

# Engaging youth to advance safer streets for all

Guide and inspiration for partnership  
between youth and adults

*Source: Ulupono Initiative*



**“We cannot solve our problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.”**

*- Albert Einstein*

## Introduction

In the United States and across the globe, youth have spurred the evolution of social norms and values. From civil rights to global climate change and the movement to end gun violence, youth have been key changemakers. This is also true for transportation safety. Youth in high school and early adulthood across the country have a long track record of caring about road safety and are having an impact on safe transportation in their communities. Many young leaders were motivated to act after a traffic crash that impacted their school community. They are encouraging more walking and biking and advocating for infrastructure improvements and policy change, all to create safer, more livable communities for everyone.

Meaningful youth engagement is key to these successes and calls for an understanding by both adults and youth of what is needed for successful



*National Bike & Roll to School Day event in Washington, DC.  
Source: Walkbiketoschool.org.*

partnerships. Each can benefit immensely from the other and can work together to accomplish each of their goals.

This brief guide provides a framework for meaningful engagement of youth in addressing transportation safety. The guide covers:

- Centering youth
- Meaningful youth engagement
- Youth voices shaping active transportation

A separate companion document, [\*Engaging Youth to Advance Safer Streets for All: Recommendations for Meaningful Youth Engagement\*](#), features ways to take action for meaningful youth engagement.

This guide has been designed for youth advocates, city leaders, and transportation professionals, but the research and recommendations can be applied to other issues and forms of advocacy for youth. Moreover, while this guide focuses on the United States context, the topic of youth engagement and the need for it is not unique to the United States so the underlying concepts have global relevance.

The Vision Zero for Youth (VZY) initiative led by the National Center for Safe Routes to School (National Center) with funding from the FIA Foundation developed this guide. VZY encourages cities to prioritize places where youth walk and bike for safety improvements and encourages cities and communities to adopt policy change and infrastructure improvements to help eliminate traffic fatalities and serious injuries. VZY recognizes that starting with youth can be

the catalyst to build community support for Vision Zero; that Vision Zero should include a focus on youth; and that youth voices can play an important role in creating safer streets.

The expertise and experience of two youth activists on the Vision Zero for Youth team informed by engagements with several young road safety leaders are at the heart of this guide. They shaped the content and led the outreach that informed it. Information for this guide included performing a scan of youth transportation organizations across the U.S. and conducting interviews with 14 high school and young adult road safety organizations. The goal was to better understand the impact youth are having in their communities; to highlight the ways that communities are benefitting from their efforts; to identify types of support or training these groups need to reach their potential; and identify current policy change opportunities. The team also examined the challenges that youth groups face in sustaining a changing membership.

## Centering youth

### Understanding the importance of youth perspective and engagement

Young people play an important role in shaping the future transportation system for two key reasons.

**First**, social problems disproportionately impact young people.

- They are the age group most affected by road trauma, with road traffic crashes being a **leading cause of death among those aged 5–29 years**.
- Young people are disproportionately impacted by interlinking health and environmental issues, as noted in a **report by UNICEF**.
- With a culture of vehicle ownership and mass highway expansion, young people are at greater risk of air pollution and congestion.

Young people have continually been isolated as victims of road traffic crashes, instead of being involved in key policies and actions as stakeholders and partners in ending this deadly epidemic.

### “Who knows about young people, if not young people?”

- Mialy, Youth Researcher from Madagascar in an interview with [wearerestless.org](http://wearerestless.org)

- Young people in the U.S. are saturated with hundreds of youth educational peer to peer programs in teen driver behavior that isolates their lived experiences within the overall transportation system to just driving and typically ignores youth experience with public transit, walking, and biking. With peer-to-peer programs as the main strategy, the implication is that crashes are the fault of the behavior of young people, while staying silent on the role of street design and other major factors that contribute to crashes. As stated in the **Youth for Road Safety (YOURS), Policymakers Toolkit**:

*“Road traffic injuries and crashes are often viewed as accidents, moments of bad luck or bad judgement, rather than the avoidable tragedies that they are. For young people, this victim-blaming mindset is incredibly damaging. This leads to a ‘quick fix’ approach to improving road safety that targets young people as a problem rather than working with youth as active collaborators who can participate meaningfully in developing and implementing effective road safety interventions”*



*Youth envisioning changes for their community. Source: Civic Design Center*

- An equitable approach to road safety for children and youth requires cultivating, supporting, and centering youth in voicing their experience of the impact of traffic injuries and how they want to see the system change to support their safe, healthy access to streets.

