

Date: April 25, 2023

To: Judiciary Committee

From: Cole Cochrane, Maine Youth Action

Re: Testimony in Support of LD 1977, An Act to Create the Data Privacy and Protection Act



Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and the honorable members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Cole Cochrane, I am a Saco resident currently studying at Harvard, and I am representing Maine Youth Action, a statewide youth advocacy group that represents hundreds of young Mainers across the state from varying backgrounds. Maine Youth Action is testifying in support of LD 1977, An Act to Create the Data Privacy and Protection Act.

Now, Maine Youth Action's typical legislative focus is on the climate crisis. It is a multi-generational issue, and one that threatens the youth of our state disproportionately. We strongly advocate for solutions to promote sustainable practices and communities, which typically does not bring us to the Judiciary Committee all that much. However, we found it imperative to make an exception for the legislation Representative O'Neil is sponsoring. Our commitment is to be the advocates for our generation on pressing issues that threaten our future, and the issue of data privacy is one of those issues. Current practices by social media giants and other big players exploit our personal information, threaten human autonomy,, and disproportionately affect Maine's youth, especially with respect to our consumer choices and mental health. This is why we make this exception and strongly support LD 1977.

As of now, consumer protections regarding collection and use of our personal data is fragmented at best. On the federal level, there are several laws that pertain to regulation on data collection, but their scope tends to be narrow.^[1] I have attached a summary of these laws in my digital submission of this testimony. Current regulation and protection of our sensitive information only applies to particular aspects and is increasingly outdated. To put this in perspective, the Video

Privacy Protection Act (VPPA) prevents disclosure of VHS rental records. Due to the lack of protection on our personal and sensitive data, consumers, particularly our youth, are vulnerable to targeted advertisements, which are dangerously precise because of the extensive collections these companies have. They are so extensive, in fact, that Facebook executives have even pitched to advertisers that they can detect when teenagers feel “insecure” or “worthless,” according to a 2017 Guardian report.^[2] This greatly diminishes our freedom of choice online and holds an excessive influence over our consumer habits.

However, it is not only our consumer choices that are greatly impacted, but youth mental health as well. Targeted advertisements, especially through social media platforms, prey on vulnerable teens such as promoting “ideal body imagery” or addictive behaviors like vaping. In an internal report for its advertising customers, Facebook (Meta) executives stated that the company could monitor social media activity including posts and photos in real time to determine when young people feel “stressed,” “defeated,” “overwhelmed,” “anxious,” “nervous,” “stupid,” “useless,” and a “failure.” These manipulative advertising tactics are widespread, and they have negative tolls on our mental health. A recent survey of 1,500 teens, the Time found that teenagers associate social media with “high levels of anxiety and depression,” as well as other mental health issues like eating disorders.^[3] With no guardrails on the use and collection of sensitive data, we allow our youth to fall victim to profit-hungry corporations who are willing to exploit our insecurities for their gain.

Overall, in a society that fundamentally values our liberties and personal sanctity, I would find it deeply concerning if we do not pass comprehensive legislation on data privacy like LD 1977, following the lead of other states like California. Therefore, I urge the committee to vote “ought to pass” on LD 1977.

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/wirecutter/blog/state-of-privacy-laws-in-us/>
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/01/facebook-advertising-data-insecure-teens>
3. <https://time.com/4793331/instagram-social-media-mental-health/>

