
New York City's Role in the National Crisis of Social Media and Youth Mental Health: Meeting Proceedings



Introduction

Social media technologies are increasingly shaping the lives of young people. While aspects of these technologies can provide benefits, a growing body of evidence indicates that, left unregulated, these technologies can harm the mental health of youth. The role of social media in the lives of young people will only grow in the coming years, causing further exposure to a poorly understood toxin. As a leader in local public health efforts, such as tobacco control and nutrition, and the home to almost two million young people, New York City (NYC) must take action to address the environmental toxin of unregulated social media technologies.

We define “social media” in the same way as the **Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA)**, 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 June 2023 Convening

In the City’s mental health plan – **Care, Community, Action: A Mental Health Plan for New York City** – released in March 2023, we pledged to take action across three main focus areas: Child, Youth and Family Mental Health; Serious Mental Illness; and Overdose Response. One strategy outlined in the Child, Youth and Family portion is to address how social media is impacting the mental health of youth in NYC. To launch this effort, NYC hosted a convening titled NYC’s Role in the National Crisis of Social Media and Youth Mental Health on June 8, 2023. The event brought together more than 150 participants across government, community organizations, advocates, academics, families and youth. At the convening, participants explored the science, lived experience, evolving technologies and policy landscape surrounding social media, then engaged in discussion on potential directions in four areas: the research agenda, support for youth and families, policy and advocacy, and litigation and accountability. The convening agenda can be found in the Appendix.

Hosted at The Rockefeller Foundation, the event began with remarks from Dr. Ashwin Vasani, the Commissioner of the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. The Commissioner made the case that unregulated social media is impacting young people like an environmental toxin and underscored the importance of acting quickly to understand and mitigate harms. Dr. Vasani was followed by NYC Mayor Eric Adams, who discussed the escalating concerns of social media’s impact on young people and NYC’s commitment to protecting our youth. Mayor Adams and Dr. Vasani charged the group with developing recommendations NYC could act on together with partners to reign in this emerging public health threat.

The convening then transitioned to two level-setting panels. The first panel focused on what we know about social media's impact on NYC youth and how we can address the platforms while supporting youth, families, educators and health care providers. The panel titled *The Future of Social Media and Its Implications for Children's Mental Health* consisted of youth, technologists and scientists. Key takeaways of the first panel included:

- ⦿ **Impact of Social Media:** Social media has both positive and negative effects on users. It can be a part of the culture and an uplifting experience but can also play a role in developing addictive behavior and depressive symptoms.
- ⦿ **Behavioral Effects on Adolescents:** Adolescent brain development, which continues developing until around 25 years old, is profoundly shaped by social and emotional experiences. As such, adolescents are likely to be especially vulnerable to constant social media engagement, driven by algorithmic feeds. The developmental impacts can lead to negative outcomes for some individuals, such as decreased self-control and increased vulnerability to cyberbullying and harmful content.
- ⦿ **Commodification of Lives:** Social media's addictive nature is rooted in the commodification and datafication of users' lives. This harmful aspect requires societal recognition and active intervention, not placing blame on the younger generation.
- ⦿ **Emotional Impact:** Social media changes how young people express emotions and interact with adults, often resulting in a lack of self-regulation. Greater understanding and involvement from parents in their children's online activities is crucial to ensuring that self-regulation skills develop.
- ⦿ **Role of the Technology (Tech) Industry:** The tech industry needs to play a proactive role in addressing the problems associated with social media. This can be done through improved content moderation, safer system designs, and healthier ways of measuring and understanding engagement.
- ⦿ **Literacy and Education:** Developing a social media literacy curriculum in schools, teaching parents about potential problems and building competency within the apps themselves can help mitigate potential harms.
- ⦿ **Importance of Balance:** Maintaining balance in social media use along with other aspects of life such as exercise, diet and sleep are vital to mental well-being. Extremes in these areas can lead to severe negative outcomes, such as increases in self-harm-related behaviors.
- ⦿ **Positive Algorithms:** Designing algorithms that emphasize positive and constructive content can help create healthier online spaces and minimize the negative impact on users, especially young people.

The second panel was titled *Challenges and Opportunities in Regulating Social Media Technologies* and more deeply explored considerations for regulating the design of social media platforms to protect youth mental health. The panel was made up of youth, advocates and academics. Some key takeaways from the panel included:

- ⦿ **Regulation and Legislation:** A stronger federal regulatory framework is needed to ensure that social media platforms protect users, especially youth, from harm. However, progress in introducing such regulations has been slow.

