

Mental health misinformation and young people in Australia

Written by ReachOut's Youth Advocates
October 2025



Content warning

The following document includes references to mental ill-health. The document has been prepared with reference to Mindframe's guidelines. ReachOut encourages anyone in distress to seek support. A list of crisis support services can be found [here](#).

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank and acknowledge the Black Dog Institute for their contribution to this paper.

Design

This report was designed by ReachOut Youth Advocate, Maddie.

AI disclaimer

AI tools were used to support the research presented in this paper.

About ReachOut

At ReachOut we are guided by a clear, simple ambition: Helping young people feel better.

Helping them feel:

- better in the moments when they most need help
- better about who they are and their place in the world.

And be:

- better able to cope with the challenges they're facing today
- better set up and equipped to manage when life doesn't go as planned.

Anonymous and confidential, ReachOut is a safe place where young people can openly express themselves, get a deeper understanding and perspective on what's happening in their lives, connect with people who will provide judgement-free support, and build the resilience to manage their challenges now and in the future.

Designed specifically for – and with – young people, and 100% online, ReachOut lets young people connect on their terms at any time from anywhere. From one-to-one support from experienced peer workers, to tips, stories and resources, ReachOut offers a wide range of support options that allow young people to engage in the ways they want to, when they want to.

About ReachOut's Youth Advocates

[ReachOut's Youth Advocacy program](#) exists to give young people a platform for sharing their lived experiences and their views on policy solutions that will make a real difference to their mental wellbeing.

The advocates who have worked on this submission are:

- April, 22, from Eora Nation, NSW (Warringah Electorate)
- Chase, 25, from Wadawurrung Nation, VIC (Corio Electorate)
- Georgia E, 21, from Boonwurrung Land (Kulin Nation), VIC (Macnamara Electorate)
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- Martin, 21, from VIC
- Sina, 24, from Darug Land, NSW (Macquarie Electorate)

Executive summary

This report presents new research by ReachOut's Youth Advocates on the growing challenge of mental health misinformation. Young people in Australia are confronting misinformation every day, often with serious consequences for their mental health.

We surveyed more than 750 young people across Australia to understand the scale of the issue. We asked how often they encounter mental health misinformation, where they see it most, how they respond to it, and what changes they want to see from the government and tech platforms.

What we found is clear: mental health misinformation isn't simply an annoyance – it's a public health issue. For some young people mental health misinformation is distorting how they understand mental health issues, can delay their help-seeking and, ultimately, undermine their wellbeing.

Just as the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the dangers of unchecked health misinformation, mental health misinformation poses a similarly urgent challenge today. Young people should not be left to navigate that challenge alone.

Our research highlights a pressing need for government action. Digital platforms, including social media and artificial intelligence (AI) platforms, must be held accountable for the content they host.

While tech solutions are an important part of the answer, they are not enough on their own. We also need to equip young people, and their parents and carers, with the knowledge and tools that will help them to navigate online mental health information safely.

We are also calling for further research. Many of us have personally experienced the positive impact that credible mental health information can have on our mental health journeys. We need deeper insights into how misinformation spreads, those whom it most affects and how to combat it most effectively.

Finally, with the development of Digital Duty of Care legislation now underway, Australia has an important opportunity to provide increased online safety protections for young people across the country. We urge the government to act swiftly and transparently to ensure that this reform provides meaningful protection for young people and the wider population. We are seeking clarity on what the legislation will include, how it will be enforced, and how it will safeguard mental health in the digital age.

We shared our insights in advance with experts at the Black Dog Institute and throughout this report you will find additional commentary from their team on our recommendations.

Recommendations summary

1. Verify trusted mental health information and organisations on digital platforms.
2. Educate young people, parents and carers about mental health misinformation.
3. Hold social media companies accountable for taking swift, effective action against mental health misinformation.
4. Enhance mental health safety and support features on social media platforms for young people in distress.
5. Integrate mental health safeguards into emerging AI tools.
6. Invest in research to understand the impacts of mental health misinformation on young people's wellbeing and help-seeking, and Australia's mental health system to inform targeted solutions.

Survey results overview

Mental health misinformation has impacted the wellbeing of many members of our youth advocacy group, including contributing to delayed help-seeking. With that in mind, we designed a survey *by* young people, *for* young people about mental health misinformation.

