ABSTRACT: A growing literature finds that wartime violence, crime, and other harms can cause individuals to become more engaged in politics. Yet for victims, activism is costly: they tell and re-tell painful stories, face searing criticism, and work to exhaustion—all at one of the worst moments of their lives. So why do they do it? This manuscript explores the puzzle of victims' political participation through ethnographic research with Families for Safe Streets, a group of victims-turned-activists in New York City. I argue that for some victims, politics offers unique ways of finding meaning in the aftermath of loss and trauma. Political participation helps victims re-conceptualize their experiences as policy problems, rather than random, inexplicable events. Victims may also seek to change laws to prevent similar tragedies from recurring, and some victims see political engagement as essential to fulfilling obligations to their communities, their families, and their deceased relatives.

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1 This research was conducted with financial support from the MIT Department of Political Science. I am grateful for research assistance from My Seppo and Blair Read, as well as helpful comments and feedback from Mallory SoRelle, Karen Hult, Zoe Marks, Dara Kay Cohen, Jessica Stanton, Ragnhild Nordás, Rich Nielsen, Nick Smith, Graham Denyer Willis, Vanessa Navarro Rodríguez, Bree Bang-Jensen, and audiences at Boston University, George Washington University, and APSA 2022.
On an October afternoon in Queens, NY, a young life was lost and a family of activists was born. Dashboard camera footage shows a small child in a crosswalk, holding her grandmother’s hand. Then suddenly, a black SUV whips into the frame. Shopping bags flail, and the grandmother falls backward as the child disappears under the vehicle, never to emerge again.

Before their daughter Allison was killed, Amy Tam-Liao and HP Liao were not particularly active in politics. But in the weeks, months, and years following Allison’s death, Amy and HP spoke at rallies and press conferences, met with elected officials, and joined with other victims of traffic violence to form a new advocacy organization, Families for Safe Streets. Working in collaboration with other activists, they embarked on a major city- and statewide lobbying campaign, and soon they had succeeded in lowering New York City’s default speed limit—no small feat in “a city that has long identified itself as sleepless and fast, aspiring to everything lickety-split” (Paumgarten 2014).

Amy and HP’s rapid transformation from grieving parents to sophisticated political actors may seem surprising, but their experience is consistent with a growing body of research in political science. Whether they have experienced wartime violence (Blattman 2009, Bellows and Miguel 2009, Bauer et al. 2016), crimes (Bateson 2012, Rojo Mendoza 2014), sexual violence (González and Traunmüller 2020), political repression (Lupu and Pesaikhin 2015), natural disasters (Sinclair, Hall, and Alvarez 2011), or serious illnesses (Jennings and
Andersen 2003, Crismon 2020), victims tend to be more politically active than their peers.\(^2\)

However, we still know relatively little about \textit{how} and \textit{why} victims choose to participate in politics. These questions matter because victims’ participation is both consequential and puzzling. From survivors of mass shootings to the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo to the Me Too movement, victims-turned-activists wield significant influence in politics. More than abstract facts or statistics, personal stories shape policy decisions—and victims’ stories are nothing if not compelling.\(^3\) Indeed, victims speak with a moral authority that no one can deny.\(^4\)

Yet at the same time, victims’ involvement in politics is hard to understand. Political scientists often suggest post-traumatic growth as the mechanism linking victimization and political participation (e.g. Blattman 2009, Bateson 2012). Tedeschi and Calhoun define post-traumatic growth as "positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances" (2004: 1). Post-traumatic growth can include a newfound sense of empowerment and new goals and perspectives, which is compatible with turning to politics in the wake of tragedy. But simply invoking post-traumatic growth does not fully explain the behavior of victims-turned-activists, for two reasons.

First, post-traumatic growth is very common, to the point that it would seem to over-predict participation in politics. Tedeschi estimates that between one-half

\(^2\)Though see Ley (2018) and Córdova (2019) for important caveats.

\(^3\)Victims’ stories establish a connection with the story-teller and seem to offer solutions to avoidable problems. People process stories readily, affecting how they estimate probabilities (Newman 2003, 1426).

\(^4\)Throughout my fieldwork, political operatives, elected officials, and activists often repeated this refrain.
and two-thirds of people who experience trauma will subsequently report post-traumatic growth (quoted in Collier 2016). Second, post-traumatic growth does not necessarily imply greater civic engagement or political participation. Post-traumatic growth can occur in five domains: new possibilities, relating to others, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996). But as Lowes, Carpenter, and Matthews (2020) note, post-traumatic growth does not map neatly onto specific preferences or behaviors; it can manifest in many different ways, including career changes, renewed spirituality, and deeper relationships with friends and family.

Compared to these avenues for post-traumatic growth, political activism is fraught with conflict and stress. As Woliver observes, "direct, face-to-face adversarial politics is intimidating and alienating for many citizens" (1993, 4). Personal commitments and goals can move people to political action, even if they face considerable obstacles (Han 2009). But for victims, the costs of advocacy are extraordinarily high. Victims-turned-activists tell and re-tell one of the most devastating experiences of their lives. They face stinging rebukes and deeply personal criticism. And perhaps worst of all, they encounter callous officials who don’t seem to care about the trauma they have experienced.

So why do some victims wade into the rough-and-tumble world of politics? Based on ethnographic fieldwork with a group of victims-turned-activists in New York City, this manuscript advances a new explanation for the relationship between

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5For example, a nationally representative survey found that more than 50% of US veterans report post-traumatic growth, which jumps to 70% among those diagnosed with PTSD (Tsai et al. 2014).
victimization and political participation. Politics, I argue, offers victims unique ways of finding meaning in the tragedies they have suffered. Meaning making is "particularly important in confronting highly stressful life events" (Park 2010, 257).

Often understood as a form of post-traumatic growth, meaning making is the process of seeking to understand why an event happened, find significance in the event, and reconcile it with pre-existing worldviews.  

Working inductively, I identify three types of meaning making that are only available through political participation. First, by participating in policy debates, victims can re-frame their experiences as policy problems, constructing new causal stories and rendering their losses explicable and comprehensible, rather than random and meaningless. Second, by pushing for new legislation and policy changes, victims can find meaning in the belief that they are preventing similar tragedies from recurring. Third, political engagement allows victims to fulfill important obligations. Some feel a duty to be good public representatives of and advocates for their families and communities. Others see political engagement as a means of fulfilling perceived obligations to deceased loved ones—living as they would have wished, honoring their values, or creating lasting social changes in their memories.

The manuscript begins by introducing the data, methodological approach, and case study context. Next, I describe victims' pathways to mobilization. Then I

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6 In addition to Park (2010), see Waters et al. (2013) for a comprehensive discussion of meaning making.
turn to the puzzle of victims’ participation, and I explore the unique ways that victims find meaning in politics.7

**Data and Methods**

This manuscript is based on 18 months of intermittent ethnographic fieldwork with Families for Safe Streets, conducted while the organization was being established. The fieldwork included participant observation in New York City and Albany, NY, in-depth interviews with founding members of Families for Safe Streets, and reviews of printed and online materials, such as policy statements, lobbying schedules, and photos and videos of events.

**Research Design**

This project intentionally focuses on victims who have become politically active; it is not a comparative study of participants and non-participants.8 Rather, I offer a rigorous exploration of the experiences and perspectives of those who choose to mobilize.9 While some might categorize this research design as selecting on the dependent variable, it is appropriate and justifiable to focus on a group of people whose agency, perceptions, and beliefs are driving important policy outcomes. Understanding these processes requires "evoking the intentionality of the actors" involved (Bevir and Rhodes 2015, 3). After all, political science is not just about "macro structures, large processes, or social institutions—but about people:

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7 In other contexts, the term "victim" can have pejorative, disempowering connotations, to the point that is often rejected in favor of "survivor" (Cole 2006, 2-3). However, the members of Families for Safe Streets intentionally assert their status as victims. On language, see Appendix section 2.
8 For an outstanding example of large-N research addressing this question, see Javeline (2023).
9 As Yanow explains, research is rigorous "to the extent that its arguments are constructed logically; that is, where conclusions are adequately supported by the evidence that is presented, such that the reader is persuaded by the cogency of the argument" (2014, 102).
living, breathing, flesh and blood, real people” (Shehata 2014, 209). As Bevir and Rhodes write (2015),

Because actions and practices depend on the reasoned choices of people, they are products of decisions, not the determined outcomes of laws or given processes. After all, choices would not be choices if causal laws fixed their content. Political science has to recognize the inherent contingency of the objects it studies (5-6).

So while other researchers may profitably use surveys and other large-N approaches to understand who, among a population of victims, is more likely to become politically active, this project makes a different contribution. I use an ethnographic approach to "see inside" a movement (Fu and Simmons 2021, 1699), providing a rare glimpse of the worldviews and motivations of a group of victims who do become politically active. Empirically, I pursue these aims through participant observation and in-depth interviews with the members of Families for Safe Streets.

**Participant Observation**

Alongside the members of Families for Safe Streets, I conducted repeated, intensive bouts of participant observation at rallies, press conferences, lobbying days, community meetings, memorial-making exercises, and policy symposia, with each session lasting 2 to 12 hours. Participant observation is especially valuable because it allows for closer "access to participants' experiences—of grief and fear, monotony and exhaustion, or solidarity and laughter" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 65). Even downtime is informative (Wedeen 2010, 256); whether carpooling or sharing a meal together, informal interactions shed light on group members' dark humor, camaraderie, and patterns of reflection and rumination.
Although I am not a New Yorker, I am a cyclist, parent, and academic, and these aspects of my identity facilitated rapport. The members of Families for Safe Streets were aware that I was a researcher interested in how and why victims become active in politics. I sought their affirmative consent before starting this project and before attending specific events. But like Curry (2015, 211-212), I found it impractical to explicitly introduce myself to everyone I encountered in the field. So I identified myself as a researcher to non-group members only when I had extended conversations with them. My participant observation was thus primarily but not completely overt, situated toward the "researcher" end of the researcher-participant spectrum (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 63; Curry 2015, 15-16). Sometimes I pitched in with folding T-shirts, looking for an office, or holding purses while group members spoke onstage. At other events, I was an actively engaged audience member: clapping, chanting, wearing yellow, and raising a flower when asked to do so. But I did not have any formal role within Families for Safe Streets.

*Interviews*

My participant observation included hundreds of short conversations with group members, allied activists, elected officials, lobbyists, and journalists. In addition, I conducted in-depth interviews with 17 founding members of Families for Safe Streets. The in-depth interviews were deeply intertwined with my participant observation, which equipped me with the contextual knowledge and interpersonal trust needed to elicit rich, detailed reflections. It also helped me perceive "meta-

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10 Unless otherwise indicated, all direct quotes in this manuscript are from interviews with members of Families for Safe Streets. For more information on the interviews, see Appendix sections 3-5.
data" (Fujii 2010) and see "how individual comments fit together as parts of a more meaningful whole" (Soss 2014, 162).

While the interviews were open-ended, they all touched on several themes: prior involvement in politics, recruitment and mobilization, experiences with traffic safety advocacy, and the motivations, challenges, rewards associated with participation. Most participants were interviewed alone, though several couples were interviewed together. The participants provided written consent, consented to audio recording, and had the opportunity to provide feedback on this manuscript. One participant asked to be identified with a pseudonym, but most wanted to use their full names—a choice I have respected here.

