

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 2024

From the Director



S. Bryn Austin

These are not ordinary times. From social media's algorithmic boosting of extreme content and anti-science disinformation to the tactics of predatory weight-loss supplement marketers, who hide under a specious health halo to cash in on eating disorders, public health and adolescent health are being pummeled at every turn. As I write this in late fall 2024, much of what we are hearing from Washington is about plans for unprecedented rollbacks in federal government support for science and public health research and education. I shudder to think of the implications. These are extraordinary times.

To paraphrase the words of historian Timothy Snyder, none of us chooses the era and place we are born, but we can choose how we respond. We should all be asking, How will we respond to the challenges of our times? How will we stay true to our mission and values no matter the countervailing winds or shifting landscape? Times like these require nimbleness to anticipate the coming challenges and recalibrate as needed to stay on track toward our goals. And if STRIPED is anything, we are nimble.

◇ When the pandemic put nearly all aspects of our lives and work

online, the virtual STRIPED Youth Corps sprang to life. Don't miss the new documentary [Generation Flex](#) featuring three impressive STRIPED youth advocates – Ryan, Stanley, and Shahriar (p. 4).

◇ When a multi-billion-dollar industry tried to steamroll its predatory agenda to keep selling toxic diet pills to children in New York State, our campaign powered by youth advocates, community partners, and champion lawmakers drew the line and put commonsense protections in place for children (p. 4).

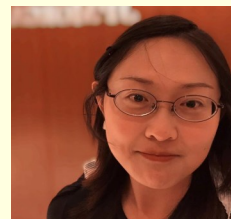
◇ When the CDC's high school Youth Risk Behavior Survey let questions on disordered eating go by the wayside, our coalition of committed researchers, clinicians, advocates, and public servants mounted a successful campaign to put back on the survey for the first time in a decade national monitoring of disordered eating in young people (p. 3).

Whether navigating ordinary or extraordinary times, we have always and will always stay true to our mission.

With gratitude,

S. Bryn Austin, ScD

What Our Trainees Say About STRIPED...



Yuning Liu

“During my time at STRIPED, I collaborated with an exceptional team to investigate how deceptive designs on social media influence eating disorders and mental

health. This experience not only connected me with leading researchers but also broadened my perspective through the rich interdisciplinary resources. It reinforced my understanding that enhancing digital well-being requires public health researchers to join forces with designers, engineers, legislators, and others to pursue innovative solutions.”



Nicholas
Andrysiak

“Through my work at STRIPED, I have grown so much as a researcher. I am working on several different projects that have given me new perspectives on public health. The mentorship and training I have gotten has been

instrumental in refining my own research skills and developing my career goals.”

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Holding Social Media Platforms Accountable

Creating Safer Online Spaces for Children With Independent Algorithm Risk Audits

Social media has emerged over the last couple of decades as an invaluable resource for information and connection, surging in popularity with teens from the start. However, social media can also harm young users through deceptive and exploitative design features. With an eye toward translating research into policy solutions to protect young people on social media, STRIPED developed a [Roadmap](#) for civil society advocates and policy-

makers. Our Roadmap starts off with summaries of the key scientific findings and legal basis for taking action, then gives the nuts and bolts of the strategy of independent risk audits of engagement algorithms, which are the computer code that drives features like the For You feed on TikTok. Our goal? To inject some

much-needed transparency into the ways that social media engagement algorithms are affecting young people and pave the way for evidence-based action to create a healthier digital environment for youth. Check out our [Roadmap](#) and all our latest resources for advocates and policymakers on our website.

Estimating the Effects of Social Media on Eating Disorders in Youth

In the digital era, social media is a vibrant hub of connection and creativity for young people. Yet, beneath the surface of these engaging platforms lies a growing concern: High amounts of social media use -- image-based social media in particular -- is linked with eating disorders and other poor mental health outcomes. Yet no studies to date have been able to estimate the full impact. To address this, we launched a new study using state-of-the-art simulation modeling methods to estimate the causal relationship between social media exposure and eating disorders in young people. We will be zeroing in on deceptive design features and manipulative tactics, such as persistent notifications, limitless scrolling, and social comparison prompts, to understand their impact on body image and disordered eating. Stay tuned for more on what we uncover in the coming year.



