

# *‘Your Product Is Killing People’: Tech Leaders Denounced Over Child Safety*

Senators criticized the chief executives of Meta, TikTok, Snap, X and Discord for not doing enough to prevent child sexual abuse online, amid rising fears over how the platforms affect youths.



Mark Zuckerberg, Meta’s founder and chief executive, turned to address the families of victims of online child abuse during a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on Wednesday. Credit...Anna Rose Layden for The New York Times



By [Cecilia Kang](#) and [David McCabe](#)

Reported from Washington

Lawmakers on Wednesday denounced the chief executives of Meta, TikTok, X, Snap and Discord for creating “a crisis in America” by willfully ignoring the harmful content against children on their platforms, as concerns over the effect of technology on youths have mushroomed.

In a highly charged 3.5-hour hearing, members of the powerful Senate Judiciary Committee raised their voices and repeatedly castigated the five tech leaders — who run online services that are very popular with teenagers and younger children — for prioritizing profits over the well-being of youths. Some said the companies had “blood on their hands” and that users “would die waiting” for them to make changes to protect children. At one point, lawmakers compared the tech companies to cigarette makers.

“Every parent in America is terrified about the garbage that is directed at our kids,” Senator Ted Cruz, Republican of Texas, said.

The tech chiefs, some of whom showed up after being forced by subpoena, said they had invested billions to strengthen safety measures on their platforms. Some said they supported a bill that bolsters privacy and parental controls for children, while others pointed to the faults of rivals. All of the executives emphasized that they themselves were parents.

In one blistering exchange with Senator Josh Hawley, Republican of Missouri, Mark Zuckerberg, Meta’s chief executive, stood up and turned to address dozens of parents of online child sexual exploitation victims.

“I’m sorry for everything you have all been through,” Mr. Zuckerberg said. “No one should go through the things that your families have suffered.” He did not address whether Meta’s platforms had played a role in that suffering and said the company was investing in efforts to prevent such experiences.

The bipartisan hearing encapsulated the increasing alarm over tech’s impact on children and teenagers. Last year, Dr. Vivek Murthy, the U.S. surgeon general, identified social media as a cause of a youth mental health crisis. More than 105 million online images, videos and materials related to child sexual abuse were flagged in 2023 to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the federally designated clearinghouse for the imagery. Parents have blamed the platforms for fueling cyberbullying and children’s suicides.

The issue has united Republicans and Democrats, with lawmakers pushing for a crackdown on how Silicon Valley companies treat their youngest and most vulnerable users. Some lawmakers, seizing on a matter that has incensed parents, have called for measures and introduced bills to stop the spread of child sexual abuse material and to hold the platforms responsible for protecting young people. Tech giants face mounting domestic and global scrutiny for their effect on children. Some states have enacted legislation requiring social media services to verify their users’ ages or take other steps to protect young people, though those rules have confronted legal challenges. Online safety laws have also been approved in the European Union and in Britain.

The White House also weighed in on Wednesday. “There is now undeniable evidence” that social media contributes to the youth mental health crisis, said Karine Jean-Pierre, the White House press secretary.

Yet the grilling of the tech leaders on Wednesday may not ultimately amount to much, if history is any guide. Meta’s executives have testified 33 times since 2017 over issues such as election interference by foreign agents, antitrust and social media’s role in the Jan. 6 storming of the U.S. Capitol — but no

federal law has been passed to hold the tech companies to account. Dozens of bills have failed after partisan bickering over details and lobbying efforts by the tech industry.

David Vladeck, a professor at Georgetown University's law school and a former head of consumer protection at the Federal Trade Commission, likened congressional actions on tech to the cartoon "Peanuts."

"Congress has consistently punted on tech legislation that seems essential, but I feel like Charlie Brown — every time he wants to kick the football, Lucy takes it away," he said.

The federal government has also not followed through on existing laws that could provide more resources for combating online child abuse, The New York Times has found. Notably, law enforcement funding has not kept pace with the staggering rise of online abuse reports, even though Congress was authorized to release more money.

On Wednesday, Mr. Zuckerberg testified before Congress for the eighth time. Shou Chew, TikTok's chief executive, was back as a witness less than a year after appearing at a hearing. Evan Spiegel, Snap's chief executive, Linda Yaccarino, X's chief executive, and Jason Citron, Discord's chief executive, testified for the first time after lawmakers subpoenaed them.

Lawmakers have focused on social media's harmful effects on children since 2021, when a whistleblower from Meta, Frances Haugen, revealed internal documents that showed that the company knew its Instagram platform was worsening body image issues among teenagers. The Senate Judiciary Committee has since held several hearings with tech executives, sex exploitation experts and others to highlight the dangerous activity for children online.

