



# Teen Engagement with News in the Social Media Era

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# Key Findings

Below we present key findings from survey data collected from 323 Tucson, Arizona teens (average age = 17, range = 16-20; 54% girls, 44.4% boys, 1.6% another gender identity, ~70% Latine) between January and May 2025:



## How teens get news

These teens primarily get news from family (59%), social media (58%), and friends (56%). Traditional sources such as TV news or newspapers play a secondary role in news engagement.



## Social media use is diffused and algorithm-based, not source-based

Teens trust news that is fact-checked and provides citations for its sources. They also noted that they trusted news from mainstream media sources, such as news organizations and news outlets, slightly more than news from social media sources. That is, teens are critical and savvy consumers of news even if they rely on social media to stay informed.



## Teens notice when news misses the mark

Over a third (37%) of the teens said they could identify when the news shared misinformation about their community. Teens also noticed when news coverage stereotyped different groups of people, misinterpreted facts, or shared incomplete information.



## What do teens want from the news?

Teens noted that they wanted news to cover more issues focused on immigration (e.g., immigration policies, ICE), the economy (e.g., inflation), and larger global issues (e.g., ongoing conflict and genocides). They also want to see news coverage, from all sources, to change its messaging around immigration, Latines, and prejudice in our society.



## News makes teens feel both bad and connected to their community

Teens noted that, often, the news made them feel connected to and informed about their community, but teens were nearly just as likely to say the news made them feel bad. Teens were more likely to avoid the news if they felt the news made them feel overwhelmed and helpless. Also, teens who said news made them feel bad also reported higher rates of depression, anxiety, and a lower connection to school.



## Reading a positive story makes teens feel more empowered

When exposed to a social media post about issues of educational inequality in the community, adolescents who read a follow-up story about a teenager who made progress on the issue through organizing and fundraising efforts reported higher feelings of efficacy to make positive change in their community. Reading news about a teen making a difference helped respondents see themselves as potential changemakers.

# Key Takeaway

Teens are not disengaged from the news despite lower reliance on traditional news sources. They are navigating news on social events and social issues through their relationships, social media personalities, and algorithms, and this engagement has real consequences for their well-being and development.



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# Background

News engagement plays a critical role in promoting informed citizenship, civic awareness, critical consciousness, and democratic participation<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>. However, adolescents today encounter and consume news within a vastly different media ecosystem than prior generations, as teens today are exposed to social media platforms, influencers, and AI-generated content<sup>5</sup>. Further, recent data indicate that adults and teens today report lower trust and engagement in news media<sup>6,7</sup>. For example, in a study of youth ages 18-24 residing across a range of countries (e.g., UK, USA, France, Italy, Japan), only 37% report they trusted the news<sup>7</sup>. In another study of US-based teens (ages 13-17), 84% of teens used negative words to describe the news<sup>6</sup>. Due to the importance of maintaining an informed population, and the changing nature of teens' news engagement, it is important to understand how teens today interact with news.

Recent studies have explored how much teens engage with news media, teens' news engagement habits, and their level of trust in traditional news media, such as news created by journalists and disseminated by news outlets<sup>8</sup>. However, fewer studies have explored how news makes them feel, or what type of news practices inform greater news engagement. When they have, these studies primarily use national or international samples that focus on general recommendations, such as assessing youths' opinions about whether they feel news covers their age group fairly or if they wish news sources were more neutral<sup>7</sup>. This information is important as it provides generalizable insights, but it often offers less explicit recommendations on how journalists may change tactics to address concerns of key subgroups.

Within this study, we focus on the news consumption practices of teens, ages 16-20, residing in the southwestern city of Tucson, Arizona. The goal of this study is to assess how teens within this border-town city, with a high Latine/Hispanic population, engage with the news, how it makes them feel, and how they think news coverage about themselves and their community could change for the better. The findings of this study can inform parents, educators, community members, and journalists seeking to create culturally relevant and youth-centered approaches to supporting youths' media and news engagement.

# Methodology

This study was completed in collaboration with scholars from seven universities across the United States, and Trusting News, a non-profit dedicated to improving news transparency and trust in communities. In Spring 2025 (January to May 2025), 323 teens in the Tucson area completed an online survey focused on assessing news consumption behaviors, mental health, and school adjustment. Participants were, on average, 17 years old (range 16-20), 54% were girls, 44.4% were boys, and 1.6% identified with another gender identity or declined to answer. Most participants were born in the U.S. (95.6%) and 4.4% were born outside the U.S. Over half of participants were Latine (67.2%), 25.7% were multiethnic (e.g., Afro-Latine), 2.8% were Asian, 2.5% were White, 1.2% were Black, and 0.6% were Indigenous.

