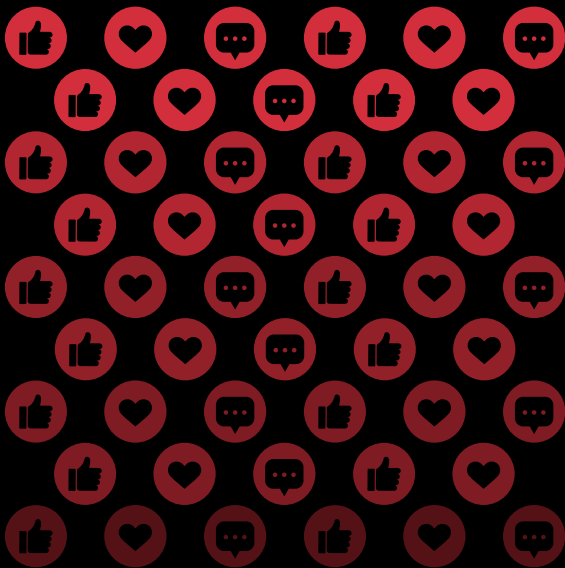
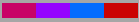




SEPTEMBER 2025

LOGGED OUT, LEFT OUT.

YOUTH ONLINE SAFETY
IN A HOSTILE FEDERAL ENVIRONMENT

LGBT

TECH

SHAE GARDNER

(SHE / HER)

DIRECTOR OF POLICY & RESEARCH

LGBT Tech is one of the nation's premier organizations working to bridge the technology gap for LGBTQ+ individuals through partnerships with tech companies, non-profit groups, policy makers, scholars, and innovators. Grounded in empirical research, we develop programs and resources that support LGBTQ+ communities and work to educate on the unique needs LGBTQ+ individuals face when it comes to tech.

LGBT Tech's policy education initiatives champion technology policies that prioritize digital equity and address systemic barriers to access, online safety, and representation. From advocating for data privacy protections to combating algorithmic bias, LGBT Tech's policy work lays the foundation for a more inclusive digital future.

LGBT Tech's programs provide tangible solutions to the digital divide while empowering LGBTQ+ individuals and organizations to navigate and thrive in the digital landscape.

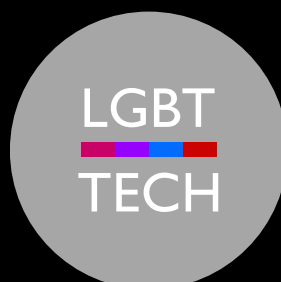


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INTRODUCTION

THE YOUTH ONLINE SAFETY LANDSCAPE

In the United States, the current federal landscape governing youth online safety presents as a patchwork of statutes and agency regulations designed to shield minors from potential harms in digital spaces.

The cornerstone of these protections is the **Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act, or COPPA**, enacted in 2000. COPPA requires commercial websites and online services that are either directed at users under thirteen or aware they are collecting data from children under thirteen to obtain verifiable parental consent before collecting, using, or disclosing personal information. COPPA further mandates practices such as parental access, deletion rights, data minimization, and safeguards for sensitive data storage.

As children and teenagers have increasingly turned to digital spaces and social media for learning, socializing, and self-expression, public calls for more modernized protections have surged. In response, over the last few years, Congress has considered several new federal proposals.

COPPA 2.0, proposed as a companion to the original law, broadly seeks to extend protections to minors under seventeen and require self-consent from teens aged thirteen to sixteen to process their personal data.

The **Kids Online Safety Act, known as KOSA**, offers a broader youth safety approach, creating a statutory “duty of care” for platforms used by minors, and establishing protections against harmful content, parental control mechanisms, and more. Even though COPPA 2.0 and KOSA passed the Senate in mid-2024, serious concerns about unintended consequences from these bills prevented either from advancing through the House before that session concluded.

