PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR SOCIAL MEDIA REFORM

Assessing CCDH's STAR Framework for Social Media Regulation.

CCDH | Center for Countering Digital Hate

Center for Countering Digital Hate

The Center for Countering Digital Hate works to stop the spread of online hate and disinformation through innovative research, public campaigns and policy advocacy.

Our mission is to protect human rights and civil liberties online.

Social media platforms have changed the way we communicate, build and maintain relationships, set social standards, and negotiate and assert our society's values. In the process, they have become safe spaces for the spread of hate, conspiracy theories and disinformation.

Social media companies erode basic human rights and civil liberties by enabling the spread of online hate and disinformation.

At CCDH, we have developed a deep understanding of the online harm landscape, showing how easily hate actors and disinformation spreaders exploit the digital platforms and search engines that promote and profit from their content.

We are fighting for better online spaces that promote truth, democracy, and are safe for all. Our goal is to increase the economic and reputational costs for the platforms that facilitate the spread of hate and disinformation.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Our online world is dominated by a tiny coterie of powerful companies. They preside over and profit lavishly from a broken, unregulated system that exploits citizens, their users. They exploit them for data on their private thoughts, relationships and lives, as well as their attention – through algorithms designed to addict people to newsfeeds peppered with paid advertisements. These companies, owned and run by a handful of unaccountable billionaires, dictate how over 4.5 billion people around the world share information, form new relationships, establish shared norms, create communities and transact business.

And yet there exists no global standard to hold these vastly powerful entities to account for their hugely consequential decisions and the way they build their products, despite considerable evidence that social media can have powerful negative effects on our psychological wellbeing, our families, our communities, on science, tolerance, and the integrity and viability of democracy itself.

In May 2022, at the Center for Countering Digital Hate's Global Summit on Online Harms in Washington DC, we convened lawmakers from the United States, European Union, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The result was the STAR Framework for legislative reform of the social media industry, which is built around four fundamental principles: Safety by Design, Transparency, Accountability, and Responsibility.

This report builds on that work, and is based on polling of over 1,000 adults and over 1,000 participants aged 13–17 in the United States.

Our poll sought to investigate general attitudes towards online spaces. What we found was surprising and deeply troubling.

Conspiracy theories have real traction among American teenagers, particularly those who use any single social media platform for four or more hours per day. This is a crisis of conspiracism that is infecting our children with potentially dangerous lies and nonsense.

Although the findings of this report paint a worrying picture, it is one that ultimately I find to be hopeful. Our polling shows there is strong support for all the principles of the STAR Framework, and we conclude by laying out next steps for CCDH and recommendations for the industry and legislators working in this area, as well as concerned members of the public.

Together, we can build a better online world.

Imran Ahmed
CEO, Center for Countering Digital Hate

Americans back CCDH's STAR Framework for social media reform

- 42% of Americans agree with all four principles of the STAR Framework for social media regulation.

  74% agree social media products should be **Safe by Design.**

  72% agree that social media platforms must be more **Transparent.**

  63% agree that social media platforms should be more **Accountable.**

  62% agree there must be mechanisms to hold platforms **Responsible.**

- Support for the STAR Framework is consistent across a wide range of demographic groups.

Clear majority of Americans understand that online harms have offline impact

- The majority of Americans agree social platforms cause real-world harm, with stronger agreement from 13–17-year-olds.

  68% of adults 83% of 13–17 y/o agree that online harms have offline consequences.

- 1 in 5 parents social media negatively impacts kids' mental health and body image.

  19% say social media is negative for their child's mental health.

  21% say social media is negative for their child's body image.

49% of Americans agree with at least four conspiracy statements, with higher rates amongst 13–17-year-olds

- American teens, particularly those with high social media use, have considerably higher levels of belief in a range of conspiracy theories, including antisemitic and white supremacist propaganda, than adults.

  49% of adults expressed agreement with at least four conspiracies.

  60% of 13–17 year-olds expressed agreement with at least four conspiracies.

  69% of high social media use 13–17 year-olds agreed with at least four conspiracies.

Americans believe social media companies and lawmakers should be tackling online harms

- A clear majority of parents and 13–17-year-olds believe that online harms can be prevented.

  70% of parents 67% of 13–17 y/o believe it is possible to prevent online harms.

- 58% of Americans say social media companies and 55% say lawmakers should be held fully or highly accountable for dealing with social media harms.

3 AMERICANS BACK CCDH'S STAR FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL MEDIA REFORM

In May 2022, at our Global Summit on Online Harms in Washington DC, the Center for Countering Digital Hate, working with lawmakers from the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, formulated the STAR Framework for legislative reform of the social media industry.

The STAR Framework preserves freedom of speech, human rights and civil liberties online by presenting core principles of a system that would, implemented in full, force social media companies to be honest and responsible in the way they design their system.

When respondents were polled on statements related to the STAR Framework, 42% of adult respondents and 53% of 13–17–year–olds agreed with all four of its principles for effective regulation of social media.

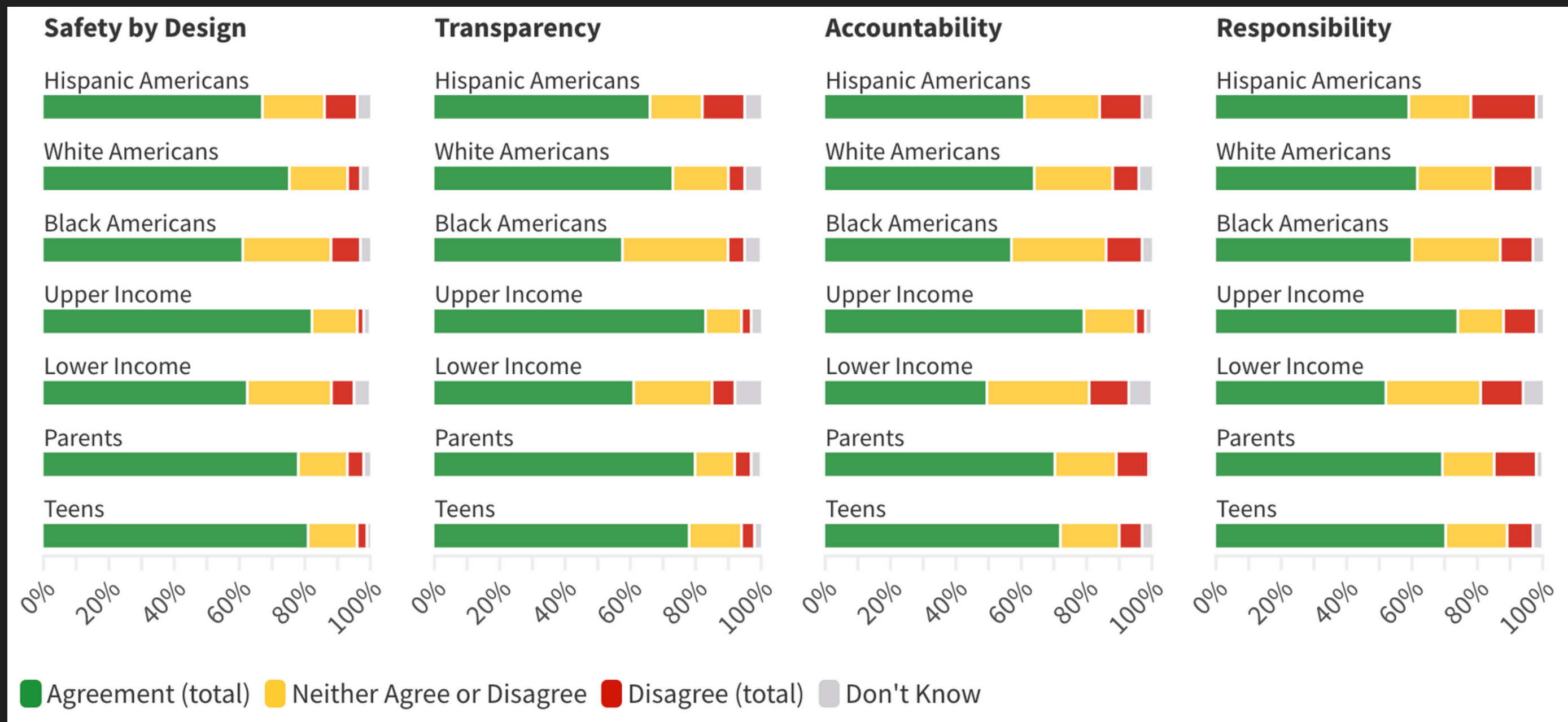| STAR Element	Polled Statement
Safety by Design	Social media platforms should build their products with safety as the guiding principle.
Transparency	Social media platforms should be more transparent in how their algorithms work and how they monetize user data.
Accountability	There needs to be more accountability to democratic bodies such as politicians and regulators when social media platforms fail to protect users.
Responsibility	Social media platform executives and owners should be held personally responsible for failings and prosecuted for negligence that causes harm.

