

29 July 2025

Submission on the Inquiry into the Harm Young New Zealanders Encounter Online and the Roles that Government, Business and Society Should Play in Addressing Those Harms

To the Education and Workforce Committee

Te Hīringa Mahara – Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission (the Commission), is making this submission on the ‘Inquiry into the harm young New Zealanders encounter online and the roles that government, business and society should play in addressing those harms’ (the Inquiry), in recognition of the impacts – both positive and negative – that online platforms have on rangatahi Māori (rangatahi) and young people experiencing mental distress.

The Commission was established as an independent Crown entity by the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission Act 2020 (the Act), following the He Ara Oranga: Report of the Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction.

Our legislated role is to:

- assess and report on the mental health and wellbeing of people in New Zealand, and the factors and approaches that affect them
- make recommendations to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and adequacy of approaches to mental health and wellbeing
- monitor mental health and addiction services and to advocate improvements to those services
- promote alignment, collaboration, and communication between entities involved in mental health and wellbeing
- advocate for the collective interests of people who experience mental distress or addiction (or both), and the persons (including family and whānau) who support them.

When performing our functions under the Act, the Commission must have regard to available evidence, factors that affect people’s mental health and wellbeing, actions to improve positive mental health and wellbeing, build resilience and prevent poor mental health and wellbeing, and identify and respond to people experiencing poor mental health and wellbeing, including those who support them.

Our submission is based on our insights and direct engagement with rangatahi and young people

Over the past four years, we have assessed and monitored mental health and wellbeing outcomes for groups with highest mental health need including young people and rangatahi. We have also commissioned a range of literature and research on broader determinants of mental health and wellbeing for rangatahi and young people and heard from young people themselves what they think good mental health and wellbeing looks like. Our research shows that social media and safety online is a key driver of wellbeing for rangatahi and young people. This was backed by many rangatahi and young people. Our work on the drivers of mental health and wellbeing, including social media and safety online, forms the basis of this submission.

Our submission provides advice on both the harms and benefits of online spaces, to rangatahi and young peoples' mental health and wellbeing. This includes both evidence (where available) and the voices of rangatahi and young people.

We would appreciate the opportunity to share our views with the Committee in person.

Voice of rangatahi and young people are a priority and must be included in this process

There has been a significant increase of psychological distress for young people aged 15-24 years over the past decade¹, and New Zealand has some of the highest rates of suicide in the OECD². New Zealand also has some of the highest rates of youth engagement in online media in the world³. There is a growing body of evidence linking social media use to negative impacts on mental health⁴. Rangatahi and young people are a legislated priority population for the Commission. We regularly engage with rangatahi and young people to elevate their perspectives on issues that support or diminish their mental health and wellbeing outcomes. We have a specific focus on rangatahi and young people who experience mental distress or addiction and improving their mental health.

Rangatahi and young people have told us that they feel left out of conversations or decisions that impact them⁵. Involving young people in decisions about them is important, especially for emerging issues with limited evidence. This submission

¹ Te Hīringa Mahara – the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission (2024). *Infographic – assessment of youth and rangatahi wellbeing and access to services*. Wellington: New Zealand.

² Ministry of Health, (2025). *Suicide Prevention Action Plan 2025 – 2029*. Wellington: New Zealand. Page 17

³ Te Hīringa Mahara – the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, (2023). *Young people speak out about wellbeing: an insights report into the wellbeing of rangatahi Māori and other young people in Aotearoa*. Wellington: New Zealand. Page 17

⁴ Marsh, Bullen, Chu, Einstein and Reid (2025). *Social media and youth wellbeing: the need for a multi-layered public health approach*. New Zealand.

⁵ Te Hīringa Mahara – the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, (2023). *Young people speak out about wellbeing: an insights report into the wellbeing of rangatahi Māori and other young people in Aotearoa*. Wellington: New Zealand. Page 14.

reflects what we have heard from rangatahi and young people regarding online harms.

We also encourage the Committee to prioritise submissions directly from rangatahi and young people. There is a risk that if the voices of rangatahi and young people are not prioritised in the Inquiry, its findings may misidentify the key issues and propose solutions that are less likely to work.

