

IMPACT BRIEF

Safe Routes to Libraries: *How Libraries Are Working Toward More Walkable and Bikeable Communities*

MAY 2026



Overview

Public libraries across the United States provide invaluable resources that support communities, from literacy, employment, and food programs, to providing space for remote work and community building. But in order to effectively do this work, their patrons must first be able to arrive to library facilities safely – which in many areas, whether urban, rural, or suburban settings, remains a challenge.

According to a [2025 Government Accountability Office Report](#), rural, suburban and urban communities across the U.S. all average a greater than 40-minute one-way walk to the library. Other contributing factors, like the need for safe walking routes and accessible sidewalks, were cited as barriers to library access nationwide. The Safe Routes to Libraries initiative seeks to empower libraries to play an active role in reinvestment to allow community members of all ages to better access their buildings, resources, and expertise for enjoyment, literacy, learning, and overall wellbeing.



Photo Credit:
Billings Public Library, MT

Safe Routes to Libraries is a national initiative designed to foster walking, biking, and rolling access to public library buildings across the United States, with the goal of safely connecting communities to library resources and programs that enhance the literacy and health outcomes of all Americans. With the support of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the Urban Libraries Council and the Safe Routes Partnership have collaborated since 2024 to lay the groundwork for this national program.

The Safe Routes to Libraries initiative is based on the [Six E's of Safe Routes to School](#), a framework to make school travel – walking, biking, rolling, and scooting – safer, easier, and more convenient for students. Safe Routes to School has been proven effective in improving safety, increasing physical activity, and increasing access to walking, biking, and rolling activities. Safe Routes to Libraries builds upon the successful foundation of Safe Routes to School to increase safety and access to public libraries. While the work is focused in the United States, the framework reflects work that is happening in libraries and communities across North America.

Regardless of whether they are using this terminology, many North American libraries today are already engaging in work to improve “safe routes” to libraries, through enhancing pedestrian and bike infrastructure, educating patrons on resources, and more. This impact brief overviews findings related to how North American libraries today are already engaging in Safe Routes to Libraries efforts which both mirror and complement existing Safe Routes to School programs.

WHAT COUNTS AS “SAFE ROUTES TO LIBRARIES” WORK?

Activities and amenities that improve safety and increase access to public libraries via active travel modes (walking, biking, rolling) can all be considered Safe Routes to Libraries work! There is not a formal list of programs that are or are not officially Safe Routes – if they improve safety, we consider them part of the Safe Routes to Libraries framework.



Photo Credit: DC Public Library, DC; Safe Routes Partnership



Photo Credit: Athens County Public Libraries, OH



Photo Credit: Ames Public Library, IA; Safe Routes Partnership



About the Survey

Data analyzed in this impact brief comes from a survey distributed to members of the Urban Libraries Council and the Association for Rural & Small Libraries in February 2025.

The survey sought to understand the existing landscape of Safe Routes to Libraries work before implementation of a national initiative. 199 responses were collected from library staff across various positions in their library system. Surveyed libraries spanned 40 states and 1 Canadian province, and a little over half had only one location or branch (54%).

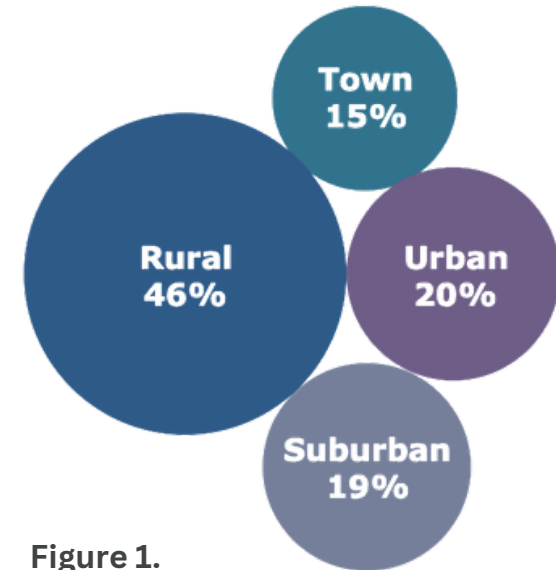


Figure 1.
Reported Library Types



Impact Snapshot: Billings Public Library, MT

“It’s helpful to **tie safe transportation work into other library programs**. Two years ago, our summer reading theme was ‘Adventure Begins at Your Library.’ To make this connection, we held a big **bike rodeo event** that matched the adventurous theme and brought in lots of other community organizations. **We even had a ‘bike wash!’**”

“I also see the Makerspace as a natural resource for promoting community bike safety, but I had to build that connection. For instance, helping patrons make high-visibility reflective vinyl stickers for them to put on their bikes, or using our Bike Library to transport Makerspace equipment to a local Children’s science museum so they see how biking and creativity go hand-in-hand.”

-Taylor Arnold, Makerspace Librarian, Billings Public Library