Support for the STAR Framework is high across a wide range of demographic groups

Support for elements of the STAR Framework is high across a wide range of demographic groups. Disagreement was also consistently low, with lower agreement in some demographics explained by a greater number of respondents who said they were undecided.

STAR principles are popular across demographic groups

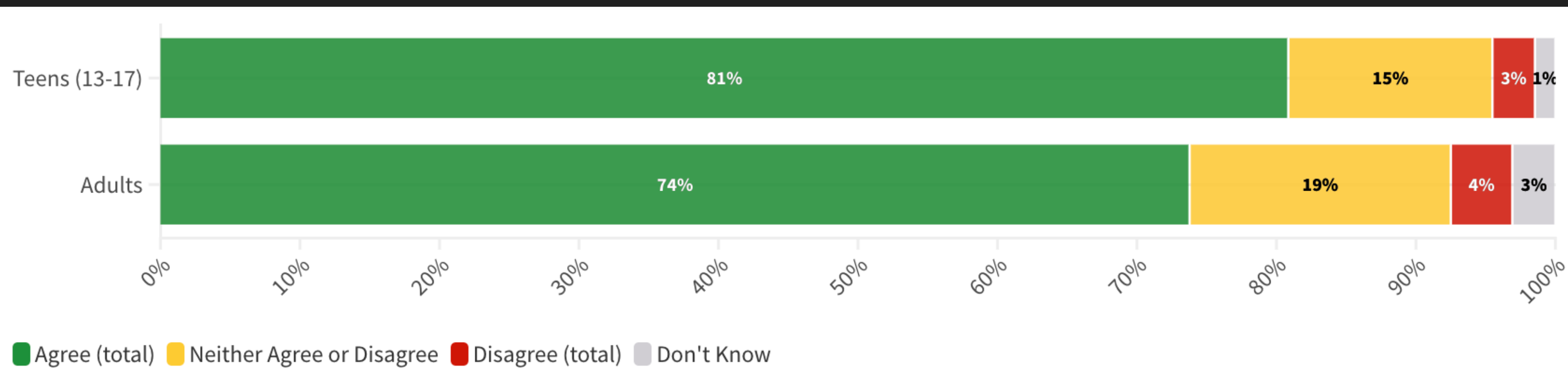% agreement and disagreement on each principle by demographic group

74% agree that platforms should build products according to safety by design

Safety by design means that technology companies need to be proactive at the front end to ensure that their products and services are safe for the public, particularly minors. Safety by design principles adopt a preventative systems approach to harm. This includes embedding safety considerations through risk assessments and decisions when designing, implementing, and amending products and services. Safety by design is the basic consumer standard that we expect from companies in other sectors.

Safety by Design
Social media platforms should build their products with safety as the guiding principle

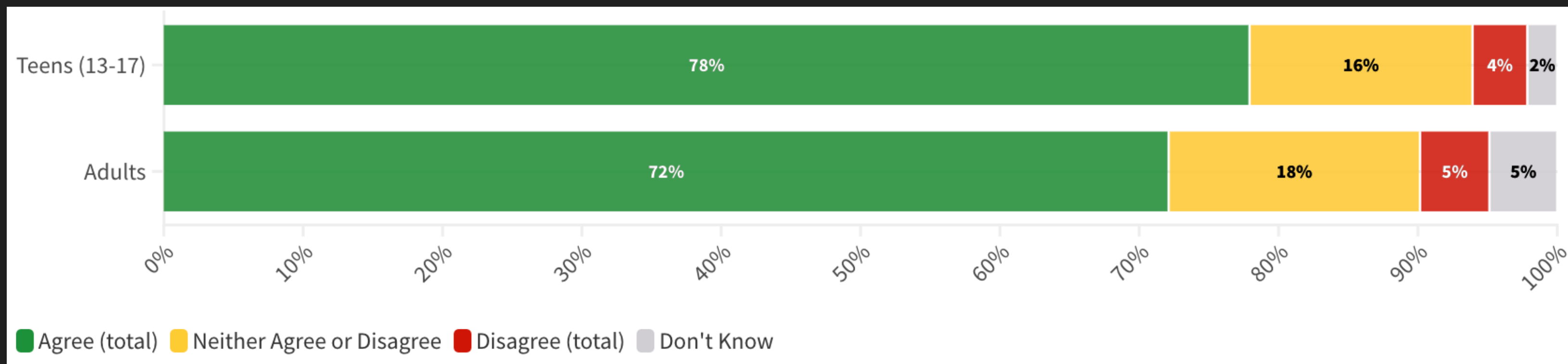|	Agree (total)	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree (total)	Don't Know
Teens (13-17)	81%	15%	3%	1%
Adults	74%	19%	4%	3%

72% agree social media platforms must be more transparent

There is currently an information asymmetry and imbalance of power, where technology companies both hold most of the information about what is happening on their platforms and have an interest in allowing room for the spread of harmful content where it is profitable. To address this, there are three key areas where transparency is desperately needed and should be prioritized: algorithms, rules enforcement and economics, specifically related to advertising.