The findings of our survey provide an important insight into how young people across Australia are encountering mental health misinformation, the impacts it is having on their mental health, and the solutions they want to employ to combat it.

But first, why is it essential that online misinformation be addressed? It is clear that digital platforms are increasingly a vital source of mental health information for young people. Research by the [Melbourne Royal Children's Hospital](#) found that two-thirds of teenagers get health information from social media, including information about mental health. And previous research by ReachOut ([2023](#)) found that 73 per cent of young people use social media for mental health support.

So, what did we find? Our recent national survey was answered by 765 young people aged 16–25 years and revealed a lot about this challenge.

Of the young people surveyed, 95 per cent reported that they come across mental health information, and almost 37 per cent indicated that this is

happening a few times a week. The most common place where young people are seeing mental health information is on social media (61 per cent).

However, almost 80 per cent of young people reported that they had also been exposed to misleading or harmful information about mental health online (78 per cent). They named exaggeration as the most common type of misleading or harmful mental health content they are coming across online (52 per cent), followed by disinformation/clickbait (42 per cent) and fake news (38 per cent).

Importantly, 58 per cent of the young people surveyed agreed that social media spreads too much unverified mental health advice. Young people have good reason to be concerned: an investigation by [The Guardian](#) found that more than half of all the top trending mental health advice on TikTok contained misinformation. This content often promoted 'quick fix' treatments that lacked any clinical backing, oversimplified 'medical concepts' and misused clinical language.

We also found that young people's concerns about mental health misinformation on social media platforms aren't being sufficiently addressed in helpful and practical ways. Almost one-quarter (24 per cent) of the young people we surveyed told us they had reported misinformation about mental health to a social media platform. Of those, fewer than 20 per cent said their concern was followed up and they were provided with adequate resources to support them (19 per cent). More commonly, people never heard back (40 per cent) or they received a generic message (39 per cent).

We also wanted to find out more about how young people are navigating mental health misinformation on a day-to-day basis, so we asked young people about their fact-checking habits. Fourteen per cent of respondents said that they always check the source of mental health information they see online and 40 per cent said they sometimes check.

While the level of fact-checking is encouraging, it's important to recognise that fact-checking isn't something all young people do, or are equipped to do. More than 30 per cent of young people told us they rarely or never fact-check the mental health information they come across online (31 per cent). One of the most common reasons for this was that they don't have the time.

Of those who are fact-checking, we found that they often rely on ad hoc processes and their own ability to spot problematic content. For example, they told us they look at who posted the information and whether the source seems trustworthy (55 per cent), they google the topic (51 per cent) and look at how the content was written in terms of tone, spelling and exaggeration (36 per cent). Forty-eight per cent of young people agree that it's hard to know which mental health advice online is actually helpful.

While misinformation is clearly a pressing challenge, it's vital we recognise digital platforms as powerful tools for accessing credible and trustworthy mental health information.

We also found that more than 60 per cent of young people surveyed reported that mental health providers (such as [ReachOut](#)) are their most trusted mental health resource. The government (34 per cent), and people sharing their lived experience of mental ill health (33 per cent) were also highly trusted by the young people we surveyed. Just over 7 in 10 (72 per cent) of our survey participants agreed that personal stories can be helpful, even if they aren't from mental health professionals. Interestingly, only 13 per cent said that news and media was a trusted source of mental health information for them.

Impacts

Our research demonstrates that mental health misinformation is a widespread and significant issue.

What stood out most in our research is that half of the young people we surveyed believe that mental health misinformation is a big issue when looking for mental health support.

This finding aligns with research by the [American Psychological Association](#), which shows that mental health misinformation can have significant impacts on help-seeking for young people, including by directly discouraging them from seeking help. The research found that exposure to misleading advice online or on social media can lead young people to minimise their symptoms, self-diagnose, or delay seeking professional care.

As young people ourselves, we know how hard it is already to reach out for support. We face real barriers, including self-stigma, costs, and the challenges of navigating a complex system.

That's why we believe mental health misinformation is an important public health concern that demands serious attention and action. Tackling it effectively won't just make it easier for individual young people to get support when they need it; it could also have positive implications for our mental health system overall. If done effectively, young people's online worlds can become a positive tool for early intervention and prevention.

