

Date of Hearing: April 16, 2026

Fiscal: Yes

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON PRIVACY AND CONSUMER PROTECTION

Rebecca Bauer-Kahan, Chair

AB 1709 (Lowenthal) – As Amended April 14, 2026

SUBJECT: Covered platforms: age restriction: e-Safety Advisory Commission

SYNOPSIS

In December 2025, spurred in part by Jonathan Haidt's The Anxious Generation and a body of research indicating that platforms can be addictive and harmful to teen mental health, Australia enacted the world's first national age limit on social media, prohibiting users under age 16 from having social media accounts. The ban applies to specific platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, X, YouTube, and Reddit. This led to the termination of 4.7 million accounts held by 2.5 million children between the ages of 8 and 15. Since then, several other countries including Indonesia, France, Denmark, Spain, Germany, Greece, and Malaysia have enacted or are currently considering age limits, typically at age 15 or 16.

This bill would add California to the growing list of jurisdictions across the world that are taking steps to keep young teens off social media. Specifically, the bill would require covered platforms – based on the “addictive internet-based service or application” definition from the Protecting Our Kids from Social Media Addiction Act (SB 976, Skinner; Ch. 321, Stats. 2024) – to prevent minors under age 16 from having accounts, using the device-based age verification system created by the Digital Age Assurance Act (AB 1043, Wicks; Ch. 675, Stats. 2025). Notably, the bill does not prevent minors from accessing social media to find information and resources; it simply prohibits them from having a personalized account.

To remain evergreen, the bill authorizes the Attorney General to adopt regulations to alter the scope of covered platforms if the Attorney General determines that doing so is necessary to ensure that the bill applies to services and applications that make addictive features available to users under 16 years of age. To help advise the Attorney General on implementation, enforcement, and other online safety matters, the bill would provide for the creation of an e-Safety Advisory Commission within the Office of the Attorney General.

The bill is sponsored by Common Sense Media, the Organization for Social Media Safety, and the and the California Commission on the Status of Women and Girls, and is supported by the Anxious Generation Movement, California Initiative for Technology & Democracy (CITED), and Mothers Against Media Addiction. They argue that the evidence of harm is compelling, platforms cannot be trusted to mitigate harms, and that age restrictions are effective and necessary to protect youth online.

The bill is opposed by an array of industry opponents, digital rights and privacy advocates, and LGBTQ+ rights associations. They argue the evidence of harm is unclear at best, the bill unconstitutionally restricts free speech, age verification is ineffective, and that the bill harms youth who depend on social media for access to critical content and communities.

If passed by this Committee, the bill will be referred to the Judiciary Committee.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Defines “social media platform” means a public or semipublic internet-based service or application that has users in California and that meets both of the following criteria:
 - a. A substantial function of the service or application is to connect users to allow users to interact socially with each other within the service or application. A service or application that provides email or direct messaging services is considered to meet this criterion based on that function alone.
 - b. The service or application allows users to do all the following:
 - i) Construct a public or semipublic profile for purposes of signing into and using the service or application.
 - ii) Populate a list of other users with whom an individual shares a social connection within the system.
 - iii) Create or post content viewable by other users, including, but not limited to, on message boards, in chat rooms, or through a landing page or main feed that presents the user with content generated by other users. (Bus. & Prof. Code § 22675(f).)
- 2) Under the Protecting Our Kids from Social Media Addiction Act, prohibits an operator of an addictive internet-based service or application, including a social media platform, from providing an addictive feed, as defined, to a minor user. (Health & Saf. Code § 27000 et seq.)
- 3) Defines “addictive feed” as an internet website, online service, online application, or mobile application, or a portion thereof, in which multiple pieces of media generated or shared by users are, either concurrently or sequentially, recommended, selected, or prioritized for display to a user based, in whole or in part, on information provided by the user, or otherwise associated with the user or the user’s device, unless any of the following conditions are met, alone or in combination with one another:
 - a. The information is not persistently associated with the user or user’s device and does not concern the user’s previous interactions with media generated or shared by others.
 - b. The information consists of search terms that are not persistently associated with the user or user’s device.
 - c. The information consists of user-selected privacy or accessibility settings, technical information concerning the user’s device, or device communications or signals concerning whether the user is a minor.
 - d. The user expressly and unambiguously requested the specific media or media by the author, creator, or poster of the media, or the blocking, prioritization, or deprioritization of such media, provided that the media is not recommended, selected, or prioritized for display based, in whole or in part, on other information associated with the user or the user’s device, except as otherwise permitted by this chapter and, in the case of audio or video content, is not automatically played.
 - e. The media consists of direct, private communications between users.

- f. The media recommended, selected, or prioritized for display is exclusively the next media in a preexisting sequence from the same author, creator, poster, or source and, in the case of audio or video content, is not automatically played.
 - g. The recommendation, selection, or prioritization of the media is necessary to comply with the act. (Health & Saf. Code § 27000.5(a).)
- 4) Requires, for purposes of the Protecting Our Kids from Social Media Addiction Act, the Attorney General to adopt regulations regarding age assurance by January 1, 2027. (Health & Saf. Code § 27006(b).)
 - 5) Establishes the Digital Age Assurance Act, which establishes a device-based age verification system in which parents who allow their children to be the primary user of a device can enter a non-identifying age-bracket signal that operating systems and application stores must send to application developers. (Civ. Code § 1798.500 et seq.)

THIS BILL:

- 1) Makes certain findings and declarations.
- 2) Defines:
 - a. “Covered platform” using language that is virtually identical to the definition of “addictive internet-based service or application” and “addictive feed” from the Protecting Our Kids from Social Media Addiction Act, as set forth above.
 - b. “Addictive feature” as a psychologically exploitative feature intended to maximize engagement that foreseeably leads to compulsive use. Such features may include notifications, addictive feeds, endless scrolls, autoplay, and their functional equivalents, including any feature that learns from user information or behavior in order to prolong engagement with a particular internet website, online service, online application, or mobile application.
 - c. “User” as a natural person who resides in the state and accesses or seeks to create an account on a covered platform.
- 3) Prohibits a covered platform from permitting a user who is under 16 years of age to create or maintain an account on the covered platform.
- 4) Requires a covered platform to implement reasonable measures to prevent users under 16 years of age from accessing or using accounts on the covered platform.
- 5) Requires a covered platform to request a signal with respect to a particular user from an operating system provider or a covered application store pursuant to the Digital Age Assurance Act, and to comply with any applicable regulations adopted by the Attorney General. Requires that any personal information collected for age assurance under the bill must be used solely for that purpose, retained for the minimum period necessary to complete verification, and not used for advertising, profiling, or algorithmic recommendation purposes.

- 6) Requires a covered platform to delete the account of a user under the age of 16, along with any associated personal information.
- 7) Authorizes the Attorney General, in consultation with the e-Safety Advisory Commission, to adopt regulations to alter the scope of “covered platform” if the Attorney General determines that doing so is necessary to ensure that “covered platform” applies to internet websites, online services, online applications, or mobile applications that make addictive features available to users under 16 years of age.
- 8) Provides for enforcement by the Attorney General or a local public prosecutor for unspecified civil penalties. Authorizes a court to consider the size of the covered platform, the severity and duration of the violation, and the covered platform’s good faith efforts to comply with the bill.
- 9) Establishes the e-Safety Advisory Commission within the Office of the Attorney General.
- 10) Requires a member of the commission to meet specified criteria and provides that members serve up to two four-year terms at the pleasure of their appointing authority.
- 11) Requires the commission to advise the Attorney General on various issues in connection with the implementation and enforcement of the bill and online safety laws, and to issue a yearly report to the Legislature that, among other things, includes recommendations for legislative changes to enhance protection of minors online.
- 12) Includes a severability clause.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Author’s statement.** The author writes:

AB 1709 is a commonsense measure to protect children from social media platforms designed to maximize engagement through addictive features like infinite scroll, autoplay, constant notifications, and algorithm-driven feeds. Research continues to show links between excessive social media use and rising rates of anxiety, depression, sleep disruption, and low self-esteem, with young people especially vulnerable during critical stages of brain development. This bill sets a clear minimum age of 16 for covered platforms and requires meaningful age assurance so companies, not families alone, share responsibility for keeping children safe.

