

Newsletter Fall 2025

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

From the Director



Bryn Austin

So here we are, nine months into the new federal administration in the US, living and working under what until recently would have been unimaginable

conditions. My colleagues and I at Harvard and in public health nationwide have spent the year in a battle of existential proportions over the value of science, public health, and higher education for our nation.

Thankfully, despite it all, STRIPED is doing OK. We have been able to continue our many projects and collaborations as planned, largely because, as a public health *incubator*, we've kept STRIPED on the nimble side of things and never relied on US federal funding to support the bulk of our work.

In the words of author Rebecca Solnit, "There is no alternative to persevering." Persevere we will, but that does not mean just business as usual for us: We are fighting back, using STRIPED's strengths to guide us. For instance, early this spring, STRIPED faculty member Ariel Beccia jumped into action to document exactly how much mental health research, including eating disorders studies, was being decimated by the federal grant cancellations.

What we found was worse than anyone imagined: The federal government canceled hundreds of mental health grants, totaling over \$2 billion in potentially life-saving mental health research and services, \$2.7 million of which had been dedicated to studies

on eating disorders. We promptly shared these findings with the Eating Disorders Coalition to include as key talking points for Capitol Hill Advocacy Day earlier this year and to share with key decisionmakers in Congress.

Our work continues. In this newsletter, we offer a glimpse of some of our most recent projects and newest team members:

- STRIPED's collaborations with accomplished, seasoned scholars from around the world have always been central to our mission. This year, we are excited to welcome our newest [Visiting Scholar Katrine Bønnelund Tølbøll](#) from Denmark (p. 3) and our new cohort of esteemed colleagues joining the [STRIPED International Expert Advisory Panel](#) (p. 4).
- The STRIPED Youth Corps is thriving. From youth-led innovative machine learning projects to modernize community advocacy tools (p. 2) to our new series of youth co-created trainings on key advocacy skills (p. 4), STRIPED youth are building the confidence they need to become powerful community leaders (p. 4).

So here we are, and here we will stay. We will continue to fight for the future we want to see.

With gratitude,

S. Bryn Austin, ScD

STRIPED Trainee Insights



Mallory Kean

“My time with STRIPED has been both deeply meaningful and rewarding. It has given me the opportunity to contribute to impactful work while growing as a researcher. One of the highlights has been developing a training program to educate judges on social media algorithms that push disordered eating content to vulnerable teens. The breadth of expertise on STRIPED's teams is incredible, from computer science to public health to law. This experience has been nothing short of amazing.”



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Holding Social Media Accountable: Our New Brief Video Series

Social media platforms can shape what we see, how we feel, and even how we think—often without us realizing it. Behind the scenes, powerful algorithms determine which posts go viral and which stay hidden. But what happens when those algorithms amplify harmful content, especially to children, including content promoting eating disorders and selling dangerous over-the-counter diet pills?

Building on our [STRIPED Roadmap](#) for how to hold social media platforms accountable through independent risk audits of engagement algorithms like the “For You” feed on TikTok, STRIPED created a new 7-part brief video series to bring these ideas to community advocates and state

policymakers. With the support of the Becca Schmill Foundation, our video series explains why algorithm transparency matters, how algorithms can fuel body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and mental health struggles, and what states can do to protect young people. Our Roadmap also introduces model legislation, the Social Media Algorithm Accountability

Act, which we are delighted is being championed by Sen. John Velis in the Massachusetts State Legislature. The bill would set in place independent risk audits of social media algorithms to promote transparency and accountability for impacts on the mental and physical health of

youth. Want to know more? Watch our brief video series on holding platforms accountable!



Data from Pew Research Center report (2024).

Can AI Help Make Policy Advocacy More Impactful? We Think So

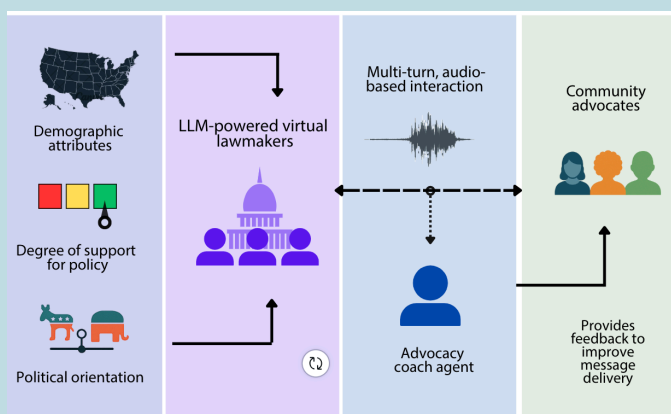
There are lots of reasons to be cautious about generative AI, from chatbots going off the rails to privacy rights of users. But despite the hot mess that is AI these days, what if the same technology behind everything from shopping online to driverless cars could be used to protect kids' health? Our team is exploring just that—how AI can power smarter, more effective advocacy for policies that prevent eating disorders before they start.

Inspired by the ingenuity of STRIPED Youth Corps members Chuying Huo and Stanley Huang, who are now college students studying computer science and data science, we're experimenting with innovative ways to use AI to support two of our key eating

disorders prevention policy advocacy campaigns: Out of Kids' Hands, which aims to stop the sale of dangerous over-the-counter diet pills to children, and a new initiative to hold social media

From prototyping a simulation tool that enables community advocates to practice their legislative advocacy skills with virtual AI-generated lawmakers to building a chatbot that helps advocates quickly get

the lowdown on their state's current policy landscape, AI offers new tools for advocates to help spark policy change. It's early days, but these innovative, youth-led pilot projects are already showing promise. By bringing together cutting-edge technology and bold policy goals, we're reimagining what's possible in the fight to put common-sense policy in place to protect young people from predatory industries and eating disorders.



