ONLINE HARMS:
A SNAPSHOT OF PUBLIC OPINION

DEMOS

This research was carried out in summer 2020 to investigate public opinion on online harms.

This project was commissioned by BT.

What online harms are people most concerned about?

How do they feel about tradeoffs between different rights online?

Who do they think is responsible for taking action?

1 People are concerned about a variety of online harms, from bullying to misinformation, but in particular, serious illegal activity and harms to children.

2 In the abstract, people prioritise protection from harm over other rights: but this consensus is not so clear in more in-depth discussions.

3 The public want a cross-sector approach to dealing with online harms, where different stakeholders have different responsibilities for helping to create a healthy internet.

1 Nationally representative poll of 2,019 people in the UK, 22 June 2020 - 29 June 2020
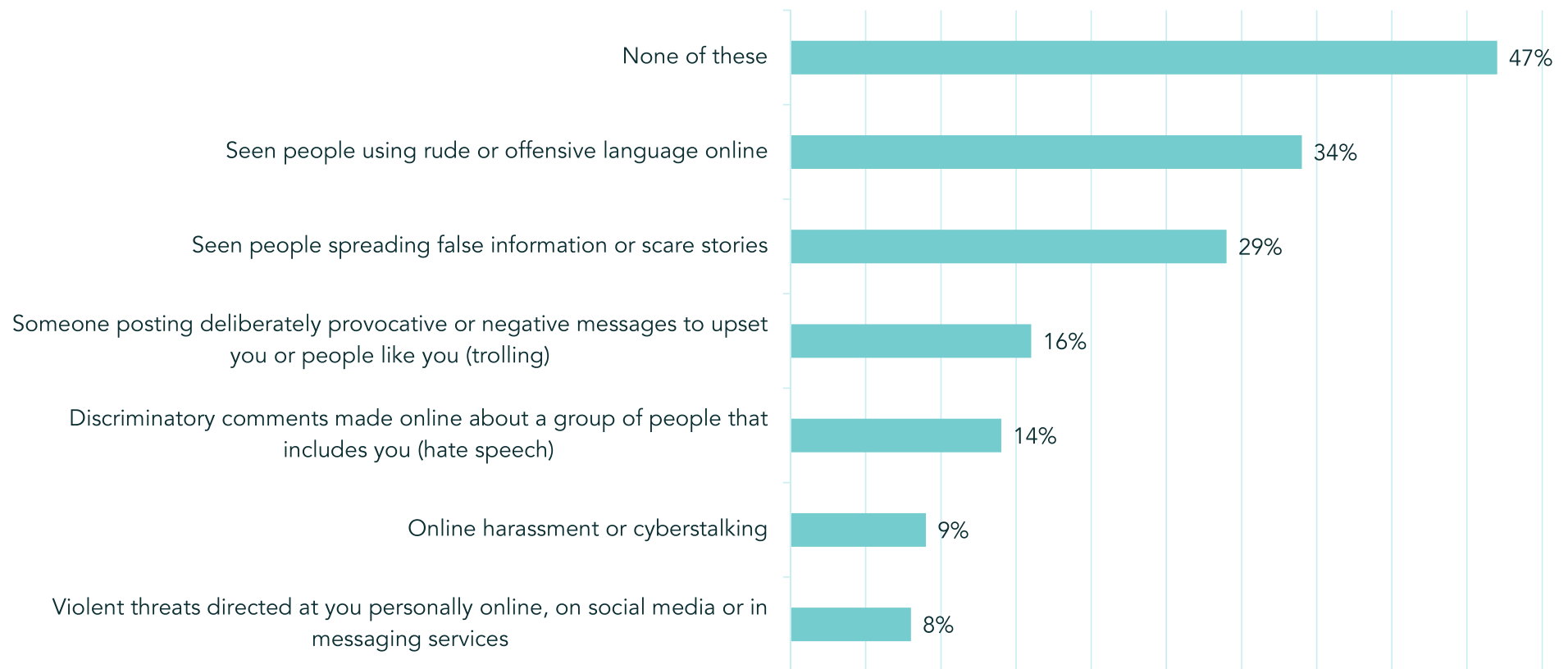
2 2 focus groups, 8 and 9 July 2020

1 group of men and 1 group of women, including:
- a parent of an 8-16 year old
- a young adult (18-25)
- a person without dependent children
- a person on a pay-as-you-go (top-up) phone contract
- a person on a standard (direct debit) phone contract
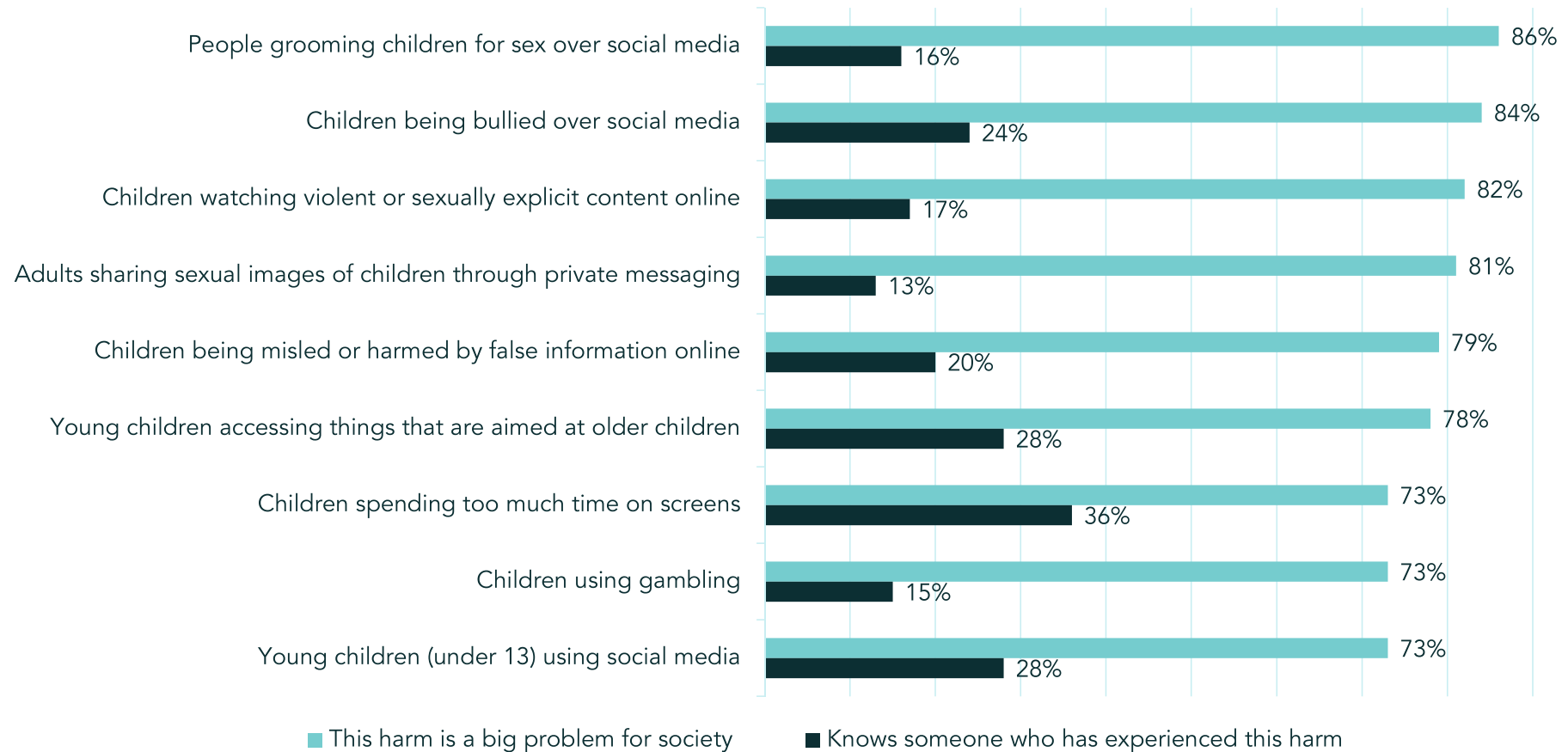
WHAT ONLINE HARMS ARE PEOPLE MOST CONCERNED ABOUT?

