

# Free the Anxious Generation

## The Art Project

### The Problem

Adolescents are in a mental health crisis. Major depressive episodes among American teens have more than doubled since 2010 as their social lives moved onto smartphones loaded with social media apps. The only available explanation for why this happened in many countries at the same time is that the ancient “play-based childhood” was replaced by the “phone-based childhood.”

The changes started in the 1980s and 1990s when adults in the U.S. and other English-speaking countries began systematically depriving children and adolescents of freedom, unsupervised play, responsibility, and opportunities for risk-taking, all of which promote competence, maturity, and mental health. This change in childhood accelerated in the early 2010s when an already independence-deprived generation was lured into a new virtual universe that seemed safe to parents but was, in fact, more dangerous than the physical world. It was in this brief period—2010 to 2015—that children’s lives changed so rapidly that we call it “the great rewiring of childhood.” This is precisely the period in which teen mental health began to collapse in many countries around the world. Many published experiments now show that moving teen social life onto phones and social media is a cause, not just a correlate, of bad mental health. The new “phone-based childhood” has been a disaster of epic proportions.

We must roll it back.

### The Art Project Mission

Creating provocative artwork and installations that intuitively and emotionally illustrate the ideas, experiments, and graphs presented in *The Anxious Generation*. We want to take the filters off the phone-based childhood to inspire understanding, conversation, and collective action around the youth mental health crisis.

### The Art Project Vision

The *Anxious Generation* author Jonathan Haidt teamed up with artist Dave Cicirelli to blanket New York, Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and San Francisco with provocative images and installations that take the filters off the phone-based coming-of-age, with the hope that this art project will help crystallize the urgency of the youth mental health crisis and catalyze action to start a new chapter.



A brief video explaining the project:  
<https://www.anxiousgeneration.com/art>



## Artist Descriptions

### The Missing Childhood Milk Cartons

Our ten-foot-tall sculpture is designed to look like it was plucked off a linoleum countertop in the early 1980s, echoing that moment when things first started to go wrong. The iconic “missing children” milk carton symbolizes the origin of our current youth mental health epidemic. We hope our “missing childhood” milk carton acts as an origin moment as well. But of a different sort. One where we first act together to roll back the phone-based childhood, restore a play-based childhood, and reclaim life in the real world. We hope this marks the moment we begin to Free The Anxious Generation.



### The Guerilla Poster Campaign

New York, LA, San Francisco, and DC are about to be wrapped in an unfiltered look at phone-based childhood. The scenes depicted in this image series are intended to strip away the digital sheen of social media and reframe it as a visceral and physical act. Provocative, but never profane, the series doesn't shy away from the darkest corners of phone-based childhood and pulls its hidden dangers to the surface.

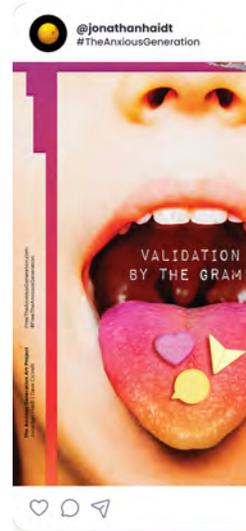
Not just the subject matter, but the aesthetic itself is a commentary. Every image is overexposed and burnt in—as if it's a copy of a copy. Subtly disturbing details, like undersized eyes or repeating mouths, create a discreetly unnatural relationship between viewer and audience. Every detail is aggressively analog, such as halftone patterns and physical tears, that remove the facade of perfection from this virtual world. The series will be on billboards and wild postings throughout each city and is supplemented by sticker packs, pull tabs, and sidewalk stencils—all of which expand the work's reach and create avenues of participation.



# Shareable Media

There's an open invitation to download the art and canvas your local community. Our hope is by crystalizing the urgency of the mental health crisis, we can catalyze action to restore life in the real world. Canvas your own community to help Free The Anxious Generation. All artwork is sized and formatted for easy sharing on social media to recruit other concerned adults to join the movement.

You can find all shareable art on the website:  
<https://www.anxiousgeneration.com/social-media>



# Guerilla Art Takeover

<b>Washington D.C.</b> The National Mall  3/22	<b>New York</b> Union Square  3/25-3/26	<b>San Francisco</b> Pier 39/ Fisherman's Wharf 3/27-3/28	<b>Los Angeles</b> Santa Monica Pier  TBD
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# About the Artist

Dave Cicirelli is a conceptual artist and author who focuses on experiential works in which audience interactions create meaning.

Social media is a frequent subject of his work, starting with his [Fakebook: A True Story Based on Actual Lies \(2013\)](#). The prescient memoir documents his 2009 secret transformation of his established Facebook page into an absurdist work of fiction, and the real-world fallout of online fantasy. The story is a comedic exploration of Fake news, influencers, and catfishing before any had a name.

His signature piece and namesake of his studio is "[The Infinity Cube](#)," a visual concept that uses proprietary techniques to create kinetic and infinite landscapes within a confined space. It is currently the centerpiece for Peacock's promotions of the 2024 Olympic Games.

His interest in perception and behavior led him to Jonathan Haidt's work, and ultimately to a friendship and a series of collaborations such as [All Minus One: John Stuart Mill's Ideas on Free Speech illustrated \(2018\)](#).

Learn more: [davecicirelli.com](http://davecicirelli.com) | [InfinityCubeStudio.com](http://InfinityCubeStudio.com)