AB 1709 also creates the e-Safety Advisory Commission under the Attorney General to help oversee implementation, measure effectiveness, and advise on emerging online risks. This bill is not about speech or content, it is about harmful product design and protecting public health. California has long led the nation on consumer safety, and AB 1709 ensures we do the same for children growing up in today’s digital world.

- 2) **The recent, international spike in youth mental health disorders.** The early 2010s saw a major upsurge in adolescent depression and anxiety, self-harm, and suicide. The trend is concentrated in Gen Z, and girls are more impacted than boys:

% U.S. Anxiety Prevalence

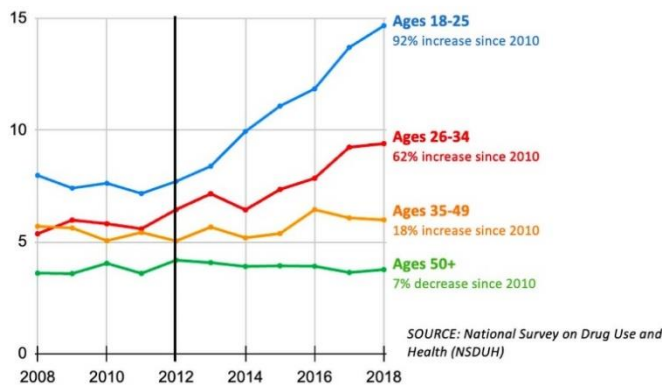


Figure 1. Percent US anxiety prevalence. National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH).¹

As of 2021, relative rates of depression among teen girls and boys had increased by roughly 150% compared to 2010:

% US Teens with Major Depression

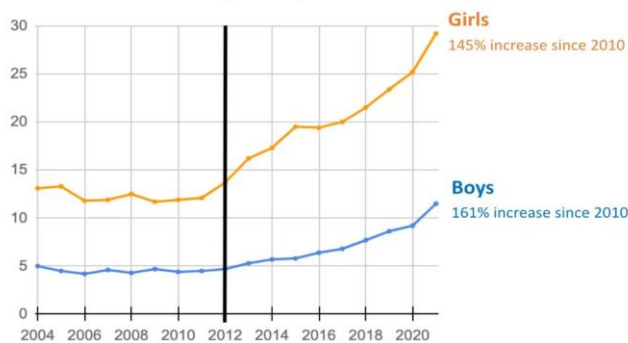


Figure 2. US teen depression prevalence. NSDUH data.²

The trend is reflected in objective measures, including hospitalizations from self-harm. In 2020, young teenage girls were hospitalized for self-harm, primarily from cutting, at three times the rate they were in 2010:

¹ Haidt, “The Teen Mental Illness Began Around 2012” *After Babel* (2023), <https://www.afterbabel.com/p/the-teen-mental-illness-epidemic>, summarizing Haidt et al, “Adolescent mood disorders since 2010: A collaborative review” (ongoing) available at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1diMvsMeRphUH7E6D1d_J7R6WbDdgnzFHDHPx9HXzR5o/edit?tab=t.0#.

² “The Teen Mental Illness Began Around 2012,” *supra*.

US Teens Admitted to Hospitals for Nonfatal Self-harm (Ages 10-14)

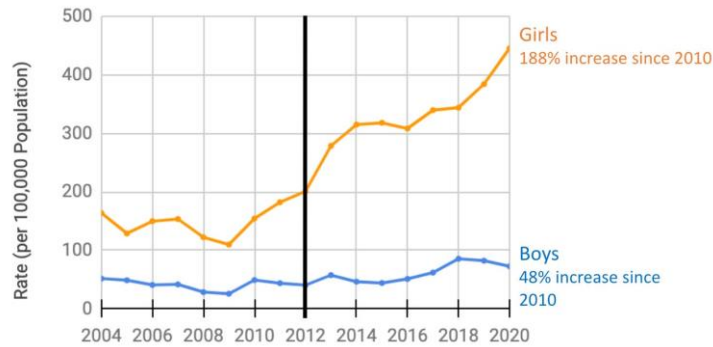


Figure 3. Hospital admissions for self-harm, ages 10-14. CDC data.³

Young teen suicide more than doubled in this timeframe:

US Teens, Suicides (Ages 10 – 14)

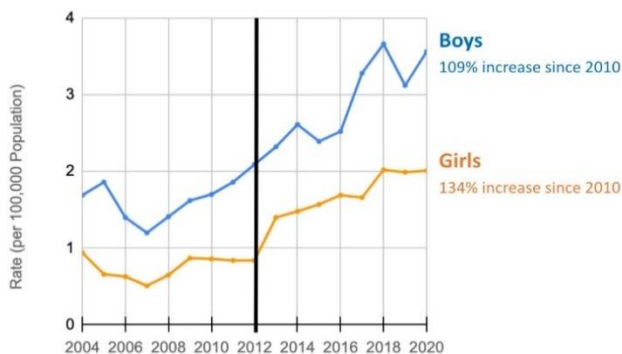


Figure 4. Suicide rate per 100,000 of US population, ages 10-14.⁴

Similar trends have been observed in several western countries.⁵ These trends track “the years when adolescents in rich countries traded their flip phones for smartphones and moved much more of their social lives online – particularly onto social-media platforms designed for virality and addiction.”⁶

3) **Social media use is associated with significant mental health harms to young people.** In May 2023, former Surgeon General Murthy issued an advisory warning of the potential mental health impacts of social media on young people. The advisory recognizes the benefits of social media for some users:

³ *Ibid.* For older teens, the increase for girls was 48%; for boys, 37%.

⁴ *Ibid.* For older teens, the increase for girls was 63.9%; for boys, 35%.

⁵ A series of articles from Haidt and Rausch addresses this issue under the header “The International Mental Health Crisis” on Haidt’s Substack, *After Babel*, <https://www.afterbabel.com/t/the-international-mental-health-crisis>.

⁶ Haidt, “End the Phone-Based Childhood Now” *The Atlantic* (March 13, 2024), <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2024/03/teen-childhood-smartphone-use-mental-health-effects/677722/>.

Social media can provide benefits for some youth by providing positive community and connection with others who share identities, abilities, and interests. It can provide access to important information and create a space for self-expression. The ability to form and maintain friendships online and develop social connections are among the positive effects of social media use for youth. These relationships can afford opportunities to have positive interactions with more diverse peer groups than are available to them offline and can provide important social support to youth. The buffering effects against stress that online social support from peers may provide can be especially important for youth who are often marginalized, including racial, ethnic, and sexual and gender minorities.⁷

The advisory calls for more research and concludes that “the current body of evidence indicates that while social media may have benefits for some children and adolescents, there are ample indicators that social media can also have a profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents.”⁸ A large and growing body of evidence, highlighted below, suggests the conclusion is well founded.