Although grief and loss are among the most sensitive subjects a researcher can study, it is possible to conduct ethical research with bereaved families (Hynson et al. 2006, 805). I established relationships with the participants prior to their interviews, and I approached the interviews with a posture of care and compassion (Ellis 2017). None of the participants became distressed—perhaps because they already had experience speaking publicly about their ordeal, and months or years had passed since their loss or injury. In addition, bereaved individuals may find it beneficial to reflect on their experiences in in-depth interviews (Dyregrov 2004, 391-2). Nearly all the interviews involved moments of crying by the participants, and sometimes me as well—but as Rosenblatt notes, there is a difference between having a deeply emotional conversation and causing harm (1995, 144). Indeed, the

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11 Hynson et al. (2006) suggest interviewing bereaved families at least 6 months after a loss (808). The earliest interview for this project occurred at 10 months. Most were 1-3 years later.
participants’ tears never seemed to reflect anxiety, panic, fear, or despair. Rather, they typically came when sharing fond memories of a deceased loved one, explaining perceived obligations to them, or reflecting on the need to prevent others from suffering a similar fate.

**Life and Death on the Streets of New York**

New York is a city of pedestrians and, increasingly, cyclists. The sidewalks and bike lanes are a demographic jumble. Wearing stiletto heels, work boots, and everything in between, New Yorkers of all classes, races, genders, and political affiliations walk and bike together, jostling with heavy, fast-moving traffic. Navigating this vehicular obstacle course may feel like the quintessential New York experience, but it is a deadly dance. In New York City, drivers hit and kill an average of 100 to 300 pedestrians and cyclists each year. Even more are injured; in 2016, for example, more than 8,000 pedestrians sought care at New York City emergency rooms after they were hit by vehicles (City of New York 2022).^{12}

In recent decades, New Yorkers have vigorously demanded safer streets, and the city has emerged as a hub of pedestrian and cyclist advocacy and innovation. During the Bloomberg administration, Transportation Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan expanded New York’s network of bike lanes, installed pedestrian plazas throughout the city, and brought bike share to New York. Then the momentum intensified under Mayor Bill de Blasio. While still a candidate, de Blasio embraced “Vision Zero” as part of his platform. Vision Zero, which originated in Sweden, is a

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^{12} This number may seem high, but it is consistent with monthly NYPD collision data. In July 2022, for instance, 618 pedestrians were injured by vehicles (City of New York Police Department 2022).
package of policy reforms and urban design strategies that seek to reduce pedestrian and cyclist fatalities to zero.\textsuperscript{13} Immediately upon de Blasio’s inauguration in early 2014, the new administration embarked on aggressive efforts to make Vision Zero a reality. Officials like Transportation Commissioner Polly Trottenberg allied themselves with the traffic safety activist community—including Transportation Alternatives (TA), the oldest pedestrian and cyclist advocacy organization in New York City.\textsuperscript{14}

Against the backdrop of this well-developed advocacy network, a new set of actors emerged in 2013 and 2014: the victims of traffic crashes. Some intrepid victims and their surviving relatives had previously spoken out about their experiences, but they had never coalesced into a movement. Eventually these early activists “just tired out, really; it was a different moment in that time.”\textsuperscript{15} By late 2013, the policy climate was different: TA’s growth and professionalization and de Blasio’s embrace of Vision Zero had created a “perfect storm” for traffic safety activism.\textsuperscript{16} So when tragedy struck the Liaos and several other families, they did something unprecedented: they banded together and became public advocates for traffic safety. By February 2014, this nascent group of victims-turned-activists had a name: Families for Safe Streets.

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\textsuperscript{13} New York pioneered Vision Zero in the United States. Since 2014, it has been adopted by many cities, including San Francisco, Boston, and Washington, DC.
\textsuperscript{14} TA was founded in 1973. TA currently has 28 staff and approximately 30,000 members. Related organizations include Right of Way, Streetsblog, StreetsPAC, and borough committees like Make Queens Safer and Make Brooklyn Safer.
\textsuperscript{15} Interview with Amy Cohen. Amy is describing the experience of a mother whose son was killed in 1997.
\textsuperscript{16} Multiple interviewees used this term to describe the climate in 2013 and 2014.
\end{flushleft}
Families for Safe Streets

Families for Safe Streets was founded in 2014, but the group’s story really begins with the death of Carl Nacht in 2006. A tow truck driver hit Carl while he was cycling on the West Side of Manhattan with his wife, Mary Beth Kelly. Carl and Mary Beth had been members of TA for 30 years, though they always saw cycling as a quality of life issue, not a political cause. As Mary Beth remembers,

I think I had a certain kind of calm about riding my bike everywhere, because it always worked. I rode in Boston, Philadelphia, New York. We went abroad, across Canada, throughout Europe. [Joining TA] was mainly about the vision of seeing places like Copenhagen or Amsterdam and wonderful pedestrian plazas – and Italy – and thinking, “Why can’t New York have these?” [It] adds to such a positive experience of life and community and health and pleasure. ... So, we became members [of TA]. But I was never really – you know, I was not active. It was more of: put in the membership, support them because they worked towards making this city better for bicycling. But I was not active.

That all changed after Carl died. Within weeks, Mary Beth contacted TA and said, “I want to meet with you. ... I think I’ve got something to offer.” To Mary Beth, “it seemed like I was almost the first family member to approach them and say, ‘I want to work with you.’” TA was much smaller at the time, with about five full-time staff members, but they were receptive. Mary Beth soon found her place in the TA community, and she began speaking at press conferences, TA events, and city council hearings.

Within a year, another member of TA was killed, and Mary Beth got in touch with his grieving family. This was the beginning of victim-to-victim organizing. As TA learned about other pedestrians and cyclists who had been injured and killed, the informal network grew, with Mary Beth as its central node.
In late 2013, the pace of organizing increased when several children were killed in quick succession. Just two days after Allison Liao’s death in October 2013, a driver hit and killed 12 year-old Sammy Cohen Eckstein in Brooklyn, on the edge of Prospect Park. Sammy’s family threw themselves into a blitz of outreach and advocacy, and they quickly found themselves in touch with sympathetic elected officials, organizations like TA, and other families. A partner at the law firm representing the Liaos happened to know the Cohen Ecksteins, and he realized both families had recently lost children under eerily similar circumstances. So in November, Amy Tam-Liao’s lawyer gave her Amy Cohen’s phone number. “We were just both, like, in tears on the phone,” Amy Tam-Liao remembers.

It was more of an emotional need at the beginning. We were just connecting with someone who understands what the hell we were feeling. And then out of that, as we learned more, I think, we found out how wrong the laws were in this situation. And then things happened from there.

Through groups like Make Queens Safer and Make Brooklyn Safer, the Liaos and the Cohen Ecksteins met more and more people who had suffered similar losses, like Judy Kottick and Ken Bandes. In January 2013, Ken and Judy’s 23 year-old daughter Ella had been hit by a bus. The crash happened in a chaotic intersection on the border of Queens and Brooklyn. All year, Ken and Judy had been pushing for safety improvements at the intersection, but as Judy recalls,

Nothing happened! We couldn’t get information. I kept trying to call people from the DOT. We couldn’t get people to call us back. So months and months and months went by. I guess it was when it was starting to get close to her anniversary, I just felt like, you know, it’s a whole year, and nothing [has happened]. More people are going to get killed.

So Judy redoubled her efforts, searching and searching online. She remembers thinking, "I have to do this for Ella. I have to figure out a way to save other people."
But she was also "getting really frustrated" and "thinking I need help, because I don’t know what to do, and I’m not connected to people, and I don’t know people in the media, and I don’t know people in politics." Then Judy found Make Queens Safer. She reached out, and HP Liao replied. "He was just incredible," Judy remembers. "I mean, it was like, 'Oh my God, he actually understands.'"

The families and other activists started having regular conference calls, and soon an incipient organization was forming. The families demonstrated in support of Vision Zero at Bill de Blasio’s inauguration, and they organized a large vigil for the anniversary of Ella Bandes' death. Multiple elected officials spoke at the event, and the families emerged with a renewed sense of purpose and efficacy.

In early February, about 35 family members gathered for a meeting. Amy Cohen secured meeting space, and a professional facilitator helped the group set priorities. Some attendees found the meeting cathartic; others were overwhelmed by the grief in the room. As one participant told me, it was "as dark and depressing as a meeting could be.... I mean, it was really grim. It was really bleak, and it was a lot of sadness to handle." Nonetheless, the meeting ended with a "unanimous vote that we all wanted to be an organization and keep going."\(^\text{17}\)

So on Feb. 23, 2014, nearly 200 family members, friends, and allied activists assembled on the steps of City Hall for Families for Safe Streets’ inaugural press conference. The day was unseasonably warm and sunny, but the mood was somber.

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\(^{17}\) Interview with Mary Beth Kelly.
Bearing photos of their loved ones, family members came forward to tell their stories. Tears flowed, both onstage and among the assembled journalists.\textsuperscript{18}

In the weeks and months that followed, the members of Families for Safe Streets met with public officials, testified at hearings, and advocated for the passage of laws related to traffic safety. Thanks to the hospitable policy climate and their strong alliance with TA, Families for Safe Streets leapfrogged over many of the obstacles that often plague new grassroots organizations. Through TA, Families for Safe Streets was able to tap into a ready-made infrastructure; for example, they did not have to apply for nonprofit status, because they were able to raise funds as a program of TA.\textsuperscript{19} The relationship between Families for Safe Streets and TA is symbiotic: TA benefits because the families bring unmatched moral authority to traffic safety advocacy, and the families benefit in many ways, both logistical and substantive.\textsuperscript{20} TA provides supplies for rallies, secures permits, offers advice, connects family members with elected officials, and even hires lobbyists at crucial moments.

By March 2014, Families for Safe Streets was a major player in the fight to lower New York City’s default speed limit. City Council was already behind the effort, but it was still an uphill battle. New Yorkers walk fast, talk fast, and drive fast, and speed has long been romanticized as part of the city’s culture, identity, and allure. The speed limit campaign was also complicated by Albany’s control over New York City. State law sets 30 mph as the default speed limit in urban areas in the state

\textsuperscript{18} Fieldnotes, Feb. 23, 2014. \\
\textsuperscript{19} Interview with Lindsay Motlin. \\
\textsuperscript{20} Interview with Harold Kahn.
of New York. To adopt a lower speed limit, New York City needed the approval of the Assembly and the Senate—meaning the issue was widely seen as yet another downstate vs. upstate power struggle.\textsuperscript{21} So for the spring of 2014, the members of Families for Safe Streets walked the halls of Albany, lobbying for New York City to be allowed to lower its speed limit. After much drama, the necessary bills cleared both houses in June, and on Nov. 7, 2014, New York City’s default speed limit dropped to 25 mph. Families for Safe Streets had scored their first major policy victory, and they rocketed to prominence as “a heroic club that no one wants to join” (Reeves 2014).

\textbf{Pathways to Participation}

Some of the members of Families for Safe Streets had prior experience with politics or community organizing, but none had ever been involved in an effort of this scale or intensity. In fact, several describe themselves as formerly clueless about politics. As Dana Lerner explains, before a taxi driver struck and killed her 9 year-old son Cooper Stock in front of their apartment,

\begin{quote}
I was the most apolitical person you've ever met. I was completely not involved in politics at all. I didn't even know who the district attorney was. ... I voted for president, but I was never political at all.
\end{quote}

Likewise, Debbie Marks Kahn remembers that before her young adult son, Seth, was hit by a bus, she was "non-political, totally non-political, not interested at all. ...

\begin{quote}
Except for now. After this, I've changed."
\end{quote}

How does that evolution happen? Most of the members of Families for Safe Streets have post-secondary education, and a critical mass has flexible jobs that

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{21} Interviews with Aaron Charlop-Powers, Harold Kahn.
\end{flushright}
allow them to attend events during the workweek. They also speak English,\textsuperscript{22} and most have access to mental health treatment and medical care.\textsuperscript{23} These demographic and contextual factors surely matter, but their processes of mobilization also diverge from those envisioned in the literature on victimization and participation, in three ways.