The online environment requires a nuanced approach to ensure it is safe for rangatahi and young people

Social media, online gaming, web content and messaging apps (referred to as online spaces throughout this submission) are deeply integrated into many young people's lives with both benefits and harms. Our research⁶, commissioned in 2022 and 2023, showed that, in the absence of well-established evidence⁷ we risk further harm to mental health and wellbeing for young people in online spaces. While more research has been published on areas from entities such as the Classifications Office⁸ (extremely harmful content) Netsafe⁹ (resources for staying safe online), InternetNZ¹⁰ (online behaviour) and the Public Health Communication Centre¹¹ (emerging determinants of health), we advise that consideration of evidence is required to inform decisions and possible solutions in this nuanced and complex area.

It is important to understand where online spaces are a benefit for young people who experience distress and maintaining those for critical supports. Alternatively, we need to understand where intervention by government, businesses and society are required for online spaces that are causing harm to young people. Through our engagement with rangatahi and young people, they have highlighted that a blanket ban of social media, for example, is not an effective solution for addressing or preventing online harms. Rangatahi and young people have shared that misunderstandings from adults about social media can prohibit constructive conversations about staying safe or preventing harm online¹².

Furthermore, it is unclear how such a blanket ban would work – given the integrated nature of online spaces. Instead, action to make spaces and content safer and equip young people and their families to engage responsibly, together is advised.

⁶ Te Hīringa Mahara – the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, (2023). *Young people speak out about wellbeing: an insights report into the wellbeing of rangatahi Māori and other young people in Aotearoa*. Wellington: New Zealand.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Classification Office – Te Mana Whakaatu, (2024). *Content that Crosses the Line: Conversations with young people about extremely harmful content online*. Wellington, NZ: Classification Office – Te Mana Whakaatu.

⁹ <https://netsafe.org.nz/our-work/reports-and-research>

¹⁰ <https://internetnz.nz/new-zealands-internet-insights/>

¹¹ Marsh, Bullen, Chu, Einstein and Reid, (2025). *Social media and youth wellbeing: the need for a multi-layered public health approach*. New Zealand.

¹² Te Hīringa Mahara – the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, (2023). *Young people speak out about wellbeing: an insights report into the wellbeing of rangatahi Māori and other young people in Aotearoa*. Wellington: New Zealand. Page 18

There are concerns about harmful online content and more needs to be done to safeguard rangatahi and young people

Rangatahi and young people have raised concerns about online harms, and this is an area where government, business and society should work together to safeguard rangatahi and young people. We have heard from rangatahi and young people that social media and online spaces are simply part of their lives, and what happens online also happens in society. As a harm, this includes experiencing racism and discrimination or bullying¹³.

We know that it can be hard for young people to detach from social media and online spaces and that interaction with content that is not intentionally harmful can cause distress because of the volume of information and the difficulty of shutting it off¹⁴. We also know that social media and online spaces can impact how rangatahi and young people view themselves in relation to others, impacting their self-esteem, self-image and secureness. Evidence shows that there may be a correlation between negative self-image and social media, which can fuel unhealthy behaviours, particularly around eating¹⁵.

Exposure to extremely harmful content is concerning

We are concerned that rangatahi and young people are seeing extremely harmful content online, which can lead to short-term shock or long-term mental health issues. The recent Classifications Office report¹⁶, about young people's experiences with extremely harmful content online, highlights that seeing harmful content may be relatively common amongst young people.

InternetNZ's most recent survey notes that the top concern about different aspects of the internet is young people accessing inappropriate content, with high rates of concern of cyber bullying and sharing or viewing dangerous or discriminatory messages¹⁷. In this same survey, 86% of Pacific participants were extremely or very concerned about young children accessing inappropriate content.

During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, incidents of online harm skyrocketed, with a dramatically increased number of people suffering unwanted digital communications¹⁸. Between April and June 2020, unwanted digital communications increased by 51% compared to the previous quarter, and the communications received were more likely to be about trying to get the person receiving it to hurt

¹³ Te Hīringa Mahara – the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, (2023). *Young people speak out about wellbeing: an insights report into the wellbeing of rangatahi Māori and other young people in Aotearoa*. Wellington: New Zealand. Page 7

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Stubbing, Simon-Kumar, Gluckman, (2023). *A summary of literature reflecting the perspectives of young people in Aotearoa on systemic factors affecting their wellbeing*. Page 13.