Teens were asked a combination of multiple-choice survey questions about their level of news consumption and engagement, how news makes them feel (e.g., are there things the news gets wrong about people like you, or about things in your life?), and their overall emotional and school adjustment. To analyze close-ended questions, we averaged responses across participants and used correlational analyses to assess how responses about news engagement related to adjustment. Means and frequencies were used to assess patterns of responses. Correlations were used to assess associations between responses, and analysis of variance (ANOVAs) were used to compare mean differences between girls and boys, and teens from immigrant (born in the U.S.) and non-immigrant backgrounds (born outside the U.S.). Given the small number of youth who noted another gender identity or declined to answer, we did not make comparisons with this group.

We also asked participants open-ended questions regarding where they get news information, what they think the news gets wrong, and what they wish to see covered in the news. Inductive coding, where responses were reviewed by trained coders to identify emergent themes, was used along with consensus coding, where two coders reviewed responses and discussed coding decisions to ensure trustworthiness and impartiality in coding of participants' responses. Common themes and subthemes are reported below.

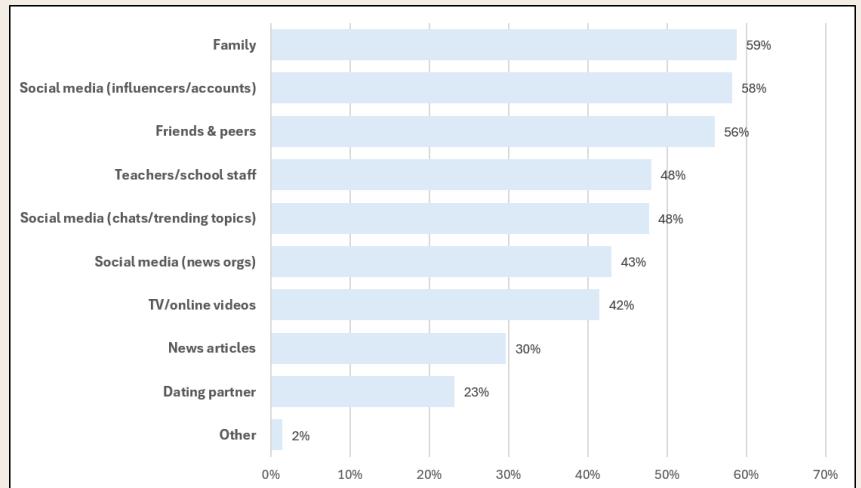
# Results

## Where do Teens get Information or News?

Teens' top three sources of news were family, social media – via influencers, and friends.

*Group Differences:* Girls and boys did not differ in these trends, nor did immigrant and non-immigrant youth.

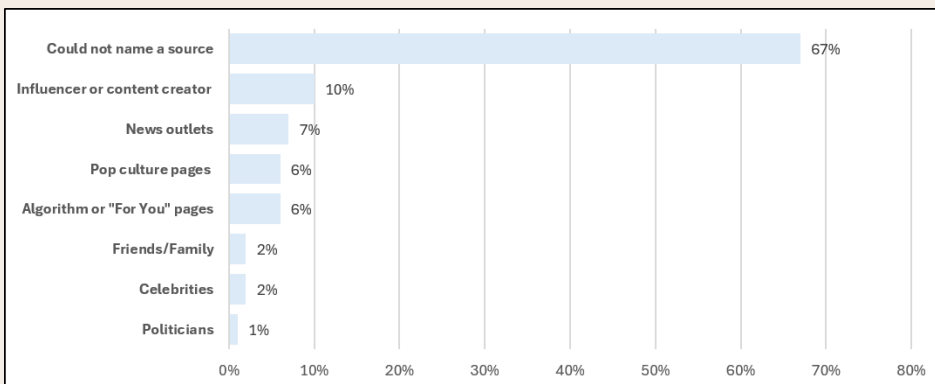
### Sources of Information or News Among Teens ( $N = 323$ )



Note. Participants were asked to indicate where they get information or news about topics that matter to them. Response options were 0 = no and 1 = yes.

## Who do Teens Follow on Social Media for News?

### % of Teens who Noted Who They Followed on Social Media for News ( $N = 323$ )



Note. Influencers or content creators mentioned: @dylan.page, Elon Musk, Dean Withers, Christian Influencers, Andrew Tate, Ana.Luisa, Ana Gastelum, Aaron Parnes, @lisaremillard, @abogadamariabernal, @fernandacortezx. Pop or community culture pages mentioned: @psltucson, @domislivenews, @gnb, @bikinibottomnews, @rap, @popnews. Celebrities included mentions of actors, musical artists, models. Percentages may not add up to 100% as teens could share more than once source of information.