Before Wednesday's hearing began, lawmakers released internal emails among top executives at Meta, including Mr. Zuckerberg, which showed that his company had rejected calls to bulk up on resources to combat child safety issues.

The hearing, held in the Dirksen Senate Office Building, began with a video of victims of child sexual exploitation, who said the tech companies had failed them. In a rare show of agreement, Republican and Democratic members of the Senate Judiciary Committee took turns accusing the tech leaders of knowing about the harm that children encounter on their platforms.

The companies' "constant pursuit of engagement and profit over basic safety put our kids and grandkids at risk," said Senator Dick Durbin, the chair of the committee and a Democrat from Illinois.

At one point, Senator Hawley told Mr. Zuckerberg, "Your product is killing people."

Mr. Zuckerberg and Mr. Chew received the most attention, with lawmakers admonishing them for not supporting legislation on child safety. After lawmakers pressed Mr. Spiegel on the problem of drug sales on Snapchat, he apologized to parents whose children have died from fentanyl overdoses after buying the drugs through the platform.

"I'm so sorry that we have not been able to prevent these tragedies," he said, adding that Snap blocks search terms related to drugs and works with law enforcement.

Lawmakers also focused on proposals that would expose the platforms to lawsuits by scrapping a 1996 statute, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which shields internet companies from liability for the content on their sites.

“Nothing is going to change unless we open up the courtroom doors,” said Senator Amy Klobuchar, Democrat of Minnesota. “Money talks even stronger than we talk up here.”

At times, lawmakers wandered into areas unrelated to children’s safety. Mr. Chew, in particular, faced questions over how TikTok’s owner, ByteDance, which is based in Beijing, handles the data of U.S. users. He was also pressed on a report that a TikTok lobbyist in Israel resigned this week based on accusations that the platform was discriminating against Israelis.

Noticeably absent from the hearing was the most popular app for teenagers: YouTube. Seven in 10 teens use YouTube daily, according to the Pew Research Center. TikTok is used daily by 58 percent of teens, followed by Snap at 51 percent and Instagram at 47 percent.

In 2022, YouTube reported more than 631,000 pieces of content to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, according to a report produced by Google.

Apple was also absent. The company has angered child safety groups for going back on a 2021 promise to scan iPhones for material abusive toward children.

YouTube and Apple were not invited to the hearing. A Judiciary Committee spokesman said the five executives who testified represented a diverse group of companies.

Weeks before Wednesday’s hearing, some of the tech companies announced changes to their services pertaining to children. Meta introduced stricter controls on direct messaging for teenagers and greater parental controls. Snap announced its support for the Kids Online Safety Act, proposed legislation to restrict data collection on children and tighten parent controls on social media.

In front of the Capitol building on Wednesday, a nonprofit critical of big tech displayed cardboard cutouts of Mr. Zuckerberg and Mr. Chew sitting atop a mountain of cash while clinking champagne glasses. Inside the hearing room, parents held up photos of victims of online child sexual exploitation.

Mary Rodee, a parent in the hearing room, said she lost Riley, her 15-year-old son, in 2021 after sexual exploitation on Facebook Messenger. She has since fought for legislation to protect children online.

“The companies are not doing enough,” she said. “Enough talking.”

## Bacteria that can make humans sick could survive on Mars

The findings have implications for future explorers and planetary protection measures



Mars' Jezero crater, as seen here by NASA's Perseverance rover, might look inhospitable but recent experiments suggest that common terrestrial bacteria could survive on the planet's surface.  
JPL-CALTECH/NASA, ASU, MSSS

By [Adam Mann](#)

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Future interplanetary explorers beware: Hitchhiking bacteria brought to Mars on human bodies might not only survive the harsh conditions on the Red Planet's surface but also potentially thrive.

Recent experiments exposed four common disease-causing microbes to a simulated Mars-like environment, with its lack of water, scant atmospheric pressure, deadly ultraviolet radiation and toxic salts. The bacteria remained alive for various periods of time and, in some cases, even grew in the imitation Martian sands, researchers report in the January *Astrobiology*.

The findings have implications for astronaut health and efforts to prevent contamination of other worlds (SN: 1/10/18). They also underscore the fact that “bacteria are really resilient little creatures that survive a lot of things, which is why they’ve existed for billions of years on Earth,” says Samantha Waters, a microbiologist at Mercer University in Atlanta, Ga., who was not involved in the experiments.

Previously, researchers seeking to understand the survivability of microbes on Mars have mostly focused on extremophile organisms — those living in places on Earth with lots of radiation, salt, temperature swings or aridity (SN: 11/2/22). But in 2020, a team of scientists found that several bacterial species that live on or inside the human body were able to grow in a medium resembling the nutrient-poor conditions found in meteorites.