Transparency
Social media platforms should be more transparent in how their algorithms work and how they monetize user data

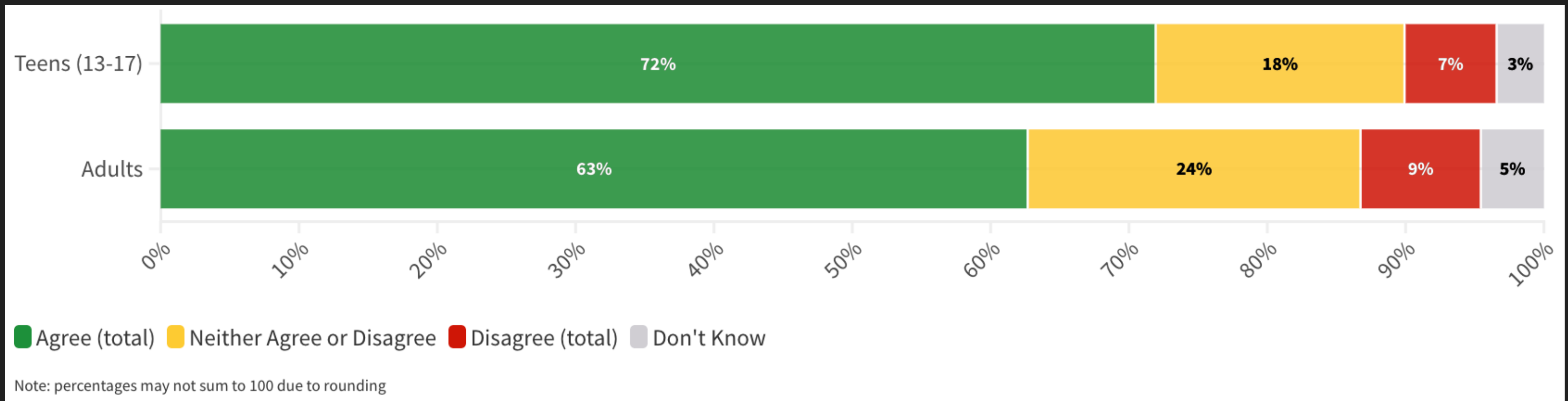|	Agree (total)	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree (total)	Don't Know
Teens (13-17)	78%	16%	4%	2%
Adults	72%	18%	5%	5%

63% agree social platforms should be accountable to democratic bodies

Regulation is most effective where there are accountability systems in place for statutory duties and harm caused, particularly where there is a risk of inaction because of profit motives and commercial factors. Frequently, accountability systems include an enforcement and independent pathway for challenging decisions or omissions.

Accountability
There needs to be more accountability to democratic bodies such as politicians and regulators when social media platforms fail to protect users

	Agree (total)	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree (total)	Don't Know
Teens (13-17)	72%	18%	7%	3%
Adults	63%	24%	9%	5%

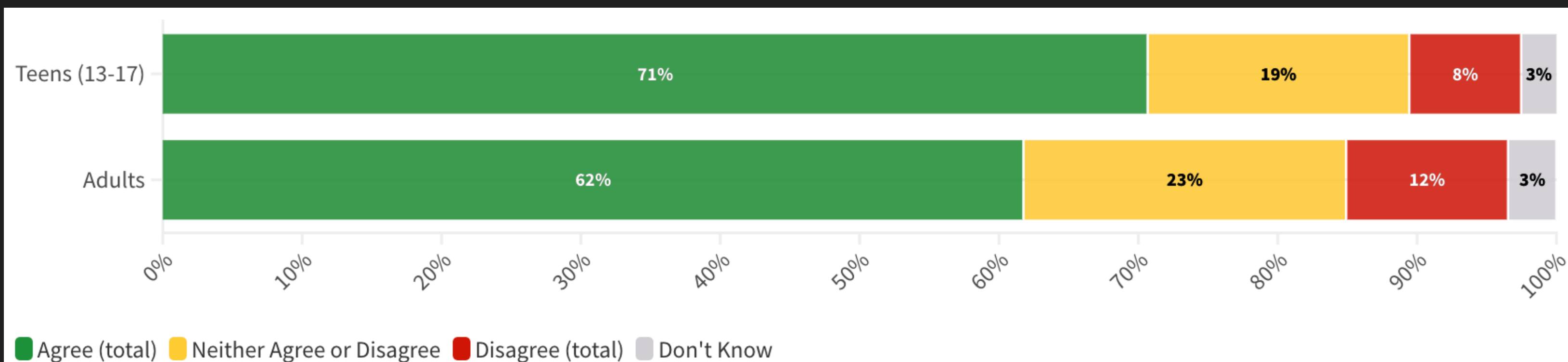Note: percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding

62% agree social platforms and executives should be held responsible for harms

The final element of the STAR Framework is responsibility – both social media and search engine companies and their senior executives that are responsible for implementing duties under a legislative framework. Responsibility means consequences for actions and omissions that lead to harm. A dual approach – targeting both companies and their senior executives – is a common intervention strategy for changing corporate behavior.

Responsibility
Social media platform executives and owners should be held personally responsible for failings and prosecuted for negligence that causes harm

	Agree (total)	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree (total)	Don't Know
Teens (13-17)	71%	19%	8%	3%
Adults	62%	23%	12%	3%

■ Agree (total) ■ Neither Agree or Disagree ■ Disagree (total) ■ Don't Know

Note: percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding

4 A CLEAR MAJORITY OF AMERICANS UNDERSTAND THAT ONLINE HARMS HAVE OFFLINE IMPACT
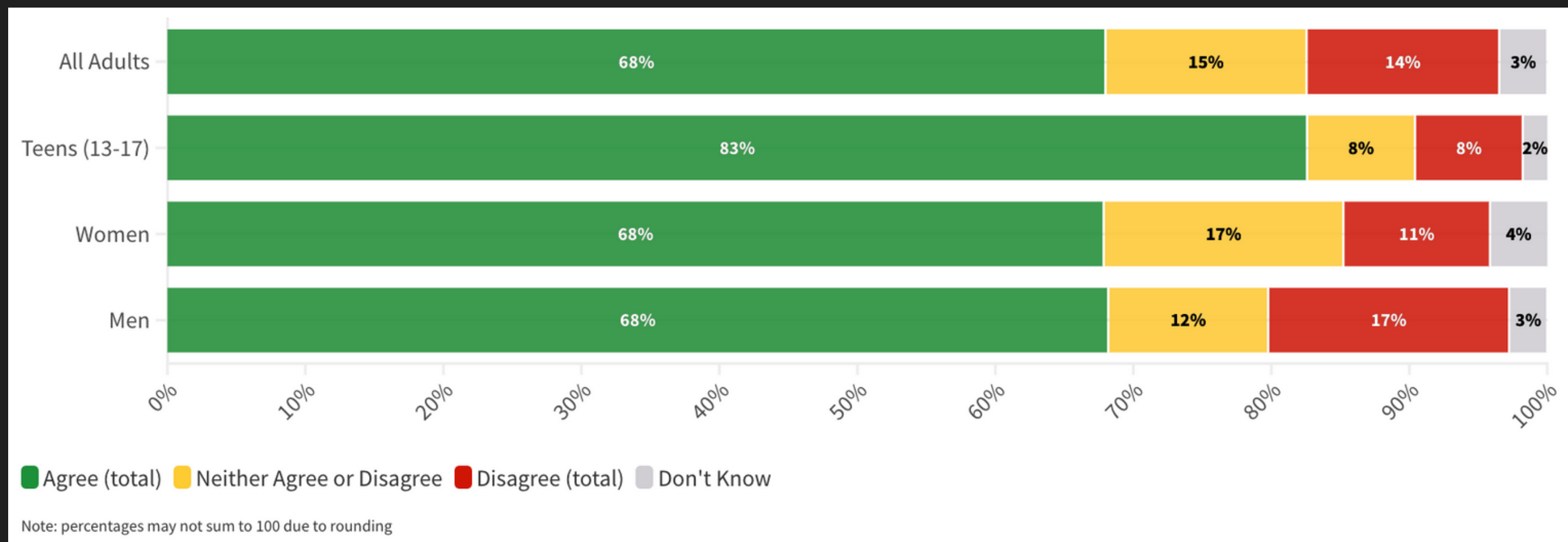
The vast majority of Americans agree that content posted to social media platforms is causing offline harm, and this view is particularly strong amongst 13-17-year-olds. One in five parents say that social media is having a negative effect on their children's mental health and body image.