Evidence of correlation. A vast body of research, summarized in large literature reviews, establishes a correlation between social media use and poor mental health outcomes for youth.⁹ For example, a 2020 review of 13 studies synthesized evidence on the influence of social media on depression, anxiety, and psychological distress in a total of 21,231 adolescents in various countries across four domains of social media: time spent, activity, investment, and addiction. The authors concluded: “All domains correlated with depression, anxiety and psychological distress,” but noted there was complexity and need for further study.¹⁰ In an open-source review of studies of social media and mental health, Haidt et al conclude that, although the research was not sufficiently clear just a few years ago, today nearly all researchers agree that there is a relationship between time spent using social media and mental health problems, although there is considerable disagreement as to the size and significance of this effect.¹¹

Some researchers have found the relationship between social media and mental health negligible. Most prominently, Orben & Przybylski (2019) concluded the risk of social media use was comparable to “eating potatoes” or wearing eyeglasses.¹² However, the study applied to all screen-based activities, including watching television¹³ – an activity that pre-dated the recent spike in youth mental health disorders. Professor Orben subsequently concluded that the

⁷ “Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory” (May 23, 2023) p. 6 (emphasis added), <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf>. (“Surgeon General’s Advisory”)

⁸ *Id.* at p. 4.

⁹ Costello et. al, “Algorithms, Addiction, and Adolescent Mental Health: An Interdisciplinary Study to Inform State-level Policy Action to Protect Youth from the Dangers of Social Media” (2023) 49 Am. J. L. and Med. 135, fn. 60 (listing studies).

¹⁰ Betul Keles et al., “A Systematic Review: The Influence of Social Media on Depression, Anxiety and Psychological Distress in Adolescents” (2020) 25 Int’l J. Adolescence & Youth 79, 84-86, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851#d1e1197>.

¹¹ Haidt, et al., “Social media and mental health: A collaborative review” (Ongoing) Unpublished manuscript, New York University, See Discussion Question 1, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1w-HOfseF2wF9Y1pXwUUtP65-olnkPyWcgF5BiAtBEy0/edit>. (“Social media and mental health.”)

¹² Orben & Przybylski, “The association between adolescent well-being and digital technology use” *Nature* (2019), <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-018-0506-1>.

¹³ See response paper from Twenge et al, “Underestimating digital media harm,” *Nature* (2019), <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-020-0839-4.epdf>.

associations between social media use and a decline in well-being ranged from $r = 0.10$ to $r = 0.15$, where $r = 1.0$ indicates a perfect relationship and $r = 0$ indicates no relationship.¹⁴ For comparison, the correlation for lead and child IQ was $r = 0.11$, enough to justify a public health campaign.¹⁵

The correlation appears to be strongest for heavy users. While some light users – roughly an hour a day – may have better mental health outcomes than non-users,¹⁶ several studies indicate that heavy users – around three or more hours a day – experience a sharp increase in the risk of mental health outcomes, with girls more impacted than boys:

- A study of 6,595 adolescents found that those who spend more than three hours a day on social media face double the risk of experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety.¹⁷
- A study of over 10,904 14-year-olds in the UK found that compared to those who used social media less than three hours a day, the increase in depressive symptoms for girls and boys, respectively, was as follows:
 - 3-5 hours of daily use: 26% and 21%
 - Over five hours of daily use: 50% and 35%.¹⁸

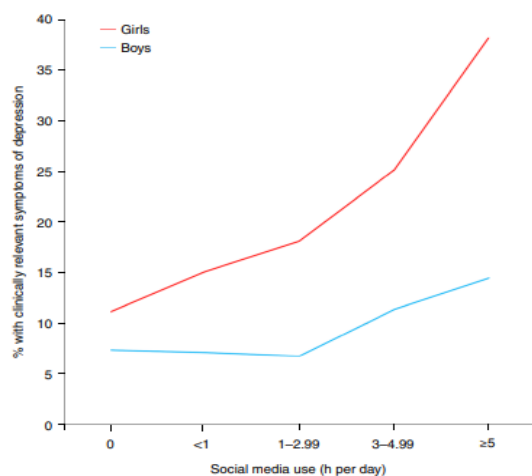


Figure 5: Percentage of clinically relevant depressive symptoms as a function of social media use.¹⁹

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ The range was from $r = .10$ to $r = .15$, where $r = 1.0$ indicates a perfect relationship and $r = 0$ indicates no relationship. (See *ibid.*) The correlation for lead and child IQ is $r = .11$. (Reuben et al, “Association of Childhood Blood Lead Levels With Cognitive Function and Socioeconomic Status at Age 38 Years and With IQ Change and Socioeconomic Mobility Between Childhood and Adulthood” (2017), <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2613157/>.)

¹⁶ *Id.* p. 311.

¹⁷ Riehm, K. E., et al., “Associations Between Time Spent Using Social Media and Internalizing and Externalizing Problems Among US Youth” *JAMA psychiatry*, 76 (12), 1266–1273 (2019), <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31509167/>.

¹⁸ Kelly et al, “Social Media Use and Adolescent Mental Health: Findings From the UK Millennium Cohort Study” *EClinicalMedicine* (2019), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6537508/>.

¹⁹ Graph based on data from Kelly et al., *supra*, by Haidt and Twenge in *Social media and mental health, supra*, Section 1.1.4.

- A review of three large surveys of a total of 221,096 adolescents in two countries found that, compared to those who use social media less than one hour a day, those who used social media three hours a day were 28% more likely to report they were low in wellbeing, a figure that increased to 64% for those who used social media more than five hours a day.²⁰
- A meta-analysis of 26 studies with a total of 55,340 adolescents found that time spent on social media was significantly associated with a higher risk of depression symptoms, with a stronger association for girls.²¹
- A recent study of more than 2,300 UK students found that those who used social media for more than three hours a day when they were aged 11-12 were more likely to have developed depression symptoms by the time they were aged 13-15, with a stronger association for girls.²²

As of 2024, the average daily social media usage for US adolescents was 4.8 hours.²³

Evidence of causation. Causal evidence for social media's effect on adolescent mental health is difficult to ascertain due to the ethical and logistical limits on experimentation. As a result, some scholars, such as UC Irvine professor of psychology Candice Odgers, assert that the data are at most correlative and does not show causation.²⁴ By contrast, the Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders, a research program based at the Harvard School of Public Health and Boston Children's Hospital, recently concluded "rigorous experimental and longitudinal public health studies of social media effects strongly suggest social media has a harmful impact on the mental health of young users."²⁵

Haidt et al list 24 experimental and quasi-experimental studies, 19 of which found significant evidence of harm.²⁶ For example, Facebook's adoption on college campuses across the US was staggered, providing a natural experiment with control groups on campuses where Facebook had not yet been adopted. One study found that the roll-out of the platform was associated with a 9% increase in depression and a 12% increase in anxiety.²⁷ Conversely, a Canadian university performed a randomized study on undergraduates with symptoms of anxiety and depression and found that the group assigned to limited social media activity for one month had improvements

²⁰ Twenge & Campbell "Digital media use is linked to lower psychological well-being: Evidence from Three Datasets," *Psychiatric Quarterly* (Mar. 2019), Tables 1 & 2, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30859387/>.

²¹ Liu et al, "Time Spent on Social Media and Risk of Depression in Adolescents: A Dose-Response Meta-Analysis" *PubMed* (2022), <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35564559/#:~:text=The%20risk%20of%20depression%20increased,of%20adolescent%20social%20media%20use.>

²² Shen, et al, "Social networking site use, depressive and anxiety symptoms in adolescents: evidence from a longitudinal cohort study (SCAMP)" *BMC Medicine* (2026), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12916-026-04667-5>.