- The public are very concerned about online harms, even those of which they have no personal experience.

- 53% of people have experienced online harms personally.

- However, there are much higher levels of concern than of experience.

- The harms which cause the most concern are not those which are most widely experienced.

HAVE YOU PERSONALLY EXPERIENCED ANY OF THE FOLLOWING?
YOU CAN SELECT MORE THAN ONE.

Category	Percentage
None of these	47%
Seen people using rude or offensive language online	34%
Seen people spreading false information or scare stories	29%
Someone posting deliberately provocative or negative messages to upset you or people like you (trolling)	16%
Discriminatory comments made online about a group of people that includes you (hate speech)	14%
Online harassment or cyberstalking	9%
Violent threats directed at you personally online, on social media or in messaging services	8%

CONCERNS AROUND ONLINE HARMS TOWARDS CHILDREN

Harm	This harm is a big problem for society	Knows someone who has experienced this harm
People grooming children for sex over social media	86%	16%
Children being bullied over social media	84%	24%
Children watching violent or sexually explicit content online	82%	17%
Adults sharing sexual images of children through private messaging	81%	13%
Children being misled or harmed by false information online	79%	20%
Young children accessing things that are aimed at older children	78%	28%
Children spending too much time on screens	73%	36%
Children using gambling	73%	15%
Young children (under 13) using social media	73%	28%

■ This harm is a big problem for society   ■ Knows someone who has experienced this harm
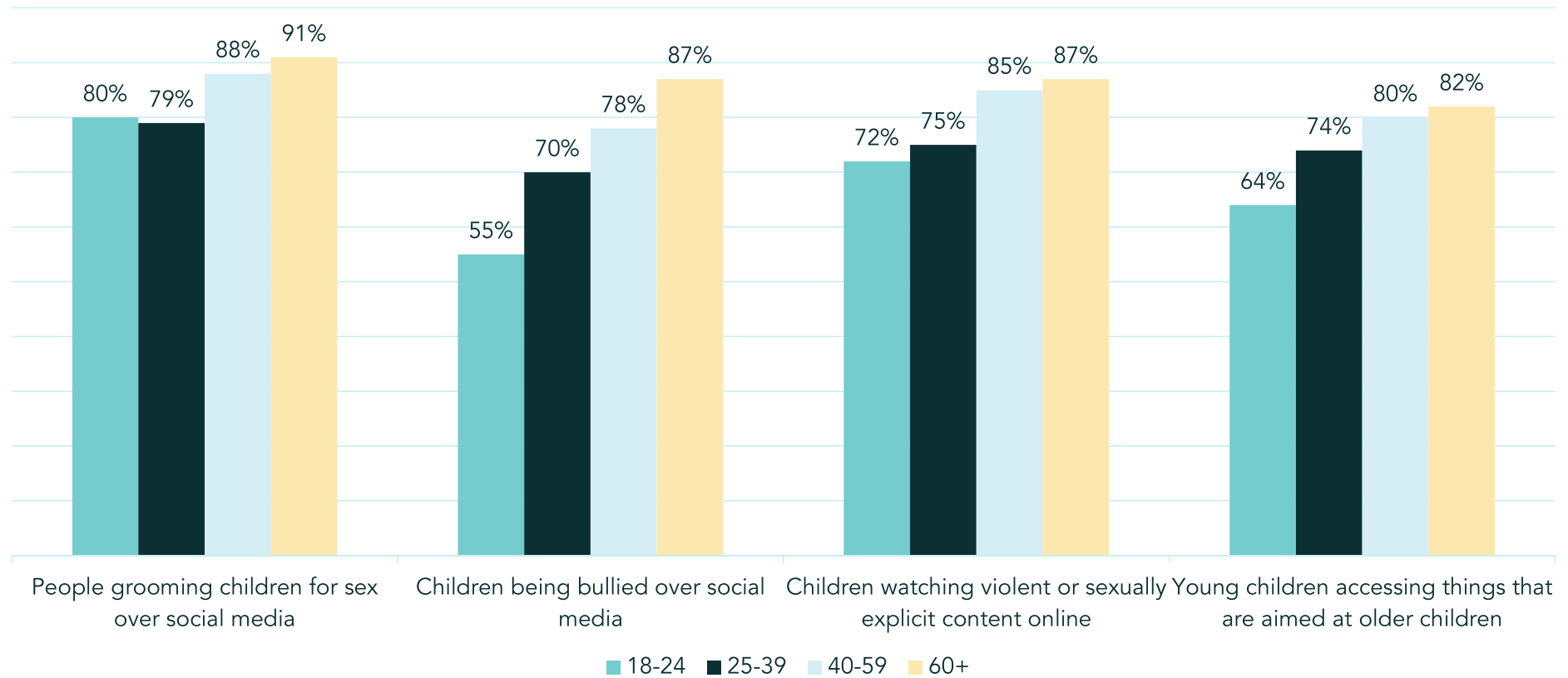
- Age is the driving variable of concerns about online harms affecting children, rather than parental status.

- Older people tended to think more that online harms affecting children were big problems for society.

- For example, 69% of people <u>with</u> dependent children at home think that young children (under 13) using social media is "a big problem for society" but 76% of people <u>without</u> dependent children at home share that view.

- In our sample 25-39 year olds were most likely to have dependent children.

