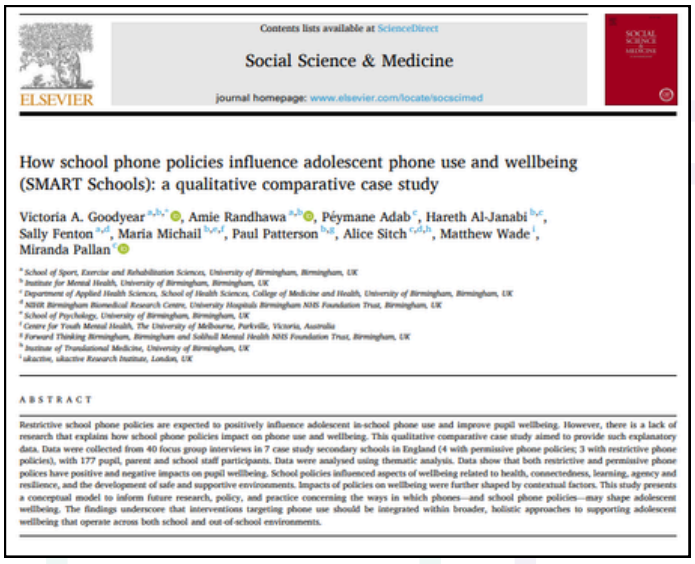
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SMART SCHOOLS

SMART Schools Study Newsletter, Issue 3: March 2026

More of our findings have now been published

Welcome to our latest newsletter from the SMART Schools Team. We are excited to announce that more of our findings from the study have now been published, including our qualitative analysis of smartphone policies and their influence on wellbeing, and our economic analysis of school smartphone policies. Once again, we'd like to thank all of the schools, teachers, pupils, and parents for their involvement in the Smart Schools Study, and for making this valuable research possible!



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Social Science & Medicine

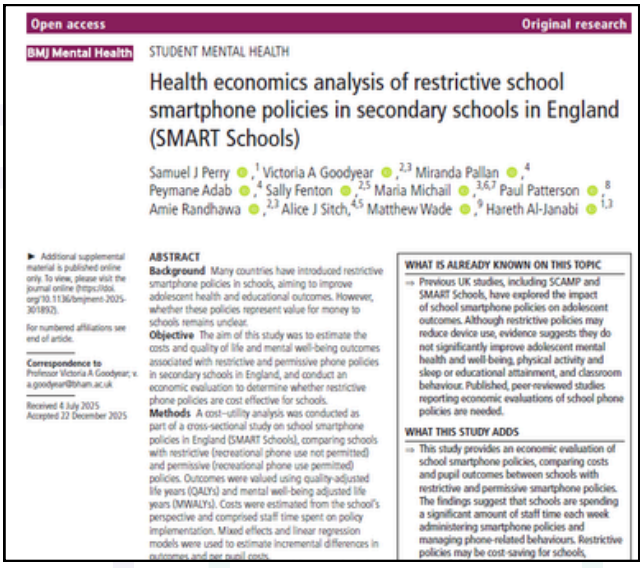
journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/socscimed

How school phone policies influence adolescent phone use and wellbeing (SMART Schools): a qualitative comparative case study

Victoria A. Goodyear, Amie Randhawa, Péymane Adab, Hareth Al-Janabi, Sally Fenton, Maria Michail, Paul Patterson, Alice Sitch, Matthew Wade, Miranda Pallan

ABSTRACT

Restrictive school phone policies are expected to positively influence adolescent in-school phone use and improve pupil wellbeing. However, there is a lack of research that explains how school phone policies impact on phone use and wellbeing. This qualitative comparative case study aimed to provide such explanatory data. Data were collected from 40 focus group interviews in 7 case study secondary schools in England (4 with permissive phone policies; 3 with restrictive phone policies), with 177 pupil, parent and school staff participants. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Data show that both restrictive and permissive phone polices have positive and negative impacts on pupil wellbeing. School policies influenced aspects of wellbeing related to health, connectedness, learning, agency and resilience, and the development of safe and supportive environments. Impacts of policies on wellbeing were further shaped by contextual factors. This study presents a conceptual model to inform future research, policy, and practice concerning the ways in which phones—and school phone policies—may shape adolescent wellbeing. The findings underscore that interventions targeting phone use should be integrated within broader, holistic approaches to supporting adolescent wellbeing that operate across both school and out-of-school environments.



Open access Original research

BMJ Mental Health STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Health economics analysis of restrictive school smartphone policies in secondary schools in England (SMART Schools)

Samuel J Perry, Victoria A Goodyear, Miranda Pallan, Peymane Adab, Sally Fenton, Maria Michail, Paul Patterson, Amie Randhawa, Alice J Sitch, Matthew Wade, Hareth Al-Janabi

ABSTRACT

Background Many countries have introduced restrictive smartphone policies in schools, aiming to improve adolescent health and educational outcomes. However, whether these policies represent value for money to schools remains unclear.

Objective The aim of this study was to estimate the costs and quality of life and mental well-being outcomes associated with restrictive and permissive phone policies in secondary schools in England, and conduct an economic evaluation to determine whether restrictive phone policies are cost effective for schools.

Methods A cost–utility analysis was conducted as part of a cross-sectional study on school smartphone policies in England (SMART Schools), comparing schools with restrictive (recreational phone use not permitted) and permissive (recreational phone use permitted) policies. Outcomes were valued using quality-adjusted life years (QALYs) and mental well-being adjusted life years (MWALYs). Costs were estimated from the school's perspective and comprised staff time spent on policy implementation. Mixed effects and linear regression models were used to estimate incremental differences in

WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN ON THIS TOPIC

⇒ Previous UK studies, including SCAMP and SMART Schools, have explored the impact of school smartphone policies on adolescent outcomes. Although restrictive policies may reduce device use, evidence suggests they do not significantly improve adolescent mental health and well-being, physical activity and sleep or educational attainment, and classroom behaviour. Published, peer-reviewed studies reporting economic evaluations of school phone policies are needed.

WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS

⇒ This study provides an economic evaluation of school smartphone policies, comparing costs and pupil outcomes between schools with restrictive and permissive smartphone policies. The findings suggest that schools are spending a significant amount of staff time each week administering smartphone policies and managing phone-related behaviours. Restrictive policies may be cost-saving for schools.

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Qualitative Study

Title: How school phone policies influence adolescent phone use and wellbeing (SMART Schools): a qualitative comparative case study

This paper reports on qualitative data collected at 7 case study schools from our SMART Schools sample, including 3 restrictive schools and 4 permissive schools. In total, we completed 40 focus groups with 82 pupils, 46 school staff, and 49 parents. This publication is available here.

What did we look at?

The focus groups, held separately with pupils, parents and school staff, addressed:

- Adolescent uses of smartphones and social media within the school and home environments
- The perceived impact of phones on wellbeing
- The school's policy on smartphone use, including perceived acceptance, adherence, and influence of policy

What did we find?

We found that different school phone policies have a mixture of perceived benefits and negative consequences for students, parents, and teachers:

- In **restrictive schools**, benefits included **increased in-person interactions** between pupils, and improved friendships. However, some students reported **compensating** for the lack of phone access during the school day outside of school, and that **displaced other activities** such as sleep or physical activity.
- In **permissive schools**, there was more tendency for pupils to report attempts to **self-regulate their phone use**, such as charging their phone downstairs overnight, and deleting social media apps. However, **issues in school could escalate** due to students' ability to take mugshots of other pupils or staff, without their permission.
- **Regardless of policy type**, issues that occurred on social media outside of school hours spilled over into the school day, shaping issues such as conflicts, bullying, and distraction.

Implications:

- These findings suggest that school phone policies are not a silver-bullet for addressing the challenges associated with adolescent smartphone and social media use.
- Schools and teachers need appropriate guidance so that they can support young people's wellbeing in a digital age, whether or not phone use is prohibited in schools.
- Adolescents' relationship with their phones is 24/7, and any new policies must recognise the crossover between in school and out of school environments to be effective.



Economic Analysis

Title: School Smartphone Policies: Health economics analysis of restrictive school smartphone policies in secondary schools in England (SMART Schools)

As part of our research, we collected data from our participating schools' on how much staff time is spent managing smartphone policies. This paper reports on data collected from 20 schools (13 with restrictive policies, 7 with permissive policies), including 815 pupils, 36 teachers, and 20 SLT members. This publication is available here.

What did we measure?

- School staff time - Schools were asked to estimate how much time staff spend:
  - Communicating with pupils and parents about phone-related issues
  - Enforcing phone rules
  - Managing incidents related to phone use
- Mental wellbeing
- Quality of life



Overview of findings:

- Regardless of school phone policy type, **the average-sized UK school spends more than 100 hours per week managing phone use**.
- Schools with **restrictive policies** spend approx. **102 hours per week**, equivalent to 3.1 full-time staff, where most time is spent applying behavioural sanctions for policy breaches (e.g. detentions and parent communication).
- Schools with **permissive policies** spend approx. **108 hours per week**, equivalent to 3.3 full-time staff, where most time is spent recording behavioural incidents and communicating information and training to staff.
- This paper also looked at pupils' quality of life and mental wellbeing, and found no significant differences in these variables between students at schools with permissive vs restrictive policies.
- Restrictive schools spent less time managing smartphone restrictions, which translated into an **estimated £94 less per pupil per year** in staff time costs.

Implications:

- Restrictive policies may offer a small economic benefit to schools, but are not linked to better pupil mental wellbeing.
- Staff spend a significant time enforcing school phone policies, which could divert time away from other well-being promoting activities, such as providing pastoral support or extra-curricular activities.
- Schools require support and guidance in developing and implementing school phone policies, which do not take up large amounts of staff time.
- We need to take a holistic approach to supporting adolescent health and wellbeing, by considering their phone and social media use both within and outside of the school setting.

What's next?

In addition to the findings reported in this newsletter, we still have plenty more to come. We are currently working on several papers that use the qualitative data collected from our 7 case study schools, and the quantitative data collected from the 1227 pupils that participated in the survey.

We will be back in touch when more of our findings are ready to be shared with you. In the meantime, please keep up to date with our progress on our study website.

Resources:
We will be preparing training materials, resources, and guidelines for schools to use, and will let you know when these are available.

Future Research:
We are planning to do some further work around adolescent phone and social media use and mental wellbeing. We may be back in touch with participating schools regarding this research. If you are from a school that did not participate, but would like to express an interest in future research, then please get in touch with us via email.

Impact of our research:

Our research has been referenced in parliamentary meetings, including those held by the Department for Education, the Department for Science and Technology, Go Science, and the Children's Commissioner, among many others. It has also been referenced in several parliamentary debates.

Publication Links:

- How school phone policies influence adolescent phone use and wellbeing (SMART Schools): a qualitative comparative case study
- Health economics analysis of restrictive school smartphone policies in secondary schools in England (SMART Schools)
- School phone policies and their association with mental wellbeing, phone use, and social media use (SMART Schools): a cross-sectional observational study
- Secondary school smartphone policies in England: a descriptive analysis of how schools rationalize, design, and implement restrictive and permissive phone policies

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