The big question now is: 'So, what do we do about it?'

Recommendations

1. Verify trusted mental health information and organisations on digital platforms

When we asked young people how the spread of credibly sourced mental health information can be encouraged, almost half suggested promoting credible and evidence based information in feeds and search results (45 per cent).

Young people also called for the labelling of expert or professional mental health advice (20 per cent), warnings or fact-check tags on posts that might be false (20 per cent) and for easier ways to check if a source is trustworthy (17 per cent).

Therefore, we suggest implementing a system of verification that highlights mental health information from reputable and factual sources. Importantly, this is an approach that has already been implemented in another context, with verification of health information during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social media sites, AI tools and search engines could all be compelled to provide confirmation that the mental health information a young person is reading is trustworthy, or a warning if the information isn't trustworthy.

We think that big tech companies should be required to co-design this solution with mental health organisations, and face significant penalties if they fail to act. We have considered a few different options in terms of what this action could look like from a practical perspective:

- warning messages similar to those used on social media sites during the pandemic.
- a verification tick or similar, as currently used by celebrities on platforms like Instagram confirming mental health credentials.

We acknowledge that there [have been efforts by some of the social media companies to implement these kinds of suggestions](#). However, we argue they haven't gone far enough and are currently ineffective.

We note that this recommendation builds on our [Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society](#).

Additional commentary from experts at the Black Dog Institute:

To ensure the safety and credibility of mental health information available on social media or delivered by AI tools, we endorse the proposal of a verification system that highlights content from reputable, evidence-based sources. This could include warning labels on potentially false information, verification ticks for expert advice – similar to those used during the COVID-19 pandemic – and easier ways for users to check source credibility.

2. Educate young people, parents and carers about mental health misinformation

Our research demonstrates that most young people have only moderate confidence in their ability to accurately identify mental health misinformation. We are concerned that with the rise of AI-powered tools, it may become even harder in the future to fact-check this information.

Therefore, it is unsurprising that a number of the young people we surveyed specifically called for school or university programs to teach them how to fact-check (13 per cent).

A school-based education program is required to support young people in developing the skills needed to fact-check misinformation. Such a program is needed in order to increase young people's understanding of mental health misinformation and to boost their confidence in correctly identifying examples of it when they encounter them in their daily life.

The [Online Misinformation in Australia: Adults' experiences, abilities, and responses](#) report identified that Australia is unlike many advanced democracies in that we don't have a national media literacy policy or strategy to tackle misinformation. Finland and the United Kingdom already have these learning models in place. We think we could learn from what others around the world are doing in this space.

We also think it is important to consider the appropriate age for this education to be provided at. While education experts would be well placed to provide advice, we feel that the early high school years would be best as we know this is the time when mental health concerns first arise for many young people.

The content provided by [eSafety](#) could be a good educational base to build on. [ReachOut](#) also has support when it comes to [the news and critical thinking](#) and [navigating mental health misinformation online](#).

Further, around a quarter of young people check the viability of online mental health information by asking friends and family members for advice. The [Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne](#) asserts that parents remain the most frequently accessed source of advice and support for their adolescent children when it comes to health information.

Therefore, education resources are also needed for parents and carers about how to safely talk about mental health with young people, including a focus on navigating mental health misinformation. As parents and carers are often short on time, we suggest that an effective approach could be to produce a series of short videos they could engage with to learn about accessing verified mental health information.

3. Hold social media companies accountable for taking swift, effective action against mental health misinformation

We are disappointed that only 19 per cent of young people reported getting the outcomes they need and deserve when they report mental health misinformation to the platforms. It is clear that more accountability and support from platforms to report or remove misleading content is required.

More robust processes are needed to ensure that action is actually taken when mental health misinformation is reported, so that young people are provided with adequate outcomes.

Such processes could include mandating response times to the reporting of mental health misinformation, ensuring that young people's concerns are addressed by real people, and implementing timely and effective measures for the escalation of complaints.

4. Enhance mental health safety and support features on social media platforms for young people in distress

We know that young people spend a lot of time on digital platforms, that more than [70 per cent use them to search for mental health information](#), and that in many cases they are coming across mental health misinformation on these platforms.

