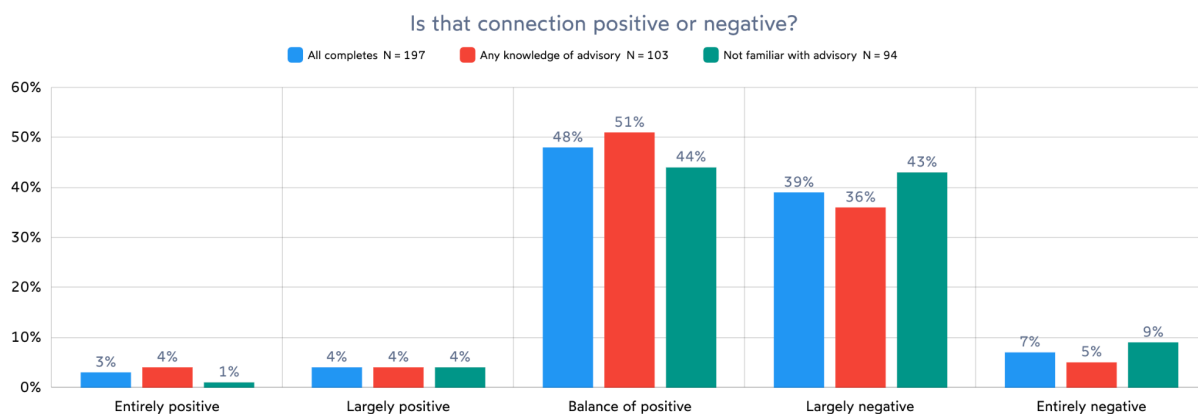
## Virtually all respondents (99%) believe that social media use and youth mental health are connected.

Two-thirds of respondents believe there is a *strong* connection, and a third believe there is *some* connection between social media and youth mental health.

Familiarity with the existence, main points, or details of the Surgeon General’s Advisory did not make a difference in respondents’ perceptions of a connection between social media and youth mental health.



Almost half of all respondents believed the connection between social media and youth mental health was *largely* or *entirely* negative. This was especially true for those unfamiliar with the Advisory.



Respondents who encountered the Surgeon General’s Advisory in the month following its release were somewhat more likely to think social media has *both* positive and negative effects on youth mental health, compared to those who had not encountered it.

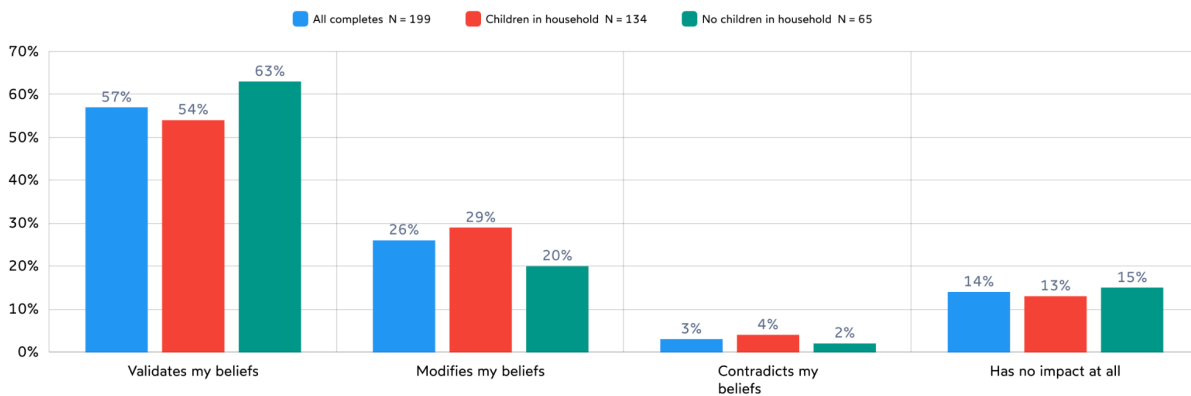
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## The Surgeon General’s Advisory largely validated existing beliefs about social media and youth mental health.<sup>1</sup>

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The Advisory confirmed most respondents' belief that social media and youth mental health were connected. Notably, however, **a quarter of all respondents (26%) indicated that the Advisory led them to modify their beliefs.**

Regarding your **\*\*previous beliefs\*\*** about the relationship between social media and youth mental health, in general this Advisory...



