



Crash Analysis Studio

Starter Kit

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Welcome

If you're reading this because someone in your community was seriously injured or killed in a traffic crash, we're sorry.

No report, toolkit, or process can undo what has happened. A Crash Analysis Studio is not about assigning blame, defending past decisions, or reopening wounds. It is about honoring the people affected by a crash by asking a simple question:

What can we learn from this?

Every serious crash has something to teach us.

In most communities, the official response to a crash focuses on determining what happened and who was responsible. Those are important questions, but they are not the only questions worth asking.

A Crash Analysis Studio looks deeper. It brings together public officials, technical professionals, and community members to examine the many factors that contributed to a crash and to identify actions that might prevent a similar tragedy in the future.

This guide will help your community build that practice.

You do not need to be a traffic engineer. You do not need a large budget. You do not need special authority. You only need a willingness to learn, a commitment to listen, and a desire to make your streets safer.

The goal is not perfection. The goal is progress.

Every community can learn from its crashes. Every community can take action. Every community can become safer.

Let's get started.

What Is a Crash Analysis Studio?

Crash Analysis Studio is a structured process for learning from serious traffic crashes.

When a fatal or life-altering crash occurs, communities typically focus on determining what happened and who was responsible. A Crash Analysis Studio asks an additional question:

What can we learn from this crash that might prevent the next one?

A Studio brings together public officials, technical professionals, community members, and others with direct knowledge of the location. Participants review what is known about the crash, identify the many factors that contributed to it, and discuss actions that could improve safety.

The purpose is not to assign blame. The purpose is to learn.

Just as doctors review unexpected patient deaths to improve medical care, and aviation experts study plane crashes to improve flight safety, communities can study traffic crashes to improve the safety of their streets.

Every serious crash has something to teach us. A Crash Analysis Studio is how a community learns those lessons.

How a Crash Analysis Studio Works

A Crash Analysis Studio is a structured process for learning from serious traffic crashes and turning those lessons into action.

While every community will adapt the process to fit local needs, most Studios follow the same basic sequence:

Step 1: A Serious Crash Occurs

A fatal crash or serious injury prompts the community to ask a different question than usual.

Instead of focusing only on who was responsible, the community commits to learning what factors contributed to the crash – and considering what can be done to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

Step 2: A Crash Response Team Visits the Site

A small team gathers information about the crash location.

They document street conditions, take measurements and photographs, review available reports, and experience the site as the people involved in the crash experienced it.

Their role is not to assign blame. Their role is to gather information that can help others learn.

Step 3: A Crash Analysis Studio Is Held

Community members, public officials, technical professionals, and others with direct knowledge of the location come together to review the information collected by the Crash Response Team.

Participants discuss the crash and identify the many factors that may have contributed to it. A skilled facilitator guides the conversation and ensures that all perspectives are heard.

Step 4: Contributing Factors Are Identified

Most crashes are not caused by a single factor.

Participants often identify a combination of conditions — street design, visibility, speed, maintenance, traffic operations, human behavior, policy, or other circumstances.

The goal is to identify as many contributing factors as possible, regardless of their level of impact.

Step 5: Findings Are Documented and Shared

The Studio produces a written summary of what participants learned.

Contributing factors, recommended actions, and opportunities for improvement are documented and shared with decision-makers and the public. This creates a record that can inform future decisions and guide long-term safety improvements.

Step 6: The Community Moves Forward

Learning leads to change.

Some improvements will happen quickly. Others will take time. But every Studio creates new knowledge, strengthens local capacity, and moves the community closer to safer streets.

Over time, communities that consistently learn from crashes make better decisions and build a stronger culture of safety.

Crash → Response → Studio → Learning → Sharing → Change

That is the Crash Analysis Studio model.

Establishing a Crash Analysis Studio

◆ Goal

Secure a commitment that serious traffic crashes in your community will be reviewed through a structured learning process.

► What It Means to Establish a Studio

A Crash Analysis Studio does not require a new department, dedicated staff, or a large budget.

Establishing a Studio simply means making a commitment: when a fatal or life-altering crash occurs, your community will gather information, hold a structured review, identify contributing factors, and document opportunities for improvement.

Different communities will make this commitment in different ways.

Some will adopt a formal resolution through their governing body. Others will establish the process through an administrative policy or staff directive. In some communities, the effort may begin with residents, advocates, or professional organizations working to build support for the model.

The specific path matters less than the commitment itself.

Before moving forward, your community should identify who will lead the effort, how serious crashes will be selected for review, and how findings will be shared with decision-makers and the public.



Completion Criteria

At least one of the following exists:

- A resolution or motion adopted by the governing body
- An administrative policy or staff directive
- A written commitment from community leadership
- A documented community coalition with identified partners and a plan for conducting Studios

Once this commitment is in place, your community is ready to build a Crash Response Team.

Build Your Crash Response Team

◆ Goal

Assemble the people who will gather information and document conditions following a serious crash.

► What Is a Crash Response Team?

A Crash Response Team is a small group of people responsible for collecting information that will later be reviewed in a Crash Analysis Studio.

Their role is not to determine fault, assign blame, or conduct a criminal investigation. Their role is to document conditions, gather observations, and help the community learn from the crash.

A Crash Response Team should visit the crash location as soon as practical after a serious crash. Team members document the site, collect photographs and measurements, review available information, and experience the location from the perspective of everyone involved.

The information they gather becomes the foundation for the Studio discussion.

► Who Should Be Included?

Every community is different, but a Crash Response Team often includes people with experience in:

- Transportation engineering
- Planning and urban design
- Public works and maintenance
- Traffic safety
- Walking and bicycling advocacy
- Neighborhood leadership
- Local government

The team does not need to be large. A small group of committed people is often more effective than a large committee.