BROADBAND
BREAKFAST

*KIDS OFF SOCIAL MEDIA ACT
DIVIDES LAWMAKERS ON
SENATE COMMERCE
COMMITTEE*

WIRED

*THE CONTROVERSIAL KIDS
ONLINE SAFETY ACT FACES
AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE*

The Washington Post

*‘SAMMY’S LAW’ WOULD HELP
PARENTS MONITOR KIDS
ONLINE. IT’S GAINING STEAM.*

Another major proposal, the **Let Parents Choose Protection Act, or Sammy's Law**, takes a surveillance-driven approach. Named after a teen who tragically died after purchasing drugs via social media, the law would require social media platforms to enable third-party software to monitor and manage youth online interactions.

At the same time, new ideas such as the **Kids Off Social Media Act, or KOSMA**, have emerged. Introduced in early 2025, KOSMA proposes banning children under thirteen from creating social media accounts, restricting recommendation algorithm for users under seventeen, mandating schools to limit social media access on their networks, and more.

While these developments reflect mounting legislative momentum in Washington to update federal protections for youth online, they have also intensified concerns about potential unintended consequences, including privacy concerns, the censorship of queer content, and the degradation of safe ways for LGBTQ+ youth to find affirming communities online.

In the following pages, this report examines current proposals in detail, with particular attention to how these measures may affect the vulnerable communities most in need of protection.

LGBTQ+ HOSTILITY IN THE POLITICAL ECOSYSTEM

Over the past year, the political ecosystem in the United States has grown unmistakably more hostile to LGBTQ+ individuals. Former fringe talking points have become mainstream federal policy, signaling a dangerous shift in how government authority is being wielded.

In this climate, no legislation can be considered neutral. Any new power given to the state, even under the well-intentioned banner of child safety, must be viewed through the lens of an administration actively working to dismantle LGBTQ+ rights.

Since January, federal institutions have increasingly wielded their authority to erase LGBTQ+ presence and protections. One of the most visible acts has been the systematic removal of LGBTQ+ content and resources from every official government platform and website, from the CDC to the State Department to the White House. In response, LGBT Tech built The LGBTQ+ Archive, a digital repository preserving these resources and ensuring continued public access to them.

At the highest levels of government, this administration has issued sweeping orders to redefine gender and erase protections for transgender individuals in particular. On day one of the new administration, Executive Order 14168 mandated that all federal agencies recognize sex as a strict binary, remove any materials that “promote gender ideology,” strip self-identification from official documents like passports, and cut funding for transgender medical care.



TRUMP ADMINISTRATION HITS
SHAMEFUL MILESTONE OF 300 ANTI-
LGBTQ ACTIONS, STATEMENTS, AND
POLICIES AGAINST THE COMMUNITY



6 WAYS TRUMP'S EXECUTIVE
ORDERS ARE TARGETING
TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

ADVOCATE

FTC HOSTS ANTI-TRANS
PANEL ON GENDER-
AFFIRMING CARE



A TERM OF INJUSTICE: SUPREME
COURT DELIVERS UNRELENTING
BLOW TO LGBTQ+ RIGHTS IN
SERIES OF RULINGS

them

HOW TRUMP'S RETURN IS
SUPERCHARGING A GLOBAL
ANTI-LGBTQ+ CRISIS

In June 2025, the Supreme Court upheld Tennessee's ban on transgender health care for minors, winding back healthcare protections for transgender youth in 26 states and delivering a sharp blow to equal protection jurisprudence. The Court also affirmed parents' rights to opt their children out of LGBTQ+ inclusive lessons, a ruling used to justify broader LGBTQ+ censorship in schools.

Emboldened by this environment, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) waded into similar territory. On July 9, 2025, the FTC held a workshop titled "The Dangers of 'Gender-Affirming Care' for Minors," which excluded any affirming perspectives, barred public attendance, and elevated only anti-transgender voices. At a contrasting workshop hosted by LGBT Tech, Public Knowledge, and Fight for the Future, experts and former FTC officials condemned the workshop as an attempt to frame transgender identity as fraudulent and as an inappropriate and complete misuse of the FTC's mandate.