\textit{Social Networks and Relationships}

The pathway from victimization to participation is often studied as an individual-level process. Yet victims’ decisions to participate in politics are intensely social and relational. Shortly after his son Sammy was killed, Gary Eckstein read about an upcoming city council hearing on traffic safety issues, and he was tentatively interested in going. He mentioned the idea to his teenage daughter, who was supportive. Then they talked to Amy, and after more deliberations, the entire Cohen Eckstein family ended up testifying at the hearing.\textsuperscript{24}

Reactions from others also influence whether victims continue participating in politics. Their first events are often uncomfortable, and small interactions matter. Dana Lerner remembers when her brother took her to her first meeting of Families for Safe Streets:

\begin{quote}
I just remember sitting there thinking, 'What am I doing? I don't want to be here, and why am I here, and what is going on?' I just remember sitting there, and just in tears the whole time. I just sat there in tears. But people came up to me. And I got a good feeling from the people there. Immediately, I got a very good feeling. ... The people were just so welcoming.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{22} Belkys Rivera was interviewed in Spanish but also speaks English. Amy Tam-Liao and HP Liao emphasized that their fluency in English enables them to participate in politics, which would’ve been very difficult for their own parents with limited English proficiency.

\textsuperscript{23} Rebecca particularly recognized that her access to medical and mental health treatment allows her to participate in politics.

\textsuperscript{24} Interview with Amy Cohen and Gary Eckstein.

\textsuperscript{25} Interview with Dana Lerner.
Similarly, the first time Lindsay Motlin signed up to speak at a town hall meeting, she was "freaking out." But her hot pink crutches drew the attention of her fellow audience members, and she found herself chatting with activists from Make Brooklyn Safer and allied groups. When she said she was nervous about making her statement, they said, "Oh, no, no, you have to." She did it, and she got immediate positive feedback from her newfound friends in the audience, as well as city councilmember Brad Lander, who live-tweeted her remarks.

Later, Lindsay’s family reinforced her decision to get involved. One day, she went to a holiday party after a Families for Safe Streets event, and she inadvertently still had her nametag on. At first she felt embarrassed, but when she explained it was from a Families for Safe Streets meeting, her relatives said, "Oh my God, that’s so great that you’re doing it!"

Broader social networks can also affect victims’ political trajectories (Dorff 2017, Ley 2022). For at least two families, pre-existing relationships with elected officials facilitated their activism. In the Bronx, Belkys Rivera had known councilmember Ydanis Rodríguez for years. Ydanis was a friend of her late husband, and he knew her son Josbel. So when Josbel was killed in a hit and run, Ydanis was one of the first people to come to the family’s apartment. He helped

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26 Lindsay Motlin had been seriously injured in a hit-and-run in Brooklyn several months before.  
27 Lander served on the New York City Council from 2010-2021. He is now the New York City Comptroller.  
28 Rodríguez served on the New York City Council from 2010-2021. He is now the city's Transportation Commissioner.
Belkys navigate the legal system and introduced her to Families for Safe Streets. As Belkys told me,

Ydanis was there with us from the beginning; he never abandoned us. ... Ydanis helped me very much with everything that had to do with the accident, in the sense of getting mobilized, of what should be done and how to do it, for the investigation: communicating with the prosecutor, communicating with—helping me so these laws get changed with the police. ... For example, he has invited me to a lot of meetings at City Hall with the group that is talking about Vision Zero; he invited me.29

In Brooklyn, meanwhile, the Cohen Ecksteins attended the same synagogue as city councilmember Brad Lander. It's a "teeny-tiny" place, so when Sammy was killed, Amy emailed Brad, and he helped arrange for the Cohen Ecksteins to testify at their first hearing. Amy's mother had also worked in politics. She put Amy and Gary in touch with a PR firm, and she arranged for meetings with U.S. Rep. Caroline Maloney and New York State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver.30 Even geography mattered. The Cohen Ecksteins' neighborhood is "teeming with journalists and politicians,"31 and one day, Amy spotted US Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY) on the sidewalk. A truck barreled by at what seemed like 60 mph, and Amy turned to Schumer and screamed, "What are you going to do about this?!" Amy remembers, "He literally thought I was crazy. ... [But] I identified myself, and he gave me his card and said, 'Why don't you come in and meet with us?' "32

29 Translated from Spanish by the author.
30 Silver was the Speaker of the New York State Assembly from 1994 to 2015. He was subsequently convicted on federal corruption charges.
31 Interview with Amy Cohen.
32 The meeting happened on Jan. 10, 2014 and is corroborated in Kleinfield (2014).
Recruitment

When Lizi Rahman's son Asif was killed riding his bike on Queens Boulevard in 2008, Lizi immediately knew she wanted to get a bike lane for the street, which is so dangerous, it is known as "the Boulevard of Death." But, she recalls, "I was not involved in politics, so I didn't know who to go [to], where to go, how to approach, who to approach, how to get it. So I kept asking people." One of Asif's friends connected her to councilmember Hiram Monserrate. Lizi had a meeting with him, but months passed and nothing happened. So Lizi intensified her efforts, "writing emails to all the councilmembers, because somebody suggested that you should write." 

Even before Families for Safe Streets existed, Lizi self-mobilized; she was a one-woman outreach machine. But victimization can also bring unwanted attention. Media crews show up at people's homes uninvited and politicians cold-call them—sometimes even asking to attend funerals. For Aaron Charlop-Powers, it was unnerving to lose his mother "in a semi-public way. ... We were forced to be public about it in a certain way, and that wasn't on our terms, and it didn't feel good." So initially, Aaron and his family turned inward. They became more private.

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33 186 drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists were killed on Queens Boulevard from 1990-2017 (Schutz 2021).
34 Hiram Monserrate served on the New York City Council from 2002-2008. He was later elected to the New York State Senate, from which he was expelled in 2010 after he was convicted on domestic violence charges.
35 Lizi continued her email campaign for years, contacting US Rep. Anthony Weiner, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and Janette Sadik-Khan.
36 Amy Cohen, Gary Eckstein, and Belkys Rivera all had this experience.
37 Self-mobilization and recruitment can occur simultaneously. After her son Cooper's death, Dana Lerner started sending emails, trying to change how taxi drivers are licensed in New York City. Simultaneously, city councilmember Helen Rosenthal contacted Dana, and Dana benefitted from advice from her brother, who had studied Mothers Against Drunk Driving (Lerner 2017).
38 Interview with Amy Tam-Liao and HP Liao.
out of a desire to protect our memories and our relationship with [our mother]. I didn't want to share her with people who may have had agendas, or who we didn't really know.

At the time, TA honored the Charlop-Powers' family's desire for privacy. They "were great," Aaron remembers. "They were really supportive, they respected our decision not to do some sort of response or campaign or whatever [right away]." TA's approach built trust for the long-term—and after careful, sustained outreach from Mary Beth and others in the TA community, Aaron and his sister Sarah eventually got more involved.

Just as outreach affects other forms of political engagement, such as voting or running for office, it can also influence who turns to politics in the wake of a tragedy. After she was seriously injured in a hit-and-run, Lindsay Motl did not seek out information about Vision Zero or traffic safety. But it was "pushed in [her] face," as friends and relatives bombarded her with a constant stream of news articles, even while still in the hospital. Similarly, although Dana Lerner does not typically like to join committees or organizations, her brother "really pushed" her to get involved with Families for Safe Streets.

For Judy Kottick and Ken Bandes, social networks led to assistance from TA and elected officials. Shortly after their daughter Ella was killed, a friend of a friend contacted their son on Facebook and put him in touch with a staffer at TA. Then TA introduced the family to councilmember Diana Reyna,39 who arranged for Ken and Judy to attend their first community meeting.40

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39 Diana Reyna served on the New York City Council from 2002-2013. She was later Brooklyn Deputy Borough President. In 2022 she ran for Lieutenant Governor of New York.
40 Interview with Judy Kottick and Ken Bandes.
Recruitment and mentoring from established activists was even more crucial for Greg Thompson, Jr. Before, Greg had always seen politics as a "totally different world."

I had never imagined myself doing any of this at all, or even being asked to get involved. All this was strictly TV for me, like in terms of my interpretation of anything political, like it was all—those guys on TV are untouchable and I would never be able to even get in front of someplace like City Hall. It was more, that kind of stuff isn't real for people like me.

But after Greg's teenage sister Renee was killed by a tractor-trailer in Manhattan, organizers from TA reached out to Greg and his family. They invited Greg to press conferences. They encouraged him to try public speaking. They told him about meetings. They even included him in a "secret photo op" with Mayor-Elect Bill de Blasio. And over time, Greg began to feel more of a sense of agency. Previously, he explained,

I felt like I had no voice in the way policies work within my neighborhood, within New York, within the world. But then I realized that if a certain number of people get together and they all aim for the same thing ... you can get things done.41

**Ebbs and Flows**

Participation is not a binary yes/no decision; it is a choice that people continuously revisit and renegotiate. And participation is non-monotonic: people dial their engagement up and down as their feelings and circumstances change. Some dive into politics right away; others linger on a listserv for months before going to their first meeting42 or decide to get involved only after seeing a similar

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41 Interview with Greg Thompson, Jr.
42 Interview with Lindsay Motlin.
tragedy happen again. Plus survivors of crashes need to heal from their injuries, and bereaved families may need time to process their loss.

Aaron Charlop-Powers recalls that his family simply didn’t "have the fortitude" to get involved right away; "the reality of [his mother's] killing and the pain and grief was overwhelming." Mary Beth Kelly agrees for some people it’s "just too raw" at first. Advocacy may not "fit within their ... sense of what they can do right now. [But] maybe they get more involved later on. People come to different things at different times." As Aaron observed, sometimes things "go faster," and sometimes they "go slower. Depending on how you're feeling, it'll change." At first, Aaron went to a TA event, he would "just get wiped out. I would just be sad for a week, because going to one of these things or talking to other people only made me sad." Over time, however, Aaron’s perspective and level of involvement changed, and he became more active.

But even once people start to get engaged, participation waxes and wanes through cycles of burnout and renewal. By the end of Families for Safe Streets' speed limit campaign, even the group's most energetic members were exhausted. Aaron was doing "boatloads of email at night." Mary Beth would wake up at 3 am and remember she still needed to send more emails. The work "was really intense" and felt "difficult to sustain." The next section explores why the members of Families for Safe Streets choose to get involved in politics, despite its considerable toll.

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43 Rebecca recalls she was "incapacitated" for months after a taxi hit her.
The Puzzle of Victims' Participation

Looming over downtown Albany, the Empire State Plaza is the seat of government for the State of New York. The vibe is Jetsons meets the Rust Belt: elevated highways soar around the Plaza, arcing between crumbling industrial buildings to deposit vehicles straight into the belly of the Death Star-like complex. When new arrivals emerge from their cars and buses, elevators whisk them into a tangle of poorly marked passageways. Slanted, uneven hallways and insider lingo make wayfinding all the more difficult. A visitor might be asked, "Are you going to The Egg, or to the LOB?"

Anyone would find it tiring to navigate the jargon and the mercilessly hard halls for hours on end, with little hope of food or rest.44 But when the members of Families for Safe Streets go lobbying in Albany, their days are especially draining. As Mary Beth Kelly explains, it's not just the "traipsing from office to office, seeing legislators." It's also the emotional toll. "You're telling your story again and again; you're hearing each other's stories. You just feel that raw pain, and it just wipes you out."45 And when victims meet with legislators, organize press conferences, or testify at hearings, they run the risk that they or their loved one could be blamed for their own injury or death.46 When Judy Kottick and Ken Bandes attended their first community meeting after the death of their daughter, Ella, the police spoke, and they

44 This description draws on fieldnotes from daylong visits to the Empire State Plaza on March 18, 2014 and May 6, 2014, as well as an interview with Sarah Charlop-Powers.
45 Interview with Mary Beth Kelly. Offering a dissenting view, Rebecca said she doesn't find advocacy particularly stressful, because the crash and her injuries are "so present to me that it feels far more honest to be having a conversation about this than it does to be having a conversation about anything else."
46 Interview with Lindsay Motlin.
only talked about people walking across the street with their headphones and looking at their phones. They basically blamed her. ... And she wasn’t on her phone! ... [The police] were really hostile, and not nice at all. ... Not one person [from the police] said, "I’m so sorry for your loss." Not one! They were just defensive and hostile. So it was hard.