Completion Criteria

Your community has:

- Identified a Crash Response Team coordinator
- Recruited initial team members
- Established a process for activating the team following a serious crash
- Identified how information will be documented and stored

Once these steps are complete, your community is ready to prepare for its first Crash Analysis Studio.

Conducting a Crash Analysis Studio

◆ Goal

Bring together a group of people to learn from a serious crash and identify opportunities to improve safety.

► What Happens in a Crash Analysis Studio?

A Crash Analysis Studio is a structured conversation.

Participants review information collected by the Crash Response Team, discuss the conditions that contributed to the crash, and identify actions that could reduce the likelihood of similar tragedies in the future.

The purpose is not to determine fault or assign blame. The purpose is to learn.

A Studio should include both technical and nontechnical participants. Engineers, planners, public works staff, and safety professionals bring important expertise. Residents, business owners, neighborhood leaders, and people familiar with the location often contribute equally important insights that might otherwise be overlooked.

A skilled facilitator guides the discussion, ensures all participants are heard, and helps the group stay focused on learning and improvement.

► The Basic Studio Process

1. Review the Crash

Participants review the information gathered by the Crash Response Team, including photographs, observations, measurements, maps, and any other available materials.

2. Identify Contributing Factors

Participants discuss all of the factors that may have contributed to the crash, such as roadway design, traffic operations, visibility, maintenance conditions, policies, human behavior, or other circumstances.

The goal is to identify as many contributing factors as possible, regardless of their level of impact.

3. Discuss Potential Responses

Participants identify actions that could address the contributing factors they have identified. These may include immediate interventions, operational changes, maintenance improvements, policy changes, or future capital projects.

4. Document Findings

Key observations, contributing factors, and recommended actions are documented in a final Studio report.



Completion Criteria

Your community has:

- Conducted a Studio session
- Included both technical and community perspectives
- Documented contributing factors
- Identified opportunities for improvement
- Produced a written summary of findings and recommendations

Once these steps are complete, your community is ready to move from learning to action.

Sharing What You Learned

◆ Goal

Document and share what your community learned from the Crash Analysis Studio.

► Why This Matters

A Crash Analysis Studio creates value by helping communities learn from serious crashes. That learning should not remain in the room.

When findings are documented and shared, they help decision-makers make better choices, help residents understand safety challenges, and create a record that can guide future improvements.

Sharing what you learned also reinforces the purpose of a Studio: not to assign blame, but to identify contributing factors, uncover opportunities for improvement, and help prevent future tragedies.

► Document Your Findings

Every Studio should produce a written summary of what participants learned. The report does not need to be lengthy or technical. It should clearly document:

- The crash being studied
- The information reviewed
- Contributing factors identified by participants
- Recommended actions and opportunities for improvement
- Any immediate actions that should be considered

The report should focus on learning and improvement, not fault or liability.

► Share Lessons With Others

Findings should be shared with the people who can help turn those lessons into action. This may include:

- Elected officials
- Local government staff
- Transportation agencies
- Community organizations
- Neighborhood groups
- Members of the public

Different audiences may need different formats, but the message should remain the same: this is what we learned, and this is how we can improve.

► Create a Record for the Future

Many safety improvements take years to implement. A documented Studio creates an institutional memory that can inform future projects, future staff, future elected officials, and future Crash Analysis Studios.

Over time, these records help communities identify recurring patterns and develop a clearer understanding of the safety challenges they face.



Completion Criteria

Your community has:

- Documented the Studio findings
- Identified contributing factors
- Recorded recommendations and opportunities for improvement
- Shared findings with decision-makers
- Made findings available to the community

Once these steps are complete, your community is ready to begin implementing improvements.



Congratulations!

Your community has completed its first Crash Analysis Studio cycle.

You have established a Studio, built a Crash Response Team, conducted a Studio session, and shared what you learned. By creating a process for learning from serious crashes, your community has joined a growing movement of leaders across North America committed to safer streets and stronger local decision-making.

That matters. Traffic crashes are not inevitable. They are the result of conditions that can be understood, and in many cases changed. Communities that commit to learning from crashes are communities that commit to doing something about them. You have made that commitment.

A Crash Analysis Studio is not a one-time project. Each serious crash presents an opportunity to learn something new about your streets, your systems, and your community. The communities that benefit most are the ones that keep going. Conducting Studios regularly, they identify recurring patterns, deepen local knowledge, and build a culture of safety that grows stronger over time.

The first Studio is the hardest. The next one will be easier — and the one after that easier still. Keep going.

You Are Not Alone

Strong Towns created the Crash Analysis Studio model to help communities learn from serious crashes and take action to improve safety. We are committed to supporting the communities that choose to do this work.

Communities with an active Crash Analysis Studio are eligible for ongoing support from Strong Towns, including office hours and technical assistance, peer learning opportunities, community of practice participation, advanced training and resources, and access to new tools and templates as they become available.

One of the most valuable parts of the program is the opportunity to learn alongside others doing this work. Communities across North America are discovering common patterns, sharing hard-won lessons, and helping each other build safer streets. You do not have to figure this out on your own.

To learn more about becoming an Active Program, visit strongtowns.org/crashstudio or contact Edward Erfurt at edward@strongtowns.org.

Strong Towns is a nonprofit organization working to help communities across North America make better decisions about their streets, their finances, and their future.

The Crash Analysis Studio model, this guide, and the resources that accompany it are all available to all at no cost. We are not a consulting firm. We are a community of advocates, practitioners, and neighbors – supported by members and donors who want to see this work happen – who believe that safer streets are possible everywhere.

You can learn more about Strong Towns at www.strongtowns.org.