



TECHNICAL BRIEF

Survey on Canadians' Preference for Social Media Age Verification Policies

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Executive summary

In May 2026, ahead of the government's introduction of Bill C-34, the *Safe Social Media Act*, the Media Ecosystem Observatory fielded a national survey of 1,306 Canadians on how children should be protected online. C-34 establishes a framework to regulate social media platforms and AI chatbot services, but specific design-focused provisions – app features, age verification, and compliance mechanisms – remain largely undefined. This brief asks what Canadians themselves want from this framework, and where their preferences are settled, divided, or uncertain.

Support for government regulation. The strongest support is for measures that place responsibility on platforms rather than on users: age-appropriate design codes (84%), strengthened legal liability (82%), and an independent regulator with the power to fine (72%). Canadians want much the same for AI chatbots, where 83% ask for the same or similar rules. Their concern is not limited to social media or any particular platform but extends to the broader risks that rapidly evolving technologies pose to children.

Prove it safe. On age limits, the public backs restrictions without insisting on an outright ban. A full ban on under-age users draws 76% support – and so does a temporary moratorium that suspends children's access until a platform can show its product is safe. Canadians are not choosing outright exclusion; they seek a safe user experience for children.

A different user experience. Canadians want design change, not just restriction. A clear majority supports limiting a wide range of features: contact with strangers (74%), data collection (67%), commercial features (61%), personalized feeds (58%), and features built to maximize time on the app (57%). On age verification the public is harder to read, with opinion scattered and one in five Canadians unsure; nonetheless they tend to favour a government-run pass/fail check, well

Résumé exécutif

En mai 2026, avant le dépôt par le gouvernement du projet de loi C-34, la *Loi sur les médias sociaux sécuritaires*, l'Observatoire de l'écosystème médiatique a mené un sondage national auprès de 1306 Canadiens afin de mieux comprendre comment les enfants devraient être protégés en ligne. Le projet de loi C-34 établit un cadre de réglementation des plateformes de médias sociaux et des services de clavardage alimentés par l'IA. Toutefois, plusieurs éléments liés à la conception des services – notamment les fonctionnalités des applications, la vérification de l'âge et les mécanismes de conformité – restent à préciser. Cette note examine ce que les Canadien·ne souhaitent voir dans ce cadre réglementaire et met en lumière les enjeux qui font consensus, ceux qui divisent et ceux sur lesquels les Canadien·ne demeurent incertains.

Un fort appui à la réglementation gouvernementale. Les mesures qui recueillent le plus d'appui sont celles qui imposent des responsabilités aux plateformes plutôt qu'aux utilisateurs: des codes de conception tenant compte de l'âge (84%), un régime de responsabilité juridique renforcé (82%) et un organisme de réglementation indépendant doté de pouvoirs de sanction (72 %). Les Canadien·ne souhaitent aussi voir des règles similaires s'appliquer aux agents conversationnels d'IA : 83 % estiment qu'ils devraient être assujettis aux mêmes exigences ou à des exigences comparables. Cette tendance suggère que les préoccupations du public ne se limitent pas aux médias sociaux ou à certaines plateformes, mais s'étendent aux risques que les technologies en évolution rapide présentent pour les enfants.

La sécurité comme condition préalable. En matière de limites d'âge, les Canadien·ne appuient des restrictions, sans pour autant privilégier une interdiction absolue. Une interdiction complète recueille l'appui de 76 % des répondants, tout comme un moratoire temporaire qui suspendrait l'accès des enfants jusqu'à ce qu'une plateforme démontre que son produit est sécuritaire. Les Canadien·ne ne privilégient donc pas l'exclusion pure et simple; ils souhaitent avant tout une expérience en ligne sécuritaire pour les enfants.

Une expérience numérique différente. Les Canadien·ne souhaitent des changements dans la conception des plateformes, et non seulement des restrictions d'accès. Une claire majorité appuie des restrictions concernant les interactions avec des inconnus (74 %), la collecte de données (67 %), les fonctionnalités commerciales (61 %), les fils personnalisés (58 %) et les mécanismes conçus pour maximiser le temps passé sur

ahead of trusting platforms or an algorithm.