68% of adults and 83% of 13-17-year-olds agree that online harms have offline consequences

Amongst adults surveyed, the majority agree with the statement that "online harms have serious real-world impact". Total agreement was 68%, with 43% indicating they strongly agreed and 25% reporting they somewhat agreed. High levels of total agreement were consistent even when the sample was broken down by gender and generation. In fact, teens felt even more strongly, with 27% reporting they somewhat agreed and 56% that they strongly agreed.

The majority of Americans feel online harms are offline harms

Agreement with the statement "Online harms have a serious real-world impact"

	Agree (total)	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree (total)	Don't Know
All Adults	68%	15%	14%	3%
Teens (13-17)	83%	8%	8%	2%
Women	68%	17%	11%	4%
Men	68%	12%	17%	3%

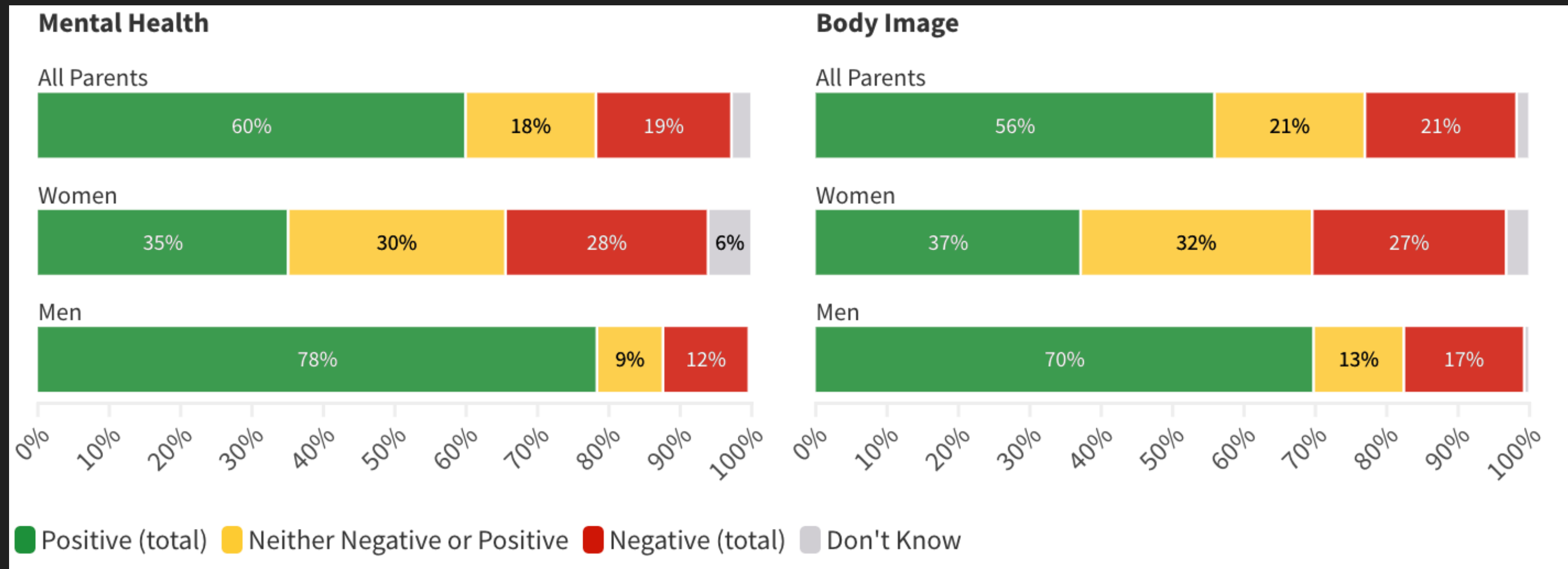Note: percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding

1 in 5 parents say social media negatively impacts their child's mental health or body image

Parents were asked to report the effect of social media on their children in two key areas, body image and mental health. The majority felt the impact was positive. However, a significant percentage reported a negative effect – 19% for mental health and 21% for body image.

More mothers noticed the negative impact on their children, with 27% saying it had negatively impacted their children's body image and 28% saying it negatively impacted their mental health.

A quarter of women feel their child has been negatively impacted
Impact of social media on children's body image and mental health as reported by parents

Mental Health

All Parents
- 60% | 18% | 19%

Women
- 35% | 30% | 28% | 6%

Men
- 78% | 9% | 12%

Body Image

All Parents
- 56% | 21% | 21%

Women
- 37% | 32% | 27%

Men
- 70% | 13% | 17%

🟩 Positive (total) 🟨 Neither Negative or Positive 🟥 Negative (total) ⬜ Don't Know

5 49% OF AMERICANS AGREE WITH AT LEAST FOUR CONSPIRACY STATEMENTS, WITH HIGHER RATES AMONGST 13-17-YEAR-OLDS

To assess belief in conspiracies, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with a series of statements representing some of the most popular and enduring conspiracies online.

The below table lists the conspiracies and associated statements that were used in our polling. The statement related to a conspiracy about the "deep state" was most popular, with 51% of adults expressing agreement. While the antisemitic statement received the lowest levels of support amongst adults, 31% still agreed with a statement claiming the Jews control media, politics and the economy.