²³ Dr. Vivek Murthy, "Surgeon General: Why I'm Calling for a Warning Label on Social Media Platforms" *New York Times* (Jun. 17, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/17/opinion/social-media-health-warning.html>.

²⁴ Odgers, "The great rewiring: is social media really behind an epidemic of teenage mental illness?" *Nature* (2024), <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-00902-2>.

²⁵ Costello et. al, *supra*, p. 142.

²⁶ "Social media and mental health," *supra*, at Sections 3.1-3.4, see Discussion Question 3.

²⁷ Braghieri et al, "Social Media and Mental Health" *American Economic Review* (2022), <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.20211218>.

in subjective mental wellbeing.²⁸ Similarly, studies show mental health improvements when schools go phone free.²⁹

Longitudinal cohort studies that track mental health impacts on groups across time also suggest a causal link between time spent on social media and mental health problems. Professor Haidt discusses 33 such studies that looked at intervals longer than a month, 25 of which found evidence indicating causation.³⁰ One study of US high school students found that the use of image-related social media was associated with the emergence of depressive symptoms one year later.³¹ Another study found that adolescent girls who used social media two or three hours a day early in adolescence, and subsequently increased use over time, had increased suicide risk ten years later.³²

However, a more recent longitudinal study of over 100,000 Australian adolescents over the course of three years found “a U-shaped association emerged where moderate social media use was associated with the best well-being outcomes, while both no use and highest use were associated with poorer well-being. For girls, moderate use became most favorable from middle adolescence onward, while for boys, no use became increasingly problematic from midadolescence, exceeding risks of high use by late adolescence.”³³ The authors concluded: “While heavy use was associated with poorer well-being and abstinence sometimes coincided with less favorable outcomes, these findings are observational and should be interpreted cautiously.”³⁴

Internal research from social media companies. Internal studies from social media obtained from leaks or in litigation provide additional evidence for the connection between social media use and mental health impacts. For example, leaked research from Meta, Instagram’s parent company revealed that Instagram made “body image issues worse for one in three teen girls.”³⁵ More alarmingly, the report also found that of users who reported having suicidal thoughts, 13% of UK and 6% of US teenagers suggested that they were the result of Instagram use.³⁶ Their internal research goes on to state that: “Teens blame Instagram for increases in the rate of anxiety

²⁸ Davis & Goldfield, “Limiting social media use decreases depression, anxiety, and fear of missing out in youth with emotional distress: A randomized controlled trial,” *Psychology of Popular Media* (2024), <https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fppm0000536>.

²⁹ Abrahamsson, “Smartphone Bans, Student Outcomes and Mental Health,” Discussion paper, <https://openaccess.nhh.no/nhh-xmlui/handle/11250/3119200>.

³⁰ Haidt, “Social Media is a Major Cause of the Mental Illness Epidemic in Teen Girls. Here’s the Evidence” *After Babel* (Feb. 22, 2023), <https://www.afterbabel.com/p/social-media-mental-illness-epidemic>. By contrast, for studies in which the reduction in social media use was a week or less, just one in seven showed an improvement in mental health, suggesting that “[g]oing cold turkey doesn’t make you happy” (*Ibid.*)

³¹ Nesi, et al, “Emotional responses to social media experiences among adolescents: Longitudinal associations with depressive symptoms” *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology* (2021), <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34424131/>.

³² Coyne et al., “Suicide Risk in Emerging Adulthood: Associations with Screen Time over 10 Years” (2021) 50 *J. Youth & Adolescence* 2324, 2326-27.

³³ Singh et al, “Social Media Use and Well-Being Across Adolescent Development” *JAMA Pediatrics* (Jan. 2026), <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/article-abstract/2843720>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Wells et al. “Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show” *Wall Street Journal* (Sept. 14, 2021), https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739?mod=hp_lead_pos7&mod=article_inline.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

and depression . . . This reaction was unprompted and consistent across all groups.”³⁷ An open-source compilation of 35 of Meta’s internal research concludes:

Across these 35 studies, which used a variety of methods, the company learned repeatedly that its products — particularly Instagram — are harming young people on a vast scale. The company’s leaders know about many of these harms, and in several identifiable cases they failed to act. Meta researchers talked with each other about their findings, noting that Meta’s leadership reacted negatively, not constructively, when they learned about harms.³⁸

Absence of compelling alternative explanations. Some scholars have argued that the apparent spike in youth mental health issues can be attributed to changing diagnostic criteria and the willingness of Gen Z to report distress as stigma around mental illness declined.³⁹ Others, such as Professor Odgers, have argued that a broader set of social ills, including “access to guns, exposure to violence, structural discrimination and racism, sexual abuse, the opioid epidemic, economic hardship, and social isolation,” better explain the rapid onset of anxiety and depression.⁴⁰ But such explanations fail to account for the fact that the spike in mental health disorders has been observed in numerous other countries, is largely concentrated in Gen Z, has impacted girls more than boys, and began suddenly in the early 2010s – around the time that smartphones became widely adopted.

4) How does social media contribute to mental health harms? According to Surgeon General Murthy, adolescents, in a critical formative period of brain development, are especially vulnerable to potential mental health impacts of social media.⁴¹ While noting that several complex factors shape social media’s influence on children and adolescents, the Surgeon General points to two primary risk factors: 1) harmful content, and 2) excessive and problematic use.

Harmful content. According to the Surgeon General, “extreme, inappropriate, and harmful content continues to be easily and widely accessible by children and adolescents” and is “spread through direct pushes, unwanted content exchanges, and algorithmic designs.”⁴² Such content includes:

- Extreme content such as live depictions of self-harm acts, like asphyxiation or cutting, “which can normalize such behaviors, including through the formation of suicide pacts and posing of self-harm models for others to follow.”⁴³

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Sippel et al., “Meta’s Internal Research: What The Company Learned About Social Media and Harms to Mental Health from Dozens of Studies,” NYU Stern, Tech and Society Lab, <https://metasinternalresearch.org/>.

³⁹ See discussion in Rausch, “The Girls Are Not Alright: Responses to Three Claims that the Youth Mental Health Crisis Is Exaggerated” *After Babel* (Apr. 11, 2024), https://www.afterbabel.com/p/the-girls-are-not-alright-responses?utm_source=publication-search.

⁴⁰ “The Great Rewiring: Is Social Media Really Behind an Epidemic of Teenage Mental Illness?” *supra*. For a response to this article, see Haidt, “Yes, Social Media Really Is a Cause of the Epidemic of Teenage Mental Illness: Two problem with a review in Nature” *After Babel* (Apr. 9, 2024), <https://www.afterbabel.com/p/phone-based-childhood-cause-epidemic>.

⁴¹ Surgeon General’s Advisory, *supra*, at p. 8.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

- Bullying and harassment: roughly two-thirds of adolescents are “often” or “sometimes” exposed to hate-based content, with nearly 75% of adolescents stating that social media sites do a fair to poor job of addressing online harassment and bullying.⁴⁴
- Predatory behaviors, including financial or sexual exploitation of children and adolescents; nearly 6-in-10 adolescent girls surveyed had received unwanted advances from strangers on social media platforms.⁴⁵

Leaked internal platform studies indicate that youth exposure to unwanted, disturbing, graphic, or sexual content is common and facilitated by platform design.⁴⁶ According to documents obtained by the *Wall Street Journal*, one in eight users under the age of 16 experienced unwanted sexual advances on Instagram, facilitated by lax privacy settings.⁴⁷

Additionally, the advisory cites a synthesis of 20 studies demonstrating that many users, especially adolescent girls, experience envy and social comparison, leading to body dissatisfaction, disordered eating behaviors, and low self-esteem. “When asked about the impact of social media on their body image, nearly half (46%) of adolescents aged 13–17 said social media makes them feel worse, 40% said it makes them feel neither better nor worse, and only 14% said it makes them feel better.”⁴⁸ Internal studies by platforms also indicate similar patterns of social comparison, with negative effects on wellbeing.⁴⁹ In an internal Meta study, younger and female users reported much greater rates of feeling “worse about yourself because of other peoples’ posts on Instagram,” with 27.4% of 13-15 year old girls reporting this experience over a 7-day period, compared to 14.6% of boys in the same age group.⁵⁰

Excessive and problematic use. The advisory cites studies showing that on a typical weekday, nearly one in three adolescents report using screens – most commonly, social media – until midnight or later.⁵¹ One third or more of girls aged 11-15 feel “addicted” to certain platforms.

