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Australia's Social Media Ban**

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Why Bans Fail: Tipping Points and Australia's Social Media Ban

Evidence from Australian teenagers four months after the under-16 ban

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Four months after Australia banned under-16s from major social media platforms, only about a quarter of affected teenagers comply, and the way the ban is designed makes that share more likely to erode than to grow.

In December 2025, Australia became the first country to ban under-16s from holding accounts on major social media platforms, and comparable legislation has since been adopted, drafted, or proposed in more than a dozen other countries. We surveyed roughly two thousand Australian teenagers four months after the ban took effect. Compliance is low, around 25%, and is unlikely to consolidate. Teenagers say they would need roughly two-thirds of their peers to comply before complying themselves, and they perceive compliers as less popular than non-compliers. Sustaining higher compliance will require pairing the ban with instruments that act on social norms and individual incentives directly.

<p>≈25%</p> <p>Estimated aggregate compliance among banned 14–15-year-olds</p>	<p>≈2/3</p> <p>Share of peers teens say must comply before they will comply themselves</p>	<p>~1 in 10</p> <p>Banned teens who believe there are personal consequences for violating the ban</p>
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The Australian ban

The Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024 sets a mandatory minimum age of 16 for holding an account on ten major social platforms. Two features of how the law is enforced shape its likely effects. First, enforcement is fully on the supply side: platforms face civil penalties of up to A\$49.5 million for failing to take “reasonable steps” to prevent under-16 accounts, while minors themselves face no legal sanction. Second, circumvention is technically straightforward. False birthdates at sign-up, identity workarounds, accounts borrowed from older siblings or parents, and VPNs all leave the user with platform access at low individual cost.

Because social media use is inherently social, whether a ban that is easy to circumvent changes behaviour at scale depends on a coordination problem. The value of using a platform rises with the number of peers on it, so the share of peers who comply is itself the central determinant of whether any given teenager finds it optimal to comply.

How much compliance, and what holds it back

We surveyed Australian teenagers aged 14–18 in March and April 2026, together with a contemporaneous US sample as a comparison group facing no comparable policy. Among 14–15-year-olds subject to the ban, about three-quarters report past-week use of a banned platform. Taking the unbanned 16–18-year-old Australian rate as the counterfactual, we estimate aggregate compliance at roughly 25%. The figure is corroborated by independent surveys from the eSafety Commissioner, the Molly Rose Foundation, and YouGov fielded in the same period.

Three channels could in principle have driven behaviour down, and the data show that none has bound. Personal sanctions are not salient: only around one in ten banned teens believes there are personal consequences for violating the ban. Access frictions are low, with most banned teens describing circumvention as easy and most having had no account removed. The peer environment has barely moved. Most banned teens believe their friends are still on the platforms, and among those who continue to use, a majority point to social reasons: their friends are still there, and they worry about missing out. Compliers, in turn, report finding it harder to keep up with friends and feeling more bored.

The tipping point

A second survey wave directly measured compliance thresholds. Respondents reported their belief about current peer compliance and then stated the share of peers who would need to comply before they themselves would. Across framings (age peers, classmates in their grade, students at their school, and a typical person their age), the mean stated threshold clusters around two-thirds, well above the share currently complying.

These thresholds imply that current compliance cannot sustain itself. A simple model of compliance under network effects, in the spirit of Schelling and Granovetter, makes the point precisely. Equilibria are points where the share of teens whose threshold has been reached equals the share who actually comply. Combining stated thresholds with current peer-compliance beliefs, the only stable equilibrium lies in the low single digits, well below the level Australia currently observes. Today's compliance therefore sits in the region where individually optimal behaviour pushes it downward rather than upward.

The popularity problem

A high-compliance state is sustained by two ingredients, not one. The share of compliers must be high enough, and those who comply must find it preferable to keep complying. The current ban achieves neither. Australian teenagers perceive compliers as less popular than non-compliers, and among current users of banned platforms that perception is sharper still. Suggestive evidence on Instagram follower counts points the same way: among banned 14–15-year-olds, current users report roughly twice the followers of non-users.

This pattern is the opposite of the cigarette precedent, in which higher-status smokers complied first, connected groups quit together, and continued smokers progressively became peripheral in their social networks. In Australia today, the teens whose continued use carries the most social weight are the ones still on the platforms. The same population of compliance thresholds can support either a high or a low equilibrium depending on the status profile of early compliers: when high-influence individuals comply early, the equilibrium is high; when they hold out, it is low. Australia currently sits in the latter regime.

Policy implications

An outright mandate enforced on platforms is unlikely, on its own, to close the gap between observed compliance (about 25%) and the threshold teens require of their peers before complying themselves (about two-thirds). Four complementary levers, each addressing a friction the data identify, could either lift observed compliance above the threshold or lower the threshold itself.

- 1. Time caps over outright bans.** Tools that operate on the intensive margin, capping daily time on platforms rather than prohibiting accounts, target the heavy use most plausibly responsible for the harms the ban is meant to address while preserving the social value of moderate use. Australian teenagers themselves prefer a self-limiting application to an outright ban.
- 2. Grade-based rather than age-based scope.** Adolescent peer groups are organised around school grades, which mix exact ages. 14- and 15-year-olds share classrooms with substantial numbers of unbanned 16-year-olds. Aligning the scope of the ban with grade rather than individual age would remove the within-classroom unbanned peers whose visible use undermines coordination.
- 3. Norm campaigns and individual incentives.** Without visible peer compliance, the descriptive norm works against the legal message rather than reinforcing it. Public-health campaigns and instruments that make non-use observable and socially validated act directly on the popularity margin. Direct incentives such as cash payments for verified non-use, vouchers, or tax credits for parents are the second instrument the cigarette precedent points to.

4. Infrastructure for alternative peer interaction. Removing social media without providing an alternative requires compliers to absorb the social cost that the gap between users and non-users on “harder to keep up with friends” already illustrates. Policies that promote alternative peer-interaction channels, such as in-person coordination infrastructure or after-school routines that occupy the freed time collectively, lower the private cost of compliance for the network as a whole.

Bottom line

Australia's ban has produced a compliance rate well below the level its design needs to consolidate itself. Whether the policy converges on a higher equilibrium will depend less on the passage of time than on whether complementary instruments shift the two margins the data identify: the share of compliers, and the social meaning of compliance. Bans of this design that operate on neither will tend to look, four months in, much like Australia does today.

DATA AND METHODS

Two survey waves of Australian teenagers aged 14–18 fielded in March and April 2026 (roughly two thousand respondents), with a contemporaneous US sample as a comparison group facing no comparable policy. Aggregate compliance is estimated by comparing past-week platform use among banned 14–15-year-olds with the unbanned 16–18-year-old rate as a counterfactual. A second wave elicited individual compliance thresholds and beliefs about peer compliance, which are combined in a network-effects model of equilibrium compliance in the tradition of Schelling and Granovetter. Magnitudes are corroborated by contemporaneous surveys from the eSafety Commissioner, the Molly Rose Foundation, and YouGov.