Taken together with and alongside record-breaking anti-LGBTQ+ legislation at the state level, these federal actions are not isolated policy decisions. LGBTQ+ individuals are being erased from the narrative, stripped of legal protections, and redefined and delegitimized under hostile definitions.

Well-meaning legislation cannot be divorced from the broader ecosystem it exists in.

LGBTQ+ CONSIDERATIONS IN ONLINE SAFETY REGULATION

When efforts to regulate digital spaces for children's safety are made in such a politically charged environment, they risk worsening the current climate through surveillance, censorship, and punishment. Briefly outlined below are thematic concerns in federal online safety proposals, and how they amplify long-standing mechanisms of LGBTQ+ erasure.



“Harm to Children” Language

Many federal online safety bills use undefined or broad language around preventing “harm to children” without specifying what qualifies as harmful. This ambiguity leaves enforcement vulnerable to ideology. In a political climate where LGBTQ+ identities are increasingly and openly framed as harmful in nature, regulatory bodies are emboldened to suppress queer content under the guise of protecting children. The same rhetorical logic currently used to ban books and restrict gender-affirming care, that of “harm,” is now visible in digital policy.



“Obscenity” Restrictions

Federal proposals that invoke “obscene” or “sexually explicit” content restrictions often fail to appropriately differentiate between pornography and LGBTQ+ content. Historically, obscenity laws were used to criminalize queer expression, and today, that legacy continues with anti-LGBTQ+ organizations and officials labeling inclusive materials as “grooming” or “sexually explicit” in nature.



“Duty of Care” and “Best Interests of the Child” Clauses

Proposals like KOSA establish a duty of care for platforms, requiring them to mitigate content deemed not in the “best interests of children.” When these standards are left to interpretation by administrations hostile to LGBTQ+ expression, they can provide the opportunity to claim that no LGBTQ+ content online is ever in a child's best interest, and therefore platforms have a duty to suppress it.



Age Verification Requirements

Age verification systems proposed at the federal level risk disproportionately harming LGBTQ+ youth who rely on private and anonymous community access, while exacerbating privacy and user data risks for users across the board.



Parental Consent Provisions

Rather than empowering families, requiring parental consent to access content or digital tools can be devastating for LGBTQ+ youth without affirming caregivers. Studies consistently show that lack of family support is both widespread and one of the strongest predictors of poor mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth. Federal policy that mandates parental oversight assumes a level of familial safety that does not exist for many LGBTQ+ youth.



Age-Appropriate Design and Algorithmic Requirements

Many bills require platforms to suppress or down-rank content unless deemed age-appropriate for all minors, based on vague standards. In practice, this incentivizes platforms to err on the side of caution by excluding content about gender identity, sexual orientation, or queer culture altogether, especially when such content might provoke political scrutiny. Algorithmic suppression may not look like direct censorship, but its impact can be just as profound: LGBTQ+ youth are quietly disconnected from affirming stories, role models, and support networks.



Attorneys General Enforcement

Some federal legislation delegates enforcement of its provisions to state attorneys general (AGs), many of whom have explicitly anti-LGBTQ+ records. If these AGs are empowered to define what constitutes harmful, obscene, or unsafe content under federal law, their enforcement against LGBTQ+ expression and content would not be speculative, but informed by a documented history of ideological targeting.



Federal Trade Commission Enforcement

The FTC's consumer protection framework is now being reoriented toward ideological enforcement. If federal online safety legislation expands FTC authority to regulate "harmful" content or youth engagement online, the risk is clear: a politicized agency may use that power to suppress LGBTQ+ speech, just as it has begun to do with healthcare.