**Second**, youth will inherit the outcomes of today's decisions about the safety of the evolving transportation system.

- Youth are passionately concerned about the state of the world and about the future, and are connected to social institutions providing mobilization and organizing power. As such, they should be asked about their needs to help shape the system and generate ideas on how to better protect some of the most vulnerable among us.

Decision-making and implementing bodies, including governments, community organizations, and non-government

organizations, benefit from having youth as key partners in many ways.

- Youth have valuable insight and connections to social movements.
- Youth provide lived experiences to help transportation professionals determine appropriate community improvements.
- Young people help city leaders gain public support for policy changes and infrastructure improvements. Youth are, and will continue to be, invested in their cities and their efforts help create a safer place for all.

Young people benefit as well.

- Young people can be a part of transforming and sustaining their own communities.
- Youth gain community organizing, professional, and leadership development skills while making a difference in their communities, adding valuable experience to their resumes.

## In Interviews:

Young leaders in road safety expressed a high level of interest in learning and engaging in road safety career development. There seemed to be a lack of opportunities for young people to be seen as future professionals in the field and opportunities for them to engage in more than their school-based projects.

### National Youth Bike Council: A growing national voice for youth

The **National Youth Bike Council (NYBC)** is a great example of the power of youth leadership. NYBC has ambitious goals which include forming a connected network of youth biking advocates across the U.S. and engaging the bicycle industry. NYBC has created a national presence including partnering with the Youth Bike Summit and speaking at national conferences.

Hear Joshua Funches, the founder of NYBC, talk about what motivated him and see a video “We didn’t know it would be like this” about NYBC’s recent work.



## Meaningful youth engagement

### Beyond the traditional view

Youth want to be meaningfully involved in what they undertake.

- This involves a shift from simply having youth present to incorporating youth voices in transportation decisions.
- This means establishing relationships with youth, providing resources, tools, knowledge, and sharing power through shared decision-making. For example, in some places, municipal leaders, transportation planners, and engineers are involving high school students in walk audits, observations and data collection in their own communities.

Given the outsized impact on this age group, youth must be involved in key work towards ending serious injuries and deaths on our roadways and can do so by starting advocacy efforts especially where they walk and bike most.

One youth advocate expressed their frustrations with their experiences with adults:

*“Our dedication, credibility, skills, abilities are scrutinized, and our lived experiences overlooked and disregarded. We often face perspectives such as ‘youth don’t know what they’re talking*

### Example of tokenism

A group is about to announce a new program about youth. Someone asks if anyone knows any youth that could be there for the kick-off event, after all the program is about youth.

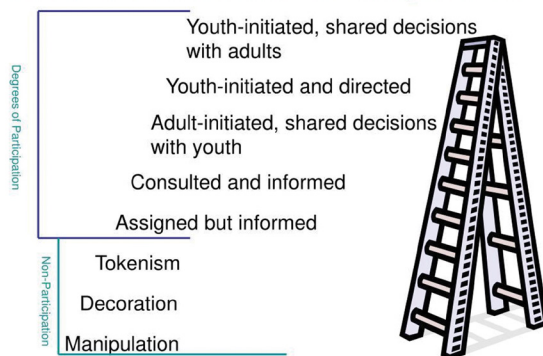
### Example of engagement

A group wants to develop a new program. Youth are included in the planning stage and throughout the process. Youth attend the kick-off event and address questions from the audience.

*about' or 'youth don't have enough experience for me to listen to them' or 'youth are too immature.' Because of this, we have realized that the challenges facing youth tend to be buried in order to paint a picture of continuous success, as a way to 'prove them wrong'."*

Many models exist for how young people are engaged. This guide uses an adaptation of Roger Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation from [creativemethods.org](http://creativemethods.org) as a framework to understanding meaningful youth participation within the context of engaging young people in road safety advocacy, policy and education.

### Ladder of Youth Participation



Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

There are a multitude of reasons why youth should be involved in changes to our streets, but the 'how' is key. Most importantly, there must be a shift from tokenism to youth power. The Ladder of Youth Participation visualizes this shift; the higher one moves up the ladder, the level of meaningful youth participation improves.