Incompetence and indifference can also be infuriating. Dana Lerner recalls that when she testified before the Taxi and Limousine Commission, "some of the comments that the commissioners made were so appalling to me. And they were so ignorant. I couldn’t believe the ignorance of these people." One commissioner did not seem to know basic traffic laws, which "really, really upset me very much. ... I was furious." After the meeting, Dana wondered, "who are these people who are voting?" and she "felt devastated." Meanwhile, for Aaron Charlop-Powers, when you see that someone is "visibly disinterested," it’s very difficult to share a "gut-wrenching story."

Some people just flat-out don’t care. And that’s really hard, and that tries your patience, because you feel like saying to them, 'Look, just do something. This is within your power.'

This frustration was palpable on lobbying trips to Albany. In one instance, I waited in a legislator’s anteroom while the Families for Safe Streets delegation went in for their meeting. Words began to float out, the tone and content completely out of synch with the mundane dental-office-like surroundings. "Killed." "Run over." Voices rose. The pleading became anxious and desperate. Yet the official’s responses were terse and guarded. Soon the group poured out, emotions exploding in the hallway. "He doesn’t fucking support 20 mph!" Their ask seemed both obvious and

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47 Interview with Aaron Charlop-Powers.
urgent, and yet he’d said no. The group was incredulous: after all their preparation, and after a heart-pounding tense conversation, they’d gotten nowhere.\textsuperscript{48}

Why would anyone put themself in these kinds of situations? It is certainly true that advocacy gives the members of Families for Safe Streets a way of keeping busy, and they benefit from social support among the group members. Their work also involves an element of memorialization; they carry photos of their deceased relatives, share their quirks and passions, and seek acknowledgment that they lived, died, and mattered. Yet the members of Families for Safe Streets also pursue these goals in less conflictual realms such as the arts, religious communities, the legal system, and counseling and bereavement support groups.\textsuperscript{49}

The specific appeal of Families for Safe Streets, by contrast, is that it is political. Amy Tam-Liao remembers that after her daughter Allison was killed, she Googled to see how parents memorialize their children. She learned that people build libraries at their child’s school or plant a tree or start a scholarship fund—and it just didn’t seem like enough. She was looking for something more; something different.\textsuperscript{50} Likewise, Sarah Charlop-Powers was drawn to Families for Safe Streets precisely because it is not a support group; it’s focused on concrete action.\textsuperscript{51}

Anger is known as a mobilizing emotion that can catalyze political participation, at least in the short term (Valentino et al. 2011; though see Milliff 2021). And the members of Families for Safe Streets do sometimes express anger

\textsuperscript{48}Fieldnotes, March 18, 2014.
\textsuperscript{49}For instance, Liz Rahman organized a memorial for her son Asif at a local school, staged exhibitions of his photos, organized performances by his friends, and distributed booklets of his poetry. She also published a book of Asif’s writings and drawings.
\textsuperscript{50}Interview with Amy Tam-Liao and HP Liao.
\textsuperscript{51}Interview with Sarah Charlop-Powers.
toward the drivers responsible for crashes, a legal system that seems to let them off scot free, and decision-makers who refuse to do more to save lives. They also feel outraged when they see similar crashes happening again and again, and anger seems to play a role in motivating them to try to prevent similar harms from befalling others. But overall, the group members’ activism is more deeply intertwined with the intensive cognitive processing, rumination, and reflection typical of post-traumatic growth.

Indeed, some group members explicitly frame their involvement in Families for Safe Streets as a form of post-traumatic growth, which they are familiar with because they work in counseling, psychology, or social services, or simply because they read about it online. After listing several reasons why she participates in Families for Safe Streets, Lindsay Motlin told me, "Also, I'm aware that when you go through something really bad, it's psychologically helpful to make something good of it. So that's part of it." I followed up by asking, "Was that, like, advice that you had gotten, or just kind of intuition, or ... ?" Lindsay replied that years before, a different experience had prompted her to read the Wikipedia entry on post-traumatic growth. When she was recovering from the hit-and-run, she thought back to that Wikipedia page and saw how post-traumatic growth could apply to her situation.

But even if people are experiencing or intentionally seeking post-traumatic growth, why would this push them to get involved in politics? For the members of Families for Safe Streets, the answer appears to lie in the need to find meaning after loss and trauma—and politics facilitates three unique types of meaning-making.
Policy Context

Political advocacy is not just about passing laws and supporting candidates; it is also a process of growth and learning. Before they were personally affected by crashes, most of the members of Families for Safe Streets had never given any serious thought to street design or traffic safety laws. As Mary Beth Kelly observes, most people do not follow these issues closely—"and until this happened to us, we didn't either!" Judy Kottick agreed, as she recalled her old perspective: "You hear, 'Oh, someone got hit by a bus. How horrible.' But I never paid attention. I had no clue what a widespread problem was."

Through their activism, however, the members of Families for Safe Streets have become self-taught experts. They conduct research, share articles, and compile statistics, equipping themselves to make compelling arguments to elected officials and the public. Their advocacy also places them in meetings where they hear reports from engineers, listen to expert testimony, and see street design proposals.

In November 2014, for example, Families for Safe Streets co-sponsored the 2014 Vision Zero for Cities Symposium. Throughout the large, wood-paneled lecture hall at Brooklyn Law School, heads snapped to attention when several group members took the stage to share their stories. But the members of Families for Safe Streets were not just there to speak; they were also there to listen. As they watched presentations, participated in breakout sessions, and mingled with academics, engineers, and policy-makers, their notepads quickly filled with diagrams of
intersections, lessons from Sweden, and the latest updates from the de Blasio administration, punctuated with emphatic circling and underlining.\textsuperscript{52}

Marinating in these policy discussions changes the way victims understand their own experiences. For some, a focus on policy change can be empowering. Sarah Charlop-Powers finds Families for Safe Streets fulfilling because the group is action-oriented, with "a specific goal of policy change." That sense of purpose helps people see beyond their grief; "they’re part of something that is structured, and they are showing up, and somebody has got a game plan. ... I think it increases people’s sense of confidence about what they’re doing, which is worth a lot."

Policy discussions also help victims situate their experiences as part of a broader pattern. Dana Lerner remembers realizing, "This happens. This has happened to other people. Other people have gone through this." Similarly, Rebecca initially saw being hit by a car as \textit{sui generis}. But once she got involved in advocacy work, "it became an, 'oh, this happens all the time, all over the place' kind of thing."

And as talk of pain and loss is displaced by debates about S1 Gards, Barnes Dance crossings, and taxi driver licensing requirements, the members of Families for Safe Streets construct new causal stories about the losses they have suffered. The more they learn, the more they see that crashes are not random, unavoidable accidents.\textsuperscript{53} Rather, they are "caused by human actions and amenable to human intervention" (Stone 1989, 281). For Ken Bandes, a major shift occurred at a press conference with Mayor-Elect Bill de Blasio:

\textsuperscript{52} Fieldnotes, Nov. 14, 2014.
\textsuperscript{53} The traffic safety community largely rejects the term "accident" in favor of "crash." See Appendix section 2.
That was sort of the first time, somehow, that the concept or that whole Vision Zero thing sort of started to make it feel like this is not some unbelievably horribly freak out of the blue thing, but this is an actual social issue that can be addressed in a social way, and I think that made a big difference. To my mind, it made a big difference.

In the framework of Stone (1989), Ken had begun to reimagine traffic violence as a social problem, rather than a natural occurrence—shifting it from "the realm of fate and accident," to "the realm of control and intent" (283). This new understanding flowed from and reinforced Ken's nascent activism, and it mattered greatly to him. Concluding his interview, Ken emphasized that once he realized the crash that killed his daughter was just one instance of a wider problem, that made him feel a little less helpless. And it makes the whole thing just seem a little less, you know, just like unbelievably freakish bad luck. It just puts it in a slightly different context of ... [a] social issue, and that's a little easier to bear in some ways. You don't feel so alone in it, and it's not so random.

Never Again

When victims jump into politics, they often seek to ensure that the same tragedy never befalls anyone else again. As Harold Kahn explains,

No one should go through this. ... I don't want to read about someone else! Like, I don't want to turn on 1010 News and hear that someone else was killed by a truck or car or bus walking across the street.

Rebecca\textsuperscript{54} remembers the day she came home, and her parents told her that a child had been killed by a taxi just a few blocks from where she had been hit by a taxi the year before. Rebecca had already wanted to take a more active role in traffic safety advocacy; over the past year she had been sending "emails to random politicians, like, 'Can I work in your office?'" Just trying to find something, some way

\textsuperscript{54} Rebecca chose to be identified with a pseudonym.
to be involved." But nothing came of it. Then when Cooper Stock was killed, Rebecca felt she hadn't done enough. "I just felt like, great, I waited a year, and this happened." So she sent a letter to Cooper's family, and she vowed to get more involved—a promise she kept.55

Rebecca’s experience was difficult, but not anomalous. New York City is a dense place, where even rare events happen with some frequency and proximity. Aaron Charlop-Powers recalls that he felt spurred to act when he saw crashes happening over and over again

in succession, like, multiple people were killed in a matter of days. And that felt really crazy to me. So I felt, at minimum, I would go out to this [Families for Safe Streets] meeting and see what was going on.

The steady drumbeat of crashes also catalyzed Lindsay Motlin's participation. "You don't want to this to happen to other people," she explains. But "it just keeps happening, so I feel responsible to, like, be part of the movement." Even more emphatically, Dana Lerner told me,

Every time I hear about another child who was killed, particularly by a taxi driver, I can’t describe to you the agony that I feel. And I feel – I know this is a little irrational – I feel partially responsible. I feel like I should have done more, I'm not doing enough, this shouldn’t happen again.

Faced with this implicit sense of duty, victims turn to politics in an attempt to make change.

Fighting to help others also creates a sense of meaning around a relative's death or one's own injury. Several interviewees explicitly rejected the notion that

55 Dana Lerner, Cooper's mother, responded to the letter, and Rebecca became more networked in the traffic safety community. Rebecca joined Families for Safe Streets, lobbied in Albany, advised a city councilmember about Vision Zero, and helped pass Cooper’s Law.
everything happens for a reason, and I never heard anyone so much as hint that subsequent policy changes justified, absolved, or rectified their injury or their loved one’s death. But survivors Lindsay Motlin and Rebecca both try to use their new perspective to help others. And for bereaved families, working to prevent harm to others is a way of imbuing a tragic event with a note of hope. As Lizi Rahman explains, "when Asif was alive, he used to help people in many ways." After Asif was killed on Queens Boulevard,

I said if we get a bike lane, it will be his way of helping other people. ... A bike lane is going to help save lives. ... We have to have it, the rules in place for all the travelers, bikers, pedestrians, car drivers, everybody. So I want to see it done before I die, I'm really telling you that.56

Activism offers a way for victims to write a new ending to one of the worst chapters of their lives—and sometimes, it works. For Mary Beth Kelly, activism provided her with a renewed sense of optimism amidst death and devastation. After her husband Carl was killed, she realized, "I could influence whether or not this happens to other people." That was "energizing" for her. And as pedestrian deaths dropped in the years after New York adopted Vision Zero, Mary Beth saw,

That's people alive today that wouldn't be! That's families that would be suffering like ours did ... Prevention isn't sexy. You know? Prevention is dull and quiet and goes unnoticed. But that's what we want. We want people to be able to live full lives, not get cut down as 12 year-olds, or even a 56 year-old in the prime of his life. It's wrong. ... And if there's something you could do to prevent it? And then you're part of that? And you feel like you helped make

56 Lizi Rahman got her wish. In November 2021, the city finished construction of a new bike lane on Queens Boulevard. Lizi attended the dedication, carrying a photo of Asif. State Sen. John Liu told the crowd, "Many years after Asif Rahman was killed on Queens Boulevard, cementing its notoriety as the Boulevard of Death, the grief and pain is still felt by his family and community. We honor his memory with the completion of this bike lane, an important milestone in the continuing transformation of Queens Boulevard into a boulevard of life" (quoted in Parrott 2021).
that happen? There’s something that’s incredibly satisfying about that. It’s like, 'Okay, I made a little contribution to this world. I made it a little better.'