Most teens could not identify any one source they followed for news.

A smaller number noted specific social media influencers and content creators, news outlets, pop culture pages, and social media algorithms as their primary sources of news.

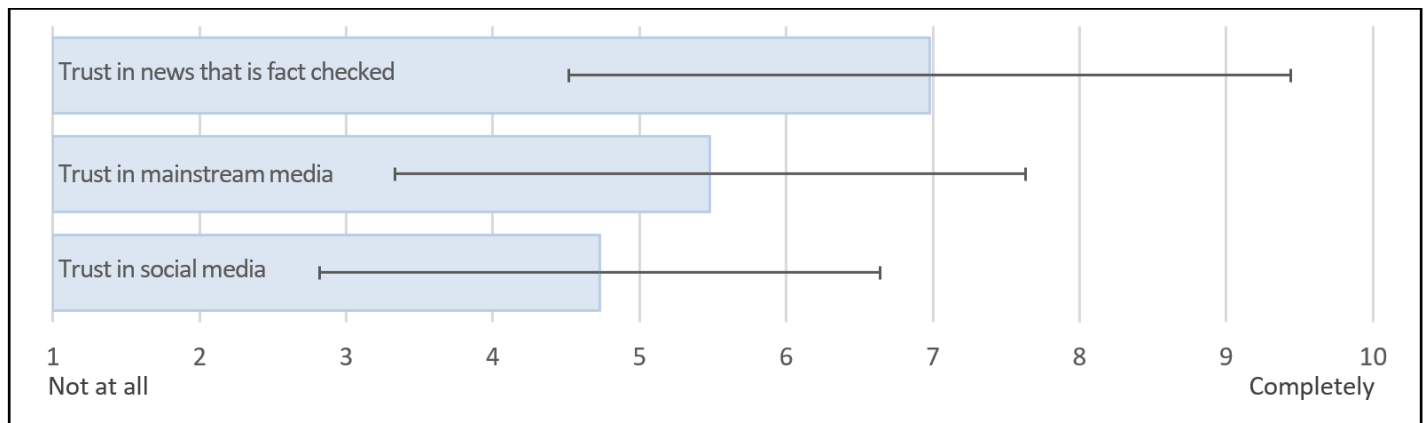




## What News do Teens Trust?

Participants were also asked to report the extent to which they trust in news that comes from mainstream news media (e.g., newspapers, TV newscast, online news sites), social media (e.g., X, social influencers, podcasts), and that is fact checked (i.e., when they cite their sources of information). Fact-checked news was rated highest, followed by news coming from mainstream media sources and lastly social media. There were no differences by gender, nor immigrant background.