## Engagement Questions

Asking the following questions can help organizations and youth gauge their progress at meaningfully engaging youth:

### Adults

- Do you or your organization already include young people's opinions and ideas?
- If not, why? What barriers have prevented you from doing so?
- If so, how would you describe their involvement? Are they included starting at the initial discussions, or only later once a plan has been set and public support is needed?
- Looking at the Ladder of Participation, are there ways to build upon the current involvement approach?

### Youth

- As you look at the Ladder of Participation, what rung or rungs describe how you've been included by groups in the past?
- What can you do to advocate for yourself and your lived experiences?
- Who can help you move up the ladder? Talk to them.



Youth and adults working on a quick-build installation. Source: Ulupono Initiative.

## Design Your Neighborhood and Nashville Youth Design Team: Engaging youth in the design of their city

The Civic Design Center, a non-profit organization in Nashville, Tennessee advocates for civic design visions and actionable change in communities to improve quality of life for all. The center has two programs to engage youth in this process.

**Design Your Neighborhood** teaches seventh and eighth grade students design thinking and the process of civic engagement centered around a project-based middle school curriculum. Each project has a community-action component that staff and volunteers help facilitate.

**Nashville Youth Design Team** is an extra-curricular high school internship program that builds on skills learned from the Design Your Neighborhood curriculum. This is a paid internship that accepts applications for new members each spring.

The Youth Design Team conducts outreach and collects data to learn about different needs, then puts the data into action with tactical urbanism design interventions that advocate for long-term change. For example, the Youth Team joined with Walk Bike Nashville to advocate for safer pedestrian infrastructure at the deadliest intersection for pedestrians in Nashville. The Youth Design Team installed a temporary crosswalk and bulb-outs with brightly colored artwork. It was the first-ever experimental installation on a state road in Tennessee, and less than one year later the Tennessee Department of Transportation committed to transform nearly two miles of Dickerson Pike into a “Complete Street”.

## Youth voices shaping active transportation

Infrastructure improvements such as traffic calming and policy changes such as lowering speed limits are proven strategies to improve safety that youth can influence. Youth have played major roles in infrastructure improve-

ments such as quick build projects and roadway redesign to accommodate walking and bicycling and in policy change such as lowering speed limits near schools. Youth have also played a critical role in helping to gain support within communities for these safety initiatives.

All the youth groups highlighted in this guide are examples of the varied ways youth work to create change and are contributing to their schools, their communities and their cities. They are part of an advocacy organization, city government, a high school and a non-profit organization. Some receive training. Some are paid interns or receive a stipend. Examples capture the following kinds of actions:

- Helping the city develop transportation plans
- Collecting street and community assessment data
- Developing street designs
- Constructing quick build projects
- Advocating for reduced transit fares for students
- Bringing youth across the country together to advocate for bicycling and
- Generating community support for slowing traffic especially around schools.

There are a multitude of engagement strategies for youth involvement in policy change, but all meaningful engagement in policy change requires three things:

1. Consciously moving from tokenism to youth power. That means elevating the expertise of youth in transportation safety and in all stages of a project.
2. Uplifting youth-initiated efforts and sharing decision making so that projects are developed using evidence-based data and lived experiences.
3. Providing tools and resources for youth to grow as civic leaders, whether through training, funding, networking, or outside opportunities.

Hear our youth advocacy team describe meaningful youth engagement and its link with policy change as part of the Global Designing Cities Initiative's Designing Streets for Kids Training.



V Youth Policy Power: a collective approach for you... Copy link

# Youth Policy Power:

a collective approach for youth and city leaders to transform communities

Watch on YouTube

VISION ZERO FOR youth

## In Interviews:

Young leaders expressed a high degree of interest in policy change and city leader engagement, but many indicated that they lack the resources and tools to do so. Youth leaders explained that they are mostly seen as peer educators, rather than young people who can actively engage in policy change. Some of the youth groups focused on peer education expressed interest in using their power to effect long-term policy change. In contrast, some cities are finding meaningful ways to incorporate youth voices.

Read more from the Vision Zero for Youth case study [\*\*Youth-Led Groups Taking Action for Road Safety and Calling for Change.\*\*](#)

## San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) Youth Transportation Advisory Board: An ambitious partnership between city and youth

SFMTA's Youth Transportation Advisory Board began with the intent of incorporating youth into city government. It is a unique relationship between young people in the San Francisco Bay Area and SFMTA Board of Directors, Director

of Transportation and staff. The youth board provides opportunities for youth to engage in monthly consultative meetings to share their lived experiences to influence existing services, practices and budgets of the SFMTA. Furthermore, youth can serve on subcommittees for project-specific work and are paid stipends for their participation.

