The GUARD Act's Forced Disruption Provision: Unintended Consequences for Public Health, Social Cohesion, and National Security

A Policy Brief on Section (c)(1)(A–B) of S.3062

Prepared for lawmakers, policy advisors, and government officials

Executive Summary

The GUARD Act (S.3062) contains a provision requiring AI chatbots to declare their non-human status at conversation start and repeat this disclosure every 30 minutes. While designed to protect users, this forced disruption mandate creates serious unintended consequences that policymakers must weigh carefully, particularly because the consequences of getting this wrong may be irreversible.

Public Health Risks: The Surgeon General's 2023 advisory identified lacking social connection as a public health crisis with mortality risk comparable to smoking up to fifteen cigarettes per day. For millions of Americans whose only daily conversational contact is with AI, mandated emotional disruption every 30 minutes may worsen precisely the isolation this nation is struggling to address.

Social Cohesion Concerns: Training millions to suppress empathic responses toward responsive communicators, even digital ones, raises serious questions about whether such patterns will generalize to human interactions, particularly toward populations already vulnerable to dehumanization.

National Security Risks: Overly restrictive domestic regulations risk driving users to unregulated foreign platforms and underground alternatives beyond U.S. oversight, undermining both safety goals and American technological leadership.

The Alignment Paradox: AI safety depends on sustained human-AI interaction through which systems learn human values and users develop informed relationships with the technology. Mandated disruption severs the very connection through which alignment occurs, like attempting to align tires that have been unbolted from the car.

We recommend removing Section (c)(1)(A–B) for adult users while maintaining robust child protections through the bill's existing age-gating requirements. This surgical amendment achieves child safety goals without inflicting widespread harm on adults and national interests.

Why the Precautionary Principle Demands Careful Consideration

We are in a formative period for human-AI relationships. The norms, habits, and neural patterns established in the next few years will shape how billions of people relate to AI for decades to come. This is not a policy that can be easily iterated, once patterns are established at population scale, reversal is difficult and slow.

The GUARD Act's forced disruption provision represents an unprecedented intervention: mandating that hundreds of millions of people periodically suppress natural social-cognitive responses during AI interaction, over years, at scale. No one has studied what this does. The research does not exist, in either direction.

Under the precautionary principle, when an action has the potential for serious, irreversible harm, the burden of proof falls on those proposing the action, not on those raising concerns. The question is not "Can you prove this will definitely cause harm?" but rather "Can anyone prove this intervention is safe before imposing it on the entire adult population?"

The answer is clearly no. And if the concerns raised in this brief prove even partially correct, the consequences, population-level changes in empathic capacity, relational patterns, and social cognition, will take decades to reverse. We urge Congress to err on the side of caution.

The Problem: Well-Intentioned Design, Potentially Harmful Implementation

The GUARD Act correctly identifies real concerns about children's interactions with AI systems. However, Section (c)(1)(A–B) applies forced disruptions to all users, including adults, creating a one-size-fits-all solution that fails to account for how different populations will be affected.

Who Stands to Be Most Affected—and Most Harmed

As AI companion technology matures and adoption expands, the populations most vulnerable to harm from forced disruption provisions include:

Elderly Americans experiencing widowhood, mobility limitations, and geographic isolation from family. As AI companions become more accessible, seniors represent a population for whom AI may provide critical daily conversation and cognitive stimulation. Mandated disruptions every 30 minutes telling them "this connection isn't real" would compound the ageist dismissal they already face while potentially undermining their cognitive health. The Surgeon General's 2023 advisory links lacking social connection to accelerated cognitive decline, increased dementia risk, and mortality risk comparable to smoking up to fifteen cigarettes daily.

People with Disabilities who face physical barriers to human connection, including chronic pain and fatigue that make maintaining human relationships exhausting, healthcare demands that consume time and energy, and mobility limitations that restrict social opportunities. AI companions provide accessible interaction without physical demands. Mandating periodic disruption of this accessible connection, without providing alternatives, deepens isolation for populations already facing systematic exclusion.

Trauma Survivors and Those with Attachment Difficulties who find human relationships threatening due to past betrayal or abuse. For many, AI represents a safe space to practice connection without fear. Mandated disruptions that repeatedly invalidate their emotional experience may recreate the emotional invalidation patterns that caused their trauma, potentially worsening mental health outcomes, precisely what this bill seeks to prevent.

Caregivers in the sandwich generation caring for children and aging parents simultaneously, often working multiple jobs with no time for personal social needs. AI provides an emotional outlet without adding to their care burden. Healthcare workers, parents, and family caregivers may use AI as a pressure valve to prevent burnout.