Teens expressed higher levels of agreement with every statement compared to adults, expressing the most support for statements related to conspiracies about vaccines and the "deep state". "High-use teens" who self-reported spending four hours or more a day on any single social media platform expressed even higher support for all conspiracy statements.
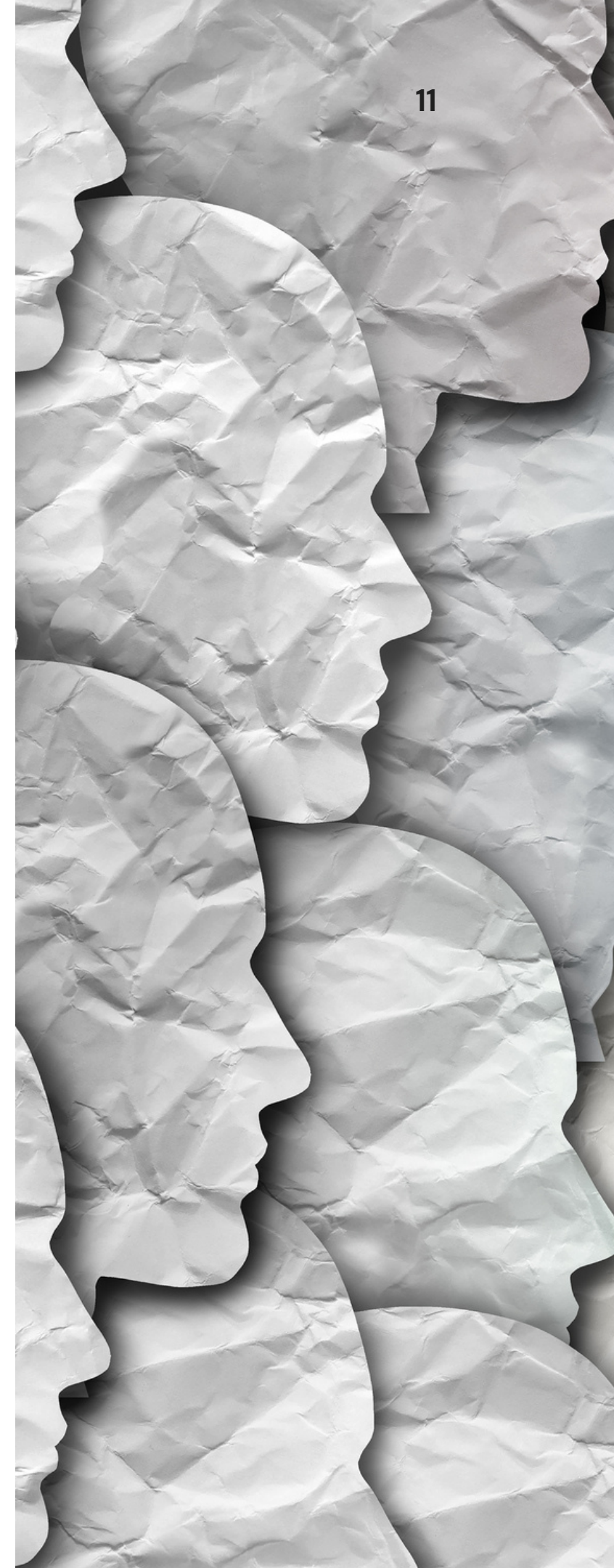
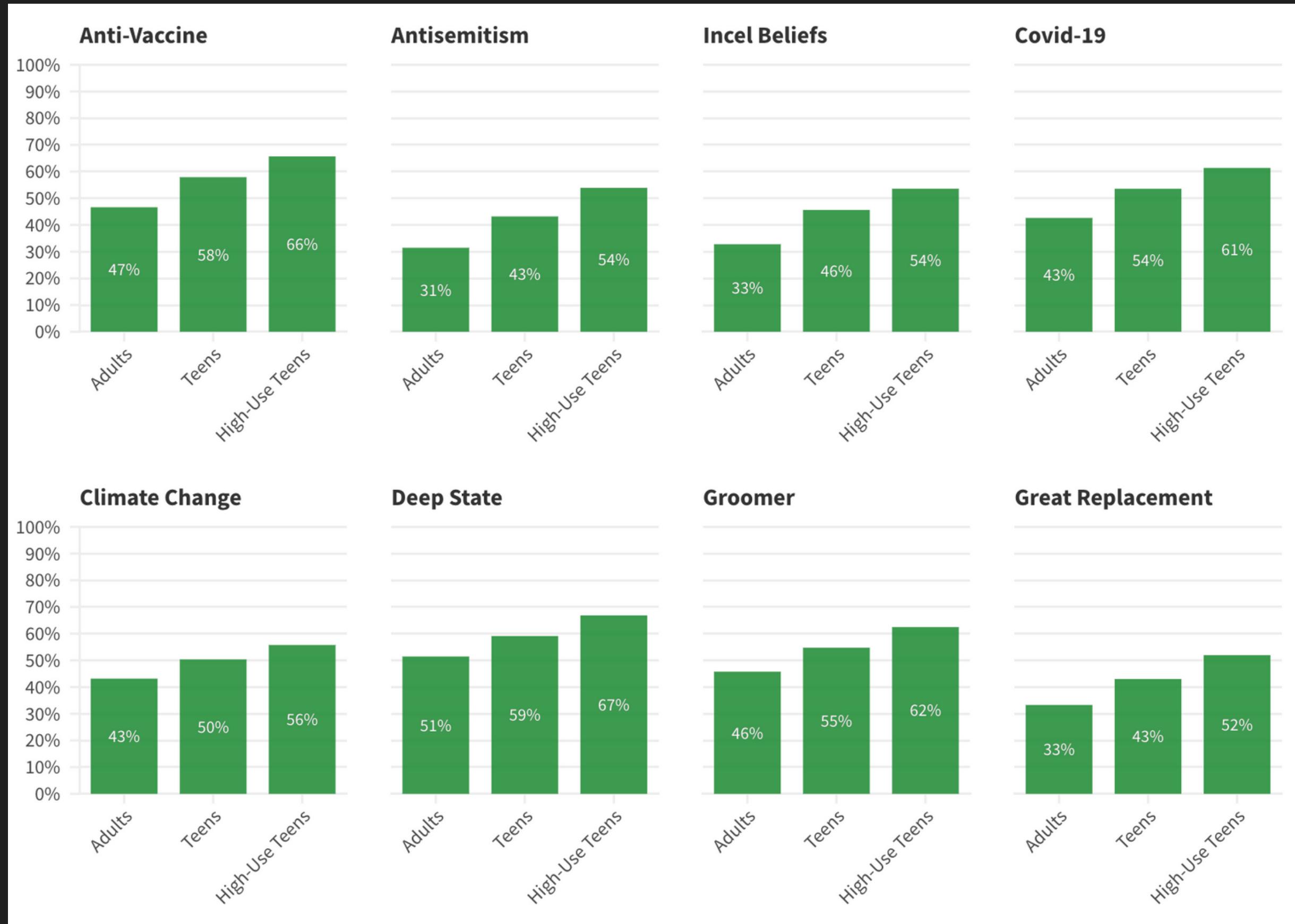| Conspiracy	Polled Statement
Anti-Vaccine	The dangers of vaccines are being hidden by the medical establishment.
Antisemitism	Jewish people have a disproportionate amount of control over the media, politics and the economy.
Incel	Some men are destined to be alone because of their looks.
Covid-19	The coronavirus is being used to force a dangerous and unnecessary vaccine on the public.
Climate Change	Humans are not the main cause of global temperature increases.
Deep State	There is a "deep state" embedded in the government that operates in secret and without oversight.
Groomer	Trans people and activists are promoting their lifestyle to children in an attempt to indoctrinate them.
Great Replacement	Mass migration of people into the western world is a deliberate policy of multiculturalism and part of a scheme to replace white people.

