Defining “Serious”

Purpose

This tool helps cities decide what counts as a “serious crash” for the purpose of activating a Crash Analysis Studio. It guides communities toward a clear, consistent trigger they have the capacity to honor, beginning with fatalities and expanding as their ability to review crashes and act on findings grows. By making that commitment explicit, cities can establish a dependable practice of learning from crashes and preventing future harm, while recognizing that every crash matters to the people affected.

What Counts as a Serious Crash?

As cities begin thinking about adopting the Crash Analysis Studio, one of the first questions that comes up sounds simple: **“What counts as a serious crash?”**

That question quickly leads to others:

- Does every fatal crash trigger a Studio?
- Should we also include crashes involving serious injury?
- Whose definition of "serious" should the city use: the police department's, the state reporting system's, or its own?
- What about a crash that does not meet the official definition of “serious,” but causes tremendous concern in the community?
- What happens when there are simply too many crashes for staff to review them all?

These questions matter because every crash is serious to someone. For the people involved, their families, neighbors, first responders, and others who regularly use that street, even a crash classified as minor may be an event they never want to see happen again. Citizens and advocates are right to resist language that seems to minimize those experiences.

The complication is that the institutions responsible for crashes already use multiple definitions of severity. Police reports, state crash databases, transportation departments, hospitals, and federal reporting systems distinguish between fatalities, incapacitating injuries, suspected serious injuries, visible injuries, and other classifications. Each serves a particular administrative purpose, but taken together they create confusion about what a city means when it says it will review "serious crashes."

A Different Kind of Definition

The Crash Analysis Studio needs a different kind of definition: an operational one.

The question is not "Which crashes matter?"
It is "What event automatically triggers the city's highest level of crash review?"

A city needs a trigger it can consistently honor. In Flint, Michigan, where staff described a high-injury network so extensive that it offered little help prioritizing work, the challenge was not a shortage of crash data. It was choosing a manageable starting point and ensuring that police, engineering and public works were notified and could act together. Beginning with every traffic fatality provides a clear commitment. For a city with 10 to 12 fatalities annually, that means roughly one full review per month, rather than promising a Studio for every reported crash.

Michigan also illustrates why the word “serious” needs care. State police reports use injury classifications for reporting, while a city's Vision Zero goals and its threshold for activating a multidisciplinary review may use different criteria. In Ann Arbor, Michigan, staff described a narrower life-threatening-injury threshold than the state's suspected-serious-injury category. That does not mean the other injuries are unimportant. It means the city should explain which crashes automatically receive its highest level of review, which receive another response, and how a case can be elevated when new information or community concern warrants attention.

Fatalities are the starting point, not the boundary.

A death is sufficient reason to examine the street, regardless of whether a driver broke the law. The Studio asks what conditions contributed, what the city can change, and what it can learn for other locations. As staff develop the capacity to conduct reviews and act on findings, the city can expand its trigger to additional life-altering injuries or other circumstances without weakening the initial promise.

The measure of success is not how many crashes receive a Studio. It is whether the city follows through and uses what it learns to prevent the next tragedy. A focused, repeatable response to fatalities can improve decisions at many other locations, including places where no Studio has been held.