RESPONDENTS WHO BELIEVE THIS ISSUE TO BE A 'BIG PROBLEM FOR SOCIETY'

People grooming children for sex over social media: 18-24: 80%, 25-39: 79%, 40-59: 88%, 60+: 91%

Children being bullied over social media: 18-24: 55%, 25-39: 70%, 40-59: 78%, 60+: 87%

Children watching violent or sexually explicit content online: 18-24: 72%, 25-39: 75%, 40-59: 85%, 60+: 87%

Young children accessing things that are aimed at older children: 18-24: 64%, 25-39: 74%, 40-59: 80%, 60+: 82%

Legend: 18-24, 25-39, 40-59, 60+

Focus Groups: Concerns about children online

"All of the girls had been targeted by people who they don't know and had suspected aren't who they say they are…" (Women's group)

"I don't think children realise the dangers of [strangers contacting them online] and to me that's a real harm" (Women's group)

"…[my son] watches…playing computer games and thinks that's a career move" (Men's group)

"One thing that's really disturbed me is seeing children being bullied online and it's being filmed…Then they post it on Facebook and I come across that a lot" (Women's group)

HOW DO PEOPLE FEEL ABOUT TRADEOFFS BETWEEN DIFFERENT RIGHTS ONLINE?

- People use the language of rights, and accept there are tradeoffs involved in tackling online harms - but there is less consensus on how to resolve them.

- We saw in the focus groups that with discussion, there is more uncertainty and opinions are fluid, suggesting a need for a more in-depth national discussion or public consultation.

"...we have got freedom of speech here and whilst it is horrible to hear some people say certain opinions I suppose people are allowed to...but awful as it is even with racist things. I mean is that freedom of speech? I don't know" (Women's group)

"There is an element of privacy that's important, but we have to work out what is most important, and it is the ability for people to abuse, and I think [dealing with abuse] should take precedence" (Men's group)
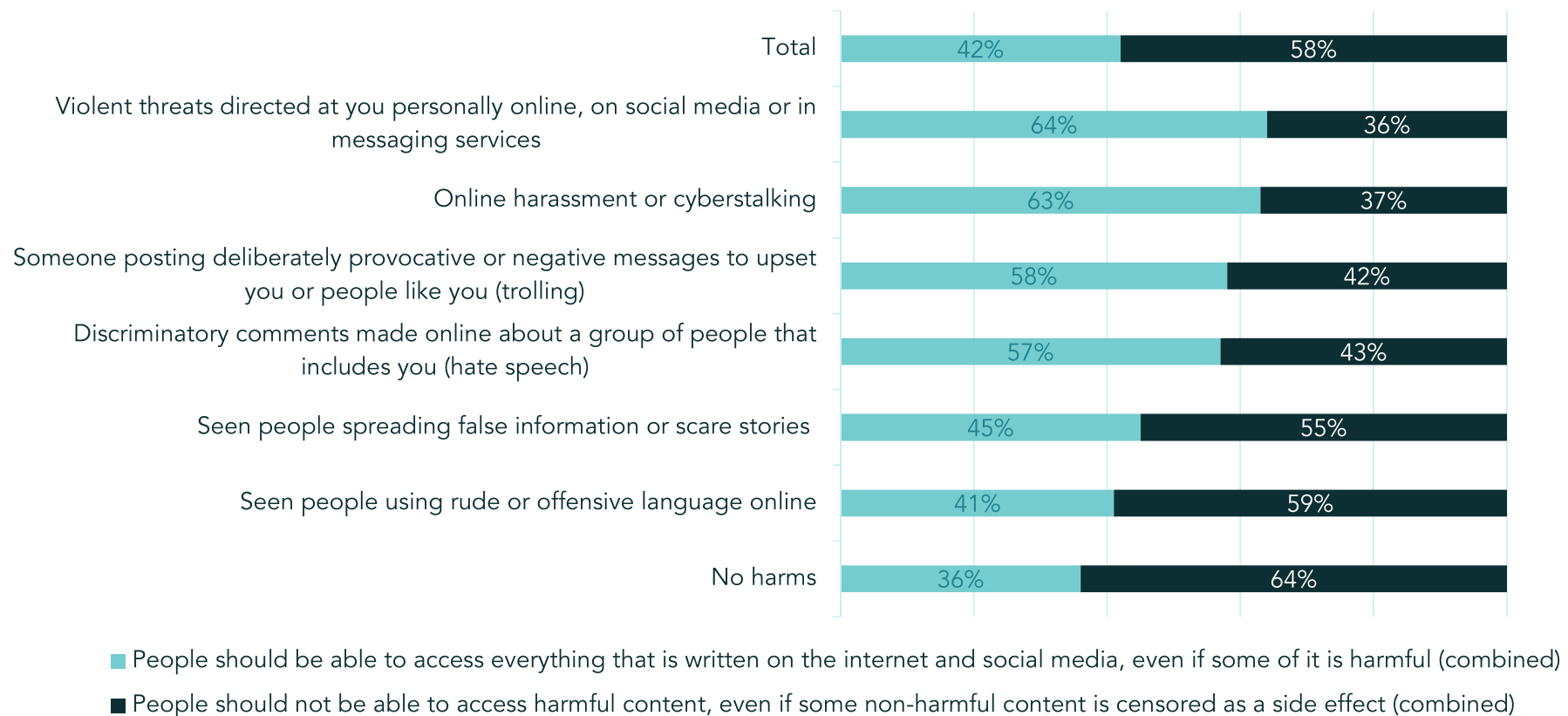
"That's not what we have been saying though, is it!"
(Discussion in the women's group, about whether Facebook should pre-moderate offensive material or if it should be a matter of choice)

"It's a tough call between freedom of speech and actually policing stuff that really warrants people keeping an eye on it" (Men's group)

The Online Generation

- People who have experienced more serious online harms are *less* likely to want some forms of censorship.

- For example, 58% of those who had experienced trolling thought that people should be able to access everything written on the internet even if it is harmful, compared to only 42% of the general public.

- 16% of the population (sample size 333) had (a) personally experienced one or more of: violent threats directed at them personally, hate speech, online harassment/cyberstalking and trolling and had also (b) chosen the tradeoff option that opposed censorship.

- The only relevant variable we could find was age: 65% of this group are under 40.

ATTITUDES TO ACCESS AND PROTECTION BY EXPERIENCE OF ONLINE HARMS

Category	Access everything	Should not access harmful content
Total	42%	58%
Violent threats directed at you personally online, on social media or in messaging services	64%	36%
Online harassment or cyberstalking	63%	37%
Someone posting deliberately provocative or negative messages to upset you or people like you (trolling)	58%	42%
Discriminatory comments made online about a group of people that includes you (hate speech)	57%	43%
Seen people spreading false information or scare stories	45%	55%
Seen people using rude or offensive language online	41%	59%
No harms	36%	64%

■ People should be able to access everything that is written on the internet and social media, even if some of it is harmful (combined)
■ People should not be able to access harmful content, even if some non-harmful content is censored as a side effect (combined)

The Online Generation

We hypothesise that as younger people are more likely to be digital natives, they are likely both to encounter more harmful content but also enjoy the benefits of internet freedoms to a greater extent.

It may also be that, conversely, those who are not experiencing serious harms are those who aren't online because they are more worried about harm than others: we found some evidence for the existence of this group.

The self-excluders

We found examples of people disengaging from online discourse in order to protect themselves from negative online spaces, suggesting a silencing effect.

