

STRIPED

A PUBLIC HEALTH
INCUBATOR

Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders

A Collaboration of Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and Boston Children's Hospital

Newsletter Fall 2023

From the Director



S. Bryn Austin

Strategic science has long been an essential element in STRIPED's game plan, guiding our choices about what projects to take on and when. Back in 2015, our colleagues Kelly Brownell and Christina Roberto published [an article](#) on strategic science in the Lancet, extolling scientists to take on "research designed to address gaps in knowledge important to policy decisions...and communicated not only in scholarly publications but also in forms relevant to policymakers (*and, I might add, also to community advocates and clinicians*).” Or as we like to think of it, research with a purpose.

How do we do this? Our social media research is a great example. In the fall of 2021, Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen captivated the nation with her revelations about the negative impact the platform was having, and the issue rocketed to the top of the political agenda. But, as it turns out, viable solutions were still elusive. With strategic science as our guide, we kicked into gear to come up with evidence-based, legally viable solutions. In [our fall 2022 newsletter](#), we covered a number of STRIPED research projects on social media, which now include an ever-growing array of legal, economic, public health, and even machine-learning studies.

In this issue, you'll find a few more examples of our projects crafted with an eye toward informing policy and pro-

grams that can lead to societal change:

- ◆ Expanding our portfolio of projects in Asia, we pilot-tested with resounding success our newest brief online course for health professionals in Malaysia to promote adolescent body image and combat colorism using strategic storytelling and media advocacy to change social norms (*pg. 2*).
- ◆ Working with partners across the US, we have mounted a multi-year, targeted campaign to get better public health monitoring of eating disorders in young people. We are very gratified now that our campaign is starting to pay off (*pg. 3*).
- ◆ We are crafting a series of economic studies expressly designed to answer lawmakers' questions on the potential cost savings that could come from putting an end to the widespread sale of toxic diet pills to children (*pg. 4*).

Our projects cover a wide range of topics, but all of them can be traced back to our number one goal: To create a society where young people of all genders can grow up at home in their own bodies. For STRIPED, that's research with a purpose, and we wouldn't have it any other way.

With gratitude,

S. Bryn Austin, ScD

What Our Trainees Say About STRIPED



Samantha Turner

“ In my time at STRIPED, I've received invaluable training in public health and policy work. I've participated in multiple projects, and each of helped me gain confidence in my skills as both a researcher and a science communicator. The connections I've made and the mentorship I've received have undoubtedly helped me launch into the early career researcher phase of my career. ”



Anderson Junjie Lu

“ In my projects at STRIPED, we delve into the world of deceptive health-related products on social media. This interdisciplinary experience has provided me with a unique opportunity to view public health from clinical, social, and behavioral perspectives. I am immensely grateful for our fantastic team members, whose collaboration has enriched our research and findings. ”

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Spotlight on STRIPED Youth Corps!

Empowering Youth & Debunking Disinformation Online

Adding another project to our growing social media portfolio, STRIPED's Jill Kavanaugh and Amanda Raffoul garnered a new grant from the Network of the National Library of Medicine. The project, *Building Adolescent Skills in Health Literacy and Public Health Advocacy*, aims to protect and improve the health of teens from the widespread misinformation on diet pills and weight-loss and muscle-building supplements on social media platforms popular with youth. Through a train-the-trainer approach, youth will learn crucial digital health literacy skills to effectively debunk baseless social media claims linked with these harmful products and will then have the opportunity to train their peers with the same skills. The program will cover essential foundations of media literacy, health literacy, and social

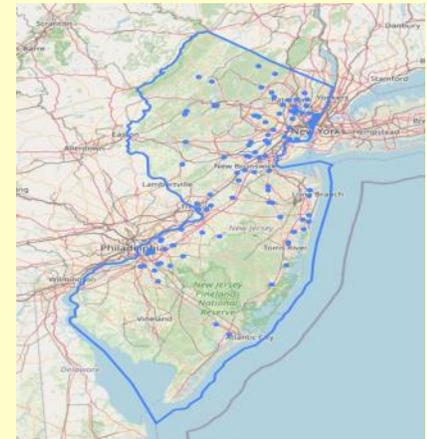
“As the market of online health and fitness information grows, this new project will serve a crucial role in educating young people on online health literacy while prioritizing our voices.”

-Najman Mahboub, 17 years old, STRIPED Youth Corps

media content creation, combined with the essential perspectives and voices of youth advocates themselves.

Maps, Maps & More Maps!

In an impressive youth-led mapping research project, STRIPED Youth Corps members are investigating the relationship between socioeconomic factors and the locations of stores across the country that sell weight-loss and muscle-building supplements to minors. Led by Youth Corps member Chuying Huo, with support from STRIPED and the Harvard University Center for Geographic Analysis, the team is applying state-of-the-art geographic research methods to create heat maps that highlight areas with an unusually high concentration of these stores and to explore the characteristics of neighborhoods most targeted by these noxious vendors. Their goal? To generate maps for every state and take the findings they generate to lawmakers to make the case — supported by the evidence — for action to protect communities and young people from these predatory products.



