

## Protecting Youth from Social Media Harms: MA Bill S.51

If passed, Bill S.51, **an act relative to social media, algorithm accountability, and transparency**, would hold social media platforms accountable for measuring the harms their platforms cause to youth.

### The Problem: Social Media's Harmful Impact on Massachusetts Youth

- Studies show that algorithm-driven social media use is linked to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and self-harm among youth.<sup>1-2</sup>
- Visual social media platforms flood young users with idealized images, fueling harmful self-comparisons and body image concerns.<sup>3</sup>
- Children and adolescents are especially vulnerable because their brains are wired for social validation, making engagement-based algorithms highly influential, while deceptive design features like endless scroll, autoplay, and notifications trap them in excessive use—even when it harms their well-being.<sup>4-5</sup>
- Engagement-based algorithms put profit over safety, reinforcing patterns of use that can lead to harmful behaviors like extreme dieting, self-harm, and substance use—without kids realizing it. Without oversight, these systems operate unchecked, making independent algorithm audits essential.<sup>6-7</sup>

### The Solution: How MA Bill S.51 Holds Social Media Platforms Accountable

- Requires independent, third-party algorithm risk audits of social media platforms to uncover risks tied to platform design, including features that encourage eating disorders, compulsive use, and self-harm.
- Mandates transparency, requiring platforms to disclose how engagement-based algorithms track and influence kids' online activity, and whether their platform design harms young users.
- Establishes state oversight under the Massachusetts Attorney General to enforce compliance, with fines up to \$500,000 per violation--funding youth mental health programs.

### A Message from Senator John C. Velis

*"It is critical during this day and age, where social media truly follows you everywhere you go, that we gain a better understanding of just exactly how social media algorithms impact and target children so that we as a Commonwealth can better protect them from serious harm."*

**With Massachusetts youth at risk and social media companies operating without accountability or transparency, S.51 is a necessary step. We urge your support.**

## Protecting Youth from Social Media Harms: MA Bill S.51

If passed, Bill S.51, **an act relative to social media, algorithm accountability, and transparency**, would hold social media platforms accountable for measuring the harms their platforms cause to youth.

### 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. Herriman Z, Taylor AM, Roberts RM. Interventions to Reduce the Negative Impact of Highly Visual Social networking site use on mental health outcomes: A scoping review. *Psychology of Popular Media*. 2024; 13(1):111-139.
  4. Brignull H, Leiser M, Santos C, Doshi K. Deceptive patterns – user interfaces designed to trick you. *deceptive.design*. 2023. Accessed Apr. 25, 2023. <https://www.deceptive.design/>
  5. European Data Protection Board. Guidelines 03/2022 on deceptive design patterns in social media platform interfaces: How to recognise and avoid them. Feb. 14, 2023. Accessed Nov. 1, 2023. [https://edpb.europa.eu/system/files/2023-02/edpb\\_03-2022\\_guidelines\\_on\\_deceptive\\_design\\_patterns\\_in\\_social\\_media\\_platform\\_interfaces\\_v2\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://edpb.europa.eu/system/files/2023-02/edpb_03-2022_guidelines_on_deceptive_design_patterns_in_social_media_platform_interfaces_v2_en_0.pdf)
  6. Amanda Raffoul, Zachary J. Ward, Monique Santoso, Jill R. Kavanaugh & S. Bryn Austin. Social media platforms generate billions of dollars in revenue from U.S. youth: Findings from a simulated revenue model. *PLOS ONE*. 2023; 18(12): e0295337.
  7. Costello N, Almassian M, Sutton R, Jones M, Diamond S, Ojumu O, Raffoul A, Salvia M, Kavanaugh JR, Austin SB. (2024). How to Hold Social Media Platforms Accountable: A Roadmap for State Policymakers & Advocates for Legislation to Require Independent Algorithm Risk Audits. Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders, Boston, MA. <https://hsph.me/algorithm-auditing>
-