
New York City's Role in the National Crisis of Social Media and Youth Mental Health: Framework for Action

To our fellow New Yorkers:

Our young New Yorkers are the future of our city, and right now, too many are struggling. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many experienced incredible loss, disconnection and stress. Our most recent data find that youth in New York City (NYC) are experiencing hopelessness and even attempting suicide at rates we have never seen before. We are facing a youth mental health crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic is only part of the story, though – our young people’s mental health began to get worse more than a decade ago. This timing coincides with the rise of social media platforms, as they made their way onto our phones and into homes. These social media platforms have not been tested to make sure they are safe for children. Instead, they have been designed by social media companies to be as addictive as possible, making them a digital toxin for children’s mental health.

The research shows that social media can harm youth mental health in a number of ways, such as distorting body image, damaging self-esteem and inviting addiction. Social media use even changes the way that the brain develops. When we talk to young New Yorkers about the different challenges they face in their lives, social media often comes up. Many want to have a healthier relationship to social media, and want to spend more time offline connecting with friends, but they need help.

Since the start of this Administration, we’ve been working tirelessly to empower and protect our young people. We’ve taken steps to keep children safe from gun violence, housing insecurity and climate change, while equipping them with emotionally healthy classrooms, supportive mentors and high-quality work experiences. We’ve also taken steps to increase access to mental health services. Now, we’re taking on social media platforms and supporting young New Yorkers in a way that is healthy – to limit the toxin. This is a commitment we made in our Administration’s Mental Health Plan: Care, Community, Action.

To get our strategy right, we started by listening. We convened over 150 advocates, researchers, technologists, mental health providers, community-based organizations, caregivers and – most critically – NYC youth. We held breakout groups where people could bring their expertise and lived experience to help us understand how best to support young New Yorkers. Out of this came a series of recommendations, and this Framework for Action outlines our commitments.

By taking the actions outlined here we can protect young New Yorkers against this new threat and empower them to use these technologies in ways that are less harmful. With these actions, we will hold social media companies accountable for making their platforms safe for children and provide resources and other supports to our youth, their caregivers and their communities to achieve healthier relationships with social media, stronger offline connections and, ultimately, better mental health.

NYC will always protect and draw strength from its young people. We look forward to partnering with NYC youth and caregivers, as well as educators, providers, community-based organizations and our partner cities across the nation, in delivering on this promise to our most precious resource: our city’s children.



Eric Adams
Mayor



Ashwin Vasani, MD, PhD
Commissioner of Health

Introduction

NYC is facing a crisis in youth mental health. In 2021, 38% of NYC high schoolers reported feeling so sad or hopeless during the past year that they stopped engaging in their usual activities, compared with 27% in 2011. The rate of hopelessness in 2021 was almost 50% higher for Latino and Black students than for White students, and almost 70% higher for female students than for male students. National data indicate that LGBTQ+ youth are facing particular challenges, as they report experiencing hopelessness at almost double the rate of their heterosexual and cisgender peers. Similarly, rates of considering and even attempting suicide have been on the rise for youth, with almost one in 10 NYC high schoolers reporting a suicide attempt in the past year in 2021.

A lot has happened over the last decade that could contribute to worsening youth mental health problems, but we cannot ignore the rise of social media as a likely contributor. Social media became a central part of young people's everyday lives over the same time period that youth mental health concerns increased, especially after the introduction of smartphones.¹ By 2021, 77% of NYC high schoolers reported spending an average of three or more hours per school day in front of screens – not including time spent on schoolwork. Of course, not all social media use is harmful, but unsafe platform design, unfettered access and content, and use by young people without the appropriate education and support can result in recurring toxic exposures that harm young people's mental health.

In June 2023, NYC convened leaders from government, community organizations, education, advocacy and academia, as well as young people and their caregivers and families, to discuss the impacts of social media on mental health. Participants generated recommendations, and the findings from our convening are summarized in NYC's Role in the National Crisis of Social Media and Youth Mental Health: Meeting Proceedings. As our efforts proceed, we are committed to listening to diverse perspectives and continuing dialogues with communities affected by the issue. NYC's Framework for Action is already underway, led by the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and New Yorkers can expect to see progress in the coming months as we advocate for reforms, provide resources to families and communities, and share our research findings. The City will update the public on the actions taken every year.

NYC wants to ensure that social media platforms are safe for young people and to empower them, their caregivers and their communities to use social media in ways that promote well-being and limit unsafe exposure. We cannot be the generation that stood idly by while toxic social media ran rampant over our children and their well-being. The time to act is now.

¹ We define "social media" in the same way as the Kids Online Safety Act, which is currently being considered in Congress: a "platform [that] predominantly provides a community forum for user-generated content and discussion, including sharing videos, images, games, audio files, discussion in a virtual setting, or other content, such as acting as a social media platform, virtual reality environment, or a social network service."