### Average Levels of Trust Teens Have in News ( $N = 323$ )



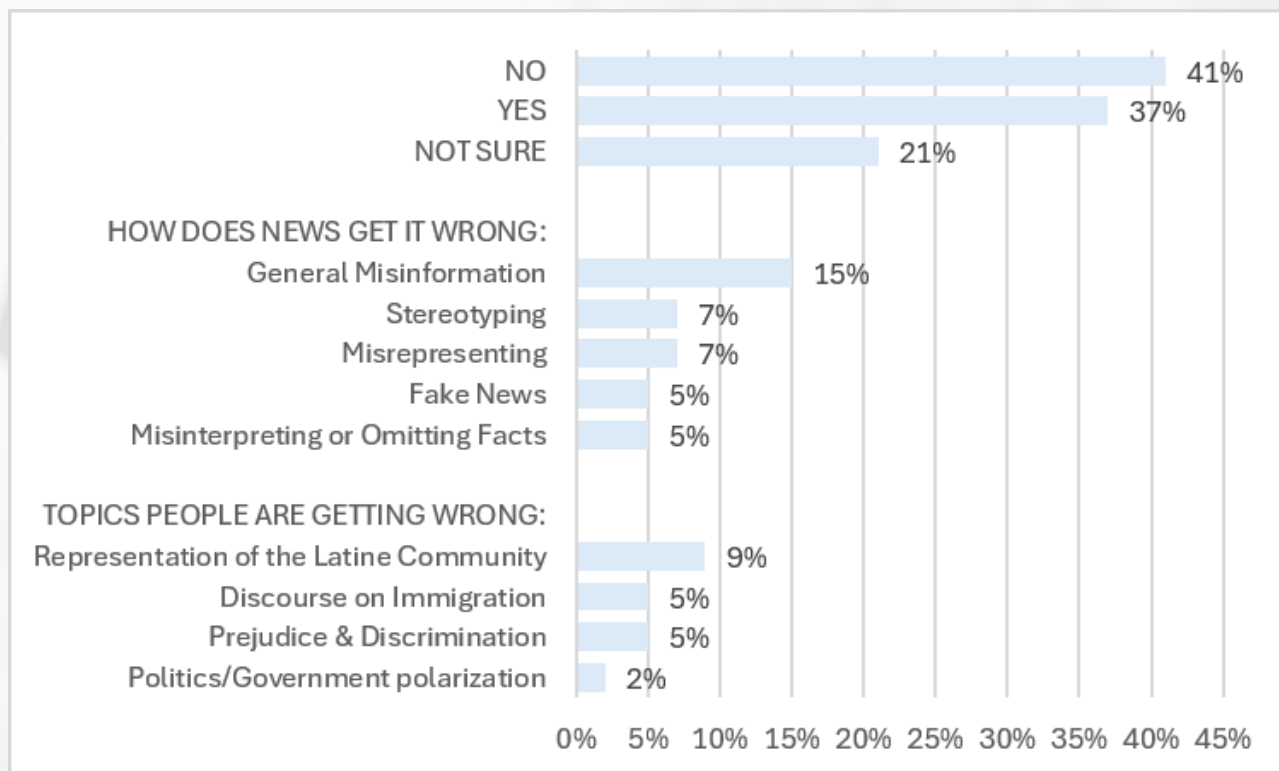
Note. Teens responded to the question "Next, we want to know how much you trust different types of news media to be accurate and fair. Please indicate how you feel on a scale of 1 = Not at all to 10 = Completely." Exact questions for each item were "How much do you trust news that is fact checked, like when they cite their sources of information?" (fact checked news), "How much do you trust news that comes from mainstream news media (e.g., newspapers, TV newscast, online news sites)?" (mainstream news), and "How much do you trust news that comes from social media (e.g., X, social influencers, podcast)?" (social media). Line note the standard deviation (average range) in response across teenagers. No differences emerged by gender or immigrant status.



## What Does the News Get Wrong?

Nearly half of teens noted nothing was reported incorrectly (41%), another 37% answered affirmatively or provided an example of how the news got information wrong, whereas 21% were not sure. Some teens shared how the news got things wrong by sharing misinformation about a group or subject, stereotyping groups, misrepresenting facts, or sharing only partial stories. A smaller subset of youth focused more specifically on topics they thought were mishandled, specifically highlighting the misrepresentation of Latines and immigrants.

## Are There Things the News Gets Wrong About People Like You, or About Things in Your Life (N = 323)?



Note. Teens' responses come from an open-ended question "are there things the news gets wrong about people like you, or about things in your life?"