"I cut down on my Facebook completely….because it was just a white noise of vitriol that was out there" **(Men's group)**

"But then there are also people our age, or 30s or 40s or whatnot, that have already switched off and they've just picked out sections of the internet that they want…." **(Men's group)**

WHO DO THEY THINK IS RESPONSIBLE FOR TAKING ACTION?

- Companies, government and individuals all share responsibility for preventing all types of online harms: each needs to play its part according to its ability to do so.

- Looking specifically at responsibility for the prevention of serious illegal activity, those most responsible were considered to be government and regulators (86%) platform operators (86%) and the police (85%).

- Those most responsible for preventing potentially harmful but not necessarily illegal activity (such as cyberbullying or trolling) were considered to be platform operators (84%), individual internet users (81%) and private messaging services (79%).

- Those most responsible for preventing children accessing things on the internet that are inappropriate for their age were considered to be parents and other responsible adults (86%), platform operators (82%) and private messaging services (80%).

- However we also found that people who had dependent children at home were slightly less likely (82%) to think that the responsibility lay with them than those who didn't (88%), perhaps reflecting the difficulty of the task.

Focus Groups: Need for multiple actors to be involved

"*I mean you are responsible for your children over anybody else so you need to keep an eye on them, check what they're doing and check who they're in contact with. Then equally Facebook, Instagram have got a responsibility to take down things inciting racial hatred that sort of thing. Then I suppose the more severe it gets then it's down to the government and the police to step in*" (Women's group)

Focus Groups: Need for platforms and regulators to act

"I think the platforms, like, Facebook, they're making lots of money so they can afford to get people in to regulate what's going on there. It's as if I had a website and I'm putting bad content, I'm responsible for that, aren't I?" **(Women's group)**

"I didn't used to think so, until quite recently, I thought the social media companies should be able to police their own networks. But recently, all this fake news that is going on, and people just read it and make their opinions about it, and it becomes fact. And then they spread it, and more people read it...I don't think that should be allowed" **(Men's group)**
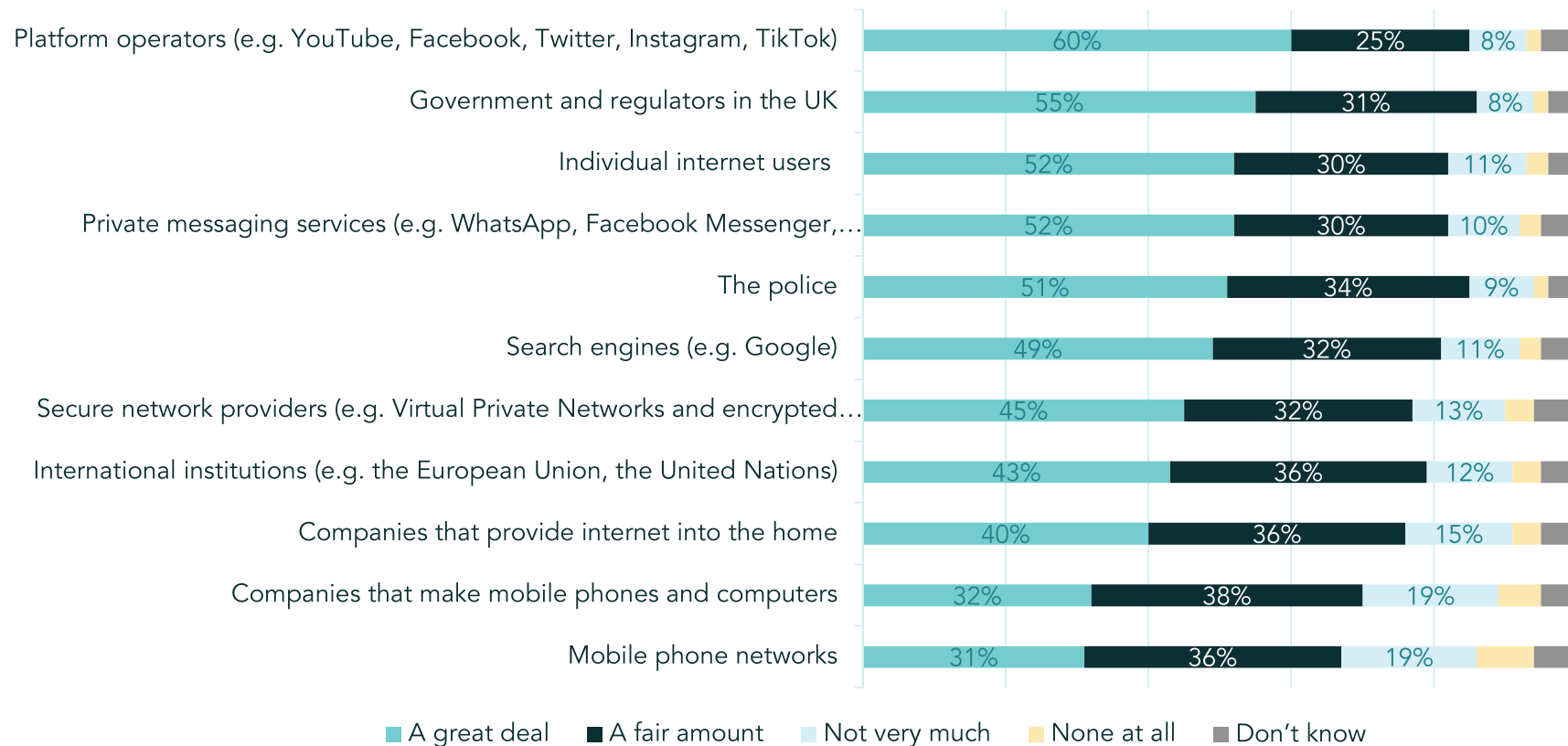
Focus Groups: Need for individual responsibility