**The Advisory was slightly more likely to modify the beliefs of respondents from households with children or youth under 21 (29%) compared to those without youth at home (20%).**

Most commonly, respondents explained that the Advisory modified their beliefs by increasing their understanding of the mental health risks that social media posed.

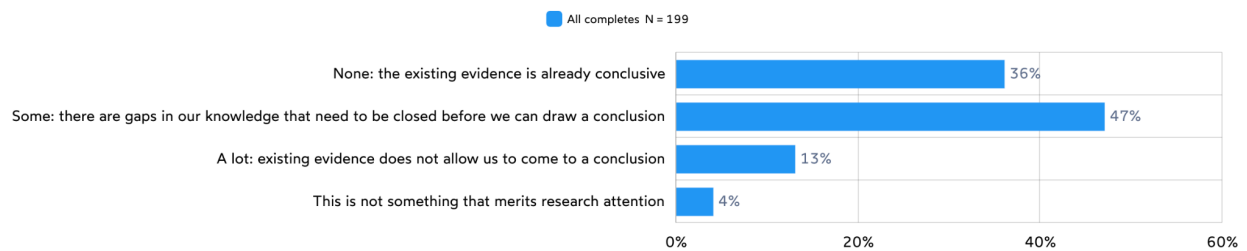
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<sup>1</sup> All survey participants were asked to read (or reread) the official [Executive Summary](#) of the Surgeon General’s *Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health* partway through their participation in this study to ensure a recent and informed impression of the Advisory. This finding and those hereafter describe responses to questions respondents encountered after reviewing the Executive Summary, which includes the main components of the full Advisory.

## Most respondents believe additional research is needed, especially those with a mentally struggling youth at home.

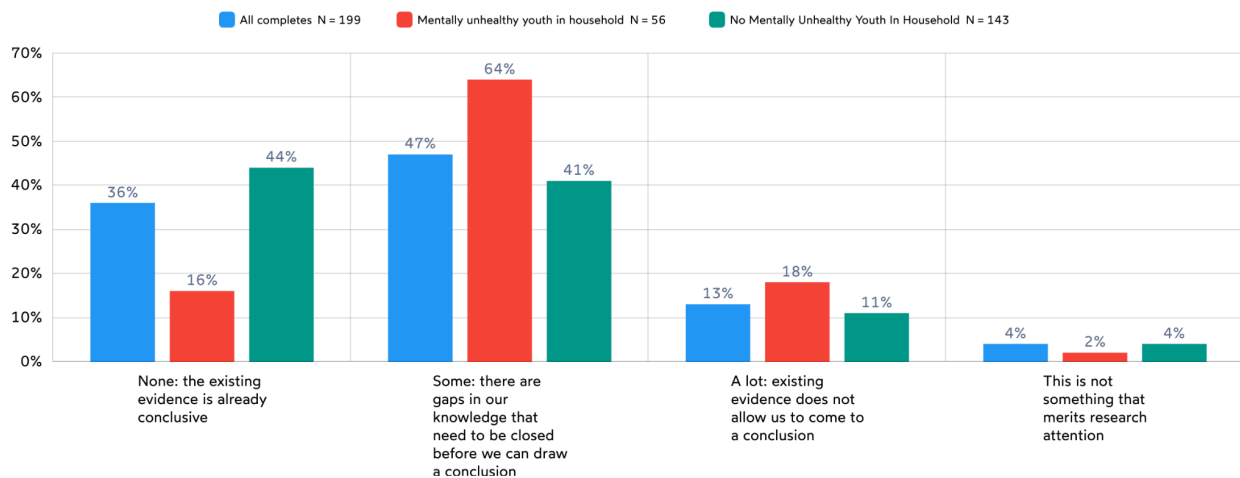
More research is needed to confidently conclude that social media poses substantial risks to young people’s mental health, according to 60% of respondents. A third of respondents believe that we have sufficient existing evidence to confidently draw this conclusion.