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- ⦿ **Involvement of Adults:** Parents and guardians should be supported to help their child develop healthy social media habits and to support their children if they are exposed to online harms, such as cyberbullying.
 - ⦿ **Need for Targeted Regulations:** It is crucial to develop targeted regulations that address harmful aspects of social media design without blanket bans on access to the technologies.
 - ⦿ **Data Transparency:** Greater transparency in how social media platforms function and use data can empower users and policymakers alike.
 - ⦿ **Business Model Change:** The underlying business models of social media platforms often encourage addictive behaviors. A shift in this model to prioritize users' mental health and well-being is necessary. In particular, behavioral advertising business models that provide incentives for companies to design products that maximize engagement to obtain more user data for targeted advertising are particularly inappropriate for younger users.
 - ⦿ **Role of State and Local Initiatives:** State and local-level education, empowerment, and accountability initiatives are essential to understanding and addressing the impact of social media on youth.
 - ⦿ **Form Broad Coalitions:** Broad coalitions across political, demographic and expertise lines are important to enforce impactful legislation.

Each session began with a landscape overview by an expert in the field, followed by a facilitated small-group discussion to develop actionable recommendations for the City and its partners. The goals of the breakout sessions were:

- ⦿ **Research Agenda:** Identify opportunities to move forward the research on social media and youth mental health to close key gaps in our understanding and support action.
- ⦿ **Support for Youth, Families, Educators and Providers:** Identify promising strategies that government agencies, community stakeholders, youth and families could test that would protect youth mental health when using social media.
- ⦿ **Policy and Advocacy:** Determine policy objectives and advocacy strategies that would be effective in protecting youth mental health while preserving benefits when using social media.
- ⦿ **Litigation and Accountability:** Examine opportunities for litigation based on harms to youth mental health, including understanding the cost of these harms to governments.

Discussion and Recommendations

The following are summaries of our findings from each of the four breakout sessions and recommendations offered by the participants.

Research Agenda

Thousands of studies examine the relationship between different aspects of social media use and youth mental health. The research is complex because young people use social media for many different purposes and in many different contexts, but there is growing evidence social media use could contribute to negative impacts on youth mental health. While existing studies originally looked at associations between screen time and mental health, the research is becoming increasingly more targeted and testing new approaches. Examples of current initiatives in social media research include:

- ⦿ The National Institutes for Health initiated a set of research activities focused on understanding social media and youth mental health.
- ⦿ The Surgeon General's Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health offered an analysis of the current literature and recommendations for researchers.

At the convening, a federal research funder and a leading academic set the stage for the group discussion. The discussion revealed a pressing need for comprehensive research on social media design, user behaviors and how this impacts the mental health of youth, especially youth facing other forms of structural oppression, such as racism and ableism. The research should encompass understanding youths' perception of privacy, the impact of algorithmic targeting, and the correlation between different social media design elements and uses and mental health and well-being. The discussion underscored the need for research to actively involve young people and their families with a focus on identifying the protective and harmful factors within various communities. Underrepresented groups should have an active role in codesigning research and policy to promote equity.

Recommendations from the group included:

- ⦿ **Understanding Youth Interaction:** There is a need for more in-depth research on youth's understanding of digital safety and privacy, risks to mental health such as algorithms that lead them to harmful sites, the influence of algorithms and other design elements on user behavior, how young users translate their offline experiences into their online behaviors and vice versa, and how different youth vulnerabilities and protective factors relate to social media's impacts.
- ⦿ **Enhancing Community Participation in Research:** The research process should involve more ground-up participation from youth and families, from conceptualizing studies to implementing and understanding findings. This could be accomplished through community advisory boards, school and community-based research design, organizing school competitions for solutions, offering youth paid experiences in research and development, and incorporating the concepts of diversity, equity and inclusion in all research projects.
- ⦿ **Identification of Protective Factors:** Research needs to identify and understand the protective factors for youth mental health in the face of social media use, especially in the context of diverse communities, including the role of parents, schools, peers and community groups.

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- ⦿ **Gather More Data To Promote Equity:** There is a need for more data and insight from diverse communities, including better representation in research, understanding the experiences of these groups online and offline, and exploring who is at a greater risk of distress from social media use. This research could be accelerated by providing incentives to youth and families, particularly for research in communities of color and underserved communities.
 - ⦿ **Role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Social Media:** AI has the potential to create positive algorithms and auto-redirection, personalize interventions to support youth, and enable analysis of large data sets for additional insights. Other technological approaches such as augmented virtual reality and wearable computers could also be explored.
 - ⦿ **Collaboration for Better Research Outcomes:** Greater collaboration with tech companies, other researchers and industry organizations should be pursued. This can include mining data from tech companies, sharing research findings bilaterally and forming a data cooperative for better access to datasets.