"Obviously, I think they should be accountable, the social media platforms but again I suppose individual responsibility has to come in somewhere as well" (Women's group)
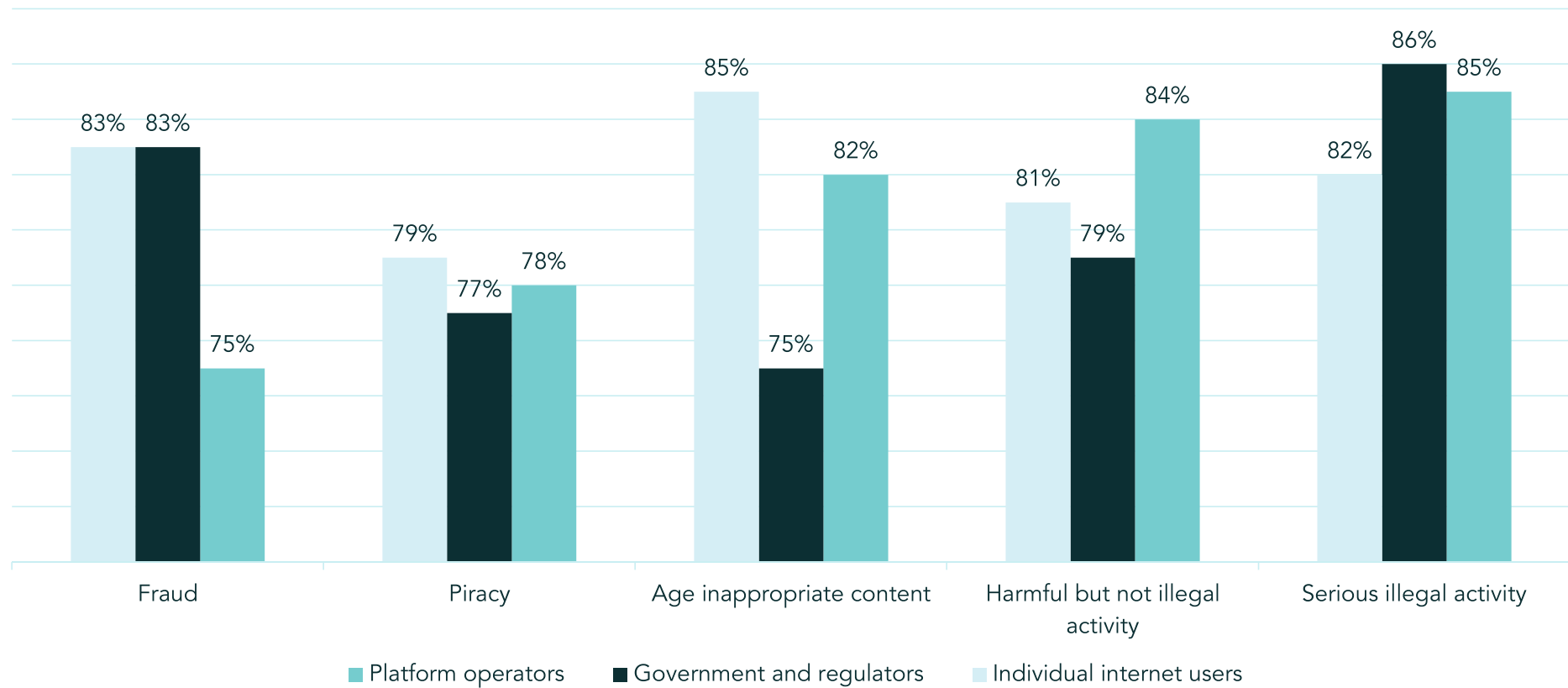
"But I think, as you get older, you're kind of responsible for yourself a little bit...Whereas with younger people, I think it's definitely an everyone else thing, when you're not that clued up about what you're doing" (Men's group)

"I think that with stuff like that does come on Facebook, I do feel it's the user's position to report it. I do feel also that it shouldn't be on there in the first place obviously but it does come down to the adult's decision and the users to report it as soon as they see it. That's how I feel" (Women's group)

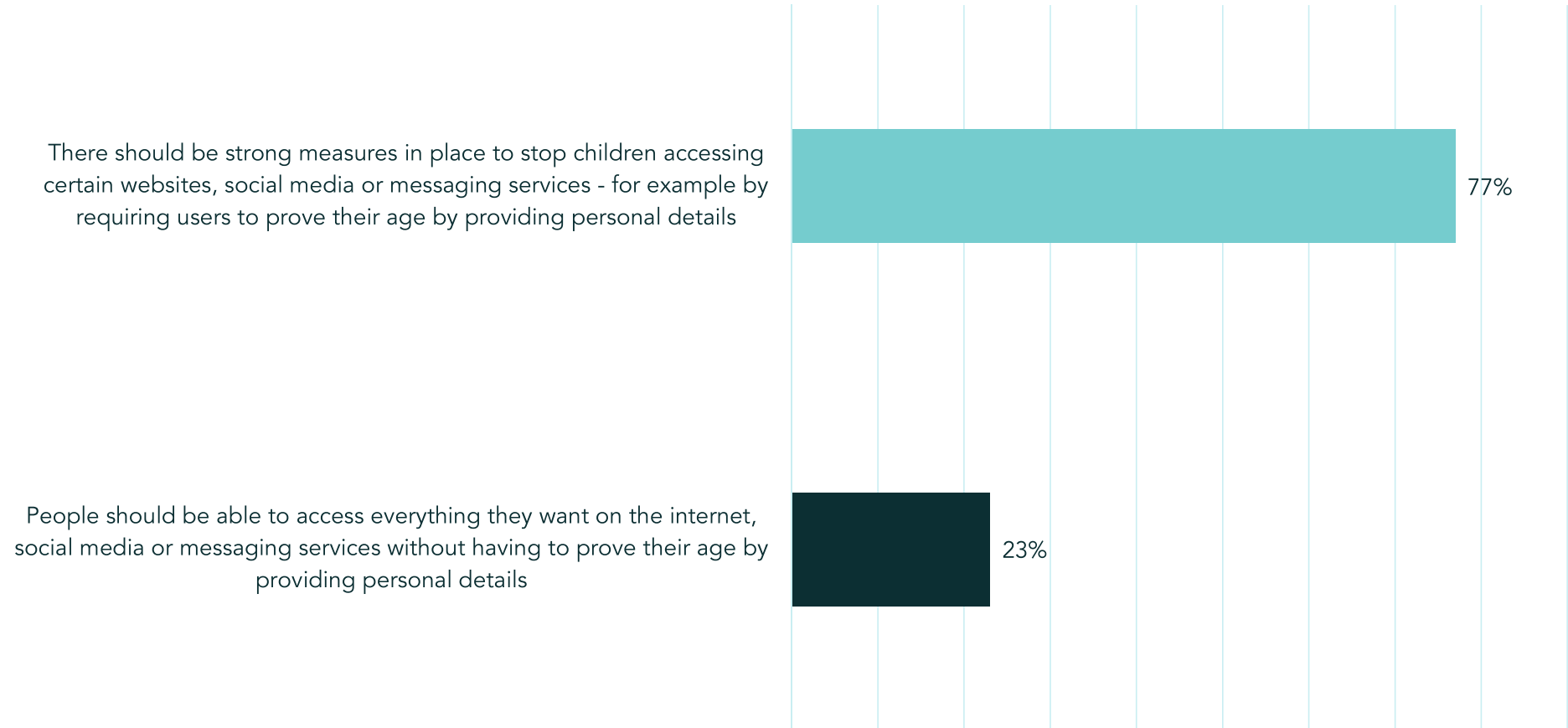# WHO HAS RESPONSIBILITY FOR PREVENTING SERIOUS ILLEGAL ONLINE ACTIVITY?

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not very much
Platform operators (e.g. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok)	60%	25%	8%
Government and regulators in the UK	55%	31%	8%
Individual internet users	52%	30%	11%
Private messaging services (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger,…	52%	30%	10%
The police	51%	34%	9%
Search engines (e.g. Google)	49%	32%	11%
Secure network providers (e.g. Virtual Private Networks and encrypted…	45%	32%	13%
International institutions (e.g. the European Union, the United Nations)	43%	36%	12%
Companies that provide internet into the home	40%	36%	15%
Companies that make mobile phones and computers	32%	38%	19%
Mobile phone networks	31%	36%	19%

■ A great deal ■ A fair amount ■ Not very much ■ None at all ■ Don't know

WHO HAS RESPONSIBILITY FOR PREVENTING SERIOUS ILLEGAL ONLINE ACTIVITY?