How much additional research do you think is needed before we can confidently conclude that social media poses substantial risks to young people’s mental health?



**Respondents from households with a youth struggling with their mental health were less likely to feel that the existing evidence was conclusive.**

How much additional research do you think is needed before we can confidently conclude that social media poses substantial risks to young people’s mental health?

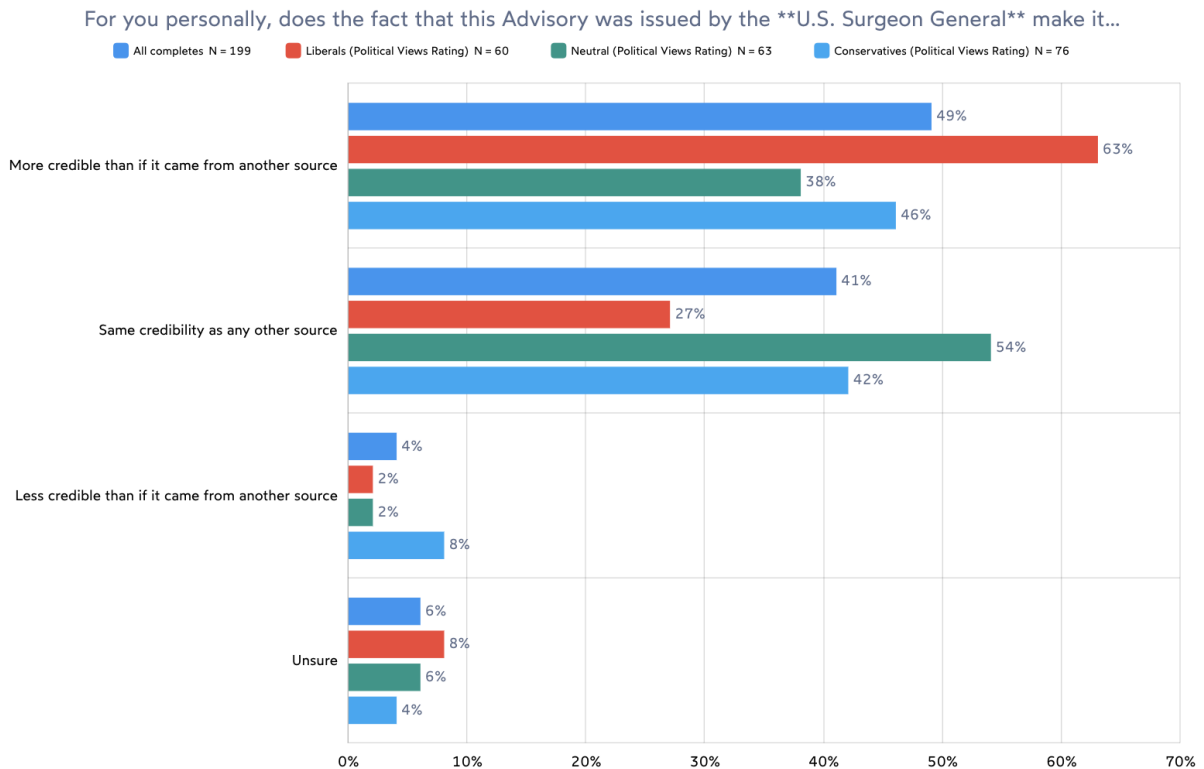


## The Surgeon General is a credible communicator about youth mental health.

For about half of all respondents (49%), the Surgeon General maintains greater credibility than other sources when communicating about youth mental health and social media. A sizable portion of respondents (41%) afford him the same credibility as other sources.

Common explanations for *why* the Surgeon General was considered to be more credible included his expertise as a physician, his reputation, and his professional duty to be knowledgeable about research and to care for public health. As one respondent put it: “[The] Surgeon General is more credible because it is their primary role to know about things that impact our health, especially negatively, so I would consider them the expert.”