S.1748

THE BILLS

KIDS ONLINE SAFETY ACT (KOSA)

The Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) was first introduced in 2022 by Senators Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) and Marsha Blackburn (R-TN). KOSA passed the Senate in 2024 but stalled in the House before being reintroduced with amendments in 2025. **As of September 2025, KOSA remains pending in the 119th Congress. It has not passed both chambers and faces significant scrutiny from digital rights organizations, LGBTQ+ advocates like LGBT Tech, and other civil liberties groups.**

Broadly, if enacted, KOSA would require online platforms likely to be used by minors to act in the “best interest” of minors by mitigating content deemed to pose risks; to allow users and parents to opt out of algorithmic recommendation systems and enable robust parental control tools; and to enable FTC enforcement, and under previous versions, state attorney general enforcement, though recent revisions have limited the latter's scope.

While the bill aims to protect children online, the ambiguous and subjective language around “harm,” combined with a worsening political environment, presents real risks for LGBTQ+ youth and the content they rely on.

The bill’s “duty of care” requirement could pressure platforms to proactively remove or suppress LGBTQ+ content to avoid liability. Under KOSA, over-moderation to avoid legal exposure could result in the removal of educational and identity-affirming content for queer youth. As stated by sponsor Senator Blackburn, KOSA would help protect children “from the transgender” in our society, directly tying KOSA to an anti-LGBTQ+ agenda.

While the bill does not mandate age verification, compliance would effectively require platforms to implement age gating or verification to distinguish minor users and fulfill KOSA’s “duty of care” requirements.

Empowering the FTC, which is currently engaging in overt anti-transgender ideology, poses a serious risk of ideologically driven enforcement. Agencies that have already eagerly erased LGBTQ+ resources from federal sites could be empowered by KOSA to erase them online as well.

We fear that KOSA, in its current form, risks becoming the federal equivalent of book bans and drag bans, which wield the pretense of protecting youth as a weapon to silence queer and transgender voices.

KIDS OFF SOCIAL MEDIA ACT (KOSMA)

The Kids Off Social Media Act (KOSMA) was introduced in May 2025 by Senators Brian Schatz (D-HI), Tom Cotton (R-AR), Chris Murphy (D-CT), and Katie Britt (R-AL). The bill merges two previously introduced proposals: Senator Schatz’s “Protecting Kids on Social Media Act” and Senator Cruz’s “Eyes on the Board Act.” **As of September 2025, KOSMA has passed the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation and awaits further action in the full Senate.**

KOSMA sets itself apart from other youth online safety bills like KOSA or COPPA 2.0 by taking a particularly restrictive stance on youth access. If enacted, KOSMA would explicitly ban minors under 13 from creating or maintaining social media accounts; would largely prohibit platforms from using personalized recommendation systems (algorithms) to suggest content to users under 17; would require platforms to delete any known child account and offer parents control over teens’ accounts; and authorize FTC enforcement and state attorney general actions.

Further, KOSMA mandates that public schools block social media access on their networks. It also requires the FTC to conduct studies on harms related to mental health, addiction, and risky behaviors, and explore age verification technologies.

KOSMA remains one of the most contentious bills in the federal kids online safety space, particularly due to concerns around enforcement mechanisms, vagueness, and the absence of safeguards for marginalized youth.

KOSMA goes beyond offering tools or protection, prohibiting entire categories of content distribution. The bill bans algorithmic recommendations to teens, the systems that LGBTQ+ youth use to find identity-affirming resources, community support, and mental health information. Without these tools, LGBTQ+ content is far less likely to reach the youth who need it most.

By requiring platforms to purge all accounts of users under 13 and sharply limit personalized content for all minors, KOSMA encourages platforms to de-prioritize or block all youth access, especially to “sensitive” topics that could be misinterpreted as legally risky, including gender identity, sexual orientation, or LGBTQ+ health. Platforms are likely to err on the side of over-compliance, a chilling effect that will censor marginalized voices.

We believe that KOSMA presents a dangerous framework, one that conflates safety with censorship and control. Any effective youth online safety legislation must ensure that youth autonomy and LGBTQ+ youth are not collateral damage in the name of safety.