Fraud: Individual internet users 83%, Government and regulators 83%, Platform operators 75%

Piracy: Individual internet users 79%, Government and regulators 77%, Platform operators 78%

Age inappropriate content: Individual internet users 85%, Government and regulators 75%, Platform operators 82%

Harmful but not illegal activity: Individual internet users 81%, Government and regulators 79%, Platform operators 84%

Serious illegal activity: Individual internet users 82%, Government and regulators 86%, Platform operators 85%

Platform operators ■ Government and regulators ■ Individual internet users

HOW DO PEOPLE FEEL ABOUT SPECIFIC MEASURES?

There is strong public support for proof of age requirements to access websites unsuitable for children, although there were hesitations around how it might work.

ACCESS WITHOUT PROVIDING PERSONAL DETAILS VS PROOF OF AGE

There should be strong measures in place to stop children accessing certain websites, social media or messaging services - for example by requiring users to prove their age by providing personal details — 77%

People should be able to access everything they want on the internet, social media or messaging services without having to prove their age by providing personal details — 23%

Focus groups: Agreement that preventing anonymous use of online services could help reduce some online harms

"When you do use your actual name online to post, then there is a certain accountability to that, you're less likely to troll than you would otherwise, you act more professionally, I think" (Men's group)

"Yes, I wouldn't mind uploading an ID. ..I wouldn't mind even uploading son's ID if it makes it safer" (Women's group)

"With the age verification, if there was some sort of way you had to verify it with like an ID or something, something a bit more strict because children and young people can always find ways around things" (Women's group)

But there remains uncertainty

"I think that they shouldn't be allowed to [have Facebook] until they're old enough to understand how it works and to be able to deal with stuff that they may or may not see...I don't know how but it would be enforceable but I think it would be a good idea" (Women's group)

"It would be nice for people just to have the freedom to go by whatever name they want. But then you get these people out there, on Twitter threads…being racist" (Men's group)

"I'd prefer people use their real name, but I don't know how you could enforce that, yes. I certainly don't think we should be giving our driving licence and our passport to Twitter, or something like that, I think that's over-reach" (Men's group)

And there are concerns at people being deprived of the positive benefits to using online pseudonyms.

"A lot of people do use usernames because I mean you're scared if you do put down your real name, if someone does troll you or say something nasty...I don't use my own name" **(Women's group)**

"Wanting to distance...[parts of their identity online]. Not because of hiding anything untoward, but literally wanting their own privacy" **(Men's group)**
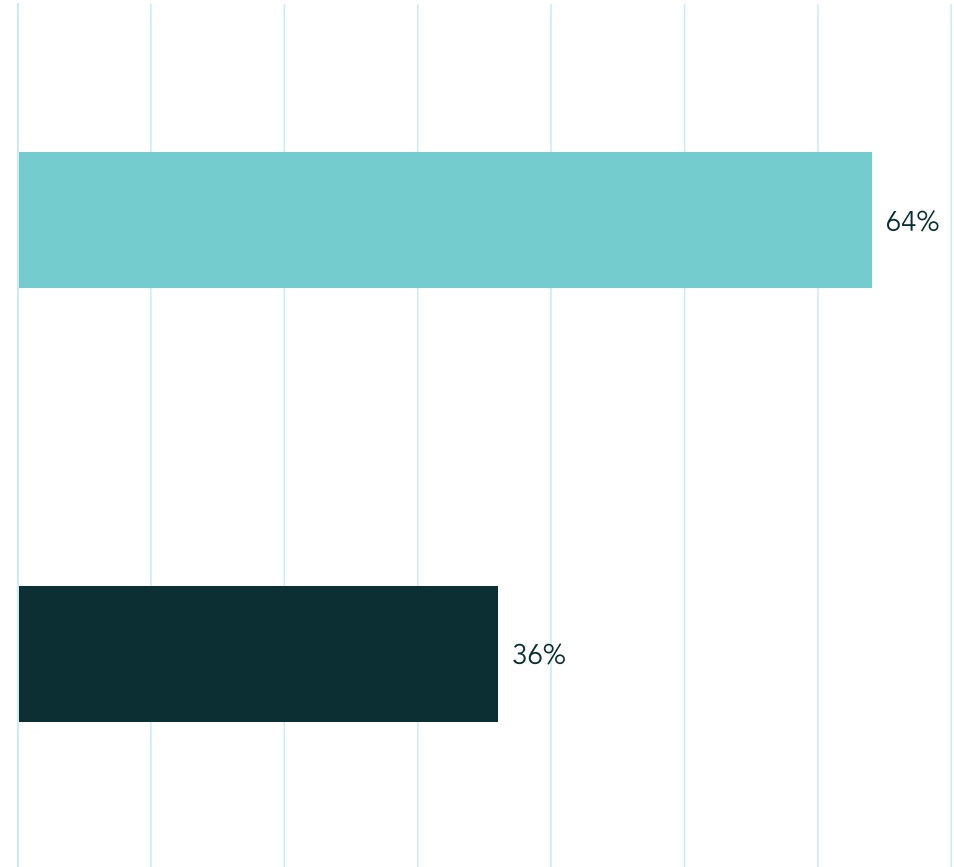
ATTITUDES TO ANONYMITY

Harmful behaviour conducted by anonymous internet users means that everyone should have to use their real name to access services — 64%

