Why Youth Social Media Bans Are a Bad Idea

Kerry McDonald

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teenage boy is scrolling through his Instagram account one night. He notices that a friend has posted a distressing message indicating depression and suicidal thoughts. The boy tries to reassure his friend through online comments, but is worried. He tells his father who contacts the depressed child's grateful father. The situation is addressed and the child's mental health improves.

In this real-life example, the boy who was concerned for his friend's mental health was able to seek the help of his parent because he was freely allowed to use social media. If he was banned from using Instagram or a similar application, either by his parents or by the state, this situation could have ended quite differently.

The concerned boy, for instance, might have been less likely to approach his father with the news that a friend could be suicidal for fear that he would get in trouble for using a banned social media platform. He might be afraid that his friend would also get in trouble. The friend's father then would not have been notified, and the friend may not have received the support he needed.

As with most bans, they not only don't work but they can also make the continued use of a prohibited product less safe.

There have been increasing calls for banning youth social media usage, arguing that social media is damaging to children's mental health and overall well-being. Last week, this effort moved beyond parental persuasion to government force when the governor of Utah signed into law two bills that require parental consent for social media usage for children under age 18, and prohibit those under 18 from accessing social media between 10:30 pm and 6:30 am.

Rather than preventing social media use by children and teens, these new Utah laws will lead them underground to use social media in more surreptitious, and less safe, ways.

This is true of prohibitions more broadly. For example, banning drugs has not ended drug use, but it has made drugs more potent and deadly.

The same was true with the national prohibition of alcohol sales beginning in 1919 with the passage of the 18th Amendment to the US Constitution. Alcohol consumption remained high throughout the Prohibition period, as speakeasies and bootleggers appeared across the country. Alcohol consumption was also made more dangerous due to its criminal component, and the content of the alcohol became less transparent and, sometimes, more deadly.

The PBS film series "Prohibition," by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, highlighted the many unintended consequences of banning alcohol during the Prohibition era that ended in 1933 with the repeal of the 18th Amendment. One of these consequences was that thousands of Americans died during that time from drinking unsafe alcohol.

As FEE Managing Editor Jon Miltimore wrote, some of these deaths were intentionally inflicted on innocent people by officials in the federal government who poisoned alcohol to boost compliance with Prohibition laws.

"The greatest unintended consequence of Prohibition however, was the plainest to see," said historian Michael Lerner. "For over a decade, the law that was meant to foster temperance instead fostered intemperance and excess. The solution the United States had devised to address the problem of alcohol abuse had instead made the problem even worse. The statistics of the period are notoriously unreliable, but it is very clear that in many parts of the United States more people were drinking, and people were drinking more."

Bans on human behavior, whether prohibiting alcohol sales in the 1920s or prohibiting youth social media use in the 2020s, don't work and, often, make the problem worse.

Parents have the right to decide the technology rules and social media guidelines for their children, though I would urge them to avoid bans and instead encourage dialogue.

The state, however, has no authority to usurp these individual rights by banning technological tools or requiring certain parental controls. This is the "fatal conceit" that the Nobel Prize-winning economist Friedrich Hayek explained when describing the hubris of central planners who believe that "man is able to shape the world around him according to his wishes," often with unintended consequences. Families should be free to make their own decisions about technology and social media, without government interference.

Deteriorating youth mental health is a serious problem, and there are worthwhile solutions to consider, but social media bans shouldn't be among them.

Kerry McDonald is an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom and a senior education fellow at the Foundation for Economic Education.