Harms and developmental costs. Canadians are clear-eyed about what a ban would and would not fix. Most think it would improve children's safety from online harms (69%) and their mental health (67%). Some remain concerned about costs to digital literacy or to access to information and civic life. They are weighing immediate protection against longer-term cost, which points to a graduated pathway into online life and digital-literacy education in schools rather than a hard wall at a fixed age. While C-34 has now been tabled, the implementation choices will determine whether the framework delivers.

les applications (57 %). Sur la vérification de l'âge, l'opinion est plus dispersée et un·e Canadien·ne sur cinq se dit incertain·e; les Canadien·ne tendent néanmoins à privilégier une vérification assurée par le gouvernement plutôt que de faire confiance aux plateformes ou à un système algorithmique.

Préjudices et coûts pour le développement. Les Canadien·ne ont une vision nuancée de ce qu'une interdiction pourrait accomplir. La majorité estime qu'elle améliorerait la protection contre les préjudices en ligne (69 %) et la santé mentale (67 %). Certains demeurent préoccupés par les conséquences possibles sur la littératie numérique ou l'accès à l'information et à la vie civique. Cette tension souligne l'importance d'un parcours graduel d'intégration à la vie numérique, accompagné d'une éducation à la littératie numérique à l'école, plutôt qu'un accès autorisé ou interdit à partir d'un âge fixe. Ce sont les décisions réglementaires à venir qui détermineront si le cadre proposé répond réellement aux préoccupations des Canadien·ne.

Introduction

Children and youth today navigate a complex online ecosystem: while social media can enable meaningful connections and opportunities for learning, it also exposes youth to significant risks – harmful content, cyberbullying, and predatory behaviour. Viral trends such as the “blackout challenge,” in which youth are encouraged to choke themselves until losing consciousness, have been directly linked to children’s deaths, while concerns have been raised about algorithmic curation pushing youth toward self-harm content. These harms are increasingly understood as a systemic feature of platform design rather than isolated individual cases. In March 2026, a U.S. jury found Meta and YouTube liable for addictive design features that contributed to the deterioration of youth mental health – one of thousands of lawsuits against platforms including TikTok and Snapchat that have intensified public scrutiny of social media’s effects on youth.

Countries have responded with legislation restricting social media access for youth. In December 2025, Australia became the first country to fully ban users under 16 from major social media platforms. Indonesia, Malaysia, and a growing number of European countries

including the UK are following suit, designing age-based restrictions or verification requirements under which a minimum age must be met to gain access.

Canada has introduced Bill C-34, which would establish a Digital Safety Act and a Digital Safety Commission of Canada, imposing new guardrails on social media and chatbot access for children and youth, and holding platforms to a duty to protect children from harmful content and exploitation. While the proposal signals a renewed commitment to online safety, specific regulatory mechanisms and implementation practices remain largely undefined.

In this context we conducted a national, quota-based survey of 1,306 Canadians using Léger’s online panel (see Methodology) to understand what Canadians think about age-restriction and verification policies for social media, and about the impact of platform-design changes on youth wellbeing and development. We answer three questions: Do Canadians support age-based restrictions, and what regulatory mechanisms do they prefer? What tradeoffs do they perceive between online child safety and other values such as access to information, mental health, and digital literacy? And which age-verification methods do they prefer, and what drawbacks concern them?

Canadians Want Strong Government Action – Not Platform Self-Regulation

Canadians overwhelmingly support government policies designed to protect children from social media harms, favouring binding measures over voluntary mechanisms. As Figure 1 shows, support is highest for measures that make platforms take responsibility for the harms their products cause: age-appropriate design codes (84%), which require stricter default settings for young users, and strengthened legal liability (82%) for platforms whose products harm children.