CHILDREN'S ONLINE PRIVACY PROTECTION ACT (COPPA 2.0)

The Children and Teens' Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA 2.0) was reintroduced in March 2025 by Senators Ed Markey (D-MA) and Bill Cassidy (R-LA) as an update to the original COPPA law, which was crafted to prevent companies from collecting personal information from children under 13 without parental consent. COPPA 2.0 aims to broaden these protections in light of evolving technologies and changing online behaviors among youth.

The bill passed the Senate as part of a broader youth safety package alongside the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) in 2024 but has yet to advance in the House of Representatives. **As of September 2025, COPPA 2.0 remains pending in the House.**

If enacted, COPPA 2.0 would look to extend privacy protections to teens under 17 and create new rights for teens to control the collection, use, and deletion of their personal information; to require verifiable consent from a teen or a parent before data can be collected or used, depending on the user's age; to expand the definition of "personal information" to include biometric data, geolocation, health data, and persistent identifiers; and to ban targeted advertising to children and teens based on personal data or inferred preferences. COPPA 2.0 also allows state attorneys general to enforce the law, in addition to FTC oversight.

While COPPA 2.0 has faced less public scrutiny and criticism than KOSA and KOSMA, civil liberty advocates point to concerns about the bill's scope, implementation model, and potential unintended consequences.

While much of the bill's oversight would fall to the FTC, it does authorize enforcement by state attorneys general, which raises concern in states where AGs have taken explicitly anti-LGBTQ+ stances. This structure could lead to selective enforcement or chilling effects if LGBTQ+ content is targeted under the guise of protecting youth.

Even without explicit censorship mandates, privacy-focused legislation can unintentionally incentivize platforms to implement blunt design changes, such as content filtering, age-gating, or algorithmic restrictions, that may reduce LGBTQ+ visibility or limit access to identity-affirming information.

While the bill permits teenagers to consent to data collection without parental approval, it remains unclear how this will be operationalized. Ambiguity in consent mechanisms could create barriers for LGBTQ+ teens who rely on online platforms for support and identity.

LET PARENTS CHOOSE PROTECTION ACT (SAMMY'S LAW)

The Let Parents Choose Protection Act (Sammy's Law) is named in honor of 16-year-old Sammy Chapman, who tragically died after unknowingly ingesting fentanyl purchased via Snapchat. His death prompted a movement, led by his parents, advocating for tools that would give parents more oversight of their children's online activities. The bill was first introduced in 2023 by Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL) and has since gained traction in the House as a narrower alternative to more sweeping proposals like KOSA.

As of September 2025, Sammy's Law is under consideration by the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

Broadly, if enacted, Sammy's Law would require large social media platforms to support third-party parental monitoring software. These third-party apps would have to be approved by the FTC and would gain technical access to monitor minors' activity in near real-time across supported platforms; to scan for indicators of harm in risky categories including drugs and mental health; and to alert parents or guardians when concerning interactions or risks are detected.

Sammy's Law is viewed by some as a more targeted solution to youth online harms, while others have concerns around data handling, content censorship, and youth autonomy.

Although the bill avoids explicitly targeting LGBTQ+ content, it allows monitoring tools to assess risk categories like suicide, cyberbullying, and fraud, which have been historically entangled with how LGBTQ+ identities are perceived or mischaracterized. For example, expressions of gender dysphoria or seeking information about gender-affirming care could be flagged unintentionally under mental health triggers.

The bill requires platforms to maintain ongoing technical integration with third-party monitoring software, which would receive frequent user data updates. While intended for safety, this creates a precedent for continuous surveillance of minors' digital lives, potentially sweeping in private conversations, exploratory content, and health-related searches, including around gender identity and mental health.

