

Testimony of Kristin Bride  
United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary  
Hearing on Protecting Our Children Online  
**February 14, 2023**

Thank you, Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Graham, and members of the committee. My name is Kristin Bride. I am a survivor parent and social media reform advocate, and member of the bipartisan Council for Responsible Social Media.

I am testifying here today to bring a face to the harms occurring every day resulting from the unchecked power of the social media industry. This is my son Carson Bride with beautiful blue eyes, an amazing smile, and a great sense of humor, who will be forever 16 years old. As involved parents raising our two sons in Oregon, we thought we were doing everything right. We waited until Carson was in 8th grade to give him his first cell phone, an old phone with no apps. We talked to our boys about online safety and the importance of never sending anything online that you wouldn't want your name and face next to on a billboard. Carson followed these guidelines. Yet tragedy still struck our family.

It was June 2020; Carson had just gotten his first summer job making pizzas, and after a successful first night of training, he wrote his upcoming work schedule on our kitchen calendar. We expressed how proud we were of him for finding a job during the pandemic. In so many ways, it was a wonderful night, and we were looking forward to summer. The next morning, I woke to the complete shock and horror that Carson had hung himself in our garage while we slept.

In the weeks that followed, we learned that Carson had been viciously cyberbullied by his "Snapchat friends," his high school classmates who were using the anonymous apps Yolo and LMK on Snapchat to hide their identities. It wasn't until Carson was a freshman in high school that we finally allowed him to have social media because that was how all the students were making new connections. What we didn't know is that apps like Yolo and LMK were using popular social media platforms to promote anonymous messaging to hundreds of millions of teen users.

After his death, we discovered that Carson had received nearly 100 negative, harassing, sexually explicit, and humiliating messages, including 40 in just one day. He asked his tormentors to "swipe up" and identify themselves so they could talk things out in person. No one ever did. The last search on his phone before Carson ended his life was for hacks to find out the identities of his abusers.

Anonymous apps like Whisper, Sarahah, and YikYak have a long history of enabling cyberbullying, leading to teen suicides.<sup>1</sup> The critical flaws in these platforms are compounded by the fact that teens do not typically report being cyberbullied. They are too fearful that their phones to which they are completely addicted will be taken away or that they will be labeled a snitch by their friends.

Yolo's own policies stated that they would monitor for cyberbullying and reveal the identities of those who do so. I reached out to Yolo on 4 separate occasions in the months following Carson's death, letting them know what happened to my son and asking them to follow their own policies. I was ignored all 4 times. At this point, I decided to fight back.

I filed a National Class Action Lawsuit in May 2021, against Snap Inc., Yolo, and LMK.<sup>2</sup> We believe Snap Inc. suspended Yolo and LMK from their platform because of our advocacy.

However, our complaint against Yolo and LMK for product liability design defects and fraudulent product misrepresentation was dismissed in the Central District Court of California last month, citing Section 230 immunity.<sup>3</sup> And still, new anonymous apps like NGL and sendit are appearing on social media platforms and charging teens subscription fees to reveal the messenger or provide useless hints.

I speak before you today with the tremendous responsibility to represent the many other parents who have also lost their children to social media harms. In the audience are Rose Bronstein from Illinois who lost her son Nate and Christine McComas from Maryland who lost her daughter Grace, both to suicide after being viciously cyberbullied over social media. Our numbers continue to grow exponentially with teen deaths from dangerous online challenges fed to them on TikTok, sextortion over Facebook, fentanyl-laced drugs purchased over Snapchat, and deaths from eating disorder content over Instagram. I have included the stories of my fellow survivor parent advocates in this written testimony.

Let us be clear—these are not coincidences, accidents, or unforeseen consequences. They are the direct result of products designed to hook and monetize America's children.

It should not take grieving parents filing lawsuits on behalf of their dead children to hold this industry accountable for their dangerous and addictive product designs. Federal legislation like the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA), which requires social media companies to have a duty of care when designing their products for America's children, is long overdue. We need our lawmakers to step up, put politics aside, and finally protect all children online.

Thank you for this opportunity, and I look forward to answering your questions.

### **Cyberbullying Frequency (2022, Pew Research Center)<sup>4</sup>**

US Teens aged 13-17 reported:

- 46% experienced cyberbullying, with offensive name calling being the most common type of harassment
- 22% had false rumors spread about them
- 17% received explicit images they didn't ask for
- 15% report being constantly asked where they are; what they are doing or who they are with by someone other than a parent
- 10% reported receiving physical threats
- 7% reported having explicit images of them shared without their consent

### **Cyberbullying Impact (2018, Cyberbullying Research Center)<sup>5</sup>**

Cyberbullying is more devastating than traditional bullying because:

- The victim may not know who is bullying them due to anonymity.
- Hurtful actions go viral which increases the audience and aggressors to limitless.
- It is easier to be cruel on-line as no social cues exist.