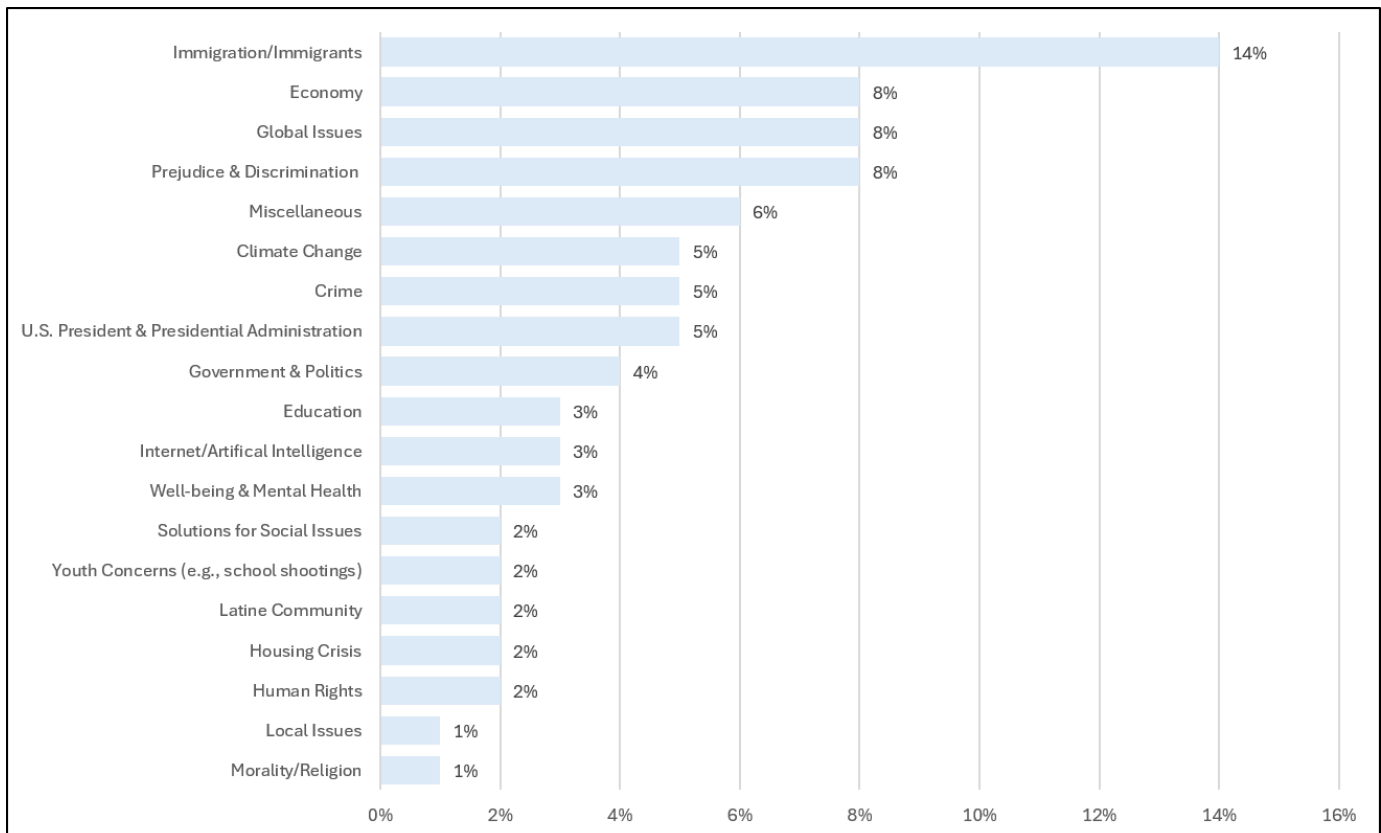
## What Do Teens Want News Sources to Cover?

Teens were asked an open-ended question: “What problems do you see that you wish more people were talking about in the news or social media?” Over half of teens provided an answer (65%), specifically noting a topic they wished the news would cover more or would cover differently. A smaller group (35%) said they were not sure or did not provide recommendations.

### TOPICS TEENS WANT COVERED

Of the teens who provided recommendations, most teens shared topics they wish were talked about more, such as immigration, the economy, and global issues. For immigration, teens shared that they wanted more news on recent deportations and ICE activity. Regarding the economy, they wanted people to talk about inflation, the cost of living, and financial inequality. For global issues, teens wanted to hear more about recent political conflicts. Teens also wanted more coverage on local and regional issues, such as the 2025 Los Angeles fires. They also wanted more coverage on climate change, crime, and the current presidential administration. Importantly, the responses varied across a large range of topics, highlighting that teens have varied interests and concerns.

## Topics or Problems Teens Want to See Covered More (N= 295)



Note. Teens' responses come from an open-ended question, “What problems do you see that you wish more people were talking about in the news or social media?”