NYC's Framework for Action

We will achieve our goals for social media platform reform and provide support to youth and families through a three-pronged strategy:

1. **Accountability:** Social media companies must change the design of their platforms to be safer for young people. To hold companies accountable for making these changes, NYC will:
 - ⦿ Issue the Call to Action for Social Media Companies From the City of New York (see Page 6) outlining their obligations to NYC youth and children across the nation and the world;
 - ⦿ Support federal legislation that creates a regulatory framework for social media companies to protect children from mental health harms, as well as state legislation that targets addictive features of social media platforms; and
 - ⦿ Monitor and participate in litigation against social media companies for harms to youth mental health.
2. **Education and Support:** Young people and their families need support to gain knowledge and skills to become healthier users of social media. To empower youth, families and communities, NYC will:
 - ⦿ Issue a Commissioner's Advisory on social media as a toxin impacting children's mental health to create broad awareness of the threat;
 - ⦿ Disseminate resources and educational materials that cover digital literacy and citizenship, positive social media use, challenges such as cyberbullying and online predators, and relevant social and emotional skills for both young people and adults, which may include guides on how most effectively to use evidence-based materials from other sources (for more details, see How We Will Support NYC Youth, Families and Communities on Page 7);
 - ⦿ Train school educators and administrators on how to integrate resources into curricula and expand mental health supports in schools and after-school programming, including enhancing implementation of existing materials;
 - ⦿ Train pediatricians and other health care providers on how to talk to their patients and their parents and caregivers about the mental health impacts of social media use;
 - ⦿ Train community-based organizations in how to integrate conversations and resources on social media and youth mental health into their programming to reach diverse communities;
 - ⦿ Issue "tech-free zone" guidance for schools and other community programs, while encouraging families to explore similar opportunities;
 - ⦿ Create forums and support groups for caregivers to discuss how best to support their children's mental health in the age of social media and that will be responsive to the needs of diverse communities;
 - ⦿ Create resources for adults on adopting and modeling healthy social media and device use, especially in front of youth and children; and
 - ⦿ Establish a youth advisory council that represents diverse voices to elevate and incorporate the voices of young people in the development of programming on social media and youth mental health, including enhancing opportunities in communities and schools to facilitate offline connection, as well as to elevate technologies and uses of social media that promote mental health.

3. Research: Studying the impacts of social media on NYC youth will help us advance our knowledge and address local needs. To close gaps in research, NYC will:

- ⊙ Identify where local data can support existing research on this topic, including:
 - Surveying NYC youth on their experiences with social media, why they use social media, their current social media habits and social media’s impacts on their mental health; and
 - Measuring the role of social media in the decline in youth mental health in NYC over the past decade, and measuring the associated costs to the City.
- ⊙ Partner with other governments, academia, industry and nonprofit organizations to build on existing research and share learnings; and
- ⊙ Examine key research questions (see Our Priorities for Research on Page 8), including:
 - What are the types of social media – both type of platform and type of content, and including duration and frequency of use – that are most associated with worse mental health outcomes;
 - What are the reasons that youth use social media, and how do these relate to mental health;
 - Which groups of youth are most at risk for worse mental health outcomes when using social media; and
 - Which harm reduction strategies are most effective in reducing mental health harms associated with social media use?

A Call to Action for Social Media Companies From the City of New York

Companies must make sure that their products are safe for children. Social media companies have avoided this responsibility so far, contributing to the youth mental health crisis in NYC, around the nation and around the world. NYC calls for all social media companies to take the following steps to ensure the safety of their platforms for children:

Do No Harm: Conduct independent audits of their platforms' impacts on children's mental health and address issues identified:

- ⦿ Post the results of an annual audit, disaggregated by demographics, including how the audit was conducted, what was found and what actions the company took in response; and
- ⦿ Enable regulators to inspect the audit process and results.

Put Safety at the Center: Make children's mental health part of design decisions and ensure that new features do not cause harm, including by:

- ⦿ Adhering to design safety guidelines created by a reputable, independent third party;
- ⦿ Creating transparent processes for reporting complaints related to youth mental health, including aggregated reporting on types of complaints and actions taken in response;
- ⦿ Publicly sharing the methods the company uses for ensuring feature safety, such as assessing the potential mental health impacts of proposed new features, with demographic subgroup analyses to avoid inequities; and
- ⦿ Posting the results of the safety tests for new features, including any warnings for users.

Empower Young Users: Support children to control their experience, including customization options when they first make accounts and regular prompts to review settings, along with default settings that maximally protect mental health and privacy so that the burden is not on young people to protect themselves, which may include:

- ⦿ Required tutorials for users as part of making an account and ongoing guidance on healthy, developmentally appropriate use that is culturally and linguistically responsive and disability accessible;
- ⦿ Options to shape what is included on feeds, with defaults that are the most protective and guidance on how these choices may impact mental health;
- ⦿ Youth and caregiver councils that provide insight into feature design; and
- ⦿ Limitations on contact with strangers, unapproved accounts or older users.