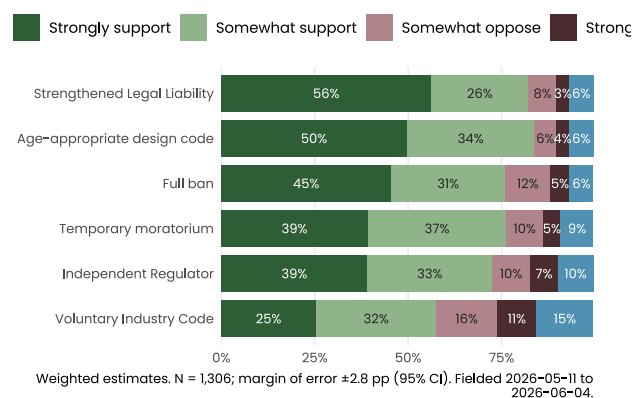


Figure 1. Support for Policies to Protect Children on Social Media: weighted share supporting (strongly + somewhat), opposing, and unsure for each proposed policy; bars sum to 100%. Platform-responsibility measures – design codes and liability – draw the strongest support; the voluntary industry code the least.

Outright restrictions on access take two forms that rest on different premises. A full ban blocks children under a set age entirely – the approach Australia adopted for users under 16. A temporary moratorium is conditional: it suspends children's access only until a platform can demonstrate its product is safe, treating harm as a fixable feature of design. Both options draw broad and *identical* support (76%). That equality is itself telling: Canadians support age-based restrictions but, on this evidence, are not prioritizing an outright ban over a proof-of-safety requirement that shifts the burden onto platforms. Both, however, still draw less support than the design-code and liability measures. A strong majority (72%) also support empowering an independent regulator to set safety standards and impose fines.

The voluntary industry code – under which platforms

that adopt safety standards on their own face lighter regulation – is the least-preferred option. It still receives majority support (58%), but markedly less than the others.

These preferences signal a clear public appetite for decisive, binding action rather than voluntary platform compliance. For policymakers, reliance on the goodwill of platforms is unlikely to allay public concern about youth safety. Canadians also support similar designs for youth engagement with AI chatbots: 83% favour the same or similar rules. Public concern, in other words, follows the relationship between youth and technology rather than attaching to a specific platform or product – so legislation written around today's platforms risks dating quickly, while a technology-comprehensive framework is better placed to keep pace with chatbots and whatever interfaces follow.

Canadians Distinguish Immediate Safety from Long-Term Development

Asked about the potential impact of a social media ban, Canadians draw a consistent distinction between immediate and downstream effects. As Figure 2 shows, a large majority believe a ban would improve children's safety from online harms – harassment, predators, harmful content (69%) – and benefit their mental health and wellbeing (67%). Canadians see direct, tangible benefits to strict regulation for a child's immediate safety.

The downstream effects are more divided. On social development and friendship, slightly more than half (58%) expect a ban to help, against 18% who expect it to worsen and 19% who foresee no change. This reflects social media's dual character in young people's lives: a tool for connection that can also displace in-person interaction and enable cyberbullying.

A more prominent concern is the long-term cost to children's access to information and to digital-literacy development. A share of Canadians see a full ban worsening digital-literacy preparedness (23%) and access to information crucial for public life and civic engagement (24%) – limiting young people's ability to participate in the information environment.

The public views a ban not as a matter of convenience but as a balancing act, weighing immediate protective benefits against more diffuse long-term developmental risks. Policies that protect the development of digital-literacy skills and ease youth's transition online while targeting exploitative platform features are more likely to achieve safety aims without curbing young people's civic development.

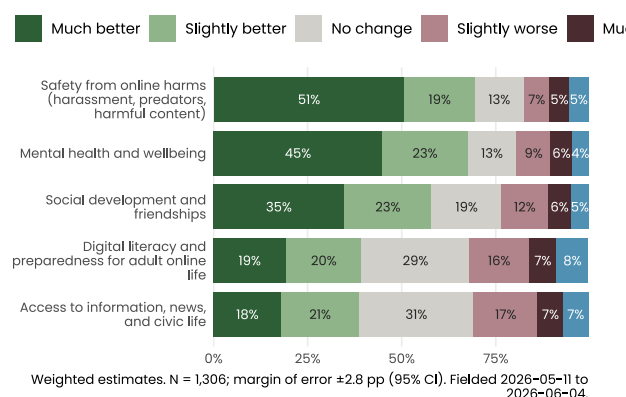


Figure 2. The Expected Effect of a Strict Social Media Ban on Children: weighted distribution from much better to much worse (plus unsure), by life area; bars sum to 100%. Canadians expect clear gains for immediate safety and mental health, but are divided on social development and on access to information and digital literacy.