⁴⁴ Alhajji et al., “Cyberbullying, Mental Health, and Violence in Adolescents and Associations With Sex and Race: Data From the 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey” *Global pediatric health* (2019), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2333794X19868887>; Vogels, “Teens and Cyberbullying,” Pew Research Center: *Internet, Science & Tech* (2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/12/15/teens-and-cyberbullying-2022/>.

⁴⁵ Nesi, et al., “Teens and mental health: How girls really feel about social media” Common Sense Media (2023), <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/teens-and-mental-health-how-girls-really-feel-about-social-media>.

⁴⁶ “Minnesota Attorney General’s Report on Emerging Technology and Its Effects on Youth Well-Being” (Feb. 2025), p. 10-11. https://www.ag.state.mn.us/Office/Reports/EmergingTechnology_2025.pdf. (“Minnesota Attorney General’s Report”)

⁴⁷ Jeff Horwitz, “His Job Was to Make Instagram Safe for Teens. His 14-Year-Old Showed Him What the App Was Really Like” *The Wall Street Journal* (Nov. 2, 2023), https://www.wsj.com/tech/instagram-facebook-teens-harassment-safety-5d991be1?mod=hp_featst_pos3.

⁴⁸ Bickham et al., “Adolescent Media Use: Attitudes, Effects, and Online Experiences” Boston Children’s Hospital Digital Wellness Lab (2022), https://digitalwellnesslab.org/wpcontent/uploads/Pulse-Survey_Adolescent-Attitudes-Effectsand-Experiences.pdf.

⁴⁹ Minnesota Attorney General’s Report, *supra*, pp. 11-12.

⁵⁰ *Arizona et al. v. Meta Platforms, Inc., et al.*, Case No. 4:23-cv-05448, Complaint (N.D. Cal. Oct. 24, 2023), <https://storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.nmd.496039/gov.uscourts.nmd.496039.36.2.pdf>.

⁵¹ Rideout, V., & Robb, M. B. “Social media, social life: Teens reveal their experiences” Common Sense Media (2018), <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/2018-social-mediasocial-life-executive-summary-web.pdf>.

Excessive use correlates with attention problems, feelings of exclusion, and sleep problems.⁵² Poor sleep, in turn, is linked with neurological development issues, depression, and suicidality.⁵³

Excessive use is driven in part by systems that are optimized to maximize user engagement through design features, such as recommendation algorithms, likes, push notifications, auto-play, and endless scroll.⁵⁴ According to a former social media company executive's statements, such features were designed intentionally to increase time spent through features that "give you a little dopamine hit every once in awhile."⁵⁵ These features "can trigger pathways comparable to addiction."⁵⁶ Young people with still-developing pre-frontal cortexes who crave social reward and lack inhibition are especially susceptible.⁵⁷

Summing it all up, Jonathan Haidt and Ravi Iyer of the Anxious Generation Movement, write in support of the bill:

The displacement of essential health behaviors is particularly well-documented. Pew Research Center data from 2025 indicates that 45% of teens report social media harms their sleep, and 40% report negative effects on productivity. These perceptions are corroborated by epidemiological research: high social media users were roughly 70% more likely than average users to fall asleep after 11 p.m. on school nights, according to UK Millennium Cohort data. A 2024 study across 40 countries published in the *Journal of Adolescence* found that problematic social media use is consistently associated with sleep difficulties among adolescents internationally.

Multiple experimental studies limiting social media use or changing platform designs have reported improved health outcomes. Meta's own internal randomized experiment, Project Mercury, found that users who stopped using Facebook and Instagram reported lower feelings of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and social comparison. Another internal Meta project, Project Daisy, found that hiding public "Like" counts on posts reduced negative social comparison among teenagers. A randomized controlled trial published in 2025 found that reducing social media use to one hour per day for three weeks led to reductions in depression, anxiety, FOMO, and sleep problems.

Beyond mental health, children face exposure to inappropriate content and contact on these platforms. Meta's internal research shows that 13% of 13- to 15-year-olds reported seeing violent or disturbing images on Instagram in a given week, and 19% reported seeing unwanted sexually explicit content. Court documents against Snap Inc. revealed that Snapchat receives around 10,000 reports of sextortion every month—likely a fraction of the actual abuse. Design features such as infinite scroll, autoplay, and engagement gamification

⁵² Surgeon General's Advisory, *supra*, at p. 10.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Burhan & Moradzadeh, "Neurotransmitter Dopamine and its Role in the Development of Social Media Addiction" 11 *Journal of Neurology & Neurophysiology* 507 (2020), <https://www.iomcworld.org/open-access/neurotransmitter-dopamine-da-and-its-role-in-the-development-of-social-mediaaddiction.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Alex Hern, "'Never get high on your own supply' – why social media bosses don't use social media," *The Guardian* (Jan. 23, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/jan/23/never-get-high-on-your-own-supply-why-social-media-bosses-dont-use-social-media>.

⁵⁶ Surgeon General's Advisory, *supra*, at p. 9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

through likes, streaks, and follower counts create significant pressures for social validation among young people.

5) **Recent lawsuits.** For decades, social media companies have been able to evade liability by invoking Section 230 of the federal Communications Decency Act of 1996, which shields online platforms for harms associated with content posted on the platforms by third-party users. Two recent groundbreaking lawsuits have found social media liable for harming users, based on the novel legal theory that social media design features, as opposed to third party content, were the source of harm.

First, a New Mexico jury found Meta violated the state’s Unfair Practices Act by hiding what it knew about the dangers of child sexual exploitation on its platforms and impacts to child mental health. “Meta’s design features enabled pedophiles and predators to engage in child sexual exploitation on Meta’s platforms. Evidence from those witnesses and other industry experts also demonstrated that Meta intentionally designs its platforms to addict young people and, contrary to Meta’s public commitments, expose them to dangerous content related to eating disorders and self harm.”⁵⁸ The jury ordered Meta to pay a total of \$375 million in civil penalties.

Second, a jury in Los Angeles found YouTube and Meta’s negligent design of their products was a substantial factor in causing the plaintiff’s mental health distress. She testified that her compulsive use of social media as a child led to anxiety, depression, and thoughts of self-harm. The jury agreed that addictive features like infinite scroll, autoplay, push notifications, and algorithmic curation of content exacerbated her mental health condition. The jury ordered Meta and YouTube to pay the plaintiff \$3 million in compensatory damages, with 70% assigned to Meta.⁵⁹

6) **California’s efforts to protect children online.** California has enacted several measures to proactively protect children online, including:

Safe-by-design provisions. AB 2273 (Wicks, Ch. 320, Stats. 2022) establishes the California Age-Appropriate Design Code Act (AADC), which imposes obligations and restrictions on businesses that provide online services, products, or features likely to be accessed by children. Key provisions include a prohibition on profiling and the collection of a child’s precise geolocation; data minimization and purpose limitations; age estimation; prohibitions on dark patterns; and a requirement that covered entities prepare data protection impact assessments (DPIA) before offering online services likely to be accessed by children. NetChoice, a trade association of online businesses, sued on several grounds. Some portions of the AADC – including the provisions relating to DPIAs, dark patterns, profiling, and data restrictions – have been blocked from implementation, while others have been allowed to go into effect, including the coverage definition, age estimation provisions, and limits on geolocation data.⁶⁰ Litigation is ongoing. AB 2246 (Wicks, 2026) would excise the unconstitutional portions of the AADC. The bill will be heard in this Committee on the same day as this bill.