Preview of a new tool designed to help community advocates build and practice legislative advocacy skills step by step.

companies accountable for the harmful design features that negatively impact body image and mental health of young people.

Shedding Light on Colorism and Body Image in East Asian American Communities

Colorism is common in East Asian communities and has profound effects on health and well-being. Yet despite its significance, little research has examined with East Asian young adults in the United States how colorism shapes body image struggles and may worsen the risk of eating disorders.

A new exploratory qualitative study led by STRIPED Visiting Fellow Chloe Gao, an MD/PhD student from University of British Columbia, seeks to fill this gap by listening directly to East Asian American young adults. The project aims to uncover how colorism shows up in their daily lives, how it influences their mental health

and self-esteem, and what solutions young people themselves envision for their communities. By amplifying the voices of youth,

Chloe hopes to spark meaningful conversations and inform culturally

sensitive interventions to prevent eating disorders and promote mental health and equity within East Asian American communities.



Chloe Gao

STRIPED Trainee Insights



Caroline Berish

“At STRIPED, I've grown as a researcher and advocate. I've written testimony for a Massachusetts bill on algorithm audits to project minors from harmful eating disorder content, explored AI and social media policy by advising a team of students building an AI chatbot for policy advocates, and learned from public health leaders, lawyers, and engineers. It's been an incredible, inspiring experience.”

From Denmark to STRIPED: A Visiting Scholar's Digital Health Mission

STRIPED is delighted to welcome Katrine Bønneland Tølbøll, a PhD candidate in Political Science at Aarhus University in Denmark. Her innovative research spans adolescent mental health, social media, and computational social science. Garnering a prestigious Crown Prince Frederik Fund Scholarship, she joined STRIPED as a Visiting Fellow for the fall semester.

Katrine's dissertation focuses on detecting and addressing problematic social media use through empirical data, behavioral theory, and predictive modeling, aiming to inform data-driven prevention strategies and youth-focused public policy. For instance, one of her studies explores whether an influencer's perceived status — that is, whether it is peer-like or celebrity-like — shapes how young adult Instagram users evaluate themselves in comparison.

“My research shows that when influencers feel like peers to young people, negative self-comparisons cut deeper,” says Katrine. “We need to strengthen media literacy for prevention.”



Katrine Bønneland Tølbøll

Helping Courts Understand Social Media's Impact on Youth

Courts are increasingly confronting cases that involve digital harms, such as the role of social media algorithms in increasing eating disorders risk. Yet judges and law clerks often lack accessible, plain-language resources to help them understand how these technologies work and why they matter in civil court cases.

With a grant from the American Association for Justice's Robert L. Habush Endowment, STRIPED launched a new initiative to offer judges and law clerk's the training they need to provide fair and informed rulings on cases involving social media algorithms and how they affect youth mental health and eating disorders risk.

Our team will be crafting virtual tutorial for judges and law clerks on the legal implications of algorithmic systems, the technology that drives them, and the role of the courts can play in protecting youth mental health and preventing eating disorders. Stay tuned for more updates!



From Training to Action: Youth Advocates Making Change

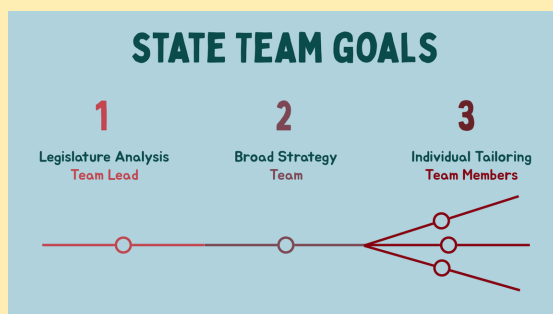
Through the STRIPED Youth Corps, young advocates gain hands-on training in policy advocacy, storytelling, and media engagement to become powerful voices for change. To expand these opportunities, we're launching a new training series co-created with Youth Corps members, offering practical tools to lead campaigns and make their voices heard.

Highlights include:

- Storytelling & Testimony Writing – Stanley Huang guides peers in crafting compelling personal stories.
- Starting a Campaign in Your State – Corlie Zhuang shares insider tips from her own advocacy.
- Strategic Communication Across the Aisle – Arshia Verma and Erina Haque lead on building bipartisan messaging skills.

Youth Corps members are already putting these skills into action:

- Caleb Song recently appeared on Fox 32 Chicago to speak about Illinois' HB3027 and STRIPED's Out of Kids' Hands campaign.
[Watch the full clip here!](#)
- In Missouri, Sahana Srikanth, Ketan Tamirisa, and Gaurish Agrawal recently published a powerful [youth-written op-ed](#) in the *Missouri Independent* newspaper, calling attention to the dangers of over-the-counter diet pills and muscle-



building supplements and the urgent need for policy action by state lawmakers to protect the health of young people.

Together, these examples highlight how the new training series is already strengthening youth leadership, and we are committed to building on this momentum to grow a lasting pipeline of young advocates leading change for years to come.

Meet Our Team!

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