That made some of the researchers wonder how such bugs would hold up under the unforgiving environment of Mars. So several members of that team, along with microbiologist Tommaso Zaccaria, placed colonies of *Burkholderia cepacia*, *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* and *Serratia marcescens* in a box with simulated Martian conditions and regolith, or soil like that found on the surface of Mars. Those four microbes usually live harmlessly on or in us but can become pathogenic when stressed.

“At the beginning, we thought that the regolith would have a toxic effect on the cells so it would limit their growth,” says Zaccaria, of the German Aerospace Center in Cologne. “But instead, we saw that it was the opposite.”

Three of the species survived the experiment, with *P. aeruginosa* in particular growing steadily for up to 21 days. “It was quite remarkable,” Zaccaria says.

He and his colleagues are now trying to figure out just how the microbes held on. Perhaps in the crannies of the regolith, the bacteria managed to find small oases with enough water, nutrients and protection from the deadly UV radiation, Zaccaria says. The researchers are also interested in determining how the human immune system — which tends to get stressed and dysregulated during spaceflight — will respond to bugs that have gone through such travails (SN: 4/11/19).

The results suggest that human missions to Mars should bring plenty of different antibiotics to deal with disease-causing bacteria surviving and perhaps mutating on the Martian surface, then reinfecting us. And since we don’t want searches for life on Mars to accidentally mistake a terrestrial bug for a native Martian one, Zaccaria also recommends that areas of the Red Planet be set aside like national parks, where humans would send only robotic vehicles and not our bacteria-spewing bodies.

Waters points out that human ingenuity will hopefully find ways to mitigate such problems, which shouldn’t scare us away from sending people beyond our planet. “At the end of the day, we want to move forward and explore our solar system more,” she says. “We try our best and that ultimately will lead to some really beautiful discoveries and some really cool history.”

# Squid Game season 2: Everything we know so far

By Mia Taylor

Features correspondent



Here's everything we can glean from the just-released teaser for Season 2 of Squid Game.

The anticipation is building for season two of the wildly popular Netflix survival thriller Squid Game. The first series was so widely watched, in fact, that within its first month – November of 2021 – it became Netflix's most streamed show of all time, with 1.65 billion viewing hours, largely contributing to foreign-language film and TV gaining more mainstream status among English-speaking viewers. Netflix then released a reality game show spinoff, Squid Game: The Challenge, which was also extremely popular (and raised ethics questions). Now, to keep fans chomping at the bit for more, Netflix just dropped a 17-second teaser of the original Squid Game's second series.

While it's hard to glean a great deal from a mere 17 seconds, here's how the clip unfolds. The winner of season one's Squid Game, Seong Gi-hun (played by Lee Jung-jae), the show's main protagonist, can be seen walking through what appears to be an airport and holding a mobile phone to his ear.

The voice on the other end of the line says: "You'll regret your decision." To this, Gi-hun replies, "I will find you." There's a pause, and then he adds: "No matter what it takes."

And that's it. The clip fades to black. If you have questions, you're not alone. First of all, who is talking on the phone? And what decision will Gi-hun regret?



Some are speculating that characters who were killed off in *Squid Game* season one may return in season two after all (Credit: Netflix)

For those who need a recap of season one (which will contain spoilers), or who missed the global sensation altogether, *Squid Game* is a show about 456 cash-strapped players who accepted a recruiter's invitation to take part in a series of classic Korean children's games. The prize dangled before the players is a chance to win \$4.56 million. But it soon becomes clear that the stakes are very high, as each challenge involves the risk of injury or death – and the game soon becomes bloody.

By the end of the first season, however, Gi-hun emerges victorious. And that's not all: Before the season wraps up, Gi-hun decides he wants to thwart the *Squid Game* recruiter's attempts to enlist more players for a future game.

"At the end of season one, Gi-hun was going to go back home to reunite with his daughter, but then he sees a person recruiting for *Squid Game* and tries to foil them," says Sean Boelman, film and television critic at FandomWire. "He was supposed to get on a flight and go back home, but he turned around in the airport at the end of the final episode."

And so here we are, back to the newly released 17-second teaser, which appears to pick right back up in the airport scene that closed out season one. So, what decision will Gi-hun regret, exactly? And who was on the phone issuing that threat?

## **What's in store for series two – and will anyone be brought back from the dead?**

Boelman suggests the voice on the phone may have been that of season one's Front Man (Lee Byung-hun). And what decision will Gi-hun regret? Boelman suggests that threat refers to Gi-hun's decision to try to thwart the *Squid Game* Recruiter's efforts to enlist more contestants and dismantle the *Squid Game* organization.

"At the end of season one, the Front Man issues an ultimatum to Gi-hun, telling him to move on with his life and go back to his daughter," explains Boelman. "The comment we hear in the season two trailer – in which Gi-hun is told he will regret his decision — appears to continue that threat from Front Man."