⁵⁸ New Mexico Department of Justice, “New Mexico Department of Justice Wins Landmark Verdict Against Meta” (Mar. 24, 2026), <https://nmdoj.gov/press-release/new-mexico-department-of-justice-wins-landmark-verdict-against-meta/>.

⁵⁹ Tyler Katzenberger, “Meta, YouTube found liable for social media addiction in landmark trial,” *Politico* (Mar. 25, 2026), <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/03/25/meta-youtube-found-liable-for-social-media-addiction-in-landmark-trial-00844625>.

⁶⁰ *NetChoice, LLC v. Bonta* (March 12, 2026) No. 25-2366 D.C. No. 5:22-cv-08861- BLF.

Addictive feeds. SB 976 (Skinner, Ch. 321, Stats. 2024), the “Protecting Our Kids from Social Media Addiction Act” regulates how internet platforms allow minors to access personalized recommendation algorithms. The Act restricts minors’ access to algorithmic feeds, requires certain default settings, including restricting notifications, hiding like counts, and making accounts private, and mandates that the Attorney General adopt regulations governing age assurance by 2027. The Act also requires covered companies to annually disclose the number of minors that use their services. NetChoice has challenged the Act on First Amendment grounds. Provisions governing notifications, like-counts, and disclosures have been blocked pending the ruling on the merits, while the rest of the Act has been allowed to stand.⁶¹ Litigation is ongoing.

Social media warning labels. AB 56 (Bauer-Kahan, Ch. 671, Stats. 2025) responds to former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy’s call for safety warning labels on social media platforms. Beginning in 2027, social media platforms must display mental health warning labels about the harms associated with social media when a child logs on to the platform and after extended use.

Device-based age assurance. AB 1043 (Wicks, Ch. 675, Stats. 2025) enacted the Digital Age Assurance Act, which establishes an age verification system for users of mobile devices and computers. Beginning in 2027, parents who allow their children to be the main users of such devices will be able to configure the device to send a non-identifying age bracket signal – under 13, between 13 and 16, between 16 and 18, or at least 18 – that operating systems and application stores must send to application developers. Developers, in turn, must treat the signal as the primary indicator of the user’s age, thereby ensuring that they cannot turn a blind eye to children on apps intended for more mature audiences. AB 1856 (Wicks, 2026) would update the law to, among other things, include websites.

7) Global trend toward social media age limits. In December 2025, Australia enacted the world’s first national age limit on social media, prohibiting users under age 16 from having social media accounts. The ban applies to Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Threads, TikTok, X, YouTube, Reddit, Twitch, and Kick. This led to the termination of 4.7 million accounts held by 2.5 million children between the ages of 8 and 15. However, a recent report indicates that nearly 70% of the under 16s still maintained access, in part due to lax age verification from the social media companies.⁶² Nevertheless, Jonathan Haidt and Ravi Iyer, who support the bill, write that the effort is working so far:

Early evidence from Australia’s age-based restriction is promising. Within the first month of implementation, platforms deactivated approximately 4.7 million underage accounts. One report found that Snapchat teen usage has dropped from 33% to 20%, which translates to thousands of children being at reduced risk of sextortion. While some young people have found workarounds through VPNs, this does not negate the benefit for the majority. Many young Australians have welcomed the change and reported finding value in alternative activities. As the Australian eSafety commissioner has observed, we have speed limits that set norms, even though we acknowledge that many people will continue to speed. If we can make it normal not to have an account on these platforms, kids without social media accounts will no longer feel left out.

⁶¹ *NetChoice, LLC v. Bonta* (9th Cir. 2025) 152 F.4th 1002, 1025.

⁶² Josh Butler, “Two-thirds of under-16s with accounts on Instagram, Snapchat or TikTok kept access despite ban” *The Guardian* (Mar. 31, 2026), <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2026/mar/31/meta-tiktok-snapchat-google-under-investigation-australia-social-media-ban>.

Age-based access restrictions may be the most effective population-level prevention tool compared to alternative policy measures. Social media platforms are subject to what researchers call *product market traps*—situations where users would prefer not to consume the product, but still consume it to avoid the social cost of abstaining. This trap is particularly dangerous for children and teenagers in puberty, when they experience low self-regulation and a high need for social belonging. Research published in the *American Economic Review* in 2025 documented this dynamic. Policies that partially limit usage, such as teen accounts, have been shown to be less effective and do not address the collective action problem. A clear age-based restriction is the strongest tool available.

Since Australia’s enactment of an age restriction, several other countries including Indonesia, France, Denmark, Spain, Germany, Greece, and Malaysia have enacted or are currently considering age limits, typically at age 15 or 16.⁶³

8) **Why age 16?** Setting the age at 16 is based on recommendations from Jon Haidt’s *The Anxious Generation*, which argues that puberty – which typically lasts until 15 or 16 for girls and 16 or 17 for boys – is an especially sensitive period for brain development during which harmful or addictive content can do the greatest damage, leading to mental health impacts.⁶⁴ In support of the bill, Jonathan Haidt and Ravi Iyer write:

Puberty, which begins for most children in the early tween years and ends in the mid to late teens, is a particularly sensitive period for the brain. Half or more of girls and boys are still in puberty on their 15th and 16th birthday, respectively, making this a crucial time for brain and identity development. The brain is changing from the child form to the adult form, and those changes are guided by whatever a child does repeatedly.

The evidence linking social media use to adverse mental health outcomes among children and adolescents is now substantial and methodologically diverse. Multiple longitudinal studies have found that social media use at one point in time predicted later increases in internalizing symptoms, including depression. Analyses of the UK Millennium Cohort Study found that adolescents who spent five or more hours per day on social media were significantly more likely to meet criteria for depression compared to those who used it for less than one hour per day. Crucially, this evidence is now supported by experimental research: a 2025 meta-analysis of 32 randomized controlled trials of social media reduction experiments found significant improvements in mental health and wellbeing when social media use was reduced.

In California specifically, the crisis is acute. A 2025 survey by Blue Shield of California and Children Now found that 94% of young Californians reported experiencing regular mental health challenges—up from 87% in 2023. Nearly a third said social media was harmful to their mental health, about one in three reported being cyberbullied on social media, and roughly seven in ten said social media contributed to a negative body image. Every year that California can delay social media use is another year free of brain-sculpting by addictive algorithms during the period when young brains are at their most vulnerable.

⁶³Aisha Malik, “These are the countries moving to ban social media for children” *TechCrunch* (Mar. 6, 2026), <https://techcrunch.com/2026/03/06/social-media-ban-children-countries-list/>.

⁶⁴Jon Haidt & Ravi Iyer, “Why Every Country Should Set 16 (or Higher) as the Minimum Age for Social Media Accounts,” *After Babel* (Jan. 13, 2026), <https://www.afterbabel.com/p/why-every-country-should-set-16>.