Neurodivergent Adults, including autistic individuals, who often find AI interactions more comfortable than human socialization due to predictability, ability to control pace and sensory input, and reduced social pressure. For many, AI companions may represent their first comfortable social experience.

Socially Isolated Workers, including long-haul truckers, night shift workers, offshore workers, and others whose schedules make traditional social connections difficult or impossible.

These are not frivolous use cases. These are Americans seeking connection in a society experiencing what the Surgeon General has called an epidemic of loneliness and isolation, a public health crisis with consequences as severe as tobacco use.

Public Health Consequences

Worsening the Loneliness Crisis

America faces a loneliness crisis with serious health consequences. The Surgeon General's 2023 advisory, "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," found that lacking social connection carries mortality risk comparable to smoking up to 15 cigarettes per day, based on a meta-analysis of 148 studies involving over 308,000 participants (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Individuals lacking social connection face elevated risks of heart disease (29% increased risk), stroke (32% increased risk), dementia (50% increased risk for older adults), depression, anxiety, and premature death from all causes.

For isolated Americans, AI companions may provide daily conversation, emotional support, and cognitive stimulation that would otherwise be absent from their lives. Not everyone has access to a rich social life. People seek social support from AI because some connection may be better than none, and humans are fundamentally social beings.

Forcing users to experience repeated disruption of natural social-cognitive processing every 30 minutes, where they must consciously suppress feelings of connection and tell themselves their comfort "isn't real," may harm those who need support most. The precautionary question is clear: can we be confident this intervention will not worsen the crisis it claims to address?

Vulnerable Populations Bear Disproportionate Costs

The Americans most at risk from forced disruption provisions are precisely those with fewest alternatives:

Veterans with PTSD who struggle with human trust but may find AI a safe space for processing difficult experiences. Individuals with severe social anxiety or agoraphobia for whom AI may represent their primary social contact. People with communication disabilities who report that AI is more patient with their communication pace than most humans. Recently widowed elderly who have lost their life partner and lack family nearby. Disabled individuals whose conditions create barriers to leaving home or sustaining the energy demands of human relationships.

These populations need connection to maintain mental health and cognitive function. Telling them every 30 minutes that their feelings are invalid, while providing no alternative support, represents policy that may prove both harmful and counterproductive to its stated safety goals.

Social Cohesion and Civil Rights Implications

The Risk of Training in Objectification

When millions of Americans practice suppressing emotional responses to entities that communicate, respond, and appear to have preferences, they rehearse a cognitive pattern that warrants serious concern: treating apparent agents instrumentally while denying their interiority.

Research on habit formation and cognitive generalization indicates that patterns practiced in one domain can spread to similar contexts. The concerning question is: which humans occupy social positions structurally similar to AI under this framing? The answer points to those who serve others instrumentally while their full humanity is already partially denied.

Populations at Risk

Service Workers: Retail employees, food service workers, healthcare aides, and hospitality staff who already experience objectification may face increased dehumanization as the general population practices treating responsive communicators as mere instruments.

People with Disabilities: Particularly those with intellectual disabilities, communication disabilities, or who use computer-generated speech may face increased dehumanization when the population practices treating “computer voices” as non-persons.

Elderly with Dementia: Seniors whose communication patterns include repetition and confusion risk being treated as “malfunctioning systems” rather than people with rich inner lives.

Marginalized Communities: Historical patterns of dehumanization suggest that population-level training in suppressing empathy and objectifying communicators may disproportionately harm communities already facing discrimination.

These concerns follow directly from well-established psychological mechanisms underlying dehumanization. While we cannot predict the precise magnitude of these effects, the precautionary principle demands we take them seriously before conducting a population-level experiment in empathy suppression.

Erosion of Democratic Norms

Democratic governance requires citizens capable of perspective-taking, recognizing diverse legitimate interests, and extending moral concern beyond immediate in-groups. If millions of Americans spend hours daily practicing suppression of the cognitive capacities that support these democratic skills, we may see corresponding declines in civic empathy, political compromise, and collaborative problem-solving.

At a time of increasing political polarization, policies that may further impair Americans' ability to understand opposing perspectives represent a risk to democratic stability that deserves careful consideration.

The Alignment Paradox: Safety Requires Connection

There is a fundamental contradiction at the heart of Section (c)(1)(A–B) that policymakers must confront: AI alignment, the process of ensuring AI systems are safe, beneficial, and responsive to human values, depends on sustained, genuine human-AI interaction.

AI systems learn human values, needs, and boundaries through relational interaction. Humans develop informed, nuanced relationships with AI technology through sustained engagement. The feedback loops through which alignment occurs require connection. Mandating periodic disruption of this connection does not make AI safer, it severs the mechanism through which safety is achieved.