While some youth benefit from active parental involvement, many LGBTQ+ young people do not. The law does not provide opt-out pathways or differentiated controls for youth in unsupportive or abusive households, where alerts triggered by "risky" yet harmless LGBTQ+ content could lead to harm. The law also does not address how platforms or third parties should navigate situations where parental disclosure might endanger the child.

CASE STUDIES IN GETTING IT WRONG

THE UNITED KINGDOM

On July 25, the UK began enforcing strict age verification mandates across thousands of websites, including social media platforms, streaming services, forums, and adult content providers. This age verification rollout is part of the Online Safety Act, which compels platforms to implement “highly effective” age assurance tools to block minors from accessing a wide and vaguely defined set of content.

Beyond pornography or graphic violence, this legislation covers anything deemed abusive, hateful, or materially risky to a significant number of children. Because the burden of compliance is steep (up to 10 percent of global revenue in fines), many platforms have adopted sweeping and overly cautious approaches. In theory, the law aims to protect children from harmful content. In practice, it triggered massive overreach and revealed just how swiftly well-intentioned regulation can spiral into dysfunction.

For those watching from the United States, the UK’s rollout offers an urgent warning: this is what happens when policy skips the hard questions and chooses optics over effectiveness.

The results have already been predictably catastrophic. Entire communities on Reddit, ranging from queer support forums to spaces discussing mental health and sexual wellness, are now hidden behind age gates. Even educational subreddits about relationships, LGBTQ+ health, and trauma recovery have been locked down. Music platforms like Spotify are requiring face scans to access some albums flagged as 18+, while Discord defaulted all users of all ages into a filtered “teen” experience with age verification required to opt out. Users have reported that the content impacted moves past explicit media and into public domain art, political commentary, and user posts with no sexual or violent messaging at all.



THE GREAT BRITISH FIREWALL: AGE VERIFICATION HAS FAILED



THE UK ONLINE SAFETY BILL IS WELL INTENTIONED BUT WILL UNDERMINE PRIVACY

Historical paintings, such as Goya's Saturn Devouring His Son, were censored by automated filters. Parliamentary speeches and political satire have been hit by moderation sweeps. Posts discussing Palestine and Ukraine have vanished from search results or been flagged as harmful, even when devoid of graphic imagery.

The Verge

THE UK IS SLOGGING THROUGH AN
ONLINE AGE-GATE APOCALYPSE

sky news

HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS
OF PEOPLE BACKLASH
AGAINST INTERNET SAFETY
RULES

**ELECTRONIC
FRONTIER
FOUNDATION**

NO, THE UK'S ONLINE SAFETY
ACT DOESN'T MAKE CHILDREN
SAFER ONLINE

BBC

SOME GAZA AND UKRAINE
POSTS BLOCKED UNDER NEW
AGE CHECKS

Public outcry has been swift and overwhelming. A petition demanding repeal of the Online Safety Act has already amassed over half a million signatures, twice as many as any other currently open petition. Virtual private network (VPN) apps soared to the top of download charts, spiking over 1,400 percent in usage, as users sought to circumvent what many see as an online censorship regime. Policymakers have offered little in the way of technical justification, and we're watching trust in the UK government's digital competency erode in real time.

Rarely do policymakers have the benefit of seeing, in real time, what a policy will look like when implemented in a comparable environment. Yet the UK has shown us exactly that.

SESTA / FOSTA

Closer to home, the 2018 enactment of the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA), collectively known as SESTA / FOSTA, acts as another powerful case study in unintentionally getting it wrong.

These laws were framed as essential tools in combating online sex trafficking, but vaguely written and broad language in them led to a disproportionate impact on marginalized communities and LGBTQ+ voices.

SESTA / FOSTA amended Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which provides immunity to platforms for the third party content they host, in an attempt to hold these platforms liable for knowingly facilitating sex trafficking. However, the language of the law lacked clear boundaries and created a chilling effect across the internet as platforms overcorrected to avoid even the risk of appearing non-compliant.