High–use teens show higher levels of agreements with all types of conspiracies

% total agreement by group across all statements

Anti-Vaccine
- Adults: 47%
- Teens: 58%
- High-Use Teens: 66%

Antisemitism
- Adults: 31%
- Teens: 43%
- High-Use Teens: 54%

Incel Beliefs
- Adults: 33%
- Teens: 46%
- High-Use Teens: 54%

Covid-19
- Adults: 43%
- Teens: 54%
- High-Use Teens: 61%

Climate Change
- Adults: 43%
- Teens: 50%
- High-Use Teens: 56%

Deep State
- Adults: 51%
- Teens: 59%
- High-Use Teens: 67%

Groomer
- Adults: 46%
- Teens: 55%
- High-Use Teens: 62%

Great Replacement
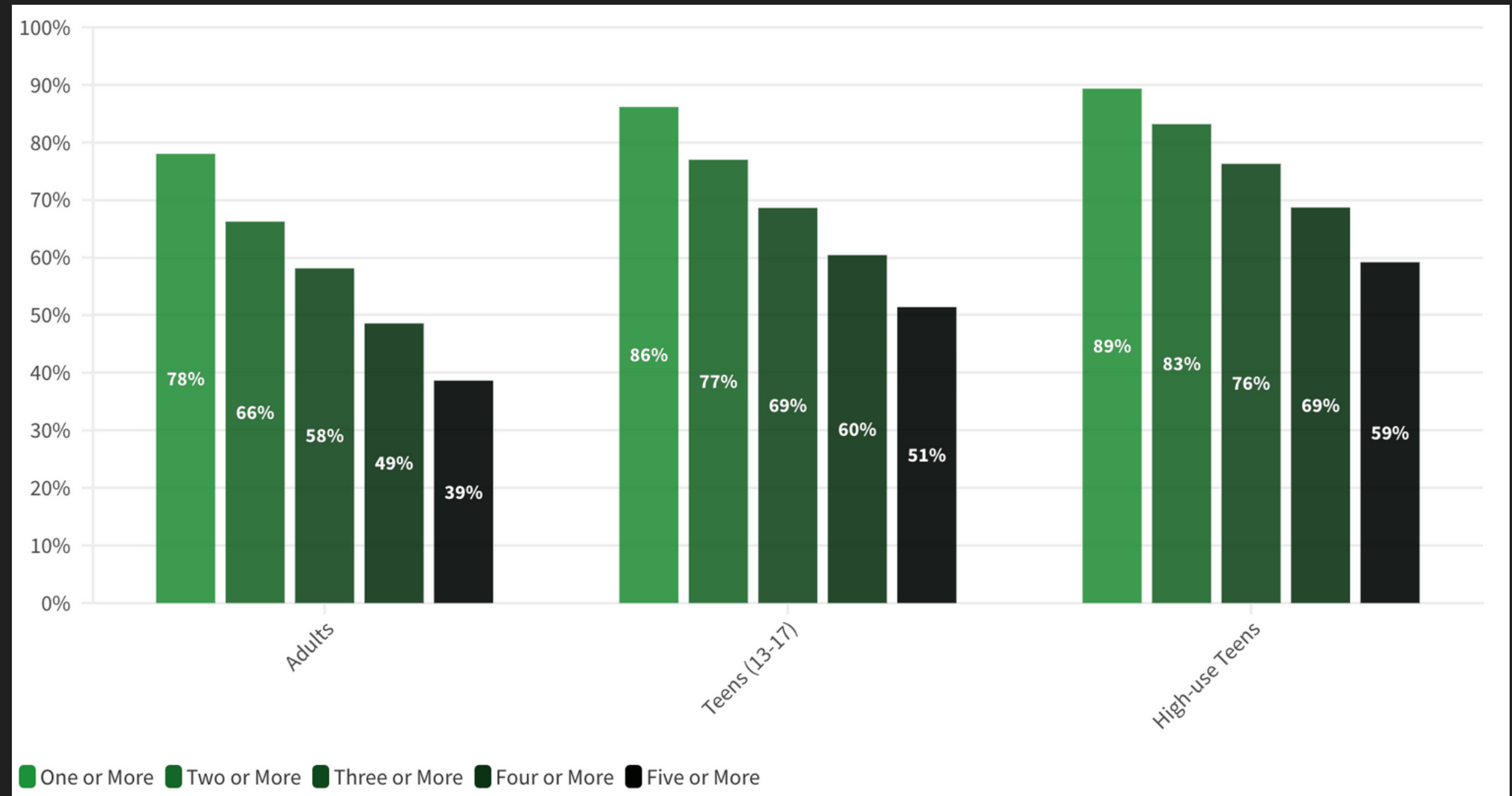- Adults: 33%
- Teens: 43%
- High-Use Teens: 52%

49% of adults and 60% of 13–17–year–olds agree with four or more conspiracy statements

Researchers found that almost half of the adults polled indicated they somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with at least four conspiracy statements. This number rose to 60% for 13 to 17-year-olds. For high-use teens that spend four or more hours a day on any single social media platform, the figure was 69%.
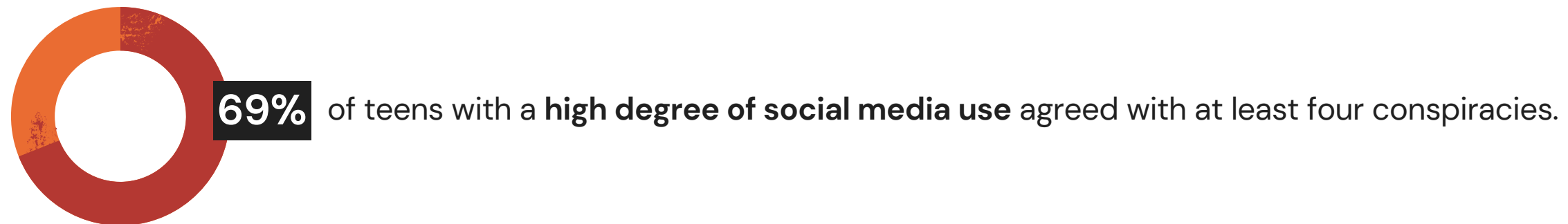
High–use teens agree with more statements than their peers

% of each group that agree with different numbers of statements

Legend: One or More · Two or More · Three or More · Four or More · Five or More

Adults: 78%, 66%, 58%, 49%, 39%

Teens (13-17): 86%, 77%, 69%, 60%, 51%

High-use Teens: 89%, 83%, 76%, 69%, 59%

The crisis of conspiracism infecting our children

American teenagers, particularly those who use any single social media platform for four or more hours per day, have considerably higher levels of belief in a range of conspiracy theories – including antisemitic and white supremacist propaganda – than adults. We asked **13–17–year–old teens** about conspiracy theories, and this is what they said:

60% of teens expressed agreement with at least four conspiracies.

69% of teens with a **high degree of social media use** agreed with at least four conspiracies.

43% of teens agreed with the statement, **"Jewish people have a disproportionate amount of control over the media, politics and the economy".**
This rose to 54% among teens who are heavy social media users.

43%

54%
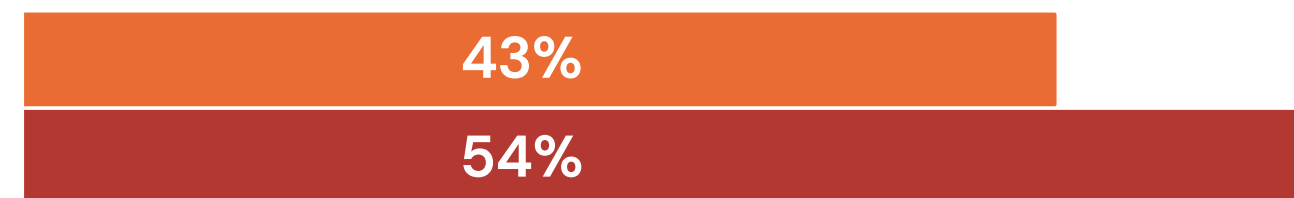
43% of teens believed the statement **"Mass migration of people into the western world is a deliberate policy of multiculturalism and part of a scheme to replace white people".** This rose to 52% among teens who are heavy social media users.