Support for Youth, Families, Educators and Health Care Providers

As concern for the impact of social media on youth mental health grows, different groups across the country have begun to test strategies for addressing potential harms. Some include:

- ⦿ Campaigns to encourage youth and families to minimize harmful social media use
- ⦿ Supporting family collaboration to establish shared norms on healthy social media use
- ⦿ Implementing digital literacy and skill-building curricula in schools and other settings
- ⦿ Developing policies in schools and communities on cyberbullying and online abuse
- ⦿ Creating other online social spaces that are designed to be healthier for young people

The federal government has initiated several areas of work in this space, including a Surgeon General's Advisory, the Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health led by the American Academy of Pediatrics and an interagency task force, which together will offer more detailed and evidence-based guidance to families, providers, policymakers and even tech companies. The National Academy of Medicine is also leading a consensus study with recommendations on this topic.

The head of the federally funded Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health explored the current evidence and potential directions to consider. The group discussed various strategies for tackling mental health issues related to social media use, stressing the need for comprehensive, multifaceted engagement. Overall, participants believe strategies should promote equity and incorporate the community, workplaces and various family configurations. Involving communities in designing interventions, incorporating youth perspectives and involving community leaders are essential elements of these strategies.

Recommendations from the group included:

- ⦿ **Family Support and Education:** Parents and caregivers need structured spaces and resources to discuss managing their children’s social media use and share best practices. It is crucial to include youth in conversations and engage youth in implementation as compensated peer educators. Education about social media, creating safe spaces for conversations about social media, and promotion of positive social media norms are essential. This can be achieved through strategies such as digital wellness classes in school curriculums, toolkits and complementary workshops for parents to understand healthy social media use, youth peer support, and social emotional learning programs.
- ⦿ **Supporting Health Care Providers:** Pediatric providers can also ask about social media use and youth mental health, reinforce key messages and resources, and help start important family conversations.
- ⦿ **Promote Inclusive and Equitable Community Engagement:** Strategies should identify the most impacted communities and ensure engagement through an equity-based lens, using language that is solution-focused and not fear-driven. By understanding the needs of different communities, interventions can be codeveloped based on actual needs. Engaging community partners, employees, parents and caregivers are all essential for a more inclusive and equitable approach to managing and mitigating social media-related mental health issues.
- ⦿ **Create Strong Alternatives:** Young people excessively use social media if they do not have desirable or accessible alternatives for socializing and exploring interests. Families, schools and communities can ensure youth have access to offline experiences that offer them joy and belonging.

Policy and Advocacy

Current laws regulate obscenity and children’s privacy on social media platforms. On the other hand, current laws also protect companies from liability for content that users post on their platforms. Recently, there have been several attempts across the U.S. to protect youth against online harms, including:

- ⦿ KOSA, a Congressional bipartisan bill meant to reduce the harms of social media on youth by requiring social media companies to implement safeguards on their platforms. It also establishes a “duty of care” for social media companies to prevent certain harms, among a range of other provisions. KOSA has been introduced in the U.S. Senate, and further action is needed to build bicameral momentum for reform.
- ⦿ The California Age-Appropriate Design Code Act, which was passed in September 2022 and will go into effect on July 1, 2024. It puts in place privacy and design protections for technologies used by children. The California law is currently being challenged on freedom of speech grounds among other issues.

Policy leaders from two organizations working on advocacy to protect youth mental health online provided a grounding for the group. The discussion highlighted current policy initiatives, such as KOSA and the California Age-Appropriate Design Code Act. Together, the group discussed the need to hold social media companies accountable for the design of their platforms, including regulation of systems that promote exposure to negative or harmful content. For example, regulation could require companies to design algorithms so feeds for users younger than age 16 are age-appropriate. In addition to making a number of policy recommendations, the group discussed how to balance free expression and safety, such as through warnings or fact checks on harmful content. They also brought up the debate around age verification and discussed options that potentially offer a better balance between privacy and safety.