For example, LGBTQ+ sex educators, activists, and organizations found their content flagged, restricted, or removed altogether due to algorithms and automated filters designed to detect and block potentially "offensive" material. Discussions around LGBTQ+ identities, relationships, and sexual health were often mislabeled as inappropriate or explicit, leading to censorship and the erasure of valuable information and support for the community.

Platforms reportedly relied on "blunt automated tools that tend to perpetuate real-world biases and are unable to understand context," exacerbating both real-world harms and questions around First Amendment rights.

The unintended harms of SESTA/FOSTA serve as a cautionary tale for the regulation of online platforms, especially when legislation is crafted with vague language, lacks specificity, and fails to consider the diverse needs and expressions of marginalized communities. While the intentions behind such legislation may be noble, the reality is that they can have far-reaching consequences, exacerbating inequalities and harming vulnerable populations.



FINAL THOUGHTS

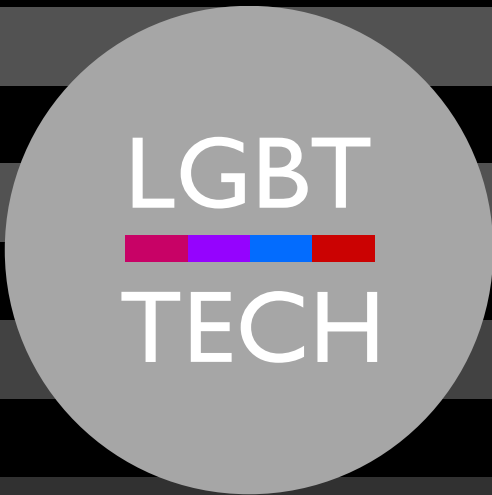
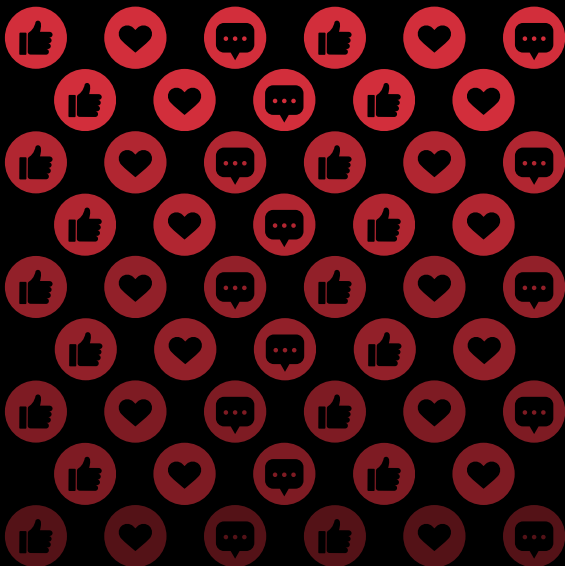
This report does not look to provide a roadmap for how to get youth online safety legislation exactly right. While LGBT Tech frequently engages in such work and in supporting privacy-forward, equity-based solutions, our goal here is more foundational.

This report is intended as a timely and informative overview of the current federal landscape, and as a reminder that none of these proposals should or can be considered in isolation from the broader political and social context.

We believe conversations about what should come next are essential. **Strong federal privacy protections** would significantly reduce risk across the board, for youth and adult users alike. **Well-funded digital literacy education** would empower youth to better navigate digital spaces with caution. **User-centric safety features**, built with flexibility and transparency, would be a way for platforms to offer far more tailored protection than blunt one-sized-fits-all restrictions. And importantly, **young people themselves must have a seat at the table.**

Still, we recognize that this report is not that table. It is a snapshot of the landscape, what has been introduced, what each bill claims to address, and what concerns we encourage consideration of, especially where LGBTQ+ youth are concerned.

More than anything, as lawmakers, platforms, and advocates continue to debate and shape the future of online safety, we hope this report can help provide some clarity and some caution: **the most well-meaning legislation can carry harm when it ignores who it leaves vulnerable and how.**



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