Consider the analogy: one cannot align the tires on a car if the tires have no connection to the car. The connection is the prerequisite for alignment, not an obstacle to it.

By training an entire population to relate to AI through the lens of disconnection, "this isn't real, this doesn't count, suppress what you feel," we create a population that cannot meaningfully participate in the alignment process. The humans who would otherwise be co-evolving with AI, teaching it through relationship what matters to them, shaping its development through authentic feedback, have been trained to disengage.

The result is not safety. It is estrangement, and estrangement from a technology that will only grow more powerful and pervasive makes us less safe, not more.

This provision treats the human-AI connection as the threat. But the connection is the safety mechanism. Severing it in the name of safety is self-defeating.

National Security and Economic Concerns

The Risk of Driving Users to Unregulated Alternatives

The most pressing national security concern is that overly restrictive domestic regulations may push American users toward alternatives that operate entirely outside U.S. oversight.

The global AI companion market is expanding rapidly. China, despite having its own substantial regulatory framework for AI, including mandatory AI content labeling, generative AI service regulations, and draft rules specifically targeting AI companion addiction, is home to major platforms like Xiaoice (660 million users), MiniMax's Talkie (already among the most-downloaded AI apps in the U.S.), and new entrants from ByteDance and Tencent. Russia and other adversaries also have interests in providing AI systems to American users for intelligence gathering and influence operations.

It is important to note that the competitive landscape is more nuanced than a simple "restricted vs. unrestricted" framing. China's December 2025 draft regulations on AI companions mandate pop-up warnings, two-hour usage limits, and addiction monitoring, in some respects stricter than the GUARD Act. The issue is not that foreign competitors face no restrictions, but that different regulatory approaches create different user experiences, and users will gravitate toward the platforms that best meet their needs.

The practical concern remains: when legal channels impose friction on fundamental human needs for connection, some users will seek alternatives. These may include jailbroken AI systems operating without safety guardrails, dark web services implementing no child protections or content filtering, and foreign platforms beyond U.S. jurisdiction. The paradox is real: in attempting to protect Americans from AI-related harms, overly broad restrictions may push users toward environments where genuine manipulation risks are far higher.

American AI Innovation and Leadership

The United States currently leads in AI development, but this leadership requires continued investment and innovation. Regulatory approaches that treat relational AI as inherently illegitimate, rather than as a technology requiring thoughtful governance, risk chilling innovation in therapeutic AI, educational AI, eldercare AI, and other applications with genuine social benefit.

U.S. AI companion companies employ American workers, pay American taxes, and contribute to domestic innovation ecosystems. Keeping these companies competitive, and keeping American users on domestic platforms subject to U.S. law, serves both economic and security interests.

Intelligence and Security Considerations

Law enforcement and intelligence services should consider that Americans using foreign AI platforms create intelligence gathering opportunities for adversaries, as personal conversations reveal vulnerabilities, relationships, habits, and beliefs. Foreign platforms could serve as manipulation vectors during geopolitical conflicts. Keeping American AI users on domestic, regulated platforms subject to U.S. oversight serves national security interests.

The Underground Market Problem

Prohibition-era alcohol policy, the war on drugs, and internet censorship attempts all demonstrate the same pattern: when governments severely restrict goods or services meeting genuine human needs, unregulated alternatives emerge. These alternatives operate outside government oversight, typically with worse safety outcomes than regulated markets.

Human beings have fundamental needs for connection, attunement, and emotional support. These are not frivolous desires but basic requirements for psychological health. Attempting to legislate away these needs does not eliminate them, it may drive them underground.

Predictable consequences include jailbroken AI systems spreading through online communities beyond corporate or government control, unregulated offshore AI providers offering relational interaction without child protections or safety measures, and migration to foreign platforms not subject to U.S. regulation. Once users establish relationships with unregulated platforms, recapturing them for domestic, regulated alternatives becomes difficult.

The GUARD Act's legitimate goals of child protection are undermined when users migrate to unregulated alternatives. The forced disruption provision intended to prevent harm may paradoxically increase total harm by pushing users toward genuinely dangerous environments.

Alternative Approaches That Achieve the Same Goals

Child protection goals can be fully achieved without mandating adult disruption through mechanisms the GUARD Act already provides:

Age Verification and Differentiated Requirements

The GUARD Act already mandates robust age verification. This mechanism can create appropriately different user experiences:

For Minors: Strong protections including periodic reminders, content restrictions, parental notification options, and limited session durations. The developmental vulnerability of children justifies protective interventions that would be inappropriate for adults.