The group recommended that policies include:

- ⦿ **Mitigating Risks:** Companies should be required to mitigate the risks of harm to youth mental health before a product is offered to the public.
- ⦿ **Enhance Digital Literacy:** Platforms should incorporate education and skill-building to avoid social media risks, possibly even requiring a digital skills course completion “diploma” before the creation of a social media account.
- ⦿ **Upholding User Rights:** Children’s human rights, privacy protections and consumer rights should be codified and upheld. This can include giving users a full set of options for account controls, such as limiting potentially harmful advertisements. Companies should also provide greater transparency about the data they collect and how it is used.
- ⦿ **Protecting Diverse Communities:** The harms of social media are often disproportionately experienced by communities experiencing structural oppression, such as racism and ableism, so any policies or regulations need to consider and address these disproportionate impacts.
- ⦿ **Community Engagement and Data:** Policies should have mechanisms for engaging youth and families in design and implementation. The results of this engagement should be paired with developing policies that are responsive to new data and research findings.
- ⦿ **Auditing AI Systems:** Policies should incorporate audit requirements for the AI systems and other algorithms used by social media platforms. It is essential to establish mechanisms to verify on an ongoing basis AI systems are working as intended in protecting youth mental health.

Litigations and Harms

More than 246 government entity plaintiffs have filed suit against social media platforms related to youth mental health and related harms, alleging that the platforms are intentionally designed to create addictive behavior, fail to use adequate age verification, encourage minors to bypass parental controls and intentionally amplify damaging content. These lawsuits, which have been consolidated into a multidistrict litigation in federal court (MDL No. 3047), include both personal injury claims and claims filed by school districts

and municipalities on behalf of their youth. Motions to dismiss have been filed in both proceedings, with defendants arguing existing federal law protects platforms from these kinds of suits and challenging the extent to which platforms can be held accountable for impacts to youth mental health.

To help participants understand potential directions in litigation and related strategies, the group heard from leading litigators who have brought suits against social media companies and a data scientist and academic whose work focuses on estimating harms before moving into group discussion. Litigation against social media platforms will likely require substantiating the harm they cause and calculating the associated costs, underscoring the importance of meticulous data gathering and analysis.

Recommendations from the group included:

- ⦿ **Legal and Policy Efforts:** From filing amicus briefs to passing local ordinances to joining lawsuits, various legal avenues should be explored. Damages and other remedies should be based on the degree of public harm, particularly to children, caused by social media platforms. Damages can be estimated from a variety of data sources, including by gathering data from NYC youth, exploring which city agencies and schools have incurred costs related to combating negative social media impacts, and employing experts, such as epidemiologists, psychologists and economists, to aid in litigation.
- ⦿ **Role of the Community in Litigation:** Engaging affected parties, including youth, their families and the wider community, is crucial. Efforts should be made to ensure they are meaningfully engaged throughout the process. Gathering information through research, surveys and firsthand accounts from parents, children and educators can provide valuable evidence. Individuals, communities, local governments, educational institutions and states can initiate and support litigation efforts. Efforts should be made to educate the public about litigation opportunities and support them in holding companies accountable.

Wrap-Up and Conclusion

After the breakout sessions, participants reconvened as a full group to discuss their findings and next steps. A panel of breakout group moderators shared high-level takeaways from each group. Next, youth shared their recommendations for stakeholders, with an emphasis on ensuring social media companies design products with their needs in mind, strengthening mental health supports for young people in schools. and better equipping adults to have informed conversations about social media. Dr. Vasani closed the convening, thanking everyone for their contributions to NYC's work in this area, highlighting the development of the Action Plan and inviting everyone to continue to partner on addressing social media's impact on youth mental health in NYC in the coming years.

Summary of Recommendations for Different Stakeholders

Stakeholders	Recommendations
Youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice mindful use of social media, check in on how use affects well-being, and consider changing habits or even doing digital detoxes to improve mental health. • Foster open communication with adults about social media usage and the kind of content being consumed. • Focus on engaging with positive and constructive content so engaging with the person’s algorithm is better for mental health.
Parents and Guardians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn about social media, how it works, how it impacts children, and what options are available to promote safer and healthier use. • Engage in open and empathetic dialogues with young people about their online experiences, focusing on understanding rather than judgment. • Consider how to apply different tools and resources collaboratively to set healthy and positive social media use norms in the home.
Educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest time in understanding the various social media platforms and their potential impacts. • Incorporate social media literacy and skill-building into school curriculums. • Create spaces for youth to discuss and share social media experiences and skills in ways that build collective positive norms. • Ensure youth have access to offline activities they enjoy, and support engagement with these opportunities.
Researchers / Academics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create structures to integrate diverse youth, families and community members into the research process from the start. Ensure their voices shape research questions and protocols. • Develop and disseminate resources that help parents, educators and young people navigate social media in a healthier way. • Use research for advocacy to inform policymaking at all levels that effectively protects young people.