Therefore, we believe it is important that more safety features are built into social media platforms to support young people, particularly when they are in distress and need support.

We recommend that digital platforms be required to work with online safety experts and young people to enhance safety, and that they must have a Digital Duty of Care to the young people who use their products.

Additional safety features could include a requirement for pop-ups when people search for information that could be harmful to their mental health or that indicates they could be in distress. These pop-ups could provide crisis numbers or links to the websites of reputable mental health organisations, such as crisis services and ReachOut.

We understand that this support may already be happening in some cases; however, in our lived experience as a group, we aren't seeing evidence of it being employed in enough places or being used effectively. A coordinated process that brings together academic, mental health and online safety experts is required.

5. Integrate mental health safeguards into emerging AI tools

Increasingly, many young people are turning to AI tools such as ChatGPT to access mental health support. While active information and help-seeking is to be encouraged, there are also reports that in many cases the information being provided isn't accurate and can even be harmful.

While only 7 per cent of the young people surveyed reported coming across mental health information via AI tools, this number is likely to grow significantly over the coming months and years. Young people also told us they are also using AI tools to fact-check the mental health information they come across online.

We think it's important to be proactive in applying the lessons we have learnt from young people's social media use to AI tools so that these can be safe spaces for them from an early stage.

For example, we recommend that mental health terms and searches are identified, and that information obtained from, and links to, credible sources are provided in response.

We think it is vital that AI tool providers partner with advocacy groups like ours, with people with lived experience and with local mental health organisations. While there remains much to be done, we have seen positive examples of other digital platforms working with Australian mental health organisations and young people to increase the safety of their platforms and we believe that AI companies must engage constructively as well.

Additional commentary from experts at the Black Dog Institute:

Emerging AI technologies have the potential to revolutionise mental health care; however, these tools are also [associated with risk](#). AI tools can improve access to mental health support by offering immediate, anonymous, and empathetic interactions, and helping users learn about mental health conditions and coping strategies. However, they also carry risks including the spread of misinformation, lack of crisis response capability, potential reinforcement of harmful beliefs, and the absence of regulation and privacy safeguards. The Black Dog Institute is working to close knowledge gaps around AI in mental health by identifying safe tools, clarifying risks and benefits, and addressing key policy and regulatory challenges.

6. Invest in research to understand the impacts of mental health misinformation on young people's wellbeing and help-seeking, and Australia's mental health system to inform targeted solutions.

The impact of online misinformation is an area that requires significantly more research. Given the general lack of relevant research in this emerging field, we think it is especially important for the government to invest in local research.

We note that [Western Sydney University](#) launched a new PhD project that will investigate how open people are to mental health misinformation following a diagnosis and will design educational media interventions to help reduce vulnerabilities. The project aims to create community-level strategies for people in both urban and regional Australia that are directly linked to the research with policy and public educational outcomes.

We suggest that a lot more research like this is required to fully understand the extent of this issue, the depth of its impact on young people and the best solutions including when it comes to help-seeking.

Additional commentary from experts at the Black Dog Institute:

Research is needed to understand the impacts of mental health misinformation on young people's wellbeing and help-seeking. The way that young people access information, services and mental health support has also changed dramatically over the last decade. These changes include the rapid emergence of AI technologies, and have occurred at a faster pace than research.

Young people are tech savvy and quick to embrace new technology, such as AI chatbots (e.g., ChatGPT). Research is needed to understand how young people across Australia are using generative AI, the risks and benefits

associated with the use of AI for mental health, the accuracy of mental health information delivered by AI, the cultural appropriateness of these tools, and their acceptability by young people.

Lived Experience stories

Martin (he/him), 21 from Victoria

Before I begin, a quick heads up that in the following piece I'll be talking about mental health, including depression and other mental health issues. If anything feels overwhelming, please take a moment to care for yourself and reach out for support.

My name is Martin, I am 21 now, but this story goes back to when I was 17. At the time, I was struggling with my mental health and like many young people, I turned to social media for answers.

I came across countless videos like 'signs of ADHD' and similar content. The videos talked about things like losing focus in class, not doing things on time and constant daydreaming. I related to the content and thought this was the answer I was looking for, but the truth is the videos oversimplified a complex situation.