A powerful aspect of this youth and city leader engagement is that youth lead the advisory board, contribute to the definition of their work, and feel their ideas, recommendations and opinions are valued and seriously considered. Key learnings from the 2021-2022 Youth Advisory Board included how youth felt that existing transportation safety and security measures were inadequate for keeping San Francisco youth safe, that youth felt discriminated against, and that network change announcements were published on unfamiliar mediums resulting in many youth struggling to navigate the system.

Elevating the lived experiences of young people explicitly through consultations, shared decision-making, and youth-led decision-making provides the opportunity for city leaders to become better informed of the consequences of local road safety policies and practices.



SFMTA Youth Transportation Advisory Board  
Source: SFMTA



## Vision Zero Youth Council: Advocacy for speed laws that reduced crashes

The **Vision Zero Youth Council**, a student-led group begun in New York City (NYC) in response to the loss of three classmates in traffic crashes, is an excellent example of youth engaged in policy change. At the time, traffic crashes were the leading cause of injury-related death for children under fourteen years of age. The Council gave a powerful youth voice to the efforts of the NYC Department of Transportation (DOT) to reduce speeds around schools. In 2014, NYC DOT installed speed safety cameras in 140 designated locations around the city, exclusively in school zones.



*Vision Zero Youth Council founder speaks out at a rally for the speed safety bill. Source: FIA Foundation.*

In a review of the first two years of data, NYC DOT found an almost 8% reduction in overall crashes, and a 15% reduction in injury crashes in locations with safety cameras. In May of 2019, the Governor of New York signed into law a speed safety camera bill, which expanded the pilot program from 140 school zones to 750, with extended hours of use. The changes permitted camera placement within one quarter mile of schools, allowing the city to place them on some of the busier arterials which are often more dangerous than the streets on which schools are located. The Vision Zero Youth Council took part in lobbying days at the New

York State Senate in Albany, organized rallies, and spearheaded a petition that received over 600 signatures from high school students across the city in just three days. The NYC DOT credited the Vision Zero Youth Council for providing the youth voice so valuable in creating public support for this policy change.

## Atlanta Students Advocating for Pedestrians (ASAP): Working with government and making a difference

The **Atlanta Students Advocating for Pedestrians** (ASAP) is a student-led club based in Atlanta, GA, that aims to create a safe environment for pedestrians, especially students. The club began in 2019 in response to a student who was killed crossing an intersection near the school. The students held safe street rallies and went to city hall to advocate for changes to the intersection. Working with the city resulted in the improvement of the walk signals, crosswalks, and light timing. They also worked with the city to have a "HAWK" (High-Intensity Activated Crosswalk) signal installed at the entrance to the school allowing pedestrians to cross safely from the bike lane. They work with MARTA, the Atlanta public transit operator, to advocate for a reduced fare for students, and with the Atlanta Department of Transportation



*Leaders from ASAP meet with an Atlanta Council Member to discuss opportunities to improve pedestrian safety for students. Source: ASAP.*

to initiate tactical urbanism projects. These students have gained valuable experience in working with elected officials, advocating effectively for transportation changes, and have gained a hands-on understanding of tactical urbanism and street and transit redesign.



ASAP students remove leaves from a bike lane that borders their school.  
Source: ASAP.

Hear ASAP members describe their work at the school and in the community.



## Closing

Young people and adults are important partners for change. There is no one way to make it happen. There are many approaches, many missions. It takes effort and often shifting mindsets, but the results can be great and rewarding for everyone involved. For suggestions on how to take action, see the companion resource [Engaging Youth to Advance Safer Streets for All: Recommendations for Meaningful Youth Engagement](#).

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## Resources

[\*\*Organizational Assessment Checklist\*\*](#) by Youth on Board

[\*\*Pathways to Policy Change\*\*](#) by ChangeLab Solutions

[\*\*Policymakers' Toolkit\*\*](#) by Youth for Road Safety (YOURS)

[\*\*A Tool for Youth Engagement and Empowerment\*\*](#) by Division X Technical Assistance

## Suggested citation

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