**Respondents who considered themselves to have liberal views were more likely to perceive the Surgeon General as a credible source.**





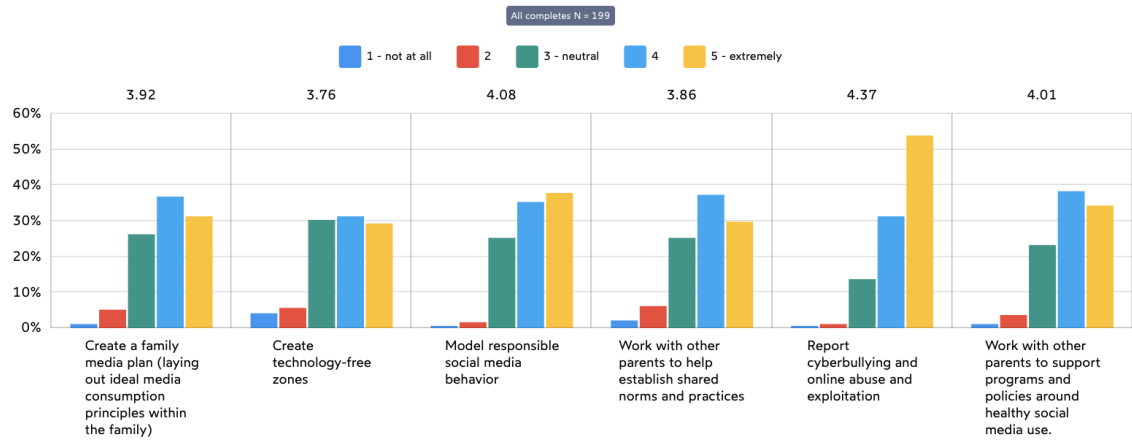
## The Surgeon General’s recommended actions would be moderately impactful if implemented, respondents believe.

In general, respondents felt all of the Advisory’s recommendations would be moderately impactful. Very few recommendations were considered to have the potential to be extremely impactful.

### ❖ The top 2 supported recommendations for *parents*:

- report cyberbullying, online abuse and exploitation
- model responsible social media behavior

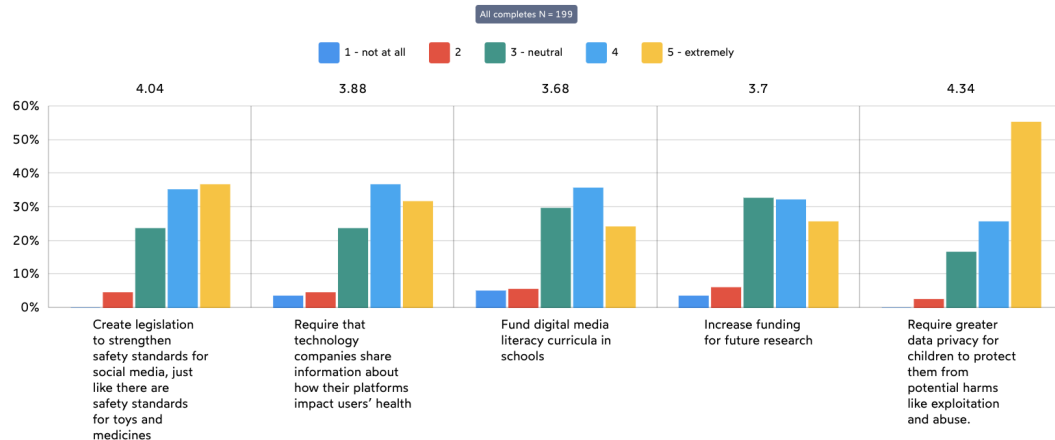
How impactful do you think the following proposed actions for **\*\*parents & caregivers\*\*** would be if they were implemented?



### ❖ The top 2 supported recommendations for *policymakers*:

- require greater data privacy for children
- create legislation to strengthen safety standards

How impactful do you think the following proposed actions for **\*\*policymakers\*\*** would be if they were implemented?

