

# US Surgeon General and Democrats launch campaign against youth access to social media and smartphones

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On Monday, US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy launched a campaign calling for a health warning label requirement to be imposed on social media platforms by Congress.

In an op-ed in the *New York Times*, Murthy wrote that “the mental health crisis among young people is an emergency,” that requires a warning label that must state, “social media is associated with significant mental health harms for adolescents.”

The government’s top public health official went on to say that the Surgeon General’s warning, like that which appears on tobacco products, “would regularly remind parents and adolescents that social media has not been proved safe.”

As with every campaign pursued by the political establishment aimed at imposing government control over social media content, Murthy refers to “online harassment, abuse and exploitation and ... exposure to extreme violence and sexual content that too often appears in algorithm-driven feeds,” as justification for an attack on basic democratic rights.

He also demanded that Congress pass legislation that would “prevent platforms from collecting sensitive data from children and should restrict the use of features like push notifications, autoplay and infinite scroll, which prey on developing brains and contribute to excessive use.”

The social media crackdown proposed by Murthy is based on a 25-page advisory he published in May 2023 which is not derived from independent research conducted by the US Public Health Service. Rather, he makes his case for action on an “urgent public health issue” based upon “a substantial review of the available evidence, primarily found via electronic searches of

research articles published in English and resources suggested by a wide range of subject matter experts.”

While the Surgeon General makes references to anxiety, depression, sleep deprivation, loneliness, peer pressure, bullying, low self-esteem and suicide—all very real problems for young people and their families—he says nothing about the economic and social reality that millions of youth face. In this way, the Surgeon General’s campaign creates a red herring of social media and amounts to a coverup of the massive social crisis facing America’s youth that is rooted in capitalism and the immense levels of social inequality that it produces.

The right-wing and undemocratic character of Murthy’s initiative is exposed by the fact that excluded from his review is any reference to the fundamental causes of the mental health crisis among youth such as poverty, hunger and malnutrition, government cuts to public education and programs for children and adolescents.

That young people face a future of dead-end, part-time and minimum wage jobs, as well as the prospect of being killed by gun violence or as soldiers in imperialist wars, does not rate a mention in the US government’s assessment of the causes of the mental health crisis.

In all the material produced by the government and the corporate media on this subject—including references to “unsupervised, developmentally inappropriate, and potentially harmful” use of social media by children—there are very few if any references to the conditions of young people where their parents or caregivers are working constantly to make ends meet, or that many children are themselves forced to work to

help the family finances.

The day after Murthy launched his campaign, Democratic Party governor of California Gavin Newsom issued a call for the statewide banning of smartphones in public schools. Newsom is being mentioned as a potential replacement for Joe Biden as the Democratic Party candidate for the 2024 presidential election less than five months from now.

Citing the Surgeon General's call for social media warning labels, Newsom said, "I look forward to working with the legislature to restrict the use of smartphones during the school day," adding, "When children and teens are in school, they should be focused on their studies—not their screens."

Newsom is embracing the same policy as fascist Republican Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who was the first governor to sign a statewide classroom smartphone ban in the US. He is echoing the call by Utah Republican Governor Spencer Cox to remove smartphones from the classroom to "help our teachers teach and our students learn." Indiana Republican Governor Eric Holcomb also signed a bill prohibiting students from using cell phones during class in April.

The *Washington Post* reported on Wednesday, "More than a dozen states have passed laws seeking to curb children's use of social media, efforts that have been challenged by the tech industry and remain the subject of ongoing legal battles. In 2022, Newsom signed a bill that established strict safeguards on data collection of underage online users; the law was temporarily blocked by a court."

The bipartisan campaign to restrict access to mobile devices and social media content among young people is connected to the hysterical effort in Washington D.C. to ban or force the sale of the massively popular Chinese-owned TikTok platform. The law passed against TikTok escalates censorship against left-wing and oppositional viewpoints online and stokes up anti-China sentiment in support of trade war and in preparation for military conflict with Beijing.

Passed by both houses of Congress with huge bipartisan majorities and signed by President Biden, the TikTok ban targets the democratic rights of young people. Of the 170 million US users of TikTok, the largest segment (25 percent or 42 million) is of young people ages 10-19, and nearly half are under the age of 30.

Behind the moves against social media and smartphones is a fear that the information being accessed every day by tens of millions of youth—such as videos exposing the war crimes and genocide being carried out in Gaza by Israel with the full backing of the US—is fueling and will intensify the growing anger and protests among students and workers against imperialism and the entire capitalist system.



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