Fulfilling Obligations

Echoing Wood’s (2003) concept of pleasure in agency, the members of Families for Safe Streets often marvel at the leadership and initiative they’ve been able to undertake, asserting themselves in spaces that were previously closed to them. But beyond this personal growth, the members of Families for Safe Streets also understand their work as fulfilling important obligations to others.

Some group members told me that in the wake of the crash that affected them, they felt obliged to be good public representatives of their families, neighborhoods, and racial and ethnic communities. For Amy Tam-Liao and HP Liao, their shared identity as Chinese-Americans shapes their involvement. "One of the reasons we keep going, sometimes, is there’s not a lot of people of color in Families for Safe Streets," HP told me. Although there are some members who are Japanese-American, Black, Latinx, and Bangladeshi, HP and Amy are the only Chinese family. So in some ways we feel like we’re that voice for the Asian community that’s not being represented. ... We need to pull our own weight, not just we’re part of Families for Safe Streets, we’re representing a certain group or ethnicity, and we’re pulling in that group within the community too.

Amy explained that they feel "a bit of pressure" to make sure they’re representing their community well. "And also there’s the pressure of: if we stop [participating], it also means it stops being talked about in the [Chinese] newspaper."

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57 Interviews with Dana Lerner, Lizi Rahman, Judy Kottick, Ken Bandes, Greg Thompson, Jr., Debbie Marks Kahn and Harold Kahn.
Similarly, Greg Thompson, Jr., who is Black, feels a responsibility to represent his "sister and the rest of [his] family properly." When his sister was killed, he was acutely aware people would look at me and use me as a reference for what my family is, who they are, how they may have raised me, or just in general. And it's like I'm aware of those judgements and how they come about.

Greg explains further:

Especially where we come from, you know what I mean? We're definitely not from the most extravagant environment. I mean, I grew up—I've been robbed twice in broad daylight. And my parents, like, did their best always. They did a very good job. And growing up with decent people, you want to make sure that you're representing them decently. I was given the opportunity to represent them decently in a very public way, and in a very proactive political way. So I intended to do that.

At the same time, Greg also decided to participate as a means of living out the legacy of his deceased sister, Renee. When Greg was first invited to join a press conference, he was "caught off guard."

Then I remember thinking Renee was, like, super into that sort of thing. If you wanted to find the most technically-inclined person in the family as far as politics goes, Renee would be that person. She had all of the jargon down. I don't even know why she was into it like that, because she was 16. But it definitely wasn't me. I was the computer guy in the family. But I kept thinking about that sort of thing. I was like, if Renee were here she would try to involve herself because this is a chance to make an impact. So she was the kind of person—I think eventually she would have been involved with something like [this]. So I kept on thinking that. ... It's like I'm here, it's like I'm living for her, to represent what she may have been, and I'm representing my family.

Echoing similar themes, Aaron Charlop-Powers notes that activism is especially meaningful for him because his mother was a community organizer in the Bronx. After she was killed, a street was dedicated to her; it is called 'Meg Charlop Way.' His voice heavy with emotion, Aaron told me that he has been thinking about that
wording, because "for me this work has been about trying to connect to my mom's legacy. I try to make her proud by doing things her way." Part of that, for Aaron, is knowing that even if it's hard,

there's valor and there's meaning in identifying something you stand for, and putting in time to try to see that thing happen. And so my involvement with this group has been an opportunity for me to wrestle with that inner conversation and feel like I'm being productive and processing away from the darker sort of doomsday, pessimistic way of looking at the world, and trying to be in the world in a way that I believe my mom lived—and frankly, [in a way that] I believe that she would want me to live [crying].

Judy Kottick also says her activism allows her to live out the wishes of her daughter, Ella. Through tears, she elaborated:

Ella really had so many goals. She wanted to make a difference in the world. I mean that was her goal, and she would have also done it in a very quiet way. She was not—she was very shy and not someone who liked attention, but she was determined, and she was a researcher. She wanted to do research on how to bring interventions to underserved populations. And so I kind of feel like I'm doing this for her. You know? This wasn't the way she wanted to change the world, but it's all we have, so it makes me feel like I'm carrying her with me. She would be proud of us.

Conclusion

In the years since Families for Safe Streets was founded, the organization has expanded to include chapters in cities from San Diego to Washington, DC. and Nashville to Toronto. And back in New York, many of the group's founding members remain active: they continue holding press conferences, collaborating with TA, and going on lobbying trips to Albany, all in the name of improving safety for pedestrians and cyclists in the city.58

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58 For a comprehensive update on Families for Safe Streets’ latest efforts, see Kim (2022).
Why has Families for Safe Streets persisted and succeeded, while so many activist groups flounder and fail? Certainly, it is hard for political leaders to ignore any group of victims-turned-activists, because brushing them off is tantamount to saying, "I don't care about your loss."59 But as Rebecca observes, the non-partisan nature of Families for Safe Streets' advocacy also matters:

"[It's] not controversial. It's not gun violence. It's just: cross the street, and do it safely. It's something that's so—you can't argue with it. You can't be like, "No, I don't want to make the street safer." That doesn't look good for you, whatever [kind of] politician you are. [Shared laughter] So I think that helps our cause."60

At the same time, activism can be a means for victims to reassert their dignity and agency (Stewart 2008, 234), and the rewards of expressive participation can be self-perpetuating. Families for Safe Streets also exemplifies Han, Campbell, and McKenna's (2022) theory of civic feedbacks. Even as Families for Safe Streets cultivated early elite support,61 the organization simultaneously developed its members' capacities and recruited and retained members, laying the groundwork for sustained political relevance and policy influence.

Victims' participation in politics matters because it is widespread, impactful, and theoretically puzzling. In this manuscript, I use ethnographic research with Families for Safe Streets to show that victims' participation is not just an expression of anger; it can also be a search for meaning.

59 Interview with Sarah Charlop-Powers.
60 Harold Kahn agreed, "It has nothing to do with Republicans or Democrats. It has to do with saving a life."
61 Arrington (2016) finds that early elite support can hinder victims' grassroots mobilization.
To be sure, the circumstances of the members of Families for Safe Streets are different than many victims of violence. They live in a democracy, their victimization did not result from war or political repression, and they experienced an individual- or family-level shock, rather than group-level, targeted predation, which can depress non-electoral participation (Ley 2018, Córdova 2019).

Yet despite these limitations, insights from this research should resonate beyond the streets of New York. Methodologically, the project illustrates the value of deep, sustained engagement with the people whose perspectives and behavior we seek to understand. And substantively, there are parallels between the experiences of the members of Families for Safe Streets and other victims-turned-activists, including those affected by gun violence, illnesses, drownings, plane crashes, drug overdoses, suicide, and other circumstances.62

From fulfilling obligations to constructing new causal stories to helping others, politics offers multiple unique and compelling ways for victims to find meaning in the aftermath of tragedy. This may be why victims-turned-activists often see their advocacy less as a choice, than an imperative.63 The policy changes they seek feel urgent and essential, and the narratives they construct are vital to their own well-being. For as Joan Didion once wrote, "we tell ourselves stories in order to live" (1979, 1).

62 On generalizability, see appendix section 7.
63 Debbie Marks Kahn explained, "It feels right, it’s the right thing to do. It makes us feel better. It fulfils us, it’s the right path. It’s like it clicks. It’s what we’re meant to do. I mean at least for me, I can’t not do it. I can’t not do it."
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Appendix

This appendix includes additional methodological and contextual information for, "Finding Meaning in Politics: When Victims Become Activists."

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1. National and International Context

The pedestrian fatality rate in New York City is higher than in many other cities around the world, such as Stockholm, Tokyo or Berlin (New York City Department of Transportation 2010, 7). By American standards, however, New York’s pedestrians fare reasonably well. The pedestrian fatality rate for the New York-Newark-Jersey City metro area is below the national average (Smart Growth America 2022). Meanwhile, the highest pedestrian fatality rates are found in Sunbelt states with wide roads, high speeds, and few pedestrian amenities (Vock 2022). In 2021, for example, the pedestrian fatality rates in New Mexico, Florida, Louisiana, South Carolina, Arkansas, Arizona, Mississippi, and Georgia were the highest in the nation—and two to three times the rate in New York State (Governors Highway Safety Association 2022, 13).

New York’s pedestrians are the most diverse in America: people from all social, economic, and demographic groups walk frequently. Yet mirroring national trends (Maciag 2014), they fall victim to vehicle vs. pedestrian crashes at different rates. Elderly residents are most likely to be killed by vehicles, men are more likely to be killed than women, and the pedestrian fatality rate is higher in high-poverty neighborhoods (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2017).

After peaking in 2013, New York’s pedestrian fatality rate declined for several years, before ticking up again in 2019. Then, mirroring national trends, pedestrian deaths increased sharply in 2020 and 2021. Advocates speculate that this change may be due to the rising popularity of larger, heavier vehicles, an increase in speeding and reckless driving during the pandemic, and a decrease in traffic enforcement (Hu 2021, Blumgart 2021).

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2. A Note on Language: Victims and Survivors, Crashes and Accidents

Language is a sensitive issue when discussing experiences with violence, loss, and trauma. In some movements and communities, there is a strong preference for the term "survivor" rather than "victim." This is especially true among survivors of sexual assault. But in the traffic safety community, the term "victim" is not particularly stigmatized. To the contrary, it is often used affirmatively—as in the "Crash Victim Rights and Safety Act" promoted by TA and Families for Safe Streets.

There are several reasons why the traffic safety community tends not to reject the term "victim." The first is practical. In most of the instances described in this manuscript, the person hit by a vehicle did not survive, so they are literally a victim, not a survivor. Typically, their family members were not injured alongside them, so they do not consider themselves "survivors" either. Rather, they describe themselves as grieving families, bereaved families, victims, or simply as the mother, father, brother, sister, daughter, son, or spouse of the person who was killed. A smaller percentage of the people in Families for Safe Streets were injured in crashes, like Lindsay Motlin and Rebecca. They tend to refer to themselves as "survivors," but they do not object to the term victim either.

Additionally, people harmed by traffic violence often have to fight to be recognized as victims. In New York State, hitting and killing someone with a vehicle is not necessarily a crime. Drunk driving and leaving the scene of a crash ("hit and run") are crimes in New York, and the state considers people injured or killed by drunk or hit-and-run drivers to be "crime victims"—meaning they (or their surviving relatives) are eligible for a range of victims' services. They can attend state-sponsored counseling and support groups, and they receive more regular communication from police and prosecutors about the status of their case. Should the perpetrator be found, they may also be invited to attend the trial and give a victim impact statement.