To that end, Boelman envisions a variety of potential season two plot lines unfolding involving Gi-hun. "Perhaps the conflict could involve the organizers of the games kidnapping Gi-hun's loved ones to punish Gi-hun for trying to thwart their sadistic games," explains Boelman. "Maybe this could end with Gi-hun himself ending up back in the games – whether he is kidnapped by the organizers and forced to participate or secretly infiltrates the games to bring them down from within."

"The teaser makes it look like a classic revenge thriller in the vein of something like [the French action-thriller film directed by Pierre Morel] Taken," adds Boelman. He also believes season two may involve bringing back some of the characters from season two who appeared to have been killed off.

"My speculation is that some characters we saw die in the first season might not actually be dead," Boelman continues, adding that he expects Netflix will release at least a few more teasers before series two gets underway.

For its part, Netflix has revealed some details about the forthcoming season, including that "the highly-anticipated second season will follow Gi-hun as he abandons his plans to go to the US and starts a chase with a motive".

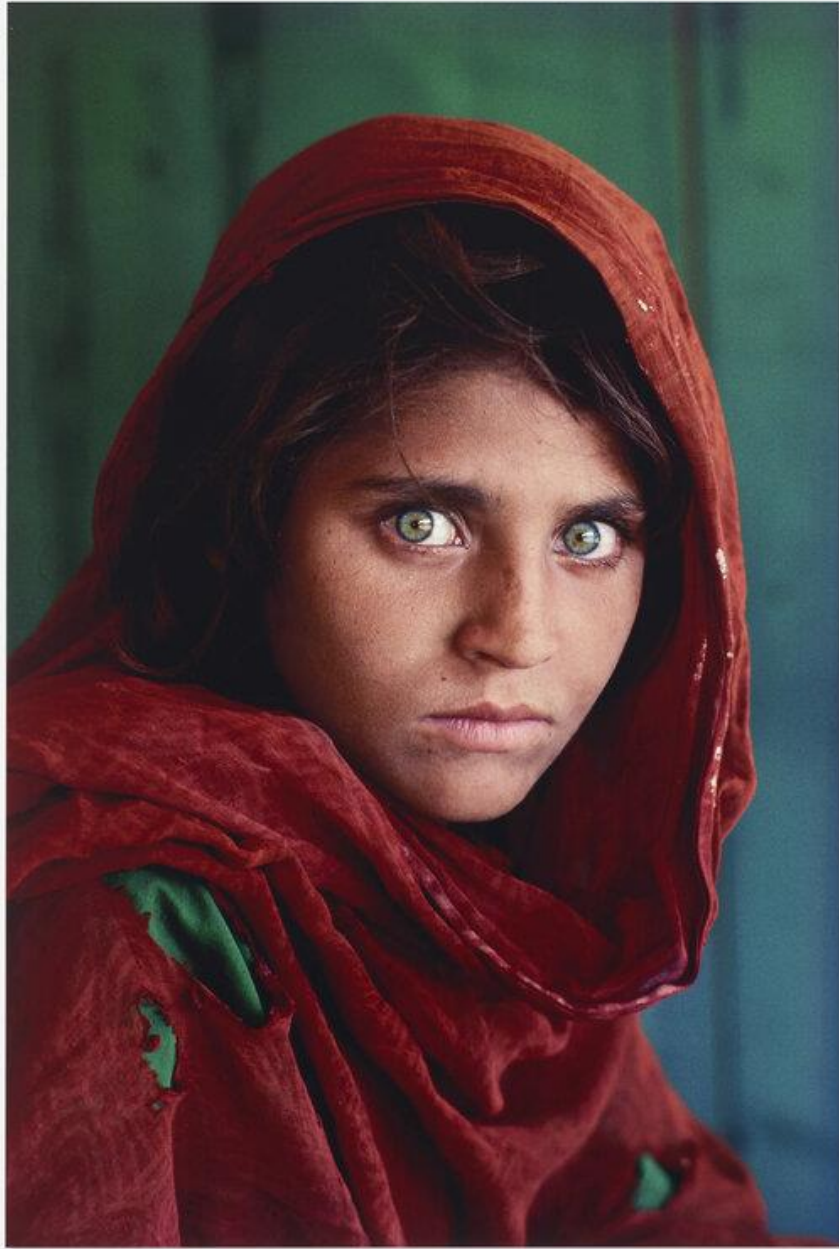
In addition, the entertainment giant has confirmed that several of season one's popular characters will indeed be back, including Lee Jung-jae, Lee Byung-hun, Wi Ha-joon, and Gong Yoo – all of whom will reprise their roles from the first season.

Netflix however, has not confirmed when in 2024 series two will begin airing.

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Official trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBuOz7mK9TY>

# Afghan Girl



Photograph by Steve McCurry, 1984