Stakeholders	Recommendations
<p>Tech Industry</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support regulatory frameworks that require platforms and products to protect youth mental health and be age-appropriate by design. • Test platform design elements to ensure that they do not harm youth mental health, and prioritize engagement metrics that promote well-being over those that promote continued use. • Share data with researchers to allow for independent research on the impacts of social media platform design on youth mental health. • Consider youth-friendly feeds (algorithms and designs specifically tailored to be positive for young people). • Improve content moderation measures to limit harmful content and interactions on platforms. • Engage diverse young people and families in efforts to improve platform health and safety.
<p>Policymakers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support legislation that requires social media companies to protect youth mental health. This should include provisions on data transparency and funding for independent research as well as youth control over their data and experience customization. • Explore alternatives to age verification to balance privacy and safety concerns. • Develop policies and regulations that specifically address the disproportionate impacts of social media harms on communities experiencing structural oppression. • Engage youth, families, schools and communities in ongoing discussions about social media regulation and control.

Stakeholders	Recommendations
Government and Agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct regular surveys and use other engagement methods to understand the needs and concerns of diverse groups of youth and communities, and use this information to shape strategies and responses to the issue. • Collaborate with community organizations to design, implement and evaluate strategies that work for diverse populations and promote equity. • Pursue opportunities to increase corporate accountability for harms, including litigation.
Health Care Providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directly address the issue of harmful social media use with youth and their families. • Engage in research to better understand the nuanced impact of social media on mental health and development, particularly for adolescents. • Advocate, both individually and through associations and societies, for state and federal policies that require social media companies to design platforms that protect youth mental health.

Appendix: Convening Agenda

Dr. Naveen Rao – Welcoming Remarks from The Rockefeller Foundation

Commissioner Ashwin Vasani – The Public Health Imperative to Social Media’s Impacts

Mayor Eric Adams – The City’s Concern and Commitment on This Issue

Panel 1: The Future of Social Media and Its Implications for Children’s Mental Health

- Moderator: Michael A. Lindsey, PhD, MSW, MPH, Dean and Paulette Goddard Professor of Social Work, NYU School of Social Work
- Jameill “Meme” Styles, MPA. President and Founder, Measure
- Ravi Iyer, PhD, Managing Director, Psychology of Technology Institute, USC Marshall School of Business
- Mitchell J. Orenstein, PhD, Chief Scientific Officer, American Psychological Association
- Ariya Palmer, Student

Panel 2: Challenges and Opportunities in Regulating Social Media Technologies

- Moderator: Jennifer Jones Austin, Esq., CEO and Executive Director, Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies
- Gabrielle Shea, JD, Senior Policy Analyst, Bipartisan Policy Center
- Nicholas B. Allen, PhD, Ann Swindells Professor and Director of the Center for Digital Mental Health, University of Oregon
- Corbin Evans, JD, Senior Director of Congressional & Federal Relations, American Psychological Association
- Amy Guzman, Teen Against Guns and Teaching a Generation

Concurrent Breakout Sessions

Session 1: Support for Youth, Families, Educators and Health Care Providers

- Facilitator: Jessica McJunkin-Flatts, LMHC, RYT, RCYT, Strategic Partnerships in the Office of School Health, NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
- Expert Speaker: Nicole Owings-Fonner, MA, PMP, Director, American Academy of Pediatrics Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health

Session 2: Research Agenda

- Facilitator: Qiana Outlaw, MSW, MPA, Crisis Response and School Support Coordinator in the Office of School Health, NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
- Expert Speaker: Natalie Bazarova, PhD, Director, Cornell Social Media Lab
- Expert Speaker: Ashley Smith, PhD, Program Officer, National Institute for Mental Health

Session 3: Policy and Advocacy

- Facilitator: Marnie Davidoff, MPA, Assistant Commissioner for Children Youth and Families in the Division of Mental Hygiene, NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
- Expert Speaker: Corbin Evans, JD, Senior Director Congressional & Federal Relations, American Psychological Association
- Expert Speaker: Nichole Rocha, JD, Head of U.S. Affairs, 5Rights Foundation

Session 4: Litigation and Harms

- Facilitator: Tim Ponciano and Andrea Ocando, Delivery Associates
- Expert Speaker: Dean Kawamoto, JD, Partner, Keller Rohrbach
- Expert Speaker: Kitty Kay Chan, PhD, Professor of Practice in Applied Analytics, Columbia University

Panel: Next Steps for New York City and Its Partners

- Moderator: Deepa Avula, MPH, Executive Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Mental Hygiene, NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

Closing Remarks from Commissioner Ashwin Vasani

