



Safe Routes
to School
National
Partnership

How to Access and Use Data: Tips for Safe Routes to School Practitioners



Photo courtesy Bri Welden on Flickr

Data has always played a key role in Safe Routes to School as the basis of one of the 6 E's – Evaluation. However, data offers much more. Data provides us with an assessment of what is really happening on the ground, ensures the understanding necessary to make informed decisions about policies, projects, and programs, and is crucial for strong funding proposals. This fact sheet provides an overview of how to access and use data for Safe Routes to School practitioners. It describes key ways to use data for Safe Routes to School, lists some current sources of helpful data, and highlights some accessible (free!) online tools that can be used by Safe Routes to School programs and practitioners.

Key Ways to Use Data to Plan, Support, and Implement Your Safe Routes to School Program

Data can be useful in all aspects of a Safe Routes to School initiative. Data can be used in the following key ways to plan, support, and implement your Safe Routes to School project or program:

- **Making the Case for Investment in Safe Routes to School.** Data contributes to informed decisions and provides support for strong funding proposals, allowing improved, evidence-based demonstrations of the need for new walking and biking infrastructure or Safe Routes to School programs. With data, community members can better participate in the decision-making process, understand the issues, advocate for desired outcomes, and hold decision makers accountable.
- **Prioritizing Schools and Neighborhoods.** When funding and capacity are limited, data can help suggest which infrastructure improvements should be made first and which schools prioritized for education and encouragement programs. Measures related to safety, equity, and program reach can help ensure resources are invested in places and strategies that will best address local priorities and students' and community members' needs.
- **Planning and Developing Programs.** Data helps identify necessary measures to support student safety and provide needed support along the route to school. Information about neighborhood conditions, such as level and location of crime, missing sidewalks, and other barriers allows programs to be tailored to address specific local contexts. Such data can inform "Suggested Routes to School" maps to ensure that suggested routes are convenient for families and avoid hazards.
- **Evaluating Programs.** Gathering baseline data and conducting follow up evaluations assists in analyzing the effectiveness of specific programs and projects. Such assessments make the case for continued support of effective programs, while identifying aspects that could be improved.

Safe Routes to School by the Numbers: Using Data to Foster Walking and Biking to School

The Safe Routes to School National Partnership has developed a report that explores the current and potential uses of data in walking and bicycling to school programs and initiatives. The report, [Safe Routes to School by the Numbers: Using Data to Foster Walking and Biking to School](#), discusses why accessible and usable data is important to Safe Routes to School, which types of data must be gathered or accessed, strategies for using data, the roles of various groups in making data accessible, and ways to address challenges that may arise.

Where You Can Find Data

Much of the data of interest to Safe Routes to School is collected and maintained by government agencies, healthcare providers, and other large organizations. Although access to privately held data varies immensely, many government agencies have made their data publicly available through websites and online portals. Safe Routes to School-related data can be found at the following websites:

- [American FactFinder](#) — Demographic, housing, and employment data collected by the US Census Bureau, often available at the city level with some data available at the census tract or census block levels.
- [Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System](#) — State data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention through telephone surveys about health-related risk behaviors, chronic health conditions, and use of preventive services.
- [National Household Travel Survey](#) — Data collected by the US Department of Transportation about how people travel. State-level data is available, as well as data for some metropolitan areas.
- [Data.gov](#) — The federal open data portal for a wide range of topics at various geographic levels.
- [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System](#) — Data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention through surveys of middle school, high school, and college students on health-risk behaviors and chronic diseases. National, state, and some school district-level data is available.
- [County Health Rankings](#) — County rankings prepared by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute based on a variety of health-related indicators.
- [DataUSA](#) — Data visualization tool developed by a partnership of private organizations, which includes national data and profiles for states and major cities.

In addition, local and state government agencies and other local partners can be a rich source of data. In most states, crash

data is maintained by the state department of transportation or state or local law enforcement. Infrastructure inventories, including locations and characteristics of sidewalks and bike lanes, may be maintained by local public works/engineering departments or regional transportation commissions. Student residence locations are sometimes available to Safe Routes to School programs from school districts or state departments of education. Work with these agencies to determine what data is available, how to access it, and if there are tools available to easily use the data.

Tools for Using Data

An increasing abundance of free, low cost, and easy to use online tools of use for Safe Routes to School initiatives have appeared, emerging as data becomes more accessible and more organizations and individuals develop useful tools. While the available tools are ever-changing, following are several practical tools, particularly useful for mapping data without specialized software or skills:

- [Google Maps and Google Earth](#) — These tools are heavily used by Safe Routes to School programs to create maps. Some programs, like [the one in Solano County, California](#), have created websites that use Google maps to provide information to students and parents about suggested walking and biking routes and specific walking school bus routes, and also to solicit feedback.
- [Plot a Route](#) — This site has a free route planner for walking and bicycling. While it is designed for adults walking and bicycling for recreation, it can also be used to measure routes and create route maps for children walking and bicycling to school.
- [OpenStreetMap](#) — This site provides a free international open data tool that can be integrated into other mapping sites. OpenStreetMap is built by community members who contribute and maintain data about roads, trails, destinations, railway stations, and more.
- [Community Commons](#) — Community Commons is an online mapping tool that enables users to create maps with

data layers such as location of schools, neighborhood Walk Score, pedestrian road network, location of transit stops and stations, pedestrian motor vehicle crash mortality, commute mode, and food retailer locations. These layers can be overlaid with demographic data about a specific community. The Priority Intervention Tool analyses communities using income and educational attainment data to create maps of “Vulnerable Population Footprints,” intended to identify areas at risk of health disparities where efforts might have the greatest impact.

- [Counterpoint](#) — This site provides a free mobile app that enables community members of all ages and abilities to conduct traffic, bicycle, and pedestrian counts. The interface is designed to be very kid-friendly and includes intuitive visuals and sounds. App users can record when a car, bus, or person bicycling or walking passes by a specific location, and then use summarized data in planning efforts.

Conclusion

Safe Routes to School practitioners need data to make informed decisions, obtain funding, and persuade decision makers to commit to strong Safe Routes to School programs. With new technologies and increased sharing of data by agencies and organizations, data is becoming more and more useful and accessible to everyone. Safe Routes to School practitioners can harness these new opportunities to innovatively use data to support stronger programs and safer and healthier streets and communities.

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