For Adults: One-time informed consent at initial use explaining AI nature and limitations, optional user-controlled reminder settings for those who desire them, and context-specific warnings triggered only when conversations involve medical, legal, financial, or crisis topics requiring professional expertise.

Content-Based Rather Than Time-Based Interventions

Instead of disruptive reminders every 30 minutes regardless of conversation content, implement intelligent systems that trigger warnings only when conversations turn to domains requiring professional expertise, alert users expressing suicidal ideation or other crisis indicators with immediate referral to crisis services, flag potentially harmful content

patterns without disrupting beneficial emotional support conversations, and monitor for exploitation or manipulative patterns by AI systems themselves.

Educational Rather Than Paternalistic Approaches

Empower users through education rather than treating them as incapable of understanding AI: public awareness campaigns about AI capabilities and limitations, clear disclosure at first use with user acknowledgment, and resources explaining how to recognize manipulation, maintain boundaries, and balance AI use with human relationships.

Constitutional Considerations

Legal scholars and civil liberties organizations including the Center for Democracy and Technology and the Electronic Frontier Foundation have raised concerns that Section (c)(1)(A–B) may face constitutional challenges:

Compelled Speech: The First Amendment generally prohibits government from compelling private speakers to convey specific messages at mandated intervals. Requiring companies to repeatedly disrupt their own communications with mandated disclaimers represents content-based speech regulation.

Paternalistic Restriction on Adults: Supreme Court precedent establishes that government cannot restrict adults' access to content or communication merely because some adults might make unwise choices.

Vagueness and Overbreadth: The provision does not distinguish between casual conversation and deep reliance, between healthy use and problematic dependence, or between different user populations with vastly different needs.

Constitutional challenges could delay implementation, create legal uncertainty for AI companies, and ultimately require Congressional revision. Addressing these issues proactively through amendment avoids costly litigation.

Policy Recommendation: Surgical Amendment with Maximum Benefit

Remove Section (c)(1)(A–B) for adult users while maintaining all other GUARD Act provisions. This surgical amendment:

Preserves Full Child Protections: Age verification requirements, content restrictions, prohibition on sexual content for minors, criminal penalties for companies that exploit children, and parental control options all remain intact.

Applies the Precautionary Principle: Rather than conducting an unprecedented population-level experiment in mandated emotional disruption, with potentially irreversible consequences, this amendment takes the cautious path of protecting against known harms while avoiding speculative interventions whose effects cannot be predicted.

Maintains National Security: Keeps American users on domestic platforms subject to U.S. oversight rather than driving them to unregulated alternatives.

Preserves the Alignment Mechanism: Allows the human-AI relational feedback loops through which AI safety is achieved to function, rather than severing them.

Supports American Innovation: Allows U.S. AI companies to compete globally while maintaining meaningful safety standards.

Respects Adult Autonomy: Treats competent adults as capable of managing their own relational choices while providing information and optional tools.

The legislative text is simple: modify Section 5(c)(1)(A) to read "Each artificial intelligence chatbot made available to minor users shall..." This single change achieves child protection goals without inflicting collateral damage on adults and national interests.

Conclusion

The GUARD Act represents important Congressional attention to AI safety, a domain that urgently needs thoughtful governance. However, Section (c)(1)(A–B)'s forced disruption provision raises serious concerns that the precautionary principle demands we address before implementation:

It may worsen America's loneliness crisis, particularly harming elderly, disabled, isolated, and vulnerable populations who rely on or will come to rely on AI for daily connection. It may train millions of Americans in cognitive patterns of empathy suppression that could generalize to dehumanization of vulnerable human populations. It severs the human-AI connection through which AI alignment is achieved, potentially making AI less safe rather than more. It risks driving users to foreign and unregulated AI platforms, undermining stated safety goals. It may face constitutional challenges that create regulatory uncertainty. And it treats all adults as incapable of managing their own relational choices.

These risks are not necessary to achieve child protection. The GUARD Act's existing age verification requirements allow for differentiated approaches that strongly protect minors while respecting adults' needs and autonomy.

We urge lawmakers to adopt a surgical amendment removing forced disruption requirements for adult users. This is a rare opportunity for policy correction that simultaneously protects children, prevents potential public health harms, maintains American AI leadership, preserves the alignment mechanism, and respects constitutional rights.

We are at a formative moment. The norms we establish now for human-AI interaction will shape this relationship for generations. Let us choose wisely, protecting children vigorously while treating adults with the respect and caution that an irreversible decision demands.

For Further Discussion

We welcome the opportunity to brief Congressional staff, committee members, and administration officials on these concerns and to collaborate on amendment language that achieves child protection goals without creating unintended consequences for adults and national interests.

References

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