However, unlike many other jurisdictions, New York State does not have a vehicular manslaughter statute—so killing someone with a vehicle is often called, "the perfect crime." In New York State, legal precedent has established the "rule of two," which means that a driver cannot be criminally charged for killing a pedestrian or cyclist unless they were breaking two laws at the time of the crash (see Jaffe 2014 and Lerner 2014). And if (in the state's view) no

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1 This is the title of a somewhat glib but informative *Freakonomics* episode on the issue (Dubner 2014).
2 In 2014, as part of its Vision Zero agenda, New York City passed the Right of Way Law, "which established clear civil and criminal penalties for drivers who fail to yield to pedestrians and cyclists who have the right of way" (Pinto 2017). However, the Right of Way Law faced years of court challenges on the grounds that it violated the "rule of two" (Kuntzman 2021), and enforcement has been scanty (Pinto 2017). Outside New York City, the "rule of two" remains in effect in the rest of the state.
crime occurred, then there are no are official crime victims either—which means no state-provided counseling, no support groups, little-to-no communication from the authorities regarding any traffic infractions the drivers may receive, no opportunity to present evidence or testify, and essentially no trial. Court proceedings over traffic infractions can last less than a minute—even if the infraction resulted in the driver killing someone. The families of people killed by vehicles often feel ignored and cast aside by the state, so attaining some degree of recognition as a "victim" is a hard-won victory, not stigmatizing or disempowering.

This is not to say that the members of Families of Safe Streets do not care about language—they've just chosen to fight a different linguistic battle. Rather than parsing the distinction between victims and survivors, they tend to focus on the terms used to describe collisions involving vehicles and pedestrians or cyclists. Along with other traffic safety advocates, their main objection is the word "accident." They strongly prefer the term "crash." In fact, there is even a #CrashNotAccident pledge and social media campaign.

In the same vein, group members also wince at the way passive voice implies that pedestrians and cyclists are responsible for the fact that cars drove into them and killed or injured them. When people noticed Lindsay Motlin's injuries, for example, they would often ask her, "What did you do to yourself?" And without thinking, she would instinctively reply, "I got hit by a car." But over time, she came to realize that she really had a problem with that phrasing. Likewise, most other group members bristle at the notion that their loved one "got hit by a bus" or "got hit by a taxi." These idiomatic phrases are deeply ingrained in the way English-speakers discuss vehicle vs. pedestrian or cyclist crashes, so it can be challenging to try to eliminate them from spoken language and writing altogether. But the group members certainly try to use more active language, such as "a taxi driver hit him." They also prefer language that clarifies that behind the wheel of every vehicle, there is a driver—and it is drivers who hit and kill people, not

Figure A2. The "Crash Not Accident" Pledge.


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3 Attentive readers may recall that Belkys Rivera used the term "accident" in a quote that appears in the manuscript. Belkys was interviewed in Spanish, and she said "accidente" several times during her interview. Belkys speaks and understands English, but she is a native Spanish-speaker who navigates the world largely in Spanish. For this reason, her perspective on language and terminology is different than the other group members, and she did not seem deeply invested in the distinction between "a crash" and "an accident."

4 Law enforcement agencies and some publications use the term "collision." This term is less emphatic than "crash," but it is acceptable to some group members.

5 She also found this phrasing offensive because she was not injured by choice or through her own clumsiness; rather, a driver crashed into her.
vehicles operating autonomously. In fact, when they had the opportunity to review this manuscript, this was one of the changes the group requested. They wanted to see more emphasis on drivers (not just vehicles), and I revised the manuscript to honor their wishes to the greatest extent possible.

Works Cited


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Self-driving vehicles were not yet in widespread use at the time of this research, and even today they make up a miniscule percentage of vehicle vs. pedestrian or cyclist crashes.
3. Ethics and positionality

The research described in this manuscript was approved by MIT's Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects (COUHES), protocol number 1402006192. Subsequent to my initial application and approval, there were several amendments to the protocol. After I realized that it would be helpful to conduct interviews in Spanish, COUHES approved a Spanish translation of the consent protocol. COUHES also granted a 1-year extension to the data collection period, when it became clear that the research required a longer period of fieldwork.

All participants provided written consent to be interviewed, and they consented to have their interviews audio-recorded. The participants also had the opportunity to review the draft manuscript, and they requested several changes, which I made. One participant changed her mind and decided she would rather be identified with a pseudonym. Other group members requested that I insert additional information about the founding of the group, remove "umms" and "likes" from some quotes, add additional details about some crashes, use more active language to describe crashes, place more emphasis on the actions of drivers, and correct minor factual errors. I am grateful for the participants' collaboration, assistance, and candor; their feedback made the manuscript richer, more accurate, and more authentic.

Although research on loss, grief, and trauma is always highly sensitive, risks to participants were mitigated in several ways throughout this project. For example, while the participants could be considered "vulnerable" due to their bereavement and/or injuries, they were not "vulnerable" in the sense of lacking access to mental health treatment or social support. To the contrary, all the participants in this project were actively supported by their religious communities, city-run victims' support groups, and bereavement support groups. This helped prevent interviews from sliding into therapy—something I am not qualified to provide, and a known risk of qualitative research with bereaved individuals and families.

Prior to this project, I had previously conducted more than 200 in-depth interviews on topics related to violence and conflict, including with interviewees who were victims and perpetrators of violence. I also had professional experience working in victims' services, including responding to homicides, shootings, sexual assaults, and natural disasters. This experience helped me to structure the interviews, listen actively, and gauge the participants' reactions in real time. For example, in addition to re-iterating that participants could take a break or end the interview at any time, I watched carefully for any signs of distress or discomfort like expressing shock or surprise over questions asked; guarded, defensive body language; out of control crying (as distinct from weeping at emotionally appropriate moments); fighting to hold back tears; or silence, withdrawal, or disengagement.

Although most of the interviews for this project were conducted with solo participants, some couples were interviewed together. While this is an appropriate means of interviewing bereaved family members about their shared experience, it can cause problems if the interview prompts disagreement among the participants (Rosenblatt 1995). That did not occur during this project, perhaps because all the couples interviewed were jointly involved in activism, and they had already made a shared decision to speak publicly about their loss.

With one exception, all the participants in this project requested to be identified with their first and last names. This is somewhat unusual for social scientific research, but in this case it is understandable, given that these are people who regularly speak on the record in public fora and with journalists. However, I still think it is important to respect the participants' privacy by not releasing full transcripts or recordings of the interviews. During the interviews, participants...
sometimes diverged into sensitive matters not directly relevant to this project, for example, describing prior experiences with loss and violence or disclosing personal medical and mental health information. Despite political scientists' enthusiasm for transparency in empirical research, there is nothing that would be gained from sharing this extraneous and potentially stigmatizing material.

Throughout the fieldwork, my identity facilitated my research in multiple ways. As a white American woman, I blended in easily in an organization with multiple white women in leadership positions. As a parent, group members and I often exchanged tips about strollers, funny stories, and various reminiscences. My knowledge of Spanish helped me to form a relationship with one group member who is a native Spanish-speaker. And given my position as a university professor, participants, allied activists, and TA employees and I often chatted about topics related to higher education. I tried to be helpful however I could, encouraging people to apply to college, offering tips about how to get the most out of university studies, and answering questions about life at college. In a group that included many people with deep religious faith, my identity as a non-religious person sometimes raised eyebrows among group members. The fact that I had never lived in New York sometimes prompted gentle ribbing as well. But on balance, I fit in naturally and easily during my fieldwork, which facilitated my access to the members of Families for Safe Streets.

In this project, my greatest regret is my abrupt departure from the field. In late 2015, a medical condition limited my ability to travel, stand for long periods of time, and conduct the type of fieldwork described in this manuscript. This forced me to exit the field suddenly, without prior planning. The fieldwork was substantively complete, but I wish that I had been able to plan my own departure better and to have concluding conversations with more group members. I also regret the length of time that it has taken me to write up this research—though I feel it is still an important story that deserves to be told.
4. Interview Dates and Locations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant(s)</th>
<th>Interview Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary Beth Kelly</td>
<td>May 30, 2014</td>
<td>A friend's apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron Charlop-Powers</td>
<td>May 31, 2014</td>
<td>Public park in lower Manhattan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belkys Rivera</td>
<td>June 1, 2014</td>
<td>Her apartment in the Bronx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Charlop-Powers</td>
<td>Aug. 1, 2014</td>
<td>Garden in Central Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy Kottick and Ken Bandes</td>
<td>Aug. 2, 2014</td>
<td>Their home in suburban New Jersey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy Cohen and Gary Eckstein</td>
<td>Aug. 2, 2014</td>
<td>Their apartment in Brooklyn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie Marks Kahn and Harold Kahn</td>
<td>Aug. 3, 2014</td>
<td>Restaurant in lower Manhattan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizi Rahman</td>
<td>Nov. 15, 2014</td>
<td>Small cafe near JFK airport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg Thompson, Jr.</td>
<td>Nov. 15, 2014</td>
<td>The New York Public Library (main branch)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy Tam-Liao and HP Liao</td>
<td>Dec. 6, 2014</td>
<td>Coffee shop in midtown Manhattan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsay Motlin</td>
<td>Dec. 6, 2014</td>
<td>Coffee shop in midtown Manhattan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca (pseudonym)</td>
<td>Feb. 21, 2015</td>
<td>Indoor plaza in Cambridge, MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana Lerner</td>
<td>Jul. 15, 2015</td>
<td>Coffee shop on the Upper West Side of Manhattan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Further Information on Participants

**Ken Bandes** and **Judy Kottick**

Ken and Judy are married. They were interviewed together in their home in suburban New Jersey. They previously lived in New York City when they were younger.

Judy has a background in performing arts, and she has a graduate degree in social work. Ken has a master's degree in computer science, and he works as a programmer in New York City. They are both from politically engaged families. For example, Ken recalls going to Vietnam-era demonstrations as a teenager.

Ken and Judy have always discussed political issues and donated to causes they cared about, such as gun control, human rights, and food security. They sometimes went to marches or demonstrations, and they'd done some limited phone banking and voter registration, but they'd never previously been involved in organizing or lobbying. They had no prior involvement in traffic safety issues.

On Jan. 31, 2013, an MTA bus driver hit their 23 year-old daughter Ella Bandes in Bushwick, on the border of Queens and Brooklyn. Readers can learn more here:


O'Grady, Jim. "How many deaths does it take to redesign an intersection?" WNYC, 1 Jul. 2014. [https://www.wnyc.org/story/death-bus-could-better-street-design-have-saved-ella-bandes/](https://www.wnyc.org/story/death-bus-could-better-street-design-have-saved-ella-bandes/)

**Aaron Charlop-Powers** and **Sarah Charlop-Powers**

Aaron and Sarah are siblings from the Bronx. They were interviewed separately, though they sometimes participate in Families for Safe Streets events together.

Aaron works in public and international affairs. After college, he worked internationally, then came back to New York.

Sarah works on environmental issues and ecology. After growing up in the Bronx, she lived in upstate New York while in college and graduate school. Eventually she came back to New York City, where she works for a nonprofit. Sarah has some prior experience with activism, organizing, and lobbying, primarily around environmental issues. She also had pre-existing ties to the transportation advocacy community in New York.

Their family has always been very engaged in community organizing and social justice issues, and they sometimes attended demonstrations together. In addition, they were always fond of cycling, though primarily as part of a healthy lifestyle—not necessarily as a political issue.
Aaron and Sarah's mother, Megan "Meg" Charlop, was a noted public health and housing advocate in the Bronx. On Mar. 17, 2010, she was biking to work when someone inside a parked car opened their door suddenly, which caused Meg to be hit by a bus. For more information, see:


**Amy Cohen** and **Gary Eckstein**

Amy and Gary are married. They were interviewed together in their apartment.

Amy grew up in upstate New York, then moved to the city to work in government. Her career has been in public administration, specializing in the management of social services agencies. Although her mother was deeply involved in state and national politics, Amy describes herself as someone who was always interested in issues, rather than politics.

Gary is from Long Island. After law school, he practiced law at a small firm, then began working as a clerk in the New York State court system. He remembers going to Vietnam War protests as when he was young, and he and Amy previously did a little campaign volunteering for Obama and for a friend who ran for office.

