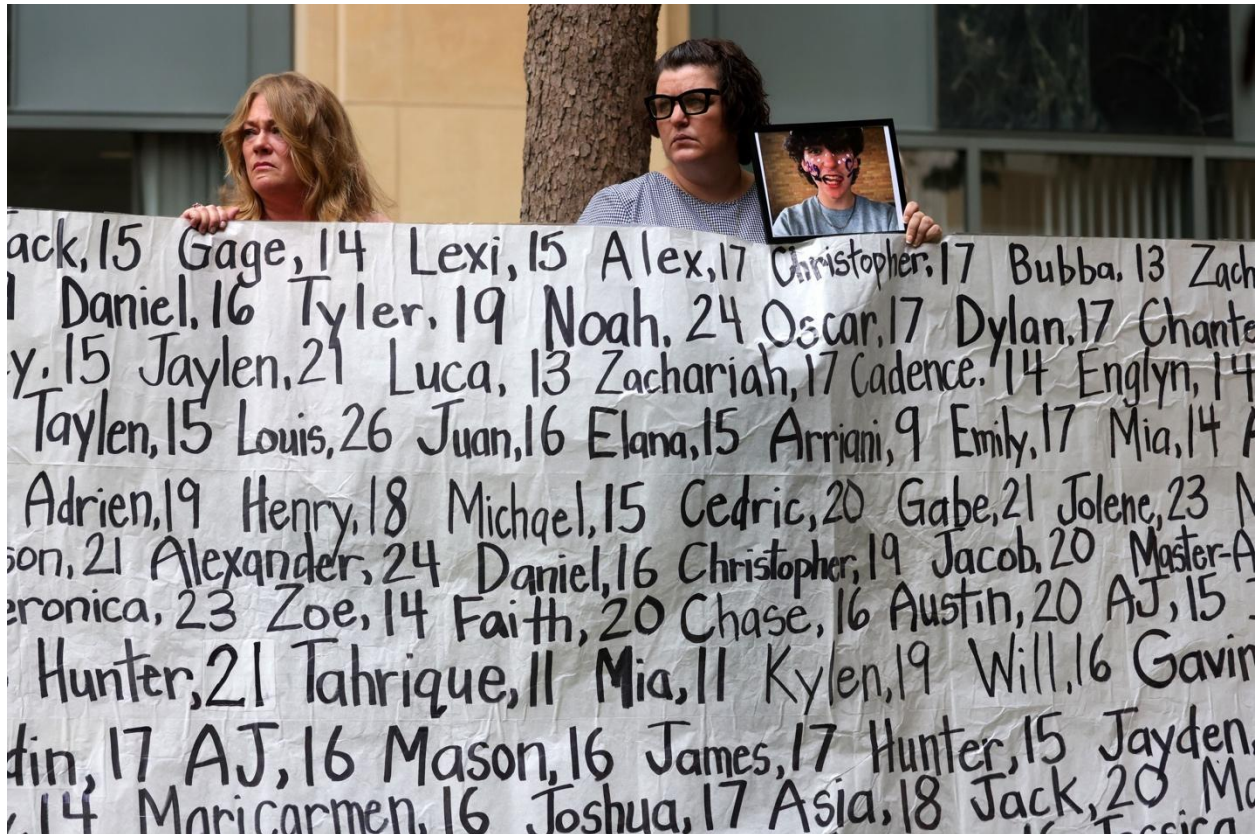


‘She died by design’: Grieving mothers condemn Meta as trial begins in Oakland

The criticism came as several state attorneys general opened their case against Meta in an Oakland federal courtroom



Shannon Heacock, right, holds a photograph of her son Elijah during a rally outside a federal courthouse on Tuesday, Aug. 18, 2026, in Oakland, Calif. Parents and advocates gathered in front of the courthouse holding a large banner with the names of children who died from what they claim are social media related harms. Opening statements begin on Tuesday in the landmark federal multi-state social media addiction trial against Meta. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

By [Jakob Rodgers](#) | and [Ethan Baron](#) |
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Victoria Hinks tried taking her 16-year-old daughter's phone away time and again as the San Rafael girl became consumed by social media feeds that Hinks said repeatedly served her posts about anorexia and self-harm. And every time her daughter would fight back — even sneaking into her parents' room to nab her phone and get back online.