The Economic Case for Protecting Kids From Predatory Diet Pills

Over the years of our Out of Kids' Hands Campaign, policymakers often ask us what the likely cost of implementation would be for a ban on sales of over-the-counter diet pills and muscle-building supplements to children. They also ask us what the potential savings might be due to health protection effects for young people. To answer these questions, we teamed up with health economists from The Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University to carry out two groundbreaking studies. We started with Massachusetts bill H.2115, sponsored by Massachusetts Rep. Kay Khan, a longtime champion of the eating disorders community. We've

been working on this issue for a while, so we had a sense that the savings would far outweigh the cost of implementation. But the size of the potential savings surprised even us: We found the cost of implementation for the state would be vanishingly small, amounting to only 0.0000823% of the annual state budget! And the savings could be enormous, annually adding up to \$14 million in healthcare savings and \$30 million in

societal savings for Massachusetts. Now that we have our modeling approach nailed down, we are fast on our way to launching a new project to estimate costs and savings for each of the many states where our campaign is gaining ground. Keep an eye out for updates in the coming year.

The infographic is titled "HOW H.2215 COULD SAVE OUR STATE MILLIONS" and features three columns of data. The first column states that in Massachusetts, eating disorders cost the state \$1.4 billion every year, accompanied by a red outline of the state. The second column states that expert economists say H.2215 costs are minimal, with a note that H.2215 would amount to a minimal one-time implementation cost of virtually nothing, illustrated with a coin icon. The third column states that expert economists say H.2215 would save MA millions, specifically yielding \$14 million in healthcare and \$30 million in societal savings annually. The infographic is decorated with red and blue stars and exclamation marks.

Welcome to STRIPED Visiting Scholar From Down Under!

Marilyn Bromberg is an Associate Professor at the University of Western Australia Law School in Perth, Australia, and one of the nation's leading legal scholars on the myriad ways that law and policy related to advertising and social media can affect body image and mental health. She is an expert advisor for the Butterfly Foundation, the leading national Australian nonprofit organization supporting people with eating disorders and their families and advancing policy for treatment access and prevention. Marilyn will be a Visiting Scholar with STRIPED in April 2025. We are looking forward to exchanging knowledge and strategies for advancing our shared interests in research-to-policy translation, innovative legal solutions to harmful body image pressures on social media, and so much more.



Marilyn Bromberg

STRIPED Faculty

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Iyiola Solanke, PhD
Trine Tetlie Eik-Nes, MSc, PhD

Making Strides in Tracking Disordered Eating Nationwide

In an exciting win culminating a multiyear advocacy campaign led by STRIPED, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) added an item assessing binge eating to its 2025 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). The change to the nation's premier high school survey marks the first time in over a decade that representative data will be collected on disordered eating among U.S. youth. This win was the result of 8 years of advocacy spearheaded by STRIPED and its [Eating Disorder Public Health Surveillance Working Group](#) along with instrumental support from the Eating Disorders Coalition and the Academy for Eating Disorder's Epidemiology and Public Health Practice Special Interest Group. The inclusion of a binge eating item on the national YRBS in 2025 will soon make it possible for researchers and public health professionals to monitor trends in prevalence and identify spikes in symptoms in a timely way.

What's next? Our [Working Group](#) is teaming up with new partners across the country to get more state surveys up to speed on monitoring disordered eating in youth. These new tools for symptom monitoring will be essential to advancing eating disorder prevention and equity.



Tricks of the Trade in Targeting Teens Online

Recent research highlights a concerning trend: Over-the-counter weight-loss and muscle-building supplements are widely promoted on social media channels that are popular with teens. Despite the lack of efficacy and known harmful side effects, marketing hype pushes these products relentlessly. How exactly do they appeal to teens? To answer this question, we launched a study examining how marketers specifically target adolescents on their product labels.