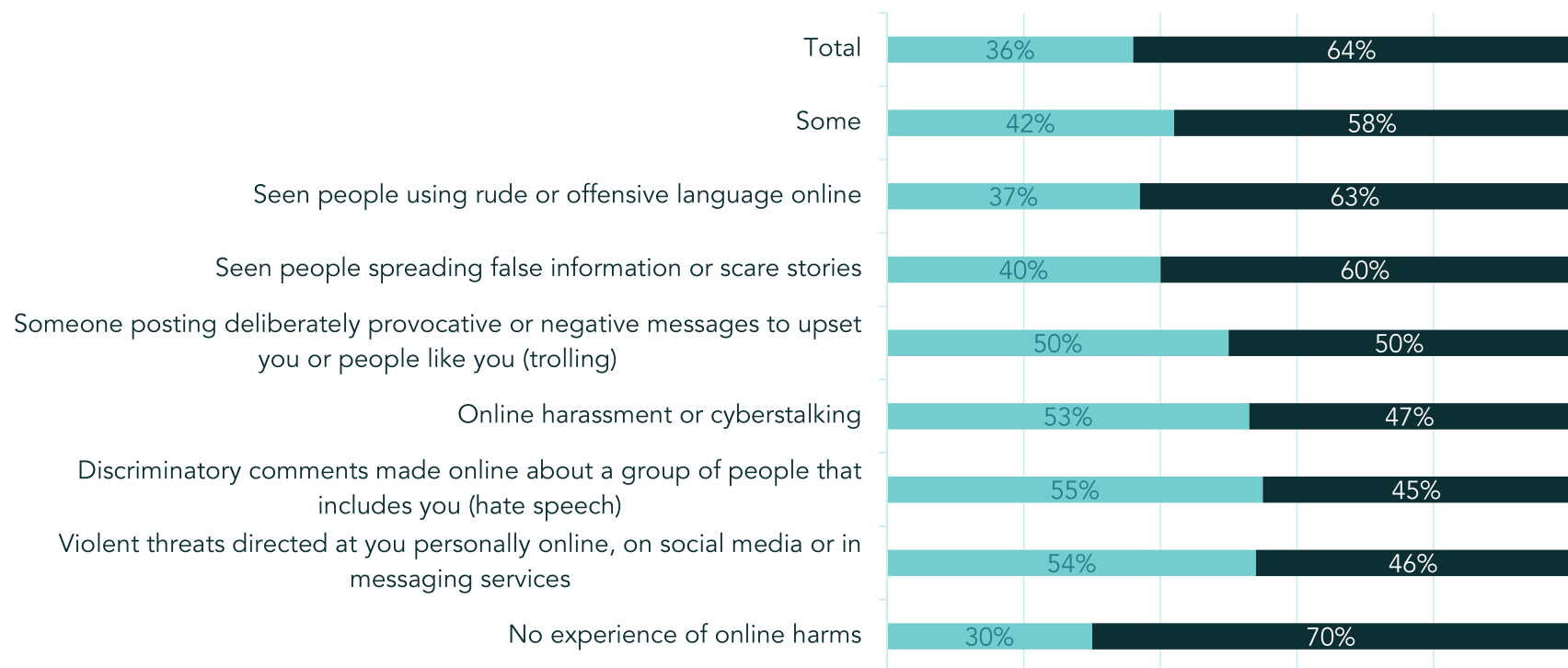Everyone should be able to use the internet without giving their real name. — 36%

However, consistent with our hypothesis of the 'online generation' and the 'self-excluders':

- 54% of those who had experienced violent threats said that everyone should be able to use the internet without giving their real name, compared to 36% of the general public.

- The group most strongly in favour of ending online anonymity had no experience of the online harms surveyed.

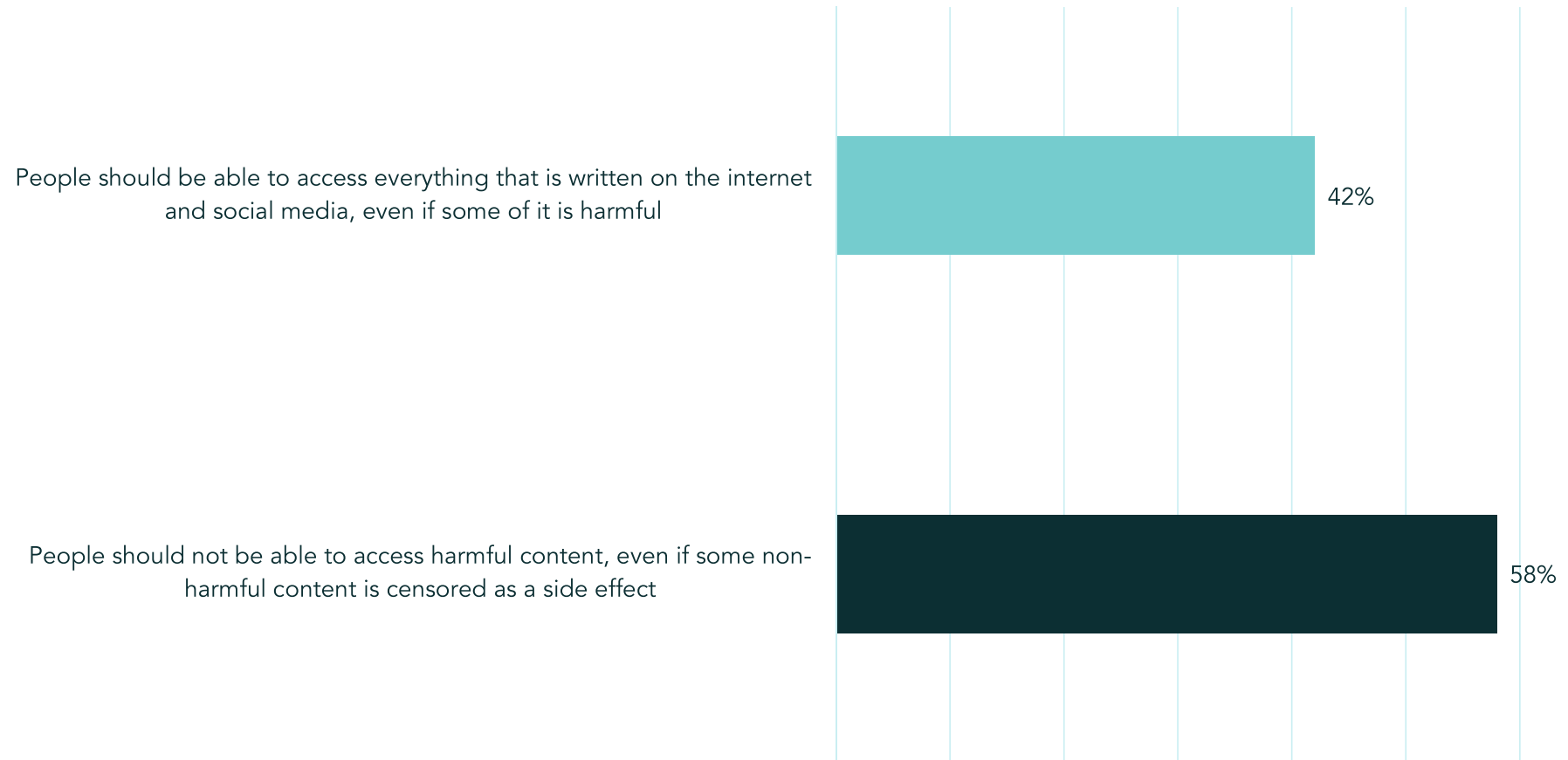# ATTITUDES TO ANONYMITY BY EXPERIENCE OF ONLINE HARMS

Category	Everyone should be able to use the internet without giving their real name (combined)	Harmful behaviour conducted by anonymous internet users means that everyone should have to use their real name to access services (combined)
Total	36%	64%
Some	42%	58%
Seen people using rude or offensive language online	37%	63%
Seen people spreading false information or scare stories	40%	60%
Someone posting deliberately provocative or negative messages to upset you or people like you (trolling)	50%	50%
Online harassment or cyberstalking	53%	47%
Discriminatory comments made online about a group of people that includes you (hate speech)	55%	45%
Violent threats directed at you personally online, on social media or in messaging services	54%	46%
No experience of online harms	30%	70%

■ Everyone should be able to use the internet without giving their real name (combined)

■ Harmful behaviour conducted by anonymous internet users means that everyone should have to use their real name to access services (combined)

Our results show an overall majority for greater content control, although there are concerns at how this could be implemented.