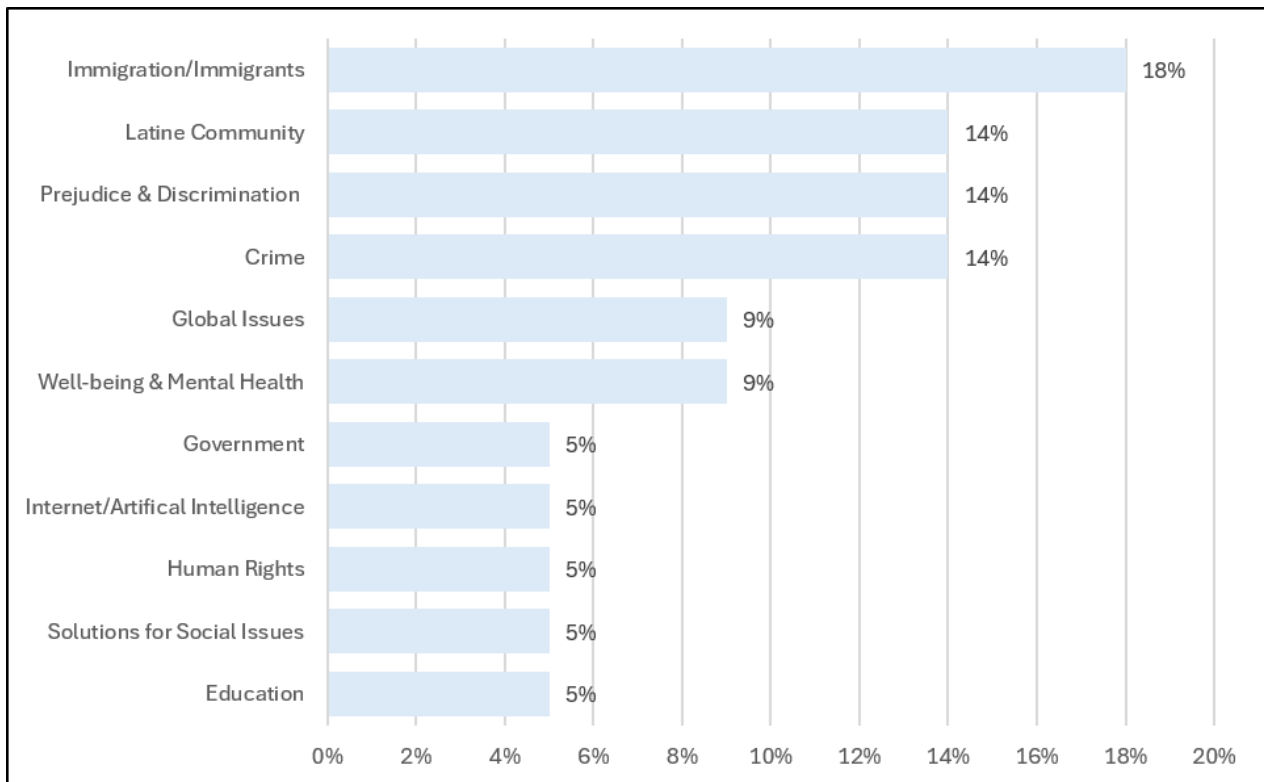
## TOPICS TEENS WOULD LIKE COVERED DIFFERENTLY

In addition to the topics reported, some teens noted they wished certain topics were talked about differently, such as by including perspectives from immigrants and sharing positive things about the immigrant and Latine community.

Once again, topics around immigration and the Latine community were the most mentioned topics. In this case, they mentioned that they wanted immigration issues to be discussed differently, where they would like to hear more of immigrants' point of view and wanted more coverage on the contributions that immigrants make to society. Similarly, teens wanted to hear more about the contributions that Latines make in society, and they wanted more coverage on crimes inflicted on the Latine community. Teens also wanted news to have more realistic conversations on the role of prejudice and discrimination and how to address it. The fourth most common topic was crime, where teens wanted news to focus less on crimes committed by members of marginalized groups.

Regarding global issues, teens wanted more coverage noting how global issues, such as political conflict, also affect teens' everyday lives. In general, teens reported a vast variety of themes, highlighting teens' complex and diverse perspectives.

## Topics That Teens Noted They Want Discussed Differently (N = 295)



Note. Teens' responses come from an open-ended question "What problems do you see that you wish more people were talking about in the news or social media?"

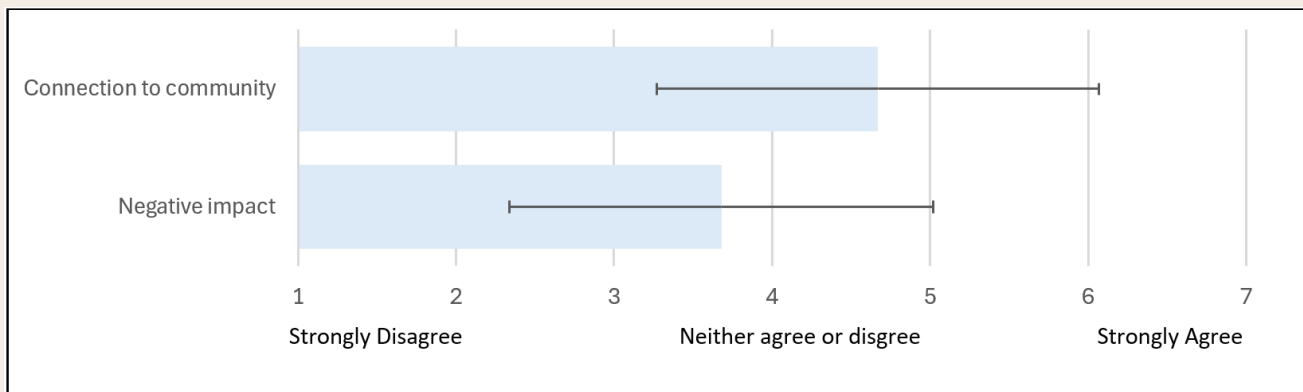


## How Does the News Make Teens Feel and What is Their Level of Engagement?

Participants, on average, somewhat agreed that the news makes them feel a sense of connection, which included feeling informed and connected to their community. On average, teens neither agreed nor disagreed that the news had a negative emotional impact, which included feelings of being overwhelmed, helplessness, and general negative mental well-being.

