

# Science Says Third-Party Risk Audits are Necessary Safeguards for Youth Mental Health

Social media's enduring presence in our society demands attention to the negative impact its deliberate design strategies and algorithms can have on youth mental health.

## Why is social media a concern?

Mental health concerns among young people in the U.S. have been worsening in recent years, with social media as a key potential driver (1-2). Many adolescents are struggling with anxiety, depression, suicide-related thoughts or behaviors, eating disorders, and cyberbullying (2-4). Social media only worsens these concerns by bombarding youth with idealized images and videos on highly visual platforms like Instagram and TikTok, influencing their perceptions of what is valuable and popular in youth culture. While self-comparisons are a natural part of teen development, unchecked algorithms exploit this process, leading to heightened body image and self-esteem concerns (5-6).

## What about the adolescent brain puts young people at risk?

- The adolescent brain is sensitive to peer feedback and social rewards, often relying on "likes" to shape their understanding of social norms.
- Their emotional responses to their social world online are intense due to underdeveloped reasoning and judgment capacity.

- Deceptive design features, combined with heightened sensitivity to rewards, can trap them in excessive scrolling, even if it harms their mental health.

## What can be done to foster online safety?

To create safer online environments and hold platforms accountable, the Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders (STRIPED) has developed the model legislation [\*Social Media Algorithm Accountability Act\*](#) and an accompanying [\*Roadmap\*](#), providing policymakers and community advocates a strategic blueprint for championing policy change to create a healthier digital environment for all youth.

### Action Steps

**Community Members:** Propose to your state representatives to champion the [\*Social Media Algorithm Accountability Act\*](#).

**State Policymakers:** File the [\*Social Media Algorithm Accountability Act\*](#) and work with your colleagues to pass it into law.

Have questions about our Roadmap or model legislation? **Contact us:**  
[\*\*striped@hsph.harvard.edu\*\*](mailto:striped@hsph.harvard.edu)

## References

1. Keyes KM, Gary D, O'Malley PM, Hamilton A, Schulenberg J. Recent increases in depressive symptoms among U.S. adolescents: Trends from 1991 to 2018. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*. 2019, 54(8): 987-996.
2. Twenge JM, Joiner TE, Rogers ML, Martin GN. Increases in depressive symptoms, suicide-related outcomes, and suicide rates among U.S. adolescents after 2010 and links to increased new media screen time. *Clinical Psychological Science*. 2018, 6(1): 3-17.
3. US Department of Health and Human Services/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. 71(1): 230-282.
4. American Academy of Pediatrics. *AAP-AACAP-CHA declaration of a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health*. Oct 19, 2021. Accessed Mar 2, 2024 <https://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/child-and-adolescent-healthy-mental-development/aap-aacap-cha-declaration-of-a-national-emergency-in-child-and-adolescent-mental-health/>.
5. Jiotsa B, Naccache B, Duval M, Rocher B, Grall-Bronnec M. Social media use and body image disorders: Association between frequency of comparing one's own physical appearance to that of people being followed on social media and body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2021;18(6):2880.
6. Papageorgiou A, Fisher C, Cross D. "Why don't I look like her?" How adolescent girls view social media and its connection to body image. *BMC Women's Health*. 2022; 22: 261.