Instead of reaching out for professional support, I put my full faith in social media. For months, I explained away everything I was going through because of 'ADHD'. However, when I finally met a psychologist, I found out I didn't have ADHD at all. What I was going through at the time was actually depression and anxiety.

Because of the misinformation I got online, I lost very valuable time getting the right help I needed, and my recovery was delayed. What had started as a search for answers online ended up leaving me more isolated, confused and unwell.

My story is not unique as thousands of young people are being misled by mental health misinformation online, as seen in the research in this paper. My experience shows how powerful social media platforms are in shaping not only opinions, but also how young peoples' wellbeing can be impacted in really serious ways.

That's why I believe we need stronger safeguards, including accountability from social media platforms, when it comes to mental health misinformation. Every young person deserves evidence-based information that is reliable about their own mental health, not falsehoods that risk our safety and delay our recoveries.

Georgia (she/they), 21 from Victoria

When I was about 16, I started to see a lot of content on my social feed about ADHD. I thought it was really interesting to learn more and was inspired by people opening up about their experiences. At the time, I knew broadly what ADHD was but I didn't know specifics.

Most of the videos I came across were people sharing their lived experience of symptoms such as restlessness, difficulty concentrating and brain fog. As I interacted with this content more and more, it started to resonate with me and I began wondering if I also had ADHD, and was unknowingly masking it.

What concerned me was the number of people online suggesting that ADHD, among other mental health concerns, was fake, as people on social media continuously dismissed the experiences of others. Another factor that was also detrimental to me was others expressing concern about the rise in the number of people being diagnosed. This made me question what I was experiencing and I didn't really know what content to trust and what not to trust.

For a while, my algorithm was flooded with content about ADHD. Concerningly during this time I wasn't served any information from mental health support services which could have supported both my learning and help seeking journey.

Learning from people's lived experiences was really valuable for me, but there were also lots of gaps in my understanding about ADHD which content from clinicians and support services could have filled. For example, I didn't really understand what my help seeking journey would look like including: how difficult it would be, the different options that were available to me, and also the costs involved.

I think that social media has its ups and downs, however mental health misinformation is one of the concerns that many young people have which needs to be addressed. As someone with a diagnosis of ADHD, it's extremely invalidating to keep seeing social media posts over and over again which say things like 'everyone has a little bit of ADHD' or that 'ADHD is a myth'.

Creating spaces where young people know there are information checks in places and where they can be given support information is really important. I am also advocating for more education for young people in the area of identifying mental health misinformation, which I think I would have really benefited from.

April (she/her), 22 from NSW

When I was in my early teens, like most people my age, I spent a lot of time on social media. Those years are already challenging for many young women, especially when it comes to body image, and the content I was exposed to made things even harder.

My feeds were filled with influencers promoting unhealthy diets, harmful routines, and misinformation about how to 'fix' your body. At the time, I didn't realise the impact this was having on me. Looking back now, I can see how deeply it shaped the way I saw myself. I treated the videos as if they were the truth and, as a result, I became increasingly unkind to myself and my body.

At the same time, I was struggling with my mental health, going through a difficult period of depression. Instead of helping, the content I came across online often made things worse. Some videos dismissed mental health struggles as if they weren't real, others offered 'cures' that were harmful, and many made fun of people who were struggling. The most damaging ones, though, came from influencers who positioned themselves as 'trusted' mental health voices. I didn't yet understand that everyone's experience is different, and that what works for one person cannot simply be pushed onto others.

If I could speak to my younger self, I would tell her to block out the noise of social media and not to take those messages as fact. I would tell her to trust professional sources, and to seek out support in safer, healthier ways. I eventually discovered positive resources, like ReachOut, later in my teens, and they completely changed my mental health journey for the better.

My experience is just one example, but it shows how damaging online misinformation can be. It doesn't just exist in the background – it directly shapes how young people think, feel, and treat themselves. That's why addressing mental health misinformation online is so important, because behind every statistic are real lives and stories like mine.

Conclusion

Mental health misinformation is harming young people's wellbeing, shaping their decisions, and placing additional strain on Australia's already overstretched and under-resourced mental health system. Our research shows that young people are not just aware of the risks; they are asking for decisive action. Behind every statistic is a young person trying to make sense of what they are feeling and to find a path to access support.