Our study is still underway, but so far, we have found some pretty eye-popping examples of brazen targeting. With product names like "#M6Teen Cherry" and "Power Teen for Him Natural Wild Berry Flavor," it's not hard to guess exactly who these companies have set their sights on. Our study aims to offer crucial new evidence on the marketing tricks of companies trying to get kids hooked on dubious and potentially harmful supplements.



Image AI-generated

A Monumental Victory for Children's Safety in New York State!

In October of 2023, we celebrated a groundbreaking achievement with the signing of our New York State bill, [S.5863/A.5610D](#), into law by Governor Kathy Hochul. Passage of this life-saving legislation, championed by Senator Shelly Mayer and Assemblymember Nily Rozic, marked a crucial step toward protecting children from the dangers of over-the-counter diet pills and muscle-building supplements. New York is the first state to pass our Out of Kids' Hands Act.

This victory would not have been possible without the tireless efforts of courageous STRIPED youth advocates, dedicated partner organizations, and our lawmaker champions. Since the law took effect this spring in April 2024, children and teens in New York can no longer purchase these harmful products, whether in stores or online—a trans-



formative step toward safeguarding their health. But the fight is far from over. The supplements industry continues to challenge enforcement, even seeking legal injunctions to delay progress. Thanks to the resilience of our movement and a decisive ruling by a New York court, the law remains firmly in place. Find out more on our [website](#)!

Youth Sleuths Investigate Enforcement of New York Law

Following the passage of our New York law, the STRIPED Youth Corps launched a new initiative: *Operation Diet Pill Sting*.

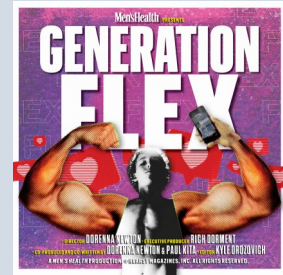
Using a meticulously crafted protocol, they visited a diverse array of stores across New York, documenting stores' adherence to the law. *Stay tuned for more!*



Tazeem Mahashin, Nafis Mahim, and Evan Yang on a store visit

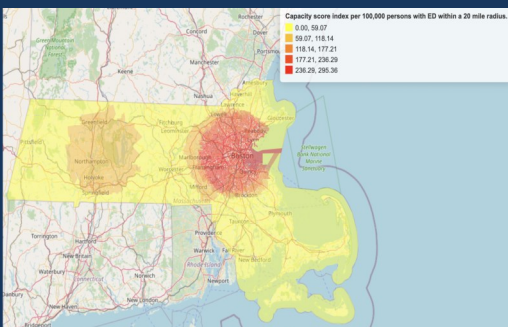
STRIPED Youth Featured in New Documentary

We're thrilled to announce the release of the highly anticipated [Generation Flex](#) documentary, directed by Dorena Newton and produced by *Men's Health* magazine. This powerful film, now available for streaming, highlights the critical issues surrounding boys' and young men's body image and features the inspiring voices of several of our former and current STRIPED Youth Corps members: Ryan Ahmed, Stanley Huang, and Shahriar Huda. Through their eloquent storytelling, these youth advocates shine a light on the urgent need for prevention efforts and share their personal journeys in creating change. Their courage and dedication exemplify the heart of our mission at STRIPED. Find out where to stream the documentary [here!](#)



Mapping Access to Eating Disorder Treatment Nationwide

Our latest mapping project highlights the stark contrasts in accessibility of eating disorder treatment across the country. Led by STRIPED Youth Corps member Chuying Huo with mentorship from Dr. Lingbo Liu of the Harvard Center for Geographic Analysis, we reveal gaps in care by visualizing data on the availability of treatment, center capacities, and tele-mental health, alongside regional population sizes and demographics. We are delving into how household income and education, rurality, and broadband access, shape access to treatment. Our study is on track to identify the social and economic dynamics at play, providing insights for advocates, clinicians, and policymakers to improve access where it is needed most.



Chuying Huo presenting at the Eating Disorder Research Society conference.

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



To make a gift, please contact Drew Davis O'Brien: dobrien@hsph.harvard.edu

Newsletter by: S. Bryn Austin and Abigail Bulens