



Safe Routes  
to School  
**National  
Partnership**

# Using Safe Routes to School to Combat the Threat of Violence



In some communities, the danger of violence and crime discourages children from walking to school and keeps people off the street, limiting physical activity and restricting errands and trips. Violent crime and conflict can cause death, pain, and trauma, both for those directly affected and for those who witness or learn of events. Preventing violence goes hand in hand with community betterment, public engagement, street scale enhancements, physical activity and improved economic opportunities.

In underserved communities, walking and bicycling are often major ways that people get around – a necessary part of getting to school, work, the grocery store, or to other key destinations. In addition, walking and bicycling may be a particularly affordable and accessible means to get physical activity.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, there is often more danger from traffic and from violence on the street in underserved communities.<sup>6</sup> Violence within a community inhibits business, job access, healthy nutritional choices, and physical activity. Addressing violence within underserved communities is critical to economic renewal and health.

## How Does the Threat of Violence Affect Safe Routes to School?

- There are 850,000 children living in gang violence “hot zones” all over the country, putting kids at risk on their way to school before they even get to the classroom.<sup>1</sup>
- Parents report violence and crime as one of the five primary factors affecting children’s walking or bicycling.<sup>2</sup>
- Five percent of high school students report not going to school at least one day per month because they feel they would be unsafe at or on their way to or from school.<sup>3</sup>
- Almost 25 percent of students ages 12-18 reported that there were gangs in their schools.<sup>4</sup>

## Combatting Violence Through Safe Routes to School

Violence and crime affect children in communities across the country. In many communities, the actual risk of harm to children is very low, and Safe Routes to School programs can play a crucial role in helping parents feel comfortable with children’s active transportation to school. In other communities, however, children face very real dangers of robbery, harassment, gang intimidation and gang recruitment. Safe Routes to School programs can assist significantly in increasing the safety of children and teens in these communities.

How can Safe Routes to School programs help with these problems? A range of potential steps are provided below. Planning and community engagement can assist in determining which of the steps are most needed and appropriate for a given community.

Using a framework known as the “Six E’s,” we identify specific kinds of actions that can combat violence and support Safe Routes to School. Safe Routes to School programs often use this framework to describe the steps that ensure that children can walk and bicycle safely to school. The Six E’s are engineering, education, encouragement, enforcement, evaluation, and equity, which sets out the need for fair opportunities for health for all communities.



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## **Engineering – Making operational and physical improvements to the built environment that discourage violence and increase street safety**

- Increase the walkability and bikeability of underserved communities. Designing communities to be more walkable makes streets safer, slows car speeds, decreases crime and helps residents become more active.<sup>7</sup> Be sure that designs for street scale improvements in underserved communities are carefully reviewed and don't compromise safety.
- Build a coalition that can develop a Safe Routes to School plan that identifies potential safety problems and prioritizes needed improvements. For example, map locations of brownfields and abandoned areas, as they can be hubs for violence and fear, and identify methods of revitalizing these areas.
- Increase trees, landscaping and green space in communities.
- Use techniques of “crime prevention through environmental design” (CPTED) to reduce opportunities for crime that may be inherent in the design of the neighborhood, influencing the offender decisions that precede criminal acts. This includes steps such as ensuring that streets and buildings have abundant pedestrian scale lighting and eliminating locations where someone can lie in wait to rob or harm someone.

## **Education – Teaching communities about the broad range of transportation choices**

- Convey the benefits of Safe Routes to School to stakeholders. Explain that walking and bicycling to school improves student focus, concentration, learning, and helps create a culture of active and safe environments.
- Encourage parental involvement in schools, with its many benefits for long term student success and health, through Safe Routes to School. By accompanying kids to school, learning the location of signalized or marked crossings, crossing guards, and pedestrian and bicycle safety tips, parents become advocates.
- Use screening practices and ensure proper training for crossing guards and school employees working on traffic and safety issues.