Gary and Amy are longstanding members of Transportation Alternatives and cycling enthusiasts and advocates.

On Oct. 8, 2013, a driver hit their son, Sammy Cohen Eckstein, on Prospect Park West. He was 12 years old. For further information, see:


**Harold Kahn** and **Debbie Marks Kahn**
Harold and Debbie are married. They were interviewed together in a restaurant in Lower Manhattan.

Debbie is an art therapist with additional training in grief counseling. Harold is an architect. He has a master's degree in urban design. They live just outside the city. Debbie grew up in a very political family, but she was always kind of turned off from politics. Debbie had been lobbying a few times before, for reasons related to her work with Alzheimer's patients. Neither Debbie nor Harold was really involved in politics or activism until now.

A bus driver struck Debbie and Harold's son Seth in Hell's Kitchen on Nov. 4, 2009. Seth was 22 years old. To learn more, see:


Mary Beth Kelly

Mary Beth is a therapist in private practice. She also has graduate training in writing.

Mary Beth has long been involved in political and community organizing. As a university student, she was active in the anti-war movement. Her memories of jumping on buses to go to protests helped spark her interest in organizing lobbying trips to Albany. Later, she was very involved in the community garden movement in New York City. In addition, she and her husband, Dr. Carl Nacht, were avid cyclists and longtime members of Transportation Alternatives. After the death of her husband, Mary Beth joined the board of Transportation Alternatives.

Mary Beth and Carl were biking together in Manhattan when Carl was struck by a tow truck on June 22, 2006. Readers can learn more at:


**Dana Lerner**

Dana Lerner is a psychoanalyst in private practice. She grew up in the Midwest, then moved to New York as a young adult. She initially worked as a social worker, then went back to school for further training in psychoanalysis. Though she votes regularly, she was not previously involved in politics or any community initiatives.

On Jan. 10, 2014, a taxi driver hit Dana's son, Cooper Stock, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, outside his apartment. Cooper was in the third grade. Readers can learn more at:


**HP Liao and Amy Tam-Liao**

HP and Amy are married. They were interviewed together at a coffee shop in lower Manhattan.

Amy grew up on the Lower East Side and in Flushing, Queens. She has degrees in public health and social work, and she works on public housing issues. HP was born in Taiwan and came to New York as a young child. He has an associate's degree and works in information technology. Amy has previously done some advocacy and lobbying related to her job. They also vote regularly, but they hadn't been involved in advocacy like this before. Traffic safety was not an issue they followed previously.

On Oct. 6, 2013, Amy and HP's 3 year-old daughter Allison was in a crosswalk in Flushing when she was hit by an SUV. For more information, see:


**Lindsay Motlin**

Lindsay is a recent college graduate originally from Long Island.

She was active in her university's student government, and she recalls occasionally going to political rallies at election times. She primarily followed issues relating to gay rights, women's rights, and racial justice. Her family always voted and they discussed current events, but they were not particularly engaged in politics or activism. After getting her bachelor's degree, Lindsay returned to New York to work in consulting.
Lindsay was seriously injured in Brooklyn on December 15, 2013. A van hit her while she was walking. The following articles describe her experience:


**Lizi Rahman**

Lizi Rahman is originally from Bangladesh. Earlier in her career, she worked at the US Embassy in Dhaka. Then she and her children moved to New York to join her husband, who was already there. In New York, Lizi worked in a temporary role at the UN, then worked at a Bengali newspaper. Later, she became a public school teacher. Lizi and her family briefly relocated to Texas and upstate New York, then returned to New York City. Since becoming a US citizen, Lizi has voted occasionally. In Bangladesh, Lizi's father ran for local office, but she never had any particular interest in politics. She is generally more interested in writing.

On Feb. 28, 2008, Lizi's son Asif was hit by a truck while he was biking on Queens Boulevard—a road so dangerous, it is known as "the Boulevard of Death." Readers can learn more at:


**Belkys Rivera**

Belkys is originally from the Dominican Republic. She studied law in the Dominican Republic. Then she met her husband, and they moved to New York and built a life there. In New York, Belkys initially focused on raising their children. Later, she studied at a local community college. After her husband died of cancer, she started working as a nanny for a family in the city.

On Dec. 26, 2011, Belkys' son Josbel Rivera was killed in a hit-and-run in the Bronx. Josbel was 23 years old. Readers can learn more here:
Greg Thompson, Jr.

Greg grew up in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. After graduating from high school, he studied computer science, then started working in information technology. His family often discussed political and social issues, especially racism, but Greg was not previously active in politics.

On July 31, 2013, Greg’s 16 year-old sister Renee Thompson was killed by a tractor-trailer driver making a turn in Manhattan. Readers can learn more here:


Rebecca (pseudonym)

Rebecca is a university student. Although she is a New Yorker, she was interviewed while she was on a visit to the Boston area.

Rebecca’s family is politically-minded and well-informed. She had previously done some light campaigning for a presidential candidate, and she had attended a march. In addition, she credits her religious education with spurring her interest in social justice issues (she is Jewish). Historically, she has been more involved in community service, rather than politics. Her family always emphasized the need to wear seatbelts and cross streets carefully, but she did not previously follow traffic safety issues closely.

In 2012, she was walking on the Upper West Side of Manhattan when a taxi struck her and seriously injured her, leaving her with a permanent disability.
6. Excerpts from Field Notes

In addition to the interviews quoted throughout the manuscript, "Finding Meaning in Politics" is also informed by my observations during my fieldwork. To help readers understand how I moved from fieldnotes to writing the manuscript, I have included several excerpts from my fieldnotes below.

Example 1: Mar. 18, 2014

In March 2014, the members of Families for Safe Streets invited me to join them for a day of lobbying in Albany. I drove separately, and when I arrived, I was supposed to meet their delegation at a particular office. These are my first impressions of the Empire State Plaza. I relied in part on these notes while writing the description on p. 24 of the manuscript:

When I told [family member] where I was going, he responded with a knowing wink and smile. “Ahhhh...” he said. “You’re going to the Death Star.” We laughed—but I didn’t entirely understand why. He’d been to Albany before on business related to state government, and he always came back in a vaguely battle-scarred trance, with bizarre tales of not having any food all day and being miserable. He showed me some pictures of the Empire State Plaza online, and he tried to explain how the parking works (complete with diagrams and maps online). That was extremely helpful, because the Empire State Plaza proved to be like nothing I’d ever seen before.

It was the Jetsons meets the Rust Belt. A series of elevated highway off-ramps swooped into the city, a continuous arc of concrete flowing from the interstate into the bowels of the Empire State Plaza. I drove along through the now-sunny day, gliding effortlessly above the crumbling contours of Albany below. Oddly, I passed directly from the countryside into the government complex, completely without any contact with the ordinary residents of Albany below. It struck me that this was no accident, but rather an intentional design choice to insulate government visitors from the crumbling facades of post-industrial decay.

The highway literally feeds right into the monolithic front of the Empire State Plaza. When I approached the wall of white marble, I knew from the photos online that I was going into the belly of the beast. I also knew to watch out for parking signs, because the parking garage was tucked under the main plaza. But still, I was shocked when I went into the tunnel. Daylight was replaced by pitch-black darkness, or so it seemed through my squinting, sun-accustomed eyes. Small signs jutted out from the side walls: Parking here! Visitors! No visitors! Luckily there was no traffic, because the interior of the plaza was more cramped and confusing than I’d expected. I managed to dive into an exit, and I entered a low-ceiling parking garage. The garage seemed to be in an advanced state of decay — hardly encouraging, since it is in the foundation of a large, heavy complex of buildings! The ceiling was among the lowest I’ve ever seen in a parking garage; even the antenna of my VW Jetta was hitting beams. Pieces of insulation dangled unencouragingly from the ceiling, and water dribbled down the beams and posts. The lighting and layout were sufficiently poor that it was hard to figure out where to park, much less how to exit the garage on foot — or where to go next! Yet somehow hundreds of other cars had already navigated this labyrinth, and presumably their passengers had found the exit, because the vehicles were now parked in tidy rows in the decidedly untidy garage. ...
I was completely at a loss as to how to exit the parking garage, until I spied two women. They were walking confidently through the garage, so I asked them for directions. They were dressed professionally, so I assumed that they knew where they were going, and that they wouldn’t harm me. I also took pictures of the area around my car, because I had no idea where I was, where I was going, or how I might return here. The experience was profoundly dislocating and unsettling. The women led me to an elevator and selected a level. They asked me where I was going. I said, “the main entrance,” having no idea where to get off the elevator. I knew I was looking for the LOB, where I was to meet FSS at a particular office, but there was no signage suggesting how one might get to the LOB.

We got off the elevator and entered a large hallway. The women turned to the left; they seemed to be going to some kind of conference at “the Egg.” Now the day was taking a decidedly Dr. Seussian turn! “The Egg?” I was far, far down the rabbit hole.

The ladies pointed me vaguely toward the right, where our hallway connected to a larger main corridor. There was virtually no signage, and there were no diagrams of the building, but this seemed to be some kind of interior main concourse. I had no idea where I was in relation to the buildings I’d seen from the outside, and there were no windows. After wandering in circles amidst groups of school children, lobbyists, and parents attending a homeschooling conference, I found some signs for the LOB and went through a security checkpoint. My bag was X-rayed and I walked through a metal detector. I saw some more signs for the LOB, and I wandered through a confusing series of tunnels and small corridors. This surely can’t be the entrance, I thought! My confusion grew stronger when I stumbled upon weapons set up in the hallway and a sea of men and women in cammo. Signs suggested it was “Fort Drum Day” at the capitol. It was unclear if this was meant to be education, lobbying, or appreciation — or perhaps a messy muddle of all three purposes. Some of the soldiers tried to engage me in conversation, but I walked briskly through the exhibit, both because I was late and in a hurry to find FSS, and because the weapons made me nervous. Even unloaded, I am never completely at ease around automatic weapons.

I knew I had to find office 422, which was presumably on the fourth floor. But I’d been through a series of sloping hallways/tunnels, and I had no idea what floor I was on. Nor was there any sign of a main elevator bank or stairway. I saw a door that seemed to be a stairway. It was small and out of the way. There was no one around in the hallway, and no one on the staircase. I was sure that I must be taking a back entrance into the LOB, because it was so confusing. But I later learned that I think this was the main entrance — it’s just very confusing. An intentional barrier to hinder access to elected representatives, perhaps? I got out on the fourth floor and walked around for quite a while, confused by the apparently nonsensical order of the office numbers. Then by luck, I happened across an office that had a member’s name on it. And it was the member I was looking for.
Example 2: Aug. 3, 2014

At times, my participant observation research helped me understand the way the members of Families for Safe Streets move through the city with a different gaze. One day, Debbie Marks Kahn and I were en route to an event together when we realized we needed to cross Queens Boulevard on foot:

It’s a Sunday afternoon, and I’m about to cross the Boulevard of Death. Ten lanes of traffic loom imposingly, separated into four distinct stretches of roadway. Three small concrete islands break up the vast expanse, offering a theoretical place of refuge for stranded pedestrians. But I know all too well that little nubs of concrete are a meager defense against speeding vehicles. I feel like a little girl, and I look over at Debbie, half-tempted to hold her hand for protection and guidance as we cross.