9) **This bill prohibits social media accounts for youth under age 16 and creates an e-Safety Advisory Commission.** This bill would add California to the growing list of jurisdictions across the world that are moving to keep kids and young teens off social media. Specifically, the bill would prohibit covered platforms – based on the “addictive internet-based service or application” definition from SB 976 – from permitting a user who is under 16 years of age to create or maintain an account on the covered platform, and would require platforms to implement reasonable measures to prevent users under 16 years of age from accessing or using accounts on the covered platform. Existing and subsequently-discovered under-16 accounts, along with the user’s personal information, would have to be deleted.

To accomplish this, covered platforms would be required to comply with AB 1043 by requesting and honoring an age signal for a particular child from an operating system or application store, subject to regulations adopted by the Attorney General. Any personal information gathered in connection with the age verification process may be used solely for that purpose and retained no longer than necessary.

The bill allows the Attorney General to adopt regulations to alter the scope of “covered platform” if the Attorney General determines that doing so is necessary to ensure that “covered platform” applies to internet websites, online services, online applications, or mobile applications that make addictive features available to users under 16 years of age. This provision is intended to ensure that the bill can be updated to remain focused solely on those platforms that use addictive features that foster compulsive use and are genuinely harmful to minors. As such the Attorney General would have the discretion, through duly enacted regulations, to exclude categories of online services and products that do not make addictive features available to minors under age 16, as well as to add addictive services and products that are the functional equivalent in terms of risks they pose to minors online.

To help advise the Attorney General on implementation and enforcement, the bill would provide for the creation of an e-Safety Advisory Commission. The Commission would enhance the Office of the Attorney General’s expertise on online safety matters, particularly those pertaining to youth online safety. Among other duties, the Commission would be required to submit an annual report to the Legislature that includes recommendations for further legislation.

The Commission was inspired by Australia’s e-Safety Commission, an independent online safety regulator. The creation of the Commission as a standalone entity was initially proposed in AB 1700 (Lowenthal, 2026), which will not be moving forward.

10) **First Amendment considerations.** Opponents argue the bill violates the First Amendment. Key to this analysis is whether the bill regulates speech based on its content. If so, it is presumptively unconstitutional and subject to “strict scrutiny,” the most exacting standard of judicial review.⁶⁵ Content-based laws include those that are based on “the topic discussed or the idea or message expressed” as well as more subtle “laws that cannot be justified without reference to the content of the regulated speech.”⁶⁶ If, on the other hand, the bill is content neutral, it will be subject to “intermediate scrutiny,” a more lenient standard.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *Reed v. Town of Gilbert* (2015) 576 U.S. 155, 163.

⁶⁶ *Id.* at 163, 164.

⁶⁷ *City of Austin v. Reagan Nat’l Adver. of Austin, LLC* (2022) 596 U.S. 61, 76.

Several state laws addressing minors' access to or treatment on social media have been blocked as content-based speech regulations.⁶⁸ However, as discussed above, AB 1709 incorporates the definition of “addictive internet-based service or application” – essentially, online spaces with algorithmic feeds that curate media using individualized data – from SB 976. Recently, a panel of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals unanimously rejected the argument that this definition is content based. NetChoice, an internet trade association that includes Google, Meta, and X, contended that the exemption for websites dedicated to commercial transactions or consumer reviews rendered the bill content based. But the court concluded that the Act “‘applies evenhandedly to all who wish to distribute and sell’ online.”⁶⁹ The court also rejected NetChoice’s argument that the definition’s incorporation of “social media” platforms was content specific, stating that “California’s use of ‘social media’ platform as statutory shorthand does not render the Act content based, since it applies to websites whether they facilitate social interaction or other forms of content.”⁷⁰

Similarly, the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals, in a 2-1 decision, denied an attempt to block Florida’s ban on accounts for kids under age 14, finding the law was content neutral and likely to survive intermediate scrutiny. Like this bill and SB 976, Florida’s law focuses on platforms with addictive features. The Court stated that neither the “definition of ‘social media platform’ nor of ‘addictive features’ makes any reference to the type of content involved.”⁷¹ Rather the law “defines social media platforms by reference to a *form* of expression, not a *subject matter*.”⁷²

These precedents suggest that this bill’s design-based framing would be subject to intermediate scrutiny, which requires that the law “advances important governmental interests unrelated to the suppression of free speech and does not burden substantially more speech than necessary to further those interests.”⁷³ Here, California is following several other countries by advancing the important interest of protecting younger teens and children from what is widely acknowledged to be a key factor in the apparent increase in youth mental health disorders. Notably, the bill focuses only on the most vulnerable age group – adolescents who are still in a highly formative and impressionable stage – and does not prohibit them from *accessing* covered platforms. Rather, it simply prohibits the creation of an account that allows for engagement-maximizing design features to be personalized – making it more likely the youth will use the platform compulsively, leading to a greater likelihood that they experience the types of harms described earlier in this analysis. As such, the burden imposed on speech is limited to the riskiest use cases. Therefore, although far from certain, the bill appears to have a strong chance of withstanding a First Amendment challenge.

In a joint letter, TechNet, Computer & Communications Industry Association, Chamber of Progress, and NetChoice rely heavily on *Brown v. Entm’t Merchs. Ass’n*,⁷⁴ a decision written by Justice Antonin Scalia that struck down a California law restricting minors’ access to violent

⁶⁸ See “US State Age Assurance Laws for Social Media,” Age Verification Providers Association (Feb. 2026), <https://avpassociation.com/us-state-age-assurance-laws-for-social-media> (listing cases).

⁶⁹ *NetChoice, LLC v. Bonta* (9th Cir. 2025) 152 F.4th 1002, 1016.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Comput. & Commc’ns Industry Ass’n v. Uthmeier* (11th Cir. Nov. 25, 2025, No. 25-11881) 2025 LX 577701, at *12-13.

⁷² *Id.* at *13, emphasis in original.

⁷³ *Free Speech Coalition, Inc. v. Paxton* (2025) 145 S. Ct. 2291, 2317 (majority opinion), quoting *Turner Broad. Sys., Inc. v. FCC* (1997) 520 U.S. 180, 189.

⁷⁴ (2011) 564 U.S. 786.

video games, “a wholly new category of *content-based* regulation”⁷⁵ that failed strict scrutiny. As discussed above, this bill uses a *content-neutral* definition that will likely face the less exacting standard of intermediate scrutiny. Thus, opposition’s reliance on this case appears to be misplaced.

11) Concerns about the impact to young people. A coalition of organizations, including the Trevor Project, LGBT Tech, Electronic Frontier Foundation, and others, asserts the bill will harm young people by blocking access to essential online resources:

[. . .] While efforts like A.B. 1709 are often intended to protect youth, cutting off their online access will both erase their important voices and perspectives and frustrate their development, ability to form in-person relationships, and autonomy. After all, social media sites are not just sources of entertainment; they provide crucial spaces for young people to explore their identities—whether by creating and sharing art, practicing religion, community building, or civic engagement.

For many young people, especially those who lack support in their physical environments, these online communities can provide meaningful connection and a sense of belonging. Research has disproven the oft-assumed link between social media use and poor mental health in youth; in fact, young people actually benefit from online connection. In one major study of 100,000 adolescents, a “U-shaped association emerged where moderate social media use was associated with the best well-being outcomes, while both no use and highest use were associated with poorer well-being.”

For LGBTQ+ youth in particular, social media provides an essential lifeline of support. A 2025 survey by The Trevor Project revealed that most LGBTQ+ young people agreed that they go online to connect with people because it is difficult finding others to relate to and connect with in their daily lives. Compared to their cisgender peers, trans and non-binary youth were more likely to agree that they go online to find others because it is hard to make in-person connections (79% vs. 65%), and because they feel they can be their complete selves online (78% vs. 64%).

