

US Surgeon General Calls on Social Media Companies to Design Safer Products to Protect Vulnerable Teens

United States Surgeon General's Advisory
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“ in recent years, national surveys of youth have shown major increases in certain mental health symptoms, including depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation. From 2009 to 2019, the proportion of high school students reporting persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness increased by 40%; the share seriously considering attempting suicide increased by 36%; and the share creating a suicide plan increased by 44%.19 Between 2011 and 2015, youth psychiatric visits to emergency departments for depression, anxiety, and behavioral challenges increased by 28%.20 Between 2007 and 2018, suicide rates among youth ages 10-24 in the US increased by 57%.21 Early estimates from the National Center for Health Statistics suggest there were tragically more than 6,600 deaths by suicide among the 10-24 age group in 2020. . . . In early 2021, emergency department visits in the United States for suspected suicide attempts were 51% higher for

adolescent girls and 4% higher for adolescent boys compared to the same time period in early 2019.”

“In these digital public spaces, which privately owned and tend to be run for profit, there can be tension between what’s best for the technology company and what’s best for the individual user or for society. Business models are often built around maximizing user engagement as opposed to safeguarding users’ health and ensuring that users engage with one another in safe and healthy ways. This translates to technology companies focusing on maximizing time spent, not time well spent.”

“technology companies must step up and take responsibility for creating a safe digital environment for children and youth. Today, most companies are not transparent about the impact of their products, which prevents parents and young people from making informed decisions and researchers from identifying problems and solutions.”

“Senior technology executives should acknowledge that their products can harm some young people and take material and measurable steps to prevent and mitigate these harms, even at the expense of engagement, scale, and profit. Leaders should be accountable for creating a safe, accessible, and inclusive digital environment for their users and designing safe products.”

“Build products and services using a precautionary approach that focuses on making them safe for youth before they are deployed. Company employees at all levels, especially those involved in product development, should be expected to prioritize user health and wellbeing in their day-to-day work.”

“Recognize that the impact of platforms and products can vary from user to user, and proactively ensure that products designed for adults are also safe for children and adolescents.”