Engage Caregivers: Enable caregivers to link accounts with their child, and provide them with tools for protecting children's mental health, including:

- ⦿ Culturally and linguistically responsive tutorials and ongoing guidance on supporting children's health, including how to use parental controls;
- ⦿ Control over privacy settings, content restrictions, feeds and total time spent on a platform; and
- ⦿ Aggregate analytics on issues such as total time spent on each platform.

Allow Independent Research: Allow researchers to access data to study impacts on children's mental health, while still protecting privacy, including by:

- ⦿ Instituting a transparent system that enables researchers to access necessary data and publish findings without approval processes or editorial control by companies; and
- ⦿ Public, independent audits by independent third parties to ensure researcher access to data and user privacy protections.

How We Will Support NYC Youth, Families and Communities

Building on our existing youth mental health resources and programs, NYC will:

- ⦿ **Promote Informed and Supported Use:** Reach all children and families with culturally and linguistically appropriate digital literacy and digital citizenship training and resources, including elevating existing evidence-based materials that include information about:
 - How platforms are designed in ways that influence children’s mental health; and
 - How to use platforms in ways that best align with a child’s and family’s values.
- ⦿ **Develop Online Skills:** Expand and reinforce content on mental health and social media in social and emotional skill-building programs and mental health education, including:
 - Building developmentally appropriate digital and social and emotional skills at every age;
 - Mindfully assessing thoughts and behaviors when using social media;
 - Protecting safety online, including avoiding predators, harmful content and cyberbullying; and
 - Creating habits around social media that promote well-being.
- ⦿ **Empower Youth Leadership:** Elevate the ideas of young people from all different backgrounds and lived experiences about how to promote mental health and address harms of social media, such as:
 - Making dedicated space to discuss social media and mental health in schools, after-school programs and other community settings;
 - Supporting clubs, organizations and programs that allow young people to implement strategies to promote healthy social media use; and
 - Encouraging youth to share their perspectives with social media companies, policymakers and other stakeholders to drive reform.
- ⦿ **Support Caregivers, Families and Communities:** Ensure that all trusted adults in a community, from parents and health care providers to educators and community-based organizations, reinforce effective skills for protecting mental health when using social media, including:
 - Aligned messaging that supports the key digital literacy, citizenship, and social and emotional skills that young people need to thrive;
 - Starting conversations about social media and mental health with young people and their families where they can be honest and discuss the issues they face;
 - Skills to modify adult social media and device use toward healthier use as modeling for young people; and
 - Supporting community and family organizations to share concerns with social media companies, policymakers and other stakeholders to build momentum for policy change.
- ⦿ **Create Space for Connection:** Promote opportunities for young people to socialize, play, study and relax that do not involve social media, such as:
 - Promoting “tech-free zones” in schools and after-school programming that help young people to disconnect from social media and reengage in offline activities;
 - Promoting access to activities they enjoy as a protective factor from harmful social media use; and
 - Discouraging smartphone ownership among children younger than 14 years old, and then encouraging families to reassess based on the current evidence of harms and the child’s strengths and needs.

Our Priorities for Research

Understanding the Needs of NYC Youth and Families: NYC is surveying youth and families to help us understand:

- ⦿ Whether youth and their caregivers use social media, how often they use it and what platforms they use;
- ⦿ Why youth and their caregivers use social media, including both positive and negative reasons for use;
- ⦿ How youth and their caregivers assess the impacts of social media use on the youth's mental health;
- ⦿ What feelings the youth experiences as a result of their social media use, including both positive and negative impacts;
- ⦿ What behaviors the youth associates with their social media use, whether positive or negative, such as those related to self-harm; and
- ⦿ Caregiver perspectives on whether social media should be regulated.

We will also ask questions about mental health, mental health service use, personal background and other mental health risk factors. This will allow us to analyze:

- ⦿ How different aspects of social media use, including frequency of use, platform most frequently used and reasons for using social media, are associated with mental health outcomes, controlling for personal background and other mental health risk factors;
- ⦿ How youth's feelings associated with social media use relate to their mental health;
- ⦿ Which youth face especially high risk of poor mental health outcomes associated with different aspects of social media use, based on personal background and other mental health risk factors; and
- ⦿ What factors might be protective of mental health when using social media, such as open dialogue between caregivers and young people about use, and how NYC can bolster those factors through resources, programs and policies.

Exploring Innovative Methods for Assessing Impacts: Social media companies have increasingly obscured access to their data, making it difficult to research the impacts of their platforms on children's mental health. NYC will explore innovative methods, including the use of big data and machine learning techniques. This research will allow us to:

- ⦿ More precisely measure the impact social media platforms have on youth mental health in NYC
- ⦿ Identify the societal and economic costs of social media to NYC, based on its harms to youth mental health