### **Cyberbullying and Suicidal Ideations (2022, JAMA Network Open Study)<sup>6</sup>**

- Cyberbullying was the #1 cause of suicidal ideations in adolescents aged 10-13 years old based on a study of 10,414 United States adolescents.

### **Cyberbullying Reporting:**

**Reasons teens don't report cyberbullying (2021)<sup>7</sup>:**

- Fear of losing their access to their technology:
  - The Pew Research Center reports that 65% of parents have taken away a teen's phone or internet privileges as punishment.<sup>8</sup>
- They don't want to be seen as snitch and lose even more social status.
- Ashamed for being a target

### **Parent Concerns (2023, Pew Research)<sup>9</sup>**

- 35% of parents are worried that their kids may be bullied (2<sup>nd</sup> to Anxiety and Depression)

## Citations:

<sup>1</sup>Ian Martin, Hugely Popular NGL App Offers Teenagers Anonymity In Comments About Each other (June 29, 2022), FORBES at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ianmartin/2022/06/29/hugely-popular-ngl-app-offers-teenagers-anonymity-in-comments-about-each-other/>

<sup>2</sup>Bride et al. v. Snap Inc., Yolo Technologies Inc., Lightspace Inc., No. 21-cv-6680 (Central District of California), ECF No. 1 (Class Action Complaint)

<sup>3</sup>Bride et al. v. Snap Inc., Yolo Technologies Inc., Lightspace Inc., No. 21-cv-6680 (Central District of California), ECF No. 142 (Order Dismissing Complaint)

<sup>4</sup>Vogels, E. (2022, Dec 15), Teens and Cyberbullying 2022, *Pew Research Center*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/12/15/teens-and-cyberbullying-2022/>

<sup>5</sup>Hinduja, Sameer PhD., Patchin, Justin W. PhD., Cyberbullying, identification, Prevention and Response, (2018) at <https://cyberbullying.org/Cyberbullying-Identification-Prevention-Response-2018.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>Arnon S, Brunstein Klomek A, Visoki E, et al. (2022), Association of Cyberbullying Experiences and Perpetration With Suicidality in Early Adolescence (2022). *JAMA Network Open*. 2022;5(6):e2218746. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.18746

<sup>7</sup>Dong, Menga, (2021, Feb 9), Why Teens Don't Report Cyberbullying at <https://desis.osu.edu/seniorthesis/index.php/2021/02/09/why-teens-dont-report-cyberbullying/>

<sup>8</sup>Pew Research Statistics (2016, Jan 7), Parents Teens & Digital Monitoring at <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/01/07/parents-teens-and-digital-monitoring/>

<sup>9</sup>Pew Research Statistics from Pew Research Center <https://www.axios.com/2023/01/29/kids-parents-mental-health-depression-anxiety>

## **Social Media Harms Parent Survivor Advocates**

### **Tawainna Anderson, *Pennsylvania***

Tawainna lost her 10-year-old daughter, Nylah, last year when she tried the “Blackout Challenge” in a closet of their home. TikTok’s algorithm served Nylah a video featuring the dangerous challenge on her "For You" page. Tawainna discovered her daughter’s body next to her phone, and the strangulation marks on her neck suggested she desperately tried to free herself before she died.

### **Joann Bogard, *Indiana***

Joann’s son Mason died at age 15 years old after he participated in a challenge he’d seen on YouTube called “the Choking Game.” He was rushed to the hospital, but his parents had to make the heart wrenching decision to take him off life support and donate his organs. In the years since, Joann has reported hundreds of choking game videos to YouTube, TikTok, and other platforms but they have universally told her the videos don’t violate their guidelines, despite killing hundreds of children like Mason, because they have a commercial interest in maximizing content on their platforms.

### **Kristin Bride, *Oregon***

Kristin’s son, Carson was 16 years old when he died by suicide after he was viciously cyberbullied by his high school “Snapchat Friends” who were using the anonymous apps Yolo and LMK to hide their identities. Carson received over 100 humiliating, threatening and sexually explicit messages before he ended his life. The last search on his phone was for hacks to find out who was abusing him. When Kristin repeatedly contacted Yolo asking them to follow their own stated policies for monitoring and revealing the identities of those who cyberbully on their platform, she was ignored all 4 times.

### **Rose Bronstein, *Illinois***

Rose’s son Nate was 15 years old when he died by suicide after he was viciously cyberbullied by over 20 high school classmates. Nate received hateful and threatening messages via iMessage. A Snapchat message was created by a classmate and reposted 7 times by others. It included threats of physical harm and death. The Snapchat quickly went viral and reached hundreds of Chicago area students. Nate also received a separate Snapchat message that read “go kill yourself”.

### **LaQuanta Hernandez, *Texas***

LaQuanta’s 13-year-old daughter, Jazmine, was cyberbullied for months via TikTok and Instagram on the basis of her race. The bullies sent her racist comments and photos, including photoshopping her face onto Emmett Till’s body after being lynched by the KKK. Instagram took over three days to take down the posts. Jazmine was too scared to sleep in her own bed until the posts were taken down.