Beyond an Age Gate: Design Restrictions and How to Verify Age

Beyond age limits, Bill C-34 requires operators to build in “design features respecting the protection of children” (s. 21) but leaves the specifics to regulation. We asked Canadians what platform functions should be restricted for youth, and found high support across the board. As Figure 3 shows, restrictions on direct interactions with strangers – public profiles, unsolicited messages from non-followers – draw the strongest support (74%). Other restrictions are also widely backed: data collection (67%), commercial features such as targeted advertising (61%), algorithmically personalized feeds (58%), features designed to maximize time on the app (57%), and livestreaming (50%). Most Canadians want a wide range of these restrictions: the average respondent wants 4 of six features restricted, and only 11% would restrict none. Canadians are most concerned about features that expose children to direct contact-based harm and data-security risks, and comparatively less concerned about the ambient features – personalization and attention-maximizing design – that characterize the social media model itself.

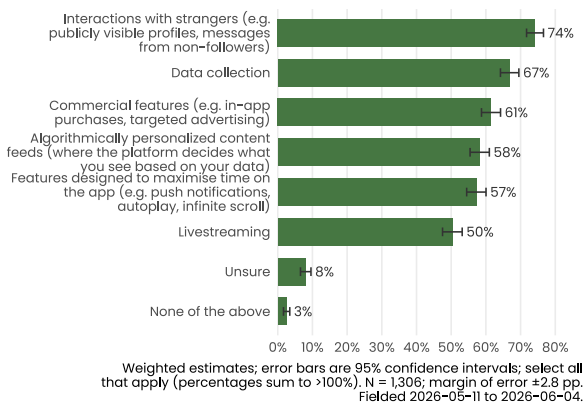


Figure 3. Platform Features to Restrict for Children: weighted share selecting each feature (select-all-that-apply, so percentages sum to more than 100%); error bars are 95% confidence intervals. Contact-based and data features lead; attention-maximizing design trails.

Canadians were also asked their preferred method for verifying age. C-34 requires age verification for some services but, as with design features, leaves the method to regulation. As Figure 4 shows, no single method commands a majority and one in five respondents

(20%) did not know which they preferred – so the finding is relative, not a clear endorsement of any one system. The most-preferred approaches lean toward government facilitation: a government service that sends a pass/fail signal to platforms (25%), or users uploading government ID to the platform (12%). Comparable support for independent third-party verification on a similar pass/fail signal (12%) points to a preference for approaches that minimize data exposure. The remaining preferences are dispersed across technology-driven and platform-forward methods – app-store verification, facial scans, algorithmic estimation – reflecting reluctance toward new data-sharing arrangements managed by platforms. The least-supported method is letting users simply enter their own age (5%), which Canadians broadly reject as too easily bypassed. The public anchors trust in verification at the government level or with an independent third party, prioritizing data minimization and security.

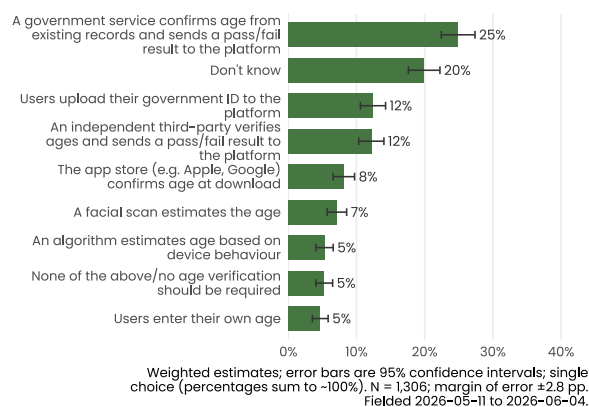


Figure 4. Preferred Approach to Age Verification on Social Media: weighted share selecting each method (single choice); error bars are 95% confidence intervals. No method commands a majority; government-facilitated pass/fail leads, and one in five are unsure.