Youth Corps' Map of Stores Selling Supplements to Minors in New Jersey

Promoting Positive Body Image & Tackling Colorism Across Cultures

Following the success of our brief online course “Colouring the Narrative” for India-based adolescent health professionals focused on promoting positive body image and combatting colorism, we launched a pilot study of a new e-course tailored to the Malaysian cultural context. We were honored and delighted that our India-based e-course garnered three awards in the past year: one each from a UK-based digital education group, a US-based public health education association, and the International Conference on Eating Disorders. But we knew we couldn't rest



Sketch by Nelson Tsen

on our laurels as we began work on our new e-course. We started by assembling a stellar team of multi-talented Malaysia-based collaborators: Sook Ning Chua, Aifa Muhammad Radzi, and Yi Fen Kong on the teaching team, creative writer Jinghann Hong to craft the case narrative, and illustrator Nelson Tsen to bring the story to life in vivid color.

In spring 2023, we pilot-tested our new e-course with a diverse cohort of educators and public health professionals who work with Malaysian youth to offer learners training in how to address body image, skin-shade discrimination, and toxic skin-lightening products with youth using strategic storytelling and media advocacy to change social norms.

Results of our pilot test were resoundingly positive. We found the e-course improved learners' knowledge and understanding of

the issues and bolstered their intentions to apply the strategic storytelling methods they learned in their future work.



Sketch by Nelson Tsen

What's next? Working closely with colleagues in India and Malaysia, we aim to translate our two “Colouring the Narrative” e-courses into local languages and offer training to larger networks of professionals to amplify impact. Want to learn more? Check out our website for the e-course materials, a list of our awards, and our journal article on our e-course:

<https://bit.ly/3Q9tQml>

Welcome to New STRIPED Visiting Scholars!



Lyza Norton

STRIPED welcomes three visiting scholars to our team this year: **Lyza Norton** has extensive clinical experience working as a pediatric dietitian and is passionate about integrating preventive interventions within healthcare services and the wider community. An Australian native, Lyza recently completed her PhD at Griffith University and is currently collaborating with the Embrace Collective, an Australian not-for-profit to develop resources for early childhood educators promoting food and body confidence. **Maren Kopland** is a clinical psychologist and PhD-student at the Modum Bad Psychiatric Centre and Department of



Maren Kopland

Clinical Psychology at the University of Oslo in Norway. She is currently working on her PhD on change processes in eating disorders for patients with childhood trauma. She is passionate about preventing eating disorders and actively challenges the impact of diet culture through writing op-eds and engaging with politicians. **Chloe Gao** is an MD/PhD student at the University of British Columbia. Building on her work experience in mental health and substance use services in Canada and Australia, she is embarking on her doctoral research to integrate the perspectives of diverse communities of young people into mental health service redesign. As a visiting scholar with STRIPED for the 2023-24 academic year, Chloe will be focusing on co-designing culturally safe strategies for engaging Asian American and Canadian youth aged 16-25 years old in eating disorders prevention research, clinical care, and policymaking.



Chloe Gao

Welcome, Lyza, Maren and Chloe!

Increasing Public Health Monitoring for Eating Disorders

A crucial role of public health is to monitor the health of communities so that we know when new concerns are emerging and to help track progress on prevention so we know what's working and for whom. Unfortunately in the US, tracking of eating disorders is sorely lacking, especially since the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) backtracked a decade ago by dropping eating disorders from its Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), the nation's flagship health survey for teens.

For STRIPED, this gap in CDC leadership on eating disorders was our call to action. Joining forces with the Academy for Eating Disorder's Epidemiology & Public Health Practice group, we initiated the first review of all the major federal health surveys where eating disorders could be assessed, then got to work to mount pressure on the CDC, including by working with members of Congress and state-level YRBS coordinators, to re-

include eating disorders in its YRBS remit. While the CDC has yet to budge on this, we

are seeing signs that others in government are paying attention. In 2022, the CDC released a shocking report on emergency departments nationwide, showing that the number of teen girls seeking treatment for eating disorders *doubled* in the first year of the pandemic. Also, the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH), another vital federal survey, included questions on eating disorder symptoms for the first time. We are now working with our NSCH colleagues to analyze these unprecedented data.

And what about the YRBS? Led by STRIPED's Ariel Beccia, we are working closely with YRBS coordinators in states nationwide. Rather than wait for the CDC, states are stepping up: Alaska, Arizona, and Kentucky are the latest states to add back eating disorders questions to their YRBS. Also, Texas, Vermont, and Colorado have all passed laws requiring their health departments to start tracking eating disorders in the states. Stay tuned for more updates on this fast-moving advocacy initiative!