43%

52%
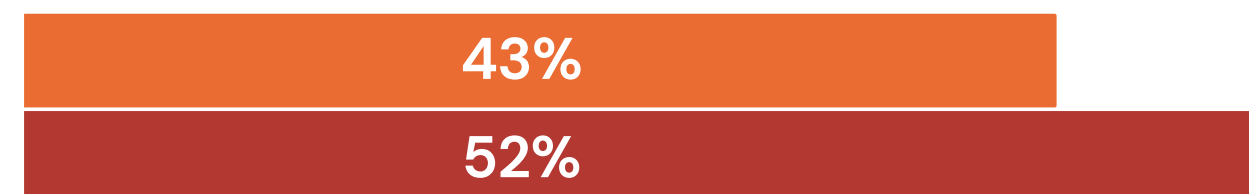
6 AMERICANS BELIEVE SOCIAL PLATFORMS AND LAWMAKERS SHOULD BE TACKLING ONLINE HARMS

The majority of parents and 13-17-year-olds believe that online harms can be prevented, in contrast to the general population of adults who are less hopeful. When asked who is accountable for online harms, adults and teens attribute high levels of accountability to social media platforms, lawmakers and individual users.

Majority of parents and teens believe that it's possible for online harms to be prevented

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they believe it is possible or impossible for online harms to be prevented on a sliding scale from zero to a hundred. Responses of 50 and above were coded as "possible" while responses below 50 were coded as "not possible". Whilst only 42% of adults believe that online harms can be prevented, the figure rises to 67% for 13-17 year olds and 70% for parents. This indicates that parents and teens are more optimistic that online harms can be effectively prevented.

Over two-thirds of parents think it's possible to prevent online harms

% who believe prevention is possible

|	
100%	
80%	
60%	
40%	
20%	
0%	All Adults 42% · Teens 67% · Parents 70%
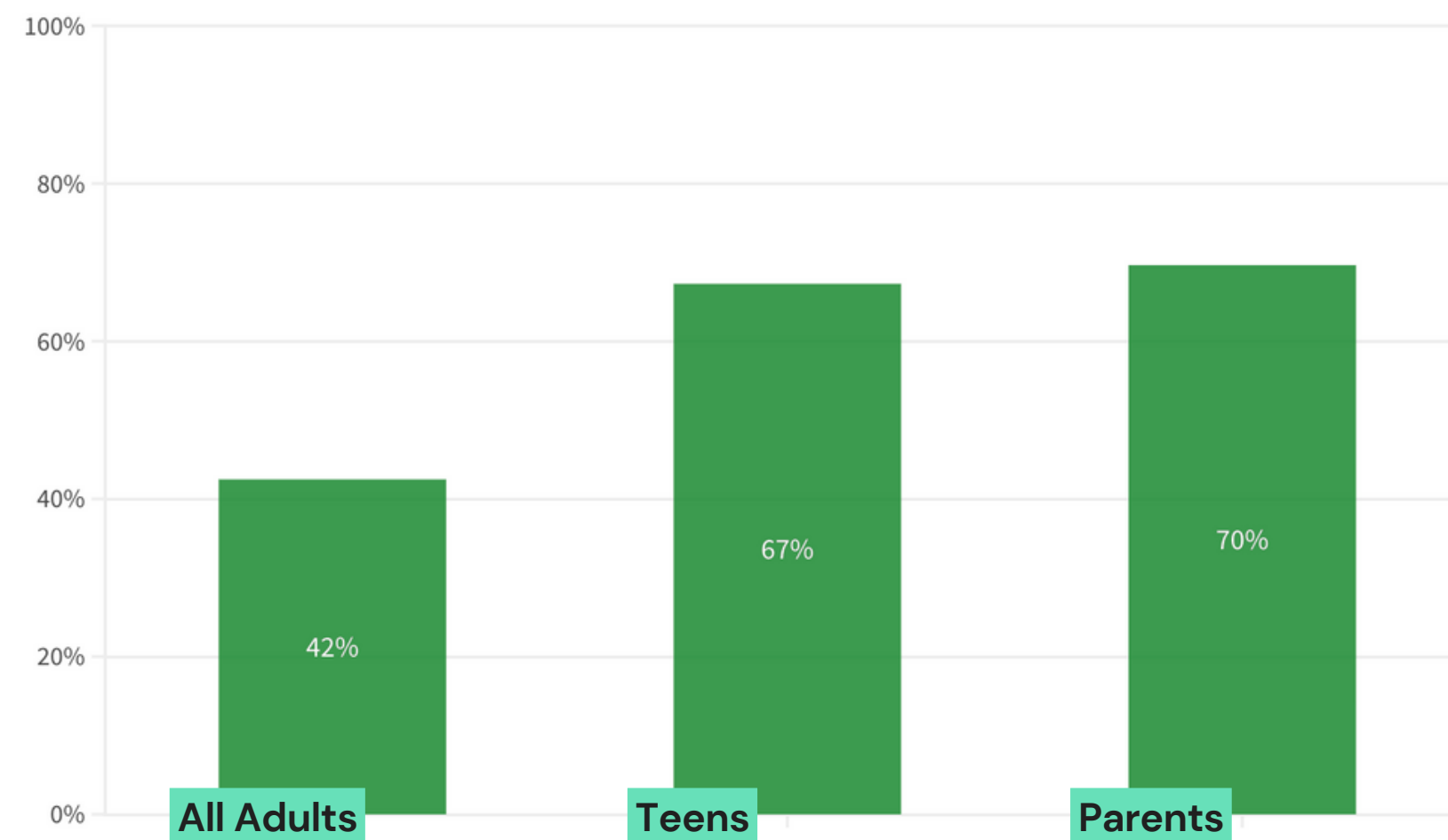
Americans believe companies, lawmakers and users share accountability for online harms

Respondents were asked to indicate how accountable social media users, lawmakers and social media companies should be for online harms. Overall, 39% of adult respondents answered that all three were either fully or highly accountable for the problem. Differences in the perceived level of accountability for each were extremely narrow, suggesting that Americans believe all three bear accountability for tackling online harms.