Age verification carries its own risks. As Figure 5 shows, a moderate number of respondents are concerned that collecting ID data introduces security risks for personal information (49%), that loose methods could be easily bypassed (42%), or that verification infrastructure could be repurposed for surveillance (40%). Concern decreases for the exclusion of youth who lack government ID (27%) and for high compliance costs for smaller platforms (18%). Canadians are more concerned with the integrity of the verification process than with who it might

exclude – though a lower priority does not make those concerns irrelevant: governments would still need to ensure equitable access and the sustainability of smaller platforms. These are not signs of opposition to action but considerations the public believes must be addressed when choosing a method.

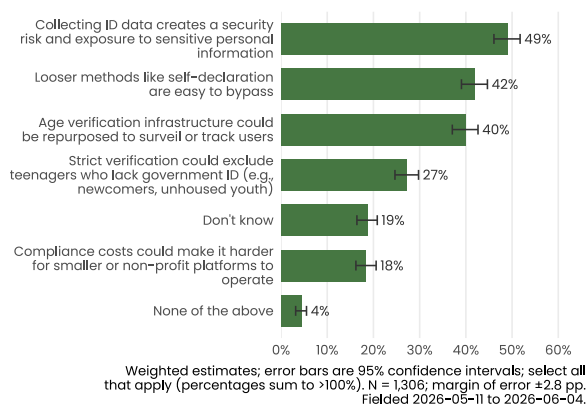


Figure 5. Concerns About Age-Verification Drawbacks: weighted share citing each concern (select-all-that-apply); error bars are 95% confidence intervals. Data-security and bypass concerns lead; exclusion and compliance-cost concerns trail.

Methodology

Data collection. We conducted a bilingual (English and French) online survey as part of MEO's monthly national tracking program. The age-verification questions reported here were added to the questionnaire on May 11, 2026, with fieldwork for this module running from May 11, 2026 to June 04, 2026. The survey was administered via Qualtrics using Léger's online panel, with quota sampling based on Statistics Canada benchmarks for region, age, and gender; respondents were compensated through Léger's standard panel reward program. An error in the French-language questionnaire affecting these questions was identified and corrected on June 1, 2026; the French sample was re-collected, and French-language responses to the affected version (submitted on or before June 1) were excluded. The final analytical sample for this module is 1,306 respondents (1,008 English, 298 French).

Measures. Estimates are weighted using block-calibrated post-stratification (raking) weights, calibrated to Statistics Canada benchmarks for age and gender within region. Response codings come directly from the Qualtrics questionnaire definition (the single source of truth for every figure label). Policy-support figures combine "strongly" and "somewhat" support; select-all-that-apply items (feature restrictions, verification drawbacks) do not sum to 100%.

Limitations. Because respondents were drawn from a non-probability online panel, a classical margin of sampling error does not apply. For comparison, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of approximately ± 2.7 percentage points, 19 times out of 20; accounting for the variance inflation from weighting (Kish effective $n \approx 1,199$), the design-adjusted margin is approximately ± 2.8 pp. The survey measures stated preferences at one point in time and cannot establish how attitudes would respond to a specific enacted policy.

Table 1. Sample demographics (unweighted and weighted). Total N = 1,306.