**Tracy Kemp, Texas**

Tracy's 14-year-old son Brayden was among a group of Black students who were targeted by racist cyberbullies on Instagram and Snapchat. The accounts used the school's name and logo and called on other students to take and submit pictures of Black students without their consent. She says the racist cyberbullying has drastically affected her son's mental health. The anonymity these platforms provide encourages this type of abusive and bullying behavior.

**Rosemarie Maneri, New York**

Shylynn was 16 years old when she was contacted by an adult via Facebook who coerced her into sending inappropriate photos of herself. Although she tried to block him, he reached out to her best friend and her best friend's mom to get back into her life. He then threatened to release her photos to her friends and family if she did not continue to send him photos and continue the relationship with him. Embarrassed, scared and not knowing what to do to make it all go away, Shylynn died from suicide at just 18 years old.

**Christine McComas, Maryland**

Christine's 14-year-old daughter Grace went from being a joyful, active teen to death by suicide in less than a year after malicious, death-wishing and dehumanizing cyber-abuse on Twitter. Christine screenshot the abuse and sought help from multiple public agencies including schools, police and the court system to no avail. The screenshot proof of social media abuse led to the unanimous passage of Maryland's criminal statute named Grace's Law less than a year after her death. An update to Grace's Law (2.0) was passed in 2019 to keep up with digital dangers.

**Annie McGrath, Wisconsin**

Annie's son Griffin died at 13 years old after he participated in an online challenge called "the Choking Game." Griffin had a YouTube channel and was trying to get more likes and comments on his videos, which may have tempted him to participate in the dangerous challenge.

**Maurine Molak, Texas**

David Molak died by suicide at the age of 16 after months of devastating and relentless cyberbullying by a group of students on Instagram, text, video, and GroupMe. Bullies threatened him and told him he should never go back to school. The cyberbullying left him feeling helpless and hopeless because neither he nor his parents could make it stop.

**Amy Neville, Arizona**

At 14, Amy's son, Alexander Neville, had his whole life ahead of him until he took a single pill that he was led to believe was oxycodone. However, it contained deadly fentanyl. Snapchat made it easy for a drug dealer to connect with him. Unfortunately, Alexander's case is not a one off situation. This happens everyday all across our country.

**Erin Popolo, *New Jersey***

Erin's daughter, Emily Murillo, was a special education student who was bullied in person for most of her school career. During the pandemic shutdown, the bullies continued to reach out to her via Snapchat and Instagram. At 17 years old Emily lost hope that she would ever be viewed as 'normal' by her peers and died by suicide in January of 2021. The bullying continued as hackers hijacked Emily's Zoomed funeral, sending cruel messages, and posting inappropriate images on the Zoom for all of Emily's mourning family to see, until they finally had to stop the funeral.

**Despina Prodromidis, *New York***

Despina's daughter Olivia died at 15 years old after meeting an adult stranger over Snapchat – a common problem across platforms who introduce kids to adult strangers to keep them engaged and online. This man gave her a drug which turned out to be pure fentanyl.

**Neveen Radwan, *California***

Neveen's 15-year-old daughter, Mariam, was an avid user of several social media platforms at the time of her anorexia diagnosis. These apps constantly bombarded her with "pro-ano" (pro-anorexia) content. The algorithms targeted her with "skinny challenges" and manipulated content that triggered her illness to an all-time high. She then embarked on a life-threatening journey of over 2 years, in multiple hospitals, and almost dying multiple times.

**Mary Rodee, *New York***

Mary's son, Riley, died by suicide at 15 years old. He was sextorted on Facebook by an adult who pretended to be a teenage girl and then threatened to release compromising images of Riley unless he gave them thousands of dollars. Riley, ashamed and frightened, died just six hours after the contact began. Facebook never responded when Mary and Riley's father reported the incident.

**Judy Rogg, *California***

Judy's son, Erik Robinson, died at 12 years old after participating in the "choking challenge" that was and continues to be widely circulated on YouTube. Erik rarely used YouTube – he heard about the challenge from a friend who did, a sadly common pattern that shows even children whose parents don't allow them access to social media are vulnerable to its harms. Investigators determined that Erik died from this just the day after he learned about it. He had no idea that this could cause harm or death.

**Deb Schmill, *Massachusetts***

Deb's daughter, Becca, died at 18 years old of fentanyl poisoning from drugs she and a friend purchased from a dealer they found on Snapchat. Becca was sexually assaulted at 15 by a boy she'd met on social media and, shortly after the assault, her peers started cyberbullying her by text and over Snapchat. Becca turned to drugs to help ease the pain and was unaware the drugs she bought over Snapchat – a massive, nearly untraceable drug market thanks to the platform's design – contained fentanyl.