ATTITUDES TO THE ACCESS VS. PREVENTION TRADEOFF

People should be able to access everything that is written on the internet and social media, even if some of it is harmful — 42%

People should not be able to access harmful content, even if some non-harmful content is censored as a side effect — 58%

ATTITUDES TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION ONLINE

People should be free to express themselves online, even if what they say causes serious distress or harm to other people.

35%

People should not be free to express themselves online if what they say causes serious distress or harm to other people.

65%

Focus Groups: Need for more control

"I do think their screening should be more thorough because you would think you shouldn't be allowed to upload something, like, violence against someone else" (Women's group)

"Zuckerberg has been getting a lot of pressure because of the Trump campaign putting out fake news, and then it gets spread around. I don't think that should be allowed, it should be fact-checked, the news should be the news" (Men's group)

Focus Groups: Uncertainty about moderation and enforcement

"I would like to be able to get all content but then be able to control it" (Women's group)

"That's not what we have been saying though, is it, because we're saying that Facebook should filter this before it goes on to the platform!" (Women's group)

"If you don't know [harmful content is] there, who does? Who knows it's going out and who knows how to stop it?" (Men's group)

Focus Groups: But who gets to decide what is legitimate speech?

"And we can see that in Hong Kong at the moment, what's going on there, China is blocking the people's internet access, freedom of speech and things like that. And although I don't expect it to happen here, you never know"
(Men's group)

"There is harmful content and there is harmful content, that we talked about, like terrorism and paedophilia and that sort of thing, which I don't think anyone would object to being removed. But who decides what is harmful?"
(Men's group)

Focus Groups: But who gets to decide what is legitimate speech?

"It has to come from some kind of international organisation or government taskforce, like we talked about. Everyone else is going to have conflict or vested interests" **(Men's group)**

"They shouldn't be able to decide what they deem as harmful, apart from the big [harms - e.g. terrorism/CSEA]" **(Men's group)**

There is support for blocking entire websites as a last resort.

However, there are also concerns around the proportionality of such a response.

WOULD YOU SUPPORT OR OPPOSE BLOCKING AN ENTIRE WEBSITE, SUCH AS A SOCIAL MEDIA SITE, IF, AFTER REPEATED WARNINGS, THEY FAILED TO TAKE STEPS TO STOP THE FOLLOWING BEING POSTED ON FORUMS THEY HOST?

	Strongly support	Support	Oppose
Serious illegal activity such as terrorism related activity or picture of child abuse	66%	21%	4%
Harmful activity such as cyberbullying, trolling, or spreading harmful false information	50%	32%	8%
Content inappropriate for children without the blocks required by regulation to prevent children from accessing it	53%	28%	8%
Scams that take place on social media websites or via messaging services which deceive people in order to take money from them	55%	28%	6%
Online piracy (by which we mean creating, using or circulating or watching illegal, unauthorized copies of someone else's intellectual property, such as music, television programmes, films, live sport, etc)	44%	32%	11%

■ Strongly support ■ Support ■ Oppose ■ Strongly Oppose ■ Don't know

Focus Groups: Concerns over implementation

"If they can't operate within the confines of the law and common decency then I suppose it's got to be taken down" (Women's group)

"For me, my life's photos are on Facebook, we can't close it down. It is a hard one, what would happen to people's content" (Women's group)

"… it tends to be smaller groups or sub-sets within a website, which surely you'd like to think they can handle that, or just completely block or delete that group, and also keep an eye that it doesn't pitch up somewhere else, further down the line" (Men's group)

The public are more split around whether it should be possible to access the content of encrypted private messages: views are divided fairly evenly with strong opinions on both sides.

PRIVATE MESSAGE PRIVACY VS. SERIOUS CRIME PREVENTION

53%

It should be possible to access contents of messages sent between two people in order to identify and prevent serious illegal content such as pictures of child abuse or terrorist activity

47%
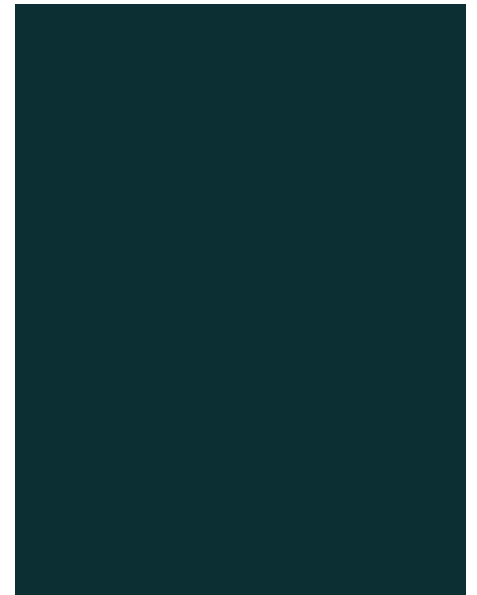
People should be able to send messages privately so that only they and the recipient can see them

Views are evenly split across all options

For each of the following pairs of statements, which comes closest to your views?

A.   People should be able to send messages privately so that only they and the recipient can see them

B. It should be possible to access contents of messages sent between two people in order to identify and prevent serious illegal content such as pictures of child abuse or terrorist activity.

	%
Option A, and I feel strongly about this	25
Option A, but I do not feel strongly about this	22
Option B, but I do not feel strongly about this	30
Option B, and I feel strongly about this	22
Option A (combined)	47
Option B (combined)	53

Focus Groups: A need for access to private messages

"Only just shy of 100% of us are completely bland and just sending crap through the internet basically. But we certainly have to get those people that are causing pain, humiliation, death in some instances I think that almost trumps it all" (Men's group)

"With young girls getting groomed by older men and there's a lot of that obviously going on as well, I feel that the law enforcement and the police do need access to those messages very quick" (Women's group)

Focus Groups: Worries about the possibility of broad access

"That's fine, if someone's being investigated, there is a real reason to hack into their messages and you've got the right to, I think fine. I don't think messages should be accessible across the board" (Women's group)

"I would say that it should be completely private until someone has been proven to be in the wrong and we can then gain further evidence from their conversations, if need be" (Men's group)

Focus Groups: Uncertainty about how to protect rights

"I think the idea of it being private is good...but at the same time, I feel that it is right that imagery and material is scanned...so it's a difficult one" (Men's group)

"...who sets those boundaries of what is a conversation of interest? It's a difficult one" (Women's group)

Focus Groups: Uncertainty about how to protect rights

"I don't know quite how you'd work it out, but I don't feel like everything should be scanned, because most of it is rubbish, in comparison to what they're looking for" **(Men's group)**

"It's a shame that a small minority have to ruin it for the rest of us that should be allowed to have private messages. Not that we've got anything to hide, but we should be allowed to live our lives privately" **(Men's group)**

1 The public are very concerned about online harms: but people don't feel empowered to bring about systemic action on these issues - there is uncertainty and anxiety about what that would look like.

2 People who have experienced online harms feel differently about what action should be taken from those who haven't.

3 We need a more in-depth public conversation on what action is needed on online harms.