Category	Unweighted n (%)	Weighted n (%)
Gender		
Man	616 (47.2%)	638 (48.9%)
Woman	680 (52.1%)	658 (50.4%)
Other	10 (0.8%)	10 (0.8%)
Age		
18-34	360 (27.6%)	350 (26.8%)
35-54	531 (40.7%)	421 (32.2%)
55+	415 (31.8%)	535 (41.0%)
Education		
High school or less	205 (15.7%)	208 (16.0%)
College / CEGEP / technical	530 (40.6%)	539 (41.3%)
University degree	571 (43.7%)	558 (42.7%)
Language		
English	1,008 (77.2%)	1,057 (80.9%)
French	298 (22.8%)	249 (19.1%)
Region		
Ontario	483 (37.0%)	506 (38.7%)
Quebec	352 (27.0%)	294 (22.5%)
British Columbia	155 (11.9%)	179 (13.7%)
Alberta	149 (11.4%)	153 (11.7%)
Saskatchewan / Manitoba	89 (6.8%)	90 (6.9%)
Atlantic provinces	77 (5.9%)	84 (6.5%)

Weighted figures use block-calibrated post-stratification (raking) weights, calibrated to Statistics Canada benchmarks for age and gender within region. "Other" gender combines non-binary, self-described, and prefer-not-to-say responses. The French count reflects the post-June-1 re-collection only. Weighted total = 1,306.

Survey Measures

The questions below are reproduced verbatim from the Qualtrics questionnaire. Matrix items show the row statements rated against a shared scale; multiple-choice items list every option in the order presented. "Select all that apply" is noted where it applies.

Different policies have been proposed to protect children on social media. For each one, tell us the extent to which you support or oppose it.

Matrix (single rating per row).

Statements:

- Full ban – children under a set age are blocked entirely from social media.
- Temporary moratorium – platforms must suspend children's access until they can prove their product is safe.
- Age-appropriate design code – platforms must apply stricter settings for younger users (e.g. no recommendation feeds)
- Independent Regulator: a government body sets safety standards and can impose fines on platforms
- Strengthened Legal Liability: Platforms are held legally responsible if their products harm children.
- Voluntary Industry Code: Platforms that adopt safety standards on their own face lighter regulations.

Response scale: Strongly support; Somewhat support; Somewhat oppose; Strongly oppose; Unsure.

We'd like you to think through how restricting children's access to social media might affect them. How do you think a strict ban would affect the lives of children in each of the following areas?

Matrix (single rating per row).

Statements:

- Safety from online harms (harassment, predators, harmful content)
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Social development and friendships
- Access to information, news, and civic life

- Digital literacy and preparedness for adult online life

Response scale: Much worse; Slightly worse; No change; Slightly better; Much better; Unsure.

Which of the following social media platform features, if any, do you think should be restricted for children? Select all that apply.

Multiple choice, select all that apply.

Options:

- Algorithmically personalized content feeds (where the platform decides what you see based on your data)
- Features designed to maximise time on the app (e.g. push notifications, autoplay, infinite scroll)
- Interactions with strangers (e.g. publicly visible profiles, messages from non-followers)
- Livestreaming
- Data collection
- Commercial features (e.g. in-app purchases, targeted advertising)
- None of the above
- Unsure

If age verification were required to use social media, which approach would you most support?

Multiple choice, single answer.

Options:

- Users enter their own age
- An algorithm estimates age based on device behaviour
- The app store (e.g. Apple, Google) confirms age at download
- An independent third-party verifies ages and sends a pass/fail result to the platform
- A government service confirms age from existing records and sends a pass/fail result to the platform
- Users upload their government ID to the platform
- A facial scan estimates the age
- None of the above/no age verification should be required
- Don't know

Some argue that age verification methods come with important drawbacks. Others are not concerned about drawbacks of age verification. Which of the following drawbacks concern you, if any? Select all that apply.

Multiple choice, select all that apply.

Options:

- Strict verification could exclude teenagers who lack government ID (e.g., newcomers, unhoused youth)
- Looser methods like self-declaration are easy to bypass
- Collecting ID data creates a security risk and exposure to sensitive personal information
- Age verification infrastructure could be repurposed to surveil or track users

- Compliance costs could make it harder for smaller or non-profit platforms to operate
- None of the above
- Don't know

Do you think AI chatbots should face similar rules to social media when it comes to children?

Multiple choice, single answer.

Options:

- Yes, the exact same rules should apply
- Yes, but different requirements - chatbots function differently than social media
- No, chatbots do not need to be regulated for children
- Unsure