¹⁶ Classification Office – Te Mana Whakaatu, (2024). *Content that Crosses the Line: Conversations with young people about extremely harmful content online*. Wellington, NZ: Classification Office – Te Mana Whakaatu.

¹⁷ InternetNZ, (2024). *New Zealand's Internet Insights*. Page 22

¹⁸ Te Hīringa Mahara – the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, (2023). *COVID-19 and safety in the home*. Wellington: New Zealand. Page 16

themselves or share their intimate images or recordings without their permission, than other types of unwanted communication¹⁹.

Unwanted communication is particularly an issue for Māori, Pacific and female-identifying young people. Other communities that are more likely to be targeted by online hate speech include ethnic, religious, disabled and rainbow communities. While not all unwanted online contacts result in mental distress, this can negatively impact on young peoples' everyday activities²⁰. These issues are critical for our young people with highest mental health and wellbeing needs and they need safety mechanisms in place to prevent harm.

Online bullying is an issue for our young people in need

Online bullying is also a concern and is often cited as an issue for young people. Despite some LGBTQIA+ young people reporting social media as a necessity to feel safe and supported, reports of bullying are common from this community²¹. Rangatahi Māori and Pacific young people have also reported online bullying as an issue²². There is also evidence that Māori are more likely than non-Māori to be exposed to content promoting discrimination based on race, as well as self-harm and suicide²³. In InternetNZ's most recent survey, they noted that 16% of New Zealanders say they have experienced online harm or harassment, with younger New Zealanders and those with a disability more likely to experience online harm or harassment²⁴.

There are genuine benefits to online spaces for rangatahi Māori and young people

There are many benefits to online spaces, particularly for those experiencing disadvantage, isolation or marginalisation, such as young LGBTQIA+ people. These include social connection, places of inclusion and access to peers and mental health support²⁵.

Online spaces can build and protect social connections

We have heard that young people who are experiencing, or have experienced, bullying find online spaces vital to connect with like-minded people. Young people have told us that online spaces can build and support social connections, friendships and a sense of community²⁶. For some rangatahi and young people, having a presence

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ Te Hīringa Mahara – the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, (2023). *Young people speak out about wellbeing: an insights report into the wellbeing of rangatahi Māori and other young people in Aotearoa*. Wellington: New Zealand. Page 18

²² *ibid*

²³ Stubbing, Simon-Kumar, Gluckman, (2023). *A summary of literature reflecting the perspectives of young people in Aotearoa on systemic factors affecting their wellbeing*. Page 15.

²⁴ InternetNZ, (2024). *New Zealand's Internet Insights*. Page 22

²⁵ Stubbing, Simon-Kumar, Gluckman, (2023). *A summary of literature reflecting the perspectives of young people in Aotearoa on systemic factors affecting their wellbeing*. Page 12

²⁶ Te Hīringa Mahara – the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, (2023). *Young people speak out about wellbeing: an insights report into the wellbeing of rangatahi Māori and other young people in Aotearoa*. Wellington: New Zealand. Page 17

online is seen as necessary for jobs and, in some cases, for school or community connections.

For rangatahi and young people, intergenerational and whānau connections are crucial for wellbeing²⁷. Rangatahi and young people have told us the importance of maintaining these relationships and would like to see adults supported to participate in online spaces to strengthen their connections with younger people and deepen their understanding of these spaces²⁸.

Research shows that there are better mental health outcomes for children whose parents report greater control over their time spent online, however, many parents are unaware of the risks their children face on online spaces or how to support them or may lack the tools and time to monitor children's social media access²⁹.

Online spaces make it easier for rangatahi and young people to access help

Online spaces can support rangatahi and young people to find community, learn coping skills and access mental health support. Digital environments can enable those who may not seek face-to-face support to express their distress online, access immediate support and build relational empathy skills³⁰.

During crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, access to digital devices and internet is crucial for rangatahi and young people, particularly those seeking support and connection³¹. Our deep dive into safety in the home during COVID-19³² saw increased calls and texts to helplines from rangatahi and young people, which provided safer and more private options for some young people experiencing distress or harm.