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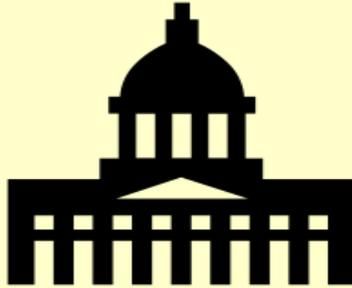
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Making the Economic Case for Banning the Sale of Toxic Diet Pills to Minors

As thrilled as we will be when the day comes that a state governor signs into law our Out of Kids' Hands bill to ban the sale of toxic over-the-counter (OTC) diet pills to children, we know even then our job will not be done. There are a lot of steps before the powers that be can enforce a new law.

After the fanfare of a bill signing comes the far less glamorous (but just as important) task of a state government preparing detailed regulations on exactly how a new law will be implemented. Implementation generally costs a state money, but the question is always, "How much?" Understandably, this is a question that lawmakers usually want answered **before** they will consider supporting new legislation.

To find the answer, STRIPED teamed up with health economists from Brandeis University with expertise in answering exactly this type of question: How much will it cost the state to implement a proposed ban on sale of toxic OTC diet pills and muscle-building supplements to children? Led by our collaborator Cynthia A. Tschampl, alongside STRIPED



trainees Mary Lee, Upanita Barman, and others from our team, we used key informant interviews and salary data from a state jobs website to estimate implementation costs, with Massachusetts as our model state. What did we find? The estimated cost to implement a commonsense law to stop the sale of these harmful products to kids would total a one-time cost of less than \$45,000. That's about a single year's salary for an entry-level secretary. A drop in the bucket considering the size of the state's total budget this year (~\$56 billion).

The next question from lawmakers is usually about post-implementation costs and benefits — getting to the "Is it worth it?" question. We will estimate the potential savings from accrued health benefits of our legislation for families, the state, and society as a whole and additional impacts on health equity. Our new analyses, focused on health equity, are well underway and will be critical to answering whether our proposed law change can be



both cost-effective (or even cost-saving!) and decrease inequity.

In the meantime, we're happy to share that our health equity framework won a Top 10 Posters Award at the 2023 International Conference on Eating Disorders (ICED), trainee Upanita, based at Presidency University in Kolkata, India, garnered an ICED Travel Scholarship for Scholars in Low and Middle Income Countries, and Brandeis colleague Masami Tabata-Kelly was selected to present initial findings at the 2023 International Health Economics Association annual conference in South Africa. Check back with us for more updates on our findings.

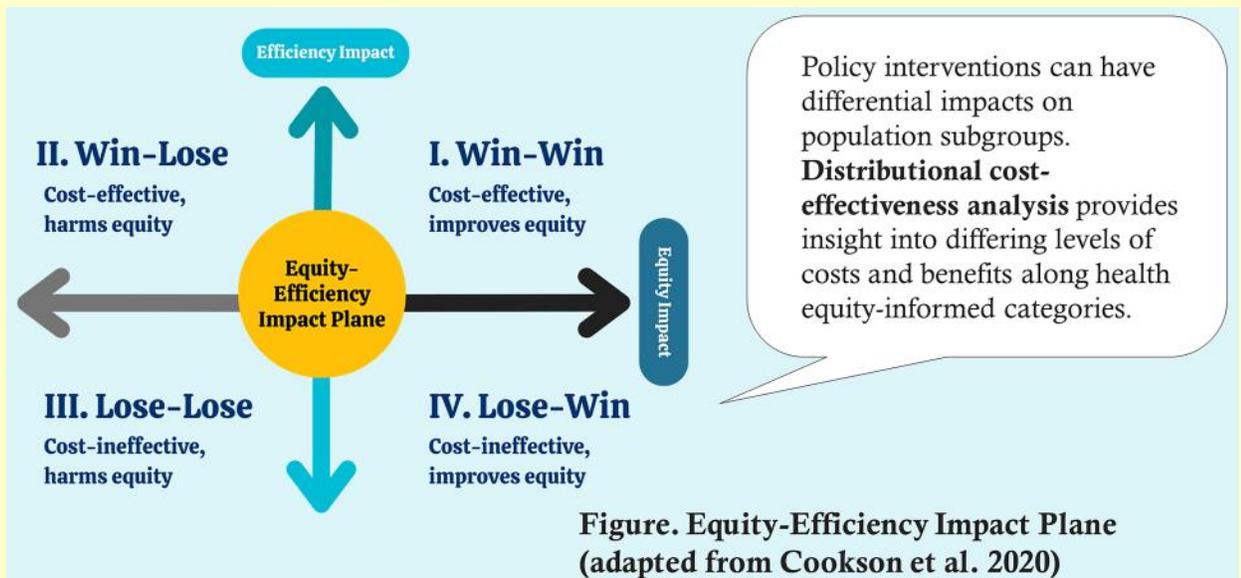


Illustration of Equity Impact Diagram From STRIPED Poster at 2023 International Conference on Eating Disorders

Check us out at: www.hsph.harvard.edu/striped



To make a gift, visit <https://goo.gl/MyI7Wl> & select the fund option "Eating Disorders Prevention (STRIPED)"

Newsletter by: S. Bryn Austin, Abigail Bulens, and Monique Santoso