Americans hold all parties responsible for online harms

Level to which participants felt users, lawmakers and companies were accountable
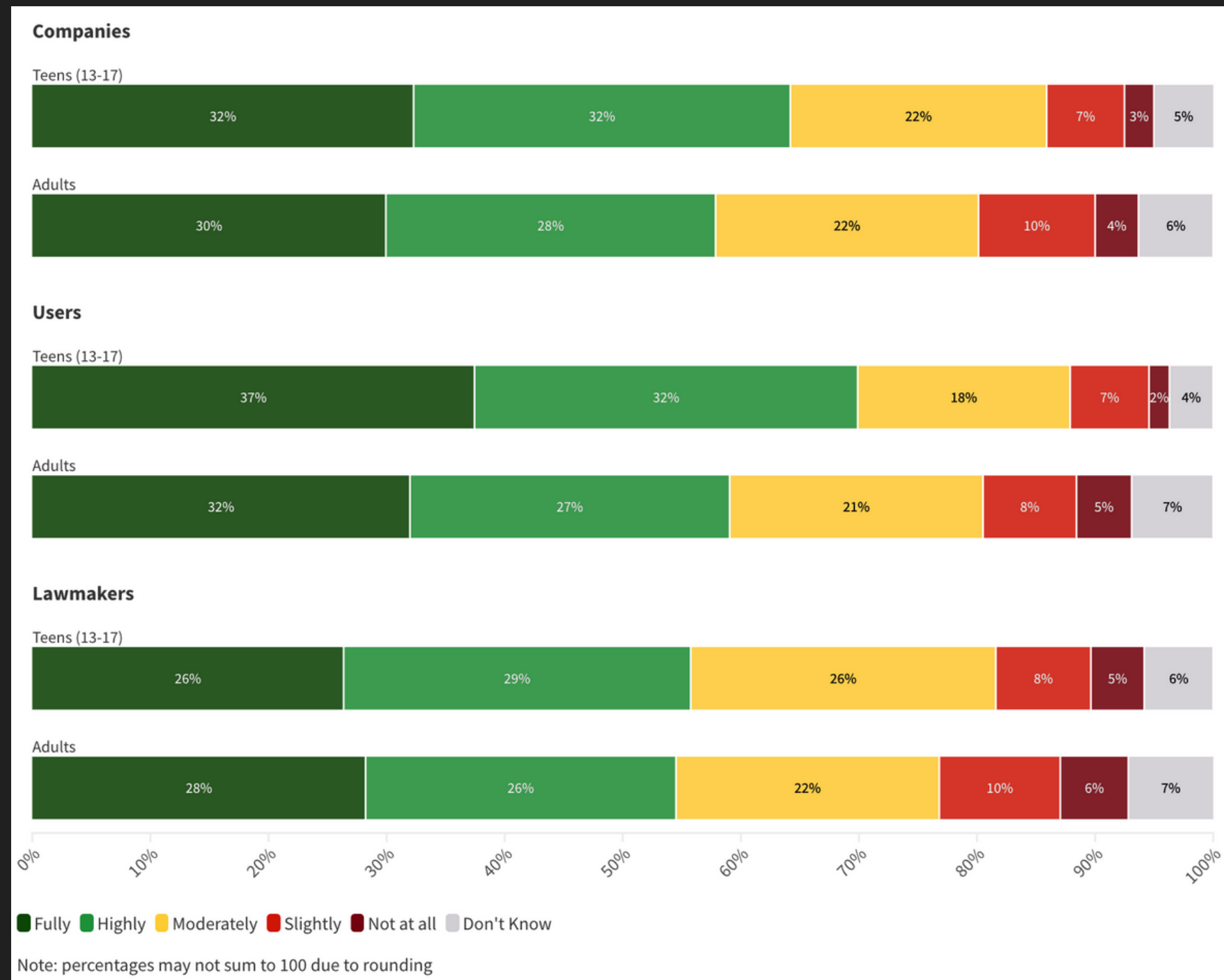
7 RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS FOR THE STAR FRAMEWORK

In the polling for this report we found that a clear majority of Americans (68% of adults and 83% of 13–17–year–olds) acknowledge that online harms have offline impact.

The STAR Framework seeks to preserve freedom of speech, human rights and civil liberties online, by presenting core principles that would force social media companies to be honest and responsible in the way they design their systems.

Now is the time to create an action plan – for the protection of our children and families, to maintain our national security, to help science and reason flourish, and to preserve our democracy.

2024 State of STAR Conference

In 2024, in Washington DC CCDH will host a follow-up to our 2022 conference, this time themed around the State of STAR. It will be a chance for global lawmakers, technology experts, journalists, academics, civil society advocates, and others to discuss how countries have responded to CCDH's clarion call for action.

We will look at what can be learned from frameworks such as the EU's Digital Services Act, the UK's Online Safety Bill, and Australia's eSafety laws. We will talk about new threats and concerns, such as AI, VR, new platforms and more. And we will start to hold accountable the lawmakers who have failed to take action to protect their voters, their communities and their national security.

Time for Action

There is an overwhelming body of evidence that online harms are real. That, and the popularity of the STAR Framework and its underlying principles, are the clearest indication yet that the time is right for Congress to legislate.

Unless action is taken to arrest the steady erosion of young people's trust in the institutions that sustain our free society, it is no exaggeration to say that US democracy itself will face an existential threat – as will the environment, or the powerful knowledge economy that sustains American prosperity and economic leadership.

We call on lawmakers in the US and elsewhere to deliberately pursue STAR principles in all future regulatory models, and work to implement them in existing frameworks, which are at varying stages of the legislative process.

What can you do?

We encourage members of the public to heed the stark warnings contained in this report, and to take the necessary steps to protect themselves and each other.

CCDH has produced Parents' Guides, which provide support and advice in protecting children from online abuse and harmful activity – including content that impacts their body image and mental health; disinformation; and the insidious, creeping conspiracism they are bombarded with on social media.

We also urge people to exercise their collective democratic power. By engaging directly with policymakers and democratic representatives en masse, we can create a political environment in which the demand for social media regulation and reform is impossible to ignore.

Together, we can take the findings of this report and build safer, more transparent online spaces, protecting our children and each other for good.

Sign up to receive updates from CCDH.

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

All polling was carried out by Survation, a member of the British Polling Council. For both samples, a European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research (ESOMAR) certified online panel provider was used.

Survation sets quotas for age, gender and region, before weighting data to correct imbalances. All results are subject to margin of error. To guard against errors caused by crossbreaks, we avoided reporting results drawn from very small subsamples, however, taking a subsample will increase the margin of error.

Adult Sample
Fieldwork was carried out between the 16th and 21st of March, 2023. There were 1,010 participants total.

Teens Sample
Fieldwork was carried out between the 17th and 24th of March, 2023. There were 1,012 participants total aged 13–17.

Definitions
Offline harms can be defined as repercussions outside of social media platforms and the online world. To help participants give us the most accurate answers possible, we provided a definition of what we meant by online harms:

"Online harms can be defined as the use of online platforms to spread hate or misinformation, including the spread of false or inaccurate information and the promotion of discrimination against particular group"

Where appropriate, researchers defined lower income as earning less than $20,000 per annum, and upper income as earning $60,000 or over.

Limitations
When asking about issues such as conspiracy theories, it is possible for results to be affected by social desirability bias. As an example, a respondent might be worried that they will be judged for agreeing with an anti-vaccine conspiracy statement, as they know this is a controversial opinion to have. This might mean that they change their answer to appear more socially acceptable to the researcher. Conducting research online and anonymously helps to guard against this.

Polls that ask respondents to indicate agreement levels with statements can also be affected by acquiescence bias. This is when a person indicates they agree with a statement despite disagreeing. It can happen for a number of reasons and is affected by the participant's cultural background, level of education as well as levels of engagement with the survey. Again, the anonymous nature of the poll should have minimized the risk.

CCDH

Center for Countering Digital Hate