The light changes. The walk sign switches on. The cars slow to a stop, all 10 lanes of them. It’s like the sea parting before us; improbable and awe-inspiring. We look carefully to the left and the right, take a deep breath, and summon our courage. “Let’s go,” Debbie says. And we are off, protected only by the white stripes painted beneath our feet. I walk briskly, fighting the impulse to run. Debbie steps forward with determination, glancing anxiously as over her right shoulder for turning vehicles. Will we make it across safely, and in time? By the time the red hand starts flashing, we are approaching the last island. Miraculously, the walk signal is long enough even for someone with [personal health information redacted]. A few cars pass disconcertingly close to us, cutting through the crosswalk as they turn left. Then we step onto the final curb, and we breathe a sigh of relief. We have reached our destination: the site of Asif Rahman’s death.
7. Generalizability and Other Victims-Turned-Activists

Although this project consciously privileges depth over breadth, it is reasonable to wonder whether and how the story of Families for Safe Streets can help us understand the experiences of other victims-turned-activists. From their pathways to participation to their motivations, news reporting suggests parallels with a wide range of other types of victims and survivors—all of whom have had a significant impact on politics and public policy.

Sudden, Traumatic, Preventable Losses

The closest comparison is with bereaved families who have lost loved ones under sudden and traumatic circumstances, in ways that are not deeply mired in pre-existing political conflicts, and in situations where it seems that better public services or more robust regulations could have made a difference. This includes car crashes, drug overdoses, unsafe consumer products, suicide, plane crashes, and drownings. Sometimes families of people (particularly children) who have died of diseases and medical conditions also become activists, especially if the death was felt to be preventable or particularly unjust.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving is a perhaps the most obvious analog to Families for Safe Streets—and indeed, the members of Families for Safe Streets sometimes look to MADD for advice and inspiration. But there are also strong parallels with aviation safety advocacy. From

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7 When a driver with a suspended license struck and killed his daughter, Haley, while she was jogging, Marc Cremer lobbied Massachusetts lawmakers for tougher penalties for driving with a suspended license. He attributed his efforts to "his late daughter's belief in positive change." As he told a reporter, "we are trying to carry on her altruistic approach to life" (quoted in Ellement 2016).

8 One example is Moms Stop the Harm, an organization in Canada that advocates for policy changes to stem the opioid epidemic. Debbie Reed says her activism is motivated by the memory of her son, Johnny. "I'm going to use Johnny's voice now, because it was big and powerful," she told a reporter. "I'm doing this for him and for everybody else who's lost a kid, or everybody else who's got this chaos and this heartache in their life because of the substance abuse disorder" (quoted in Chiwetelu and Dineen 2021).

9 Such as furniture that can tip over, putting children at risk. The STURDY Act is federal legislation promoted by Parents Against Tip-Overs (PAT). The group is chaired by Brett Horn, whose son Charlie was killed in a tip-over incident in 2007. Crystal Ellis is another group member whose son was killed by an IKEA dresser in 2014. Over time, she reconceptualized his death as a public policy problem: "The day my son Camden died, I believed it was a freak accident. [But] when I learned the industry knew tip-overs were a deadly problem for decades, I was beyond angry. They've been tinkering with an entirely inadequate, voluntary standard for almost two decades, mostly placing blame and responsibility on parents to anchor their furniture to the wall, when experts know the most effective solution to the tip-over problem is safe furniture design—and this would be required if the STURDY Act becomes law" (Quoted in Peachman 2021).

10 In the UK, bereaved parents have pushed for legislation to increase universities' reporting obligations around suicides on campus (Weale 2022) and to add suicide awareness to the school curriculum (Three Dads 2021).

11 In addition to the aviation safety examples discussed in more detail below, Jackson (2022) reports on remarkable lobbying and cooperation by the families of victims of multiple different crashes.

12 Examples include Debbie Neagle-Freed, who advocated for Connor's Law to improve pool safety in Maryland, after her son Connor drowned in 2006 (McDowell 2022). Likewise, after her daughter Virginia drowned, Nancy Baker pushed for the federal Virginia Graeme Baker Pool & Spa Safety Act, which regulates pool drain safety nationwide (Ross, Eslocker, and Gassiott 2008).

13 As in the case of pediatric cancer deaths, which have propelled families to lobby for multiple pieces of federal legislation, such as the Gabriella Miller Kids First Research Act, the Creating Hope Act, and the RACE for Children Act. Ellyn Miller, the mother of Gabriella, says that when she was lobbying for the bill, "I feel like her hands were on my back pushing me, saying, 'We are not done. We have work to do'" (quoted in Marsh 2021).
To the crashes of the Boeing 737 Max, the families of plane crash victims often lobby for improved safety and policy changes. By the 1990s, crash victims' families were a "crusading" presence with "growing clout" on Capitol Hill and beyond, and "airline and government officials [said the] family associations have had a significant impact on the industry" (Kovaleski 1996).

Although it is difficult to draw comparisons without firsthand contact with the people involved, news reports suggest particularly strong similarities between Families for Safe Streets and the Families of Continental Flight 3407. On Feb. 12, 2009, Flight 3407 crashed in the Buffalo, NY area, killing everyone onboard and one person on the ground. The investigation suggested that pilot fatigue, training, and recruitment practices played a role in the crash (Flying Cheap 2010). In the years since the crash, the families have become self-taught experts on aviation safety (Young 2010), made more than 75 lobbying trips to Washington, DC and forged relationships with powerful allies—even earning the praise of the FAA (Zremski 2022). The families played a key role in the development and passage of the Aviation Safety Act of 2010, and today they continue actively fighting to prevent the Act's repeal.17

In published interviews and statements, the families' explanations for their actions resonate with the story of Families for Safe Streets. The notion of "never again" is strongly emphasized on the website of the Families of Continental Flight 3407; "as a group," the families write, "we don't ever wish to see another family have to endure the pain and suffering we have endured, and we are therefore committed to promoting positive changes related to aviation safety."

Jennifer West, whose husband Ernie was killed in the crash, consistently presents her activism as a means of creating a legacy for those who were killed (as in Arbogast 2022, Buckley 2021). One year after the crash, Kevin Kuwik, who lost his girlfriend, Lorin Mauer in the crash, explained his activism this way:

You find yourself sending emails at one or two in the morning. You have to be very efficient and well planned out as far as what you need to get done. You try to squeeze a lot more things in the same amount of hours, but it gives you another perspective. ... Basically, anyone in D.C. who has a dog in the hunt as far as aviation safety we’ve been meeting with. We’ve invested so much, and as you get to know the 50 different sets of families and how it has rocked all of our worlds in different ways, and how this has been something that we’ve been able to rally behind, you start to think ‘hey, maybe our loved

14 As in the case of Greg Sewell, who founded an advocacy group and spent years lobbying Transport Canada to require shoulder harness seatbelts in small aircraft, after his daughter Lauren was killed in a small plane crash in 2012 (Nair 2017).
15 As in the case of Families for Safe Streets, pre-existing networks and connections seem to have affected some plane crash families' impact and reach. For instance, Ralph Nader's grand-niece, Samya Stumo, happened to be among the victims of Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302, the second crash of a Boeing 737 Max. Nader threw himself into the families' advocacy after the crash, coaching them on how to approach members of Congress and helping them prepare their testimony—to the point that "accountability for the 737 Max would very likely have been more contained and more fleeting had Samya Stumo not been a passenger on Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302" (MacGillis 2019). The families have also had to fight hard to be legally recognized as "victims" (Schaper 2022).
16 According to a statement by Flight 3407 family member Kevin Kuwik on Twitter, https://twitter.com/kevinkuwik/status/1397607765615407104.
17 Readers can learn more about the latest activities of the Families of Continental Flight 3407 on their website, which is both a memorial to those lost and a record of the families' legislative accomplishments since the crash: https://3407memorial.com/.
ones didn’t die in vain. We can make a difference here. ... Lorin had an unbelievable sense of fairness for one thing, and this clearly wasn’t fair. I know she would be proud that I, her family, all the other families are trying to do what we can and not let this happen again. I always say that actions speak louder than words, so hopefully she would realize how much I loved her by all that I’m doing (quoted in Krizan 2010).

In addition to highlighting the strain and complexity of this type of advocacy work, Kevin echoes the notion of acting as Lorin would have wished, and making her proud—much as the members of Families for Safe Streets find meaning in fulfilling perceived obligations to their deceased loved ones.

**Politically and Targeted Violence**

After sudden, traumatic, and seemingly preventable losses, the **next most proximate comparison** is with victims of politicized and/or targeted forms of violence, such as gun violence, gender-based violence, hate crimes, and police violence. In the stories of these victims and survivors, there are notable similarities with Families for Safe Streets: they and their families organize, march, lobby elected officials, and even run for office, often explaining their activism with rationales similar to those expressed by the members of Families for Safe Streets. In addition, seeing the same types of violence occur repeatedly can play a role in their mobilization. As one group of gun violence survivors expressed, “it was one thing to be shot in a fluke incident” but quite “another to be made aware that those flukes were in fact occurring constantly in the United States” (Saslow 2013).

Yet there are also important contextual differences. Hierarchies of race, gender, class, and other dimensions of identity may mean that victims and survivors have to fight multiple battles simultaneously (as articulated well by the Mothers of the Movement in conversation with Roberts (2020)). These power differentials can make it more challenging for victims and survivors to assert themselves and gain attention for their cause. They may also be facing more powerful opponents, whether police unions, white supremacist groups, or the NRA. This can raise the risks of activism and make for a more difficult path toward policy change.

In addition, the highly politicized context surrounding some of these crimes can also mean that politicians are more aggressive about reaching out and recruiting victims into politics. In the 2016 US presidential election, for example, both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump regularly appeared onstage with the families of homicide victims—though for different political reasons. Clinton was often accompanied by the Mothers of the Movement, Black mothers whose children were killed by police or vigilantes. Meanwhile, Trump appeared with his Angel Families, the relatives of people killed by allegedly undocumented individuals. In both cases, the

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19 As in the cases of Amar Kaleka, who ran for Congress after his father was killed in the Sikh temple shooting in Wisconsin (Camia 2013), and former US Rep. Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY), who ran for office after a shooter killed her husband and injured her son (Hampson 2015).
20 For instance, after their daughter, Jessica Ghawi, was killed in the movie theater shooting in Aurora, Colorado, Sandy and Lonnie Phillips threw themselves into local politics, door-knocking and campaigning to fend off the recall of pro-gun control state legislators. Sandy explained her actions in part by saying, “Jessica would be so proud of us for standing up like this” (quoted in Tosches 2013).
21 One mass shooting victim profiled by Saslow lost a daughter in Arizona, “but decided to become an activist only after the shooting in Aurora” (2013). Another was shot (and survived) at Virginia Tech, but then had a political “awakening ... years later, while watching coverage of the Binghampton shooting” (Saslow 2013).
Trump and Clinton campaigns were actively facilitating their participation, including paying for flights and providing other support (Chozick 2016, Vogel and Rogers 2018). This should not be taken as diminishing the families' agency, but their experiences were somewhat different than those of the members of Families for Safe Streets.

Political Repression and Wartime Violence

A more distant comparison can be found in the experiences of victims-turned-activists in ongoing conflicts, post-war settings, and amidst state repression. The risks, decisions, and rationales associated with activism in those contexts are quite different; as Javeline (2023) aptly notes, in a conflict setting victims face a choice between armed retaliation and peaceful activism. Yet behind nearly every campaign for accountability for human rights violations, there are survivors, victims, and their families. For example, while the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo are especially well-known, Bejarano (2002) reminds us that "motherist" activism is common across Latin America. Future research would be needed to thoroughly understand whether, how, and to what extent the search for meaning may also drive these victims' involvement in politics.

Works Cited


Particularly in the case of the Mothers of the Movement, the group members had self-mobilized years before the Clinton campaign reached out to them. And their involvement in politics continues to this day (Mothers 2021). In fact, one of the mothers was Lucy McBath—who was elected to Congress in 2018 and is now serving in the US House of Representatives. The Angel Families, meanwhile, emerged from The Remembrance Project, an organization founded in 2009 that describes itself as "a voice for victims killed by illegal aliens." (See Golshan 2016, as well as https://theremembranceproject.org/).


Appendix