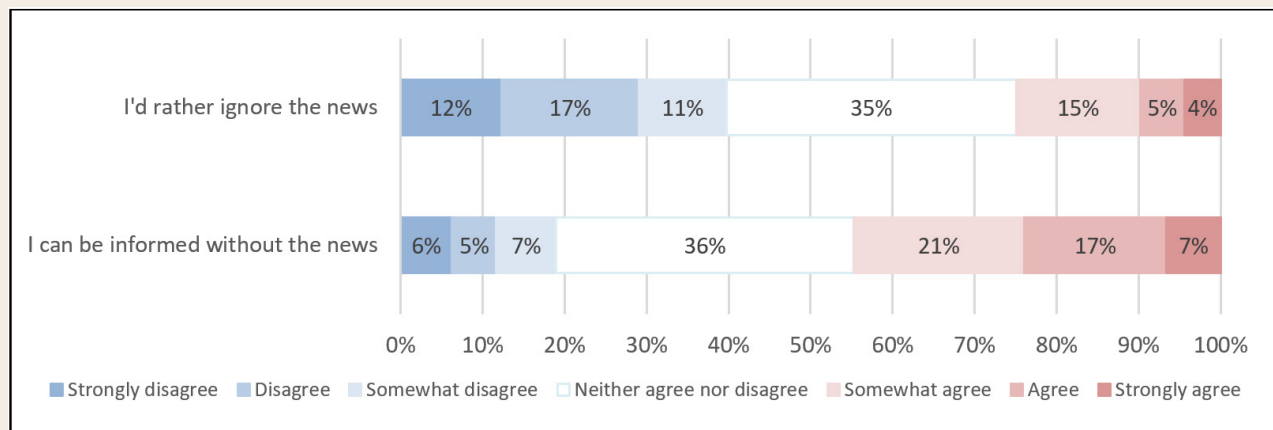
*Group differences:* The extent to which the news helps youth feel connected to their community or has a negative emotional impact was higher for girls than it was boys – suggesting girls are more impacted by news. There were not differences by immigrant background.

### Teens' Average Responses on how the News Makes Them Feel (N = 323)



Note. Participants were asked whether the news makes them feel connected to their community (e.g., “News gives me the feeling of being informed” & “News makes me feel connected to my community”), has a negative impact (e.g., “News has a negative effect on my mental well-being,” “News gives me the feeling there is little I can do to improve things,” & “The news gives me the feeling of getting overloaded with information”).

## Teens' Opinions About the Need for News and Level of News Avoidance (N = 323)



Note. Participants were asked how much they agreed/disagreed (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) with the following statements: "I'd rather ignore the news" (news avoidance) and "I can be well-informed even when I don't actively follow the News" (need for news).

Next, we asked teens how much they avoided the news, and whether they felt they needed the news. Forty percent noted that they somewhat-to-strongly disagreed that they ignored the news, suggesting that they somewhat followed the news. Another 35% did not agree nor disagree with this statement, whereas 24% noted they somewhat-to-strongly agreed with the statement suggesting these youth somewhat avoid the news.

Eighteen percent of teens somewhat-to-strongly disagreed with the statement that they did not need the news, a much smaller percentage than the 40% who engaged with the news as noted above. Further, 45% of teens noted they somewhat-to-strongly agreed with the idea that they do not need the news to stay informed. This suggests teens, though they are engaging with news, do not feel news is necessary to stay informed – perhaps because they are getting news from family, social media, and friends.





## News Experience and the Type of News Source Informs News Engagement?

Only two associations were found, such that youth who noted the news had a negative impact (e.g., helpless, overwhelmed, emotional) were more likely to avoid the news, and youth who reported having more trust in mainstream media were less likely to avoid the news.

### Correlations between news source, experience, and avoidance (*N* = 323)

|                              | News avoidance |   |
|------------------------------|----------------|---|
| Connection to community      | -.09           | - |
| Negative impact              | .27*           | ↑ |
| Trust in - Mainstream media  | -.20*          | ↓ |
| Trust in - Social media      | -.11           | - |
| Trust in - Fact checked news | -.08           | - |

Note. Numbers represent correlations coefficients; asterisks represent a statistical significance at  $p < .05$ . Blue (upturned) correlations are significant and positive, and orange (downturned) correlations are significant and negative, grey negative signs indicate no association.