The harms of a total social media ban like A.B. 1709 are further magnified for other members of marginalized groups, including young people who are rural, homeschooled, in foster care, have a disability, or are living in an unsupportive or abusive home. Additionally, social media can be a very useful tool for adolescents to obtain factual and scientifically accurate information about a wide array of topics, including sexuality and gender identities. These resources can be particularly crucial for young people living in places where open discussions of sexuality are restricted. Finally, adolescents also face increasing obstacles to information on sex, reproductive health, and abortion services. Studies have shown that social media is the primary information source for that population.

Blocking our youth from these diverse online spaces robs them of opportunities to develop as individuals and participate in public life, and to find knowledge and safety in supportive online communities that they can’t always access in the physical world.

⁷⁵ *Id.* at p. 794, emphasis added.

Two points may allay these concerns to a degree. First, the bill does not block youth from accessing social media; it only prohibits them from having accounts. Young people will still have access to the full panoply of information and resources on social media. But they will not have a curated feed and, crucially for some isolated youth, a community of friends. As Jonathan Haidt and Ravi Iyer write:

AB 1709 wisely focuses on account creation, not access to content. Children under 16 would still be able to search sites such as YouTube or Reddit for any content they want. They can view any video a teacher assigns or a friend recommends. But without an account and a contract with the company, they cannot compare the popularity of pictures of themselves, receive tailored late-night notifications, be served ever more personalized extreme content, or be contacted by strangers via messaging.”

Second, the bill allows the AG to adopt regulations to alter its scope to ensure it applies to those platforms that have truly addictive features. Through this process, online spaces that are sufficiently safe-by-design may potentially be excluded from the bill’s ambit.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT: The Organization for Social Media Safety, a co-sponsor of the bill, writes:

By establishing a minimum age requirement, AB 1709 is a reasonable, evidence-based response to a well-documented problem. Younger adolescents should not be expected to navigate products engineered to capture and hold their attention during a critical stage of development, where the available evidence clearly and convincingly shows both the serious harms of these products and long-standing internal awareness by the companies themselves.

Jonathan Haidt and Ravi Iyer of the Anxious Generation Movement, in support, write:

A Chance for California to Lead

Momentum on this issue has been building around the world. Australia led the way. Countries across Europe, Asia, and Latin America are following. California—already a global leader in technology policy—has both the credibility and the responsibility to set the standard in the United States.

Platform-level voluntary changes have been implemented but have not mitigated harm at the scale of the problem. These measures demonstrate that platforms recognize the risks of their own design features, yet they apply mitigations inconsistently and insufficiently. For services that intrinsically rely on features designed to maximize engagement, age limits would eliminate the cycle where platforms make minimal changes to preserve business models built on monopolizing youth attention.

It Will Be Imperfect. And That Is Okay.

Research continues to mount that social media causes harm to adolescents, and in fact to people of all ages. But we allow adults to do things they know are dangerous or addictive—smoking, drinking, gambling. Just as some minors will obtain alcohol before the legal age, some will defy these restrictions. Flawless implementation is not the goal. A healthier childhood is. And the best time to begin building it is now.

Without action, we resign another generation of California’s children to grow up under the influence of a handful of tech companies whose business models depend on capturing as

much of children's time and attention as possible. Children and families should not have to fight this battle alone.

We urge you to pass AB 1709. For the sake of California's children, and for the parents who are counting on you to help free them from the collective action trap that no family can escape on its own.

Mothers Against Media Addiction, in support, writes:

[. . .] In 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Children's Hospital Association jointly declared that the U.S. is in a national state of emergency for child and adolescent mental health. We are still in that state of emergency and eager for states to follow the lead of other countries and take decisive action to prioritize youth mental well-being.

Right now, social media has a stranglehold on the time and attention of children in California and nationwide. Today's youth spend nearly 9 hours on screens daily, much of that time using social media platforms. This extensive use of social media is linked to an increase in depression, anxiety, and even suicide in children and adolescents.

When children use these platforms, they are often exposed to dangerous, disturbing, and inappropriate content. In 2024, Meta reported that it removed 52.4 million pieces of content that "encouraged suicide, self-injury, and eating disorders" on Facebook and Instagram. Over 16 million more posts of this nature were removed in the first quarter of 2025 alone.

ARGUMENTS IN OPPOSITION: In a joint letter, TechNet, Computer & Communications Industry Association, Chamber of Progress, and NetChoice write:

While we share the Legislature's concern about rising rates of youth depression and anxiety, and recognize that there has been a significant focus on the role social media can play for some young people, AB 1709 takes an overly simplistic approach to a complicated issue. Research increasingly shows that the impacts of social media are highly individualized, and indeed, many youth benefit from the use of digital tools. The best available research does not establish a causal relationship between social media use and youth mental health outcomes broadly, and even if it did, AB 1709 would not effectively address those risks. First, it is highly likely that AB 1709 will be struck down as an unconstitutional violation of minors' First Amendment rights. Second, it will prove ineffective, as demonstrated by similar laws in other jurisdictions, as teens, aided by their parents, will find ways to access social media. Third, to the extent that it does displace teens from the platforms this bill covers, those teens will seek the same interaction and community elsewhere, including on sites and platforms that do not offer and invest in the same levels of safety and protection. This predictable shift will likely make teens less safe.

Oakland Privacy, in opposition, writes:

What we would like to see, and what we advocate for, is targeted legislation that focuses on identifying tech features that contribute to harm like unqualified engagement metrics that reward anger, disgust and conflict, bullying controls, behaviorally-based algorithms, invasive

push notifications, and privacy abuses. In addition, we would like to see accountability legislation that imposes meaningful consequences when harm does occur and imposes online safety audits; educational legislation that makes digital literacy as central a subject as mathematics or history in our schools; and finally support for parents in navigating social media for their kids when they lack leisure time and knowledge of how the systems work.

A coalition of organizations, including the Trevor Project, LGBT Tech, Electronic Frontier Foundation, and others, in opposition, writes:

The undersigned organizations write today in strong opposition to A.B. 1709, which would prohibit all Californians under the age of 16 from accessing social media platforms. The bill violates young people's First Amendment rights to speak and get information online. And in the process, the bill also burdens adults' free speech rights, inhibits people's rights to anonymity online, and jeopardizes everyone's privacy and data security. It also removes power from parents and young people to decide for themselves whether to use social media and jeopardizes young people's wellbeing. Lawmakers must not sacrifice their constituents' First Amendment and privacy rights, and should instead be working on constitutional measures to help young people use the internet safely.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

California Commission on the Status of Women and Girls (Co-Sponsor)
 Common Sense Media (Co-Sponsor)
 Organization for Social Media Safety (Co-Sponsor)
 Anxious Generation
 California Initiative for Technology & Democracy, a Project of California Common CAUSE
 Mothers Against Media Addiction

Opposition

AAPI Equity Alliance (UNREG)
 Advocates for Youth
 Chamber of Progress
 Civil Justice Association of California (CJAC)
 Colage
 Computer and Communications Industry Association
 Educateus
 Electronic Frontier Foundation
 Fight for the Future
 If/when/how: Lawyering for Reproductive Justice
 Internet.works
 Lgbt Tech
 Netchoice
 Oakland Privacy
 Secular Education Association
 Siecus: Sex Ed for Social Change
 Technet

The Source Lgbt+ Center
The Trevor Project
Woodhull Freedom Foundation

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