Those battles over her phone continued until Aug. 7, 2024, when Alexandra, then a student at Redwood High School, died by suicide.

“It was like taking drugs away from an addict,” Hinks told this newspaper. “The product was working exactly as it was designed.”

On Tuesday, Hinks and about a half-dozen other mothers stood outside a federal courthouse in Oakland and railed against Meta, the company that owns social media giants Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, as [it went to trial in a nationally watched case](#) that could have far-reaching — and financially perilous — impacts for the trillion-dollar company. The women recalled how their children died by suicide or drug overdoses after allegedly becoming hooked on the company’s apps and its carefully honed algorithms.

Speaking through tears, Hinks decried what she called the ‘criminal’ conduct of Meta chief executive Mark Zuckerberg. Her daughter, who went by Owl, had become a regular on Instagram and several non-Meta apps, including Snapchat and TikTok.

Behind the girl’s mother stood several parents, each of whom held up a handwritten banner emblazoned with the names of nearly 400 other children and teens who died after becoming consumed by their social media feeds.

“Owl didn’t die by accident – she died by design,” Hinks said at a press conference outside the courthouse. “Meta’s own engineers built an algorithm that knew exactly what to show a struggling 16-year-old girl to keep her scrolling, and what that content could do to her. They knew, and they did it anyway. That’s why this trial matters.”

Other parents recalled similar stories.

One woman described her daughter dying by suicide in New Jersey after being cyberbullied on Meta’s apps. Another found her son dying in her house after he became a victim of social media sextortion. Still another woman recalled her daughter talking with a drug dealer on one of Meta’s apps — ultimately scoring a drug that was laced with a lethal dose of fentanyl.

After traveling to Oakland from Colorado, Lori Schott read aloud a diary entry from her daughter, Annalee, who died by suicide at 18 after becoming engrossed with Meta’s apps. In it, Annalee described “sitting on my bathroom floor, telling myself how much I hate myself.”

“Advertisers were allegedly given access to our children so beauty ads could be delivered at the very moments these girls were at their most vulnerable,” Schott said. “Let that sink in. When my daughter was struggling, it became Meta’s bottom line.”

The criticism came as attorneys general for four states — California, Colorado, New Jersey and Kentucky — opened their case against Meta in a trial over whether the company built Facebook and Instagram [to addict children](#) and concealed that harm from consumers. An advisory jury will hear the case, but its findings will not be binding. U.S. District Judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers will make the final decision.

On Tuesday, Meta declined to comment on the mothers' claims and statements, but said of the trial, "We stand by our record of creating strong protections for teens, and look forward to making our case in court."

Outside the courthouse, the mothers were flanked by numerous advocates who framed Zuckerberg and his companies as prioritizing profits over teenagers' mental health.

"The courtroom doors are open, and it is time that the public sees what the executives at Meta have known all along: That their products are designed to addict and harm children," said Lennon Torres, director of movement partnerships at the HEAT Initiative.

Lisa Pearson, an attorney and a member of Mothers Against Media Addiction, blasted Facebook and Instagram for their "relentless pursuit of profit" while fueling "a youth mental health crisis."

She and other advocates said the trial offered an opportunity to build on court rulings in New Mexico and Los Angeles earlier this year, which forced the company to pay hundreds of millions of dollars for the harms its products inflicted on children.

"Big Tech is the new Big Tobacco — targeting kids and addicting them early," Pearson said. "Today we are witness to a historic moment — just as with Big Tobacco in the '90s, these companies are finally being held accountable."

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