## News Experience is Related to Teens' Psychosocial and School Adjustment

Feeling that news makes you feel connected to your community is linked to higher reports of flourishing, more academic engagement, and a higher sense of connection with your school. The worse the news makes teens feel (negative impact), the more symptoms of anxiety and depression youth report, and the less they feel like they are generally flourishing or connecting with their school. That is, when news makes youth feel bad, they report more psychosocial maladjustment and isolation. Additional correlations are presented below.

### Correlations between news source, experience, and avoidance ( $N = 323$ )

|                         | Anxiety Symptoms | Depressive Symptoms | Flourish   | School Connectedness |
|-------------------------|------------------|---------------------|------------|----------------------|
| Connection to community | —<br>.08         | —<br>.01            | ↑<br>.24*  | ↑<br>.26*            |
| Negative impact         | ↑<br>.33*        | ↑<br>.35*           | ↓<br>-.18* | ↓<br>-.12*           |

Note. Numbers represent correlations coefficients; asterisks represent a statistical significance at  $p < .05$ . Blue (upturned) correlations are significant and positive, and red (downturned) correlations are significant and negative, grey negative signs indicate no association.



# Conclusions and Practical Applications

The current survey data from Tucson teens suggest that teens are not disengaged from the news. They are navigating news on social events and social issues through their relationships, social media personalities, and algorithmic curated content, and this engagement has real consequences for their well-being and development.

The findings from this study align with national and historical data from Reuters Institute which suggest that when teens are not getting news information from family and friends, they are getting it from social media<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, they are relying on social media personalities and algorithmic feeds their overall algorithm for news before seeking and following established news sites<sup>5</sup>. Our findings align with national trends showing teens, like adults, value accurate information, although teens are more likely than adults to turn to social media outlets for that information<sup>5,9</sup>.

## Practical implications for families and educators:



### **Talk to youth about the news**

Families are noted as the #1 source for news. Whether that is by overhearing conversations or directly engaging in conversations about the news, it is important to talk to teens about the news not only to help youth contextualize what is happening in the world around them, but also to help them emotionally process how the news makes them feel.



### **Model how to evaluate information to build media literacy**

Teens are already savvy consumers of information, yet it is still good to discuss what is credible news, how to tell if something is fact checked, how to tell if news sources are biased, how diverse perspectives may impact how news events and issues are interpreted, and differences in professional standards between traditional news and social media influencers. Families could also discuss how algorithms work and how they may perpetuate specific perspectives by making information or perspectives feel more common. These discussions can help build media literacy and algorithm awareness.



### **Empower teen emotions and agency**

Many topics addressed in the news can be emotionally taxing, especially if teens perceive them to affect their sense of belonging and safety. By creating space to discuss feelings, teens can make sense of and honor what they are feeling, creating a sense of emotional safety. Further, families can discuss which aspects of a situation are within the teens' control and which are not. This can help teens develop a sense of agency and reduce the sense of powerlessness.

# Practical implications for journalists and news content creators:

## **Make credibility clear**

Although many teens said they turned to social media, very few could identify a specific name, handle, or account where they were consuming news. In addition, these teens said they trusted fact-checked content most, which in this study was described to them as content that cited its sources. That means these teens are often making snap judgments about who to trust based on standalone content. For journalists to stand out in the algorithm as credible voices on topics, they should be mindful of making credibility signals clear to their audience in day-to-day content, such as by clearly citing sources and sharing how they work to be fair and accurate in their news coverage.

## **Reduce news avoidance by increasing relevance, hope, and agency**

Teens in this study said the news often made them feel bad and overwhelmed, and journalists should be mindful of the negative effects news can have on mental health. Two ways journalists can do this is by helping contextualize news events and balancing negative stories with action-oriented content, which the study showed increases teens' sense of agency and connection.

## **Avoid stereotypes to further connection**

A subset of teens in this study noted concerns about how certain topics, like issues on immigration and Latines, are handled by the news, citing concerns that news coverage often stereotypes these groups, portraying them inaccurately. The news also often misses important context and information. Journalists can help remedy this by avoiding catch-all labels, being mindful of how different framing and language will land with different groups, and making concerted efforts to understand, through community conversations and surveys, why certain groups may feel underserved and distrustful of news coverage.

## **Partner with responsible content creators, influencers, and organizations**

One way journalists can expand their reach is by partnering with like-minded, responsible content creators and community messengers who may already be reaching younger audiences. Partnering can help news providers signal credibility and trust while introducing content to people who likely would not otherwise engage.

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