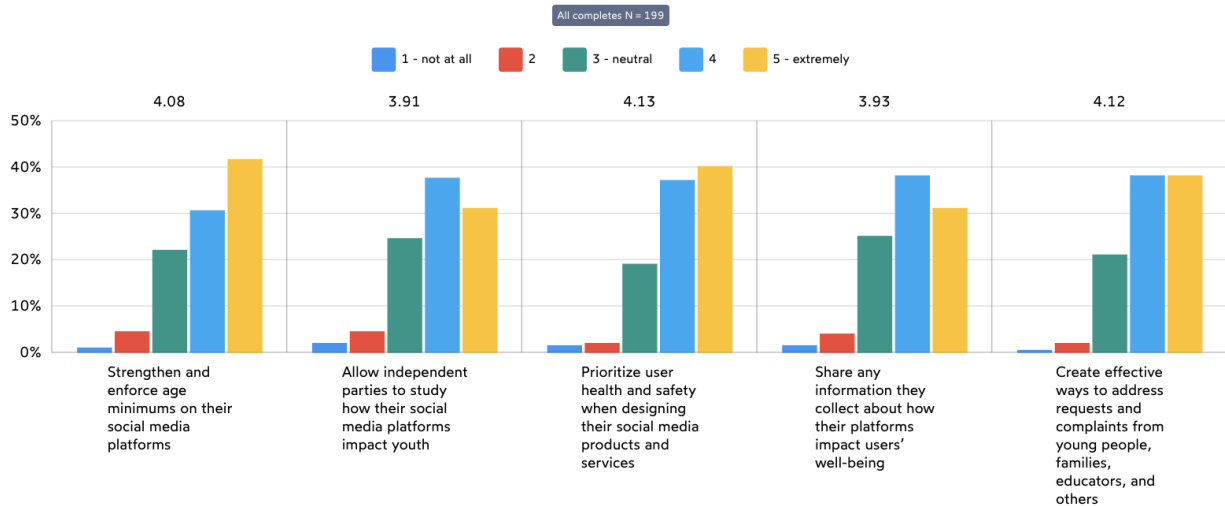


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❖ **The top 2 supported recommendations for *technology* companies:**

- prioritize user health and safety when designing social media platforms & products
- create effective ways to address complaints from parents, youth, caregivers and others

How impactful do you think the following proposed actions for **technology companies** would be if they were implemented?



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**Respondents wished the Advisory included specific guidelines for parents and more clear punishments for online offenders.**

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When asked to offer their feedback, respondents said they wished the Advisory had been less ambivalent, included more specific recommendations regarding age and time limits, and had issued guidelines for punitive measures for technology companies and others who harm youth.

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## Conclusions

The Surgeon General is a credible speaker about youth mental health, according to this study. Rather than making people aware of a new threat, the Surgeon General's *Advisory on Social Media & Youth Mental Health* seems largely to have confirmed what people already suspected— that social media are risky for youth. His affirmation that social media are worth worrying about and his articulation of the existing evidence motivated some respondents to modify their beliefs and some to take action.

While the bulk of the Advisory focused on troubling consequences of social media use, the Surgeon General made an effort to forefront positive effects that social media can have for youth. This may help explain why respondents who encountered the Advisory in the month following its release were more likely to think social media has both positive and negative effects on youth mental health, compared to those who had not encountered it.

Nonetheless, almost half of all respondents believe that social media effects are largely or entirely negative, and most believe there is a strong connection between social media and mental health. These impressions run somewhat counter to the Surgeon General's messaging about effects being both positive and negative, and of the need for more, and more nuanced, research before drawing conclusions. Indeed, despite the Advisory's explicit call for more evidence, over a third of respondents believed that we already have conclusive evidence about the threat social media poses to youth mental health. Respondents with a young person in their household who is struggling with their mental health are well-positioned to understand the multiple, complicated factors that affect mental health, which may help explain why they were far less convinced that we already know enough.

Altogether, the issuance of the Advisory alongside the uncertainty expressed within it offers a complicated takeaway for readers; it confirms beliefs about the presence of a threat without being certain of how big that threat is or who is most threatened. A potential risk of issuing an “advisory” at all is that the messaging is diluted down to only its most negative components when it is summarized and disseminated. That seems to be the case when one scans the headlines of most news coverage of this Advisory on social media and youth mental health.<sup>2</sup> Such strong, largely negative characterizations may encourage stigmatization of youth social media use, despite the fact that it is developmentally normal in 2023 and meaningful for many (Moreno & Radesky, 2023).