The solutions are within reach. Government leadership, platform accountability and education can create an online environment where credible information is amplified and harmful content is addressed. Emerging technologies such as AI must also learn from the mistakes of social media, embedding mental health safeguards from the outset.

If we act now, we can help to ensure that the information young people encounter is empowering them to take that first step, rather than holding them back.

Supplementary paper: ReachOut Youth Advocate perspective on a Digital Duty of Care

Date: February, 2026

Written by:

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Introduction

As Australia moves to modernise the *Online Safety Act 2021*, we express our support for the introduction of a Digital Duty of Care. We understand that a Digital Duty of Care will place legal obligations on online platforms, compelling them to take reasonable steps to provide safe spaces for their users.

As young people, we are digital natives and spend a lot of time online. We are currently navigating environments that are often unsafe and not designed to support our wellbeing.

Currently, Australia's online safety framework is primarily reactive and isn't working to protect young people like us. Young people and their parents and carers should not be solely responsible for keeping themselves safe online and reporting harms after they have occurred. Many of us personally know the lasting negative impacts this can have on the mental health of a young person.

We believe that big tech companies have had ample time and resources to provide safe spaces, and yet, more often than not they fail to do so.

We believe that a Digital Duty of Care, which requires platforms to take reasonable steps to prevent foreseeable harms, will support the wellbeing and mental health of young people across the country.

We hope that legislating a Digital Duty of Care will result in young people feeling more confident and safe in the digital spaces that they spend so much time in. We endorse moving towards a proactive system which works to prevent these harms.

We have a range of recommendations which we think need to be incorporated into Australia's Digital Duty of Care legislation and we note that these are aligned with many of the recommendations put forward in the *Report of the Statutory Review of the Online Safety Act* ([October 2024](#)).

1. Co-design with, and education for, young people

We advocate for a positive and inclusive approach to a Digital Duty of Care in Australia. We believe that co-design of this legislation with young people is an important foundation for this.

We think there should be a broad range of young people at the table in the co-design of this legislation, including under 16s. While social media minimum age restrictions have come into effect, we understand that many young people continue to be active online, both on social media platforms and in other digital spaces. It is therefore essential that their voices and experiences be included.

Once the new legislation is in place we also think there needs to be clear and relevant communication with young people so that they know what to expect from big tech companies under these new regulations. This education should also include teaching people how to use online spaces in positive ways and information about mental health misinformation and other challenges that they may still face in their online worlds.

2. Specific mental health protections for young people

A Digital Duty of Care should be applied broadly to digital platforms and potential harms. It should not just focus on illegal content, but also compel big tech companies to take proactive steps to protect and support young people's mental health and wellbeing.

This should include early detection of mental health misinformation and those who post it. This should be coupled with the verification of trusted mental health information and organisations on digital platforms so that young people can better understand the sources of the mental health information they are consuming.

We also think that a Digital Duty of Care should include obligations requiring enhanced mental health safety and support features for young people whose online behaviour, such as the terms they are searching, indicates that they are in distress. For example, pop ups with relevant service information.

We also believe that this new legislation should support mandatory implementation of safety by design approaches to specific platform features, such as algorithms. We know that in many cases algorithms are currently providing young people with unhelpful and dangerous information that impacts their mental health and they can also make the platforms feel addictive.

These kinds of proactive solutions to online safety issues are vital, but they need to be coupled with better reactive solutions too. In our research*, fewer than 20 per cent of young people surveyed told us that they were provided with adequate support resources when they reported mental health misinformation.

Therefore, we also support requirements for easier and more effective ways for users to report harms. Platforms should also be required to respond in a timely manner, providing users with real solutions.

3. Significant penalties for platforms

We believe that there are many lessons to be learned from the implementation of similar legislation around the world, in particular from the UK.

The UK approach has a focus on risk mitigation, not just reactive take downs. We think a similar approach here in Australia has the power to provide a whole new level of online safety for young people across Australia.

We think that some of the other key lessons from the UK legislation include considering how we could apply their approach of considerable financial penalties for companies that do not comply.

Conclusion

We urge the Parliament to ensure that the Online Safety Amendment (Digital Duty of Care) Bill is robust, enforceable, and focused on the systemic drivers of harm.

*See further details of this research in main body of our report