Access to online spaces is inequitable

Despite the benefits outlined above, access to digital devices and connections is inequitable, particularly for low-income households and rural communities³³. It is estimated that more than one in five New Zealanders experience digital exclusion, with a significant number (between 100,000 – 150,000) of students without internet access at home³⁴. During the pandemic, this was particularly difficult for rural youth, refugee young people, young disabled people, rangatahi Māori and rainbow young people³⁵.

²⁷ *ibid*, pg. 26

²⁸ *ibid*, pg. 30

²⁹ Marsh, Bullen, Chu, Einstein and Reid, (2025). *Social media and youth wellbeing: the need for a multi-layered public health approach*. New Zealand.

³⁰ Stubbing, Simon-Kumar, Gluckman, (2023). *A summary of literature reflecting the perspectives of young people in Aotearoa on systemic factors affecting their wellbeing*. Page 12

³¹ Te Hīringa Mahara – the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, (2023). *Young people speak out about wellbeing: an insights report into the wellbeing of rangatahi Māori and other young people in Aotearoa*. Wellington: New Zealand. Page 15

³² Te Hīringa Mahara – the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, (2023). *COVID-19 and safety in the home*. Wellington: New Zealand.

³³ *ibid*, pg.19

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ Te Hīringa Mahara – the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, (2023). *COVID-19 and safety in the home*. Wellington: New Zealand. Page 19

Social media use cannot be seen as a protective factor³⁶, but online spaces can be protective for the mental health and wellbeing of rangatahi and young people³⁷. We recommend taking a what works and nuanced approach to safeguarding rangatahi and young people online, supporting the benefits while mitigating the risks.

Actions to address online harms

There is no one way to address the complexity of online harms for young people. It will need a coordinated and dedicated focus across government, business and society. We have heard directly from rangatahi and young people that more support is needed, from online platforms, education systems and parents, caregivers and adults to reduce online harm.

Rangatahi and young people are clear that they see responsibility to regulate what is published lies with the online platforms. We support the calls from rangatahi and young people who want to see more efforts to regulate material, protect rangatahi and young people from harmful content, and provide support for developing the skills and tools to understand what they see and hear online.

We recommend the following calls to action that have been developed by rangatahi and young people that we have engaged with:

Actions for Government

- Engage rangatahi and young people in the Inquiry process to hear directly from them about social media use and impact.
- Develop social media and online safety guidance for caregivers, family and whānau to support rangatahi and young people to be safe online.
- Include in the education curriculum – civic engagement education, life skills, mental health awareness and critical thinking.
- Prioritise a roll-out of internet and digital tools and technology to enable equitable online participation and social connection, particularly in rural areas and lower-income households.
- Ensure government agencies are coordinated and resourced to involve rangatahi and young people in decision-making.
- Commission more research into social media and online spaces in New Zealand, including the kinds of content rangatahi and young people are exposed to and its influences.

³⁶ Webb, Kingstone, Richardson, Flett, (2024). *Rapid evidence and policy brief: COVID-19 youth recovery plan 2020-2022*.

³⁷ Te Hīringa Mahara – the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, (2023). *COVID-19 and safety in the home* Wellington: New Zealand. Page 19

Actions for Government and business

- Hold companies that establish and maintain social media and online platforms to account by ensuring they monitor and manage algorithms that produce and share distressing and harmful content.
- Regulate harmful content.
- Prioritise young people in need and ensure the digital divide does not get any wider.

Actions for society

- Support families and parents with having non-judgemental conversations about online spaces and their role in providing safety measures.
- Normalise online safety attitudes toward online spaces for young people.
- Support parents and older whānau members, such as kaumatua and kuia, to understand and participate in social media and online spaces, to foster intergenerational connections.

The rangatahi and young people that we engaged with provide a mature and nuanced view of the harms and benefits of accessing social media and online spaces but did not support efforts to ban social media access as a blanket approach.

Additional information

An insights report written from the perspective of rangatahi and young people we engaged, and a literature review commissioned by Te Hīringa Mahara and delivered by Kōi Tū Centre for Informed Futures, is available on our website as supplementary information to this submission: <https://www.mhwc.govt.nz/news-and-resources/youth-wellbeing-insights/>.

We also provide a link to our COVID-19 insights, of which the COVID-19 and safety in the home report provides more information about the benefits and harms of online spaces: <https://www.mhwc.govt.nz/news-and-resources/covid-19-insights-series-covid-19-and-safety-in-the-home/>