Given the uncertainty about effects emphasized in the Advisory, we might expect that respondents would find efficacious the Advisory's recommendations pertaining to funding additional research, requiring technology companies to share information they collect about their platform's impact, and ensuring that they allow independent parties to study their platforms' impact. However, belief that these actions would be impactful was lower than most other of the Surgeon General's recommended actions.

The general picture this survey offers is that people are indeed worried about social media's impact on youth mental health, but they are not altogether clear on the best path forward or in agreement on how

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<sup>2</sup> The following headlines are representative of media coverage of the Advisory on or after May 23, 2023: “Social Media is Driving Teen Mental Health Crisis, Surgeon General Warns” (*NBC News*); “Surgeon General Warns That Social Media May Harm Children and Adolescents” (*New York Times*); “U.S. Surgeon General: We Need to Protect Kids From Social Media Risks Immediately” (*CNBC*); “The US Surgeon General Blames Social Media for the Youth Mental Health Crisis” (*Parents.com*); “Social Media Could Harm Youth Mental Health, U.S. Surgeon General Warns” (*Reuters*).

much more we need to know before we act. The Surgeon's urgent action items were met with generally positive but modest reception. It is possible that the lack of conviction that most of them would be extremely impactful if implemented can be tied to their lack of specificity. Indeed, it is difficult to support legislation or policies in general; the devil is most certainly in the details.

In light of the overwhelming belief that social media are, at minimum, problematic for youth mental health, the public is ripe for follow-up messaging from the Surgeon General and others. In particular, parents seem to be looking for explicit guidance about how to handle social media in their households.

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Moreno, M. & Radesky, J. (2023). Putting forward a new narrative for adolescent media: The American Academy of Pediatrics Center for Excellence on Social media and Youth Mental Health. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 73(2), 227-229. [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(23\)00225-2/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(23)00225-2/fulltext)

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## Acknowledgements

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## Appendix I: How the study was conducted

A key goal for this study was to learn how a variety of Americans felt about the Surgeon General's Advisory and their sentiments about social media and youth mental health. 199 American adults completed the self-administered web survey between June 29 -July 10 2023.

The sample was recruited from across the nation by online panel providers via the market research company Purespectrum, which serves as a marketplace for third party panel providers. Purespectrum's panel providers invited panelists who had already been screened to be at least 18 years of age and who indicated basic awareness of either the topic "impact of social and digital media" or "youth mental and behavioral health." Quota sampling was used to ensure minimum racial and ethnic diversity, as well as the inclusion of respondents who had and did not have young people under the age of 21 living in their household. GroupSolver® survey platform was used to construct and host the survey, as well as to aggregate and analyze results.

All materials and procedures for the study were pre-approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of San Diego. Respondents completed the online survey in approximately 15 minutes and received up to \$5.00 as compensation. The survey included both closed- and open-ended items, and participants reviewed an Informed Consent form prior to participation.

The final nonprobability sample of 199 American adults (over age 18) captures much of the diversity present in the United States.

- Two-thirds (65%) of respondents were white, 14% were black, 14% were two or more races or mixed race, 10% indicated "other," 4% identified as Asian or Asian-American, and 3% as Native American or Alaska Native.
- Thirty-five percent of respondents identified as Hispanic, Latino, or LatinX.
- Two thirds of respondents had children under 21 living in their household.
- Three-quarters of respondents identified as female, 23% as male, and 2% were other or preferred not to answer.
- The most common income was within the \$50,000-\$74,999 range, with 56% of respondents earning less than that bracket and 31% earning more
- About a fifth of respondents completed all or some high school; two-thirds completed either some college, an associates degree or a bachelor's degree; and just over a tenth completed post-graduate work.
- Just over a third (39%) rated their political views as conservative, 30% as liberal, and 32% as neutral.