## **Enforcement – Partnering with local law enforcement**

- Cultivate relationships with law enforcement agencies and community organizations that specialize in personal safety at the regional, state and local level, in order to contribute to policy change and help to make Safe Routes to School program safety initiatives effective at reducing violence.
- Bring sheriffs, highway patrol officers, police chiefs, and school resource officers into conversation in order to create effective partnerships and initiatives, especially in communities of color where trust in law enforcement has to be delicately built and managed.
- Work with graffiti abatement programs, animal control officers, and community development advocates to provide innovative ways to engage the community and advance personal safety.





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## **Encouragement – Using events and activities to promote walking and bicycling**

- Prevent crisis situations on the street through creation of a positive school culture, and by supporting proven programs like conflict resolution and restorative justice. Work with parents, neighborhood residents and school staff to create an environment in which bullying is not tolerated within or outside of schools.
- Where children and youths travel to school without adult accompaniment, volunteer Corner Captains can stand at various locations along established school routes to improve personal security by serving as “eyes on the street.” Establish safe houses – pre-identified locations where children and youth can go in case of emergencies while going to and from school.
- Ensure children’s safety by having them travel to school in groups, accompanied by parents or adult volunteers. Walking school buses and bike trains can play a major part in a community protecting itself. Parents and guardians conducting these efforts build neighborhood cohesion, show safety in numbers and allow children to be physically active.
- Partner with senior, neighborhood revitalization, community development, faith-based, smart growth and other community groups to promote Safe Routes to School, act as volunteers, change policies and increase personal safety, especially in low-income communities.

## **Evaluation – Assess violence reduction efforts to determine what approaches are more and less successful and identify unintended consequences**

- Evaluate whether violence reduction efforts are showing success.
- Identify new problems or existing problems that are not abating or are worsening.
- Assess whether violence prevention efforts have led to any unintended negative consequences.

## **Equity – Creating access for low-income communities, communities of color, and everyone else**

- Invest in violence reduction strategies in areas where violence discourages walking and bicycling. Work towards safe and violence free environments in underserved communities.
- Ensure that low-income communities and communities of color receive an equitable share of funding for street scale infrastructure.
- Ensure that children and teens have safe places to play after school and during non-school hours through strategies like shared use of school recreational facilities, developing parks and playing fields and providing recreational programming.





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## Conclusion

Safe Routes to School programs can include a wide array of different approaches to make communities safer from crime and violence. Through Safe Routes to School coalitions and specific initiatives, community members can reduce violence and help children, teens and adults become safer throughout their neighborhoods.

## References

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- 2 Safe Routes to School National Partnership, "Identifying Factors Affecting the Number of Students Walking or Biking to School," 2009, [www.saferoutespartnership.org/resourcecenter/research/traffic-congestion-archives-1](http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/resourcecenter/research/traffic-congestion-archives-1).
- 3 National Center for Safe Routes to School, "Personal Security and Safe Routes to School," October 2010, [www.parachutecanada.org/downloads/injurytopics/PersonalSecuritySafeRoutes-ToSchool.pdf](http://www.parachutecanada.org/downloads/injurytopics/PersonalSecuritySafeRoutes-ToSchool.pdf).
- 4 *Id.*
- 5 Safe Routes to School National Partnership, "Addressing Pedestrian and Bicyclist Safety," [www.saferoutespartnership.org/resourcecenter/research/addressing-pedestrian-and-bicyclist-safety](http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/resourcecenter/research/addressing-pedestrian-and-bicyclist-safety).
- 6 Prevention Institute, "Addressing the Intersection: Preventing Violence and Promoting Healthy Eating and Active Living," May 2010, [www.preventioninstitute.org/component/jlibrary/article/id-267/127.html](http://www.preventioninstitute.org/component/jlibrary/article/id-267/127.html).
- 7 Safe Routes to School National Partnership, "Personal Safety: Making the Walking and Bicycling Trip to School Safer," [www.saferoutespartnership.org/state/bestpractices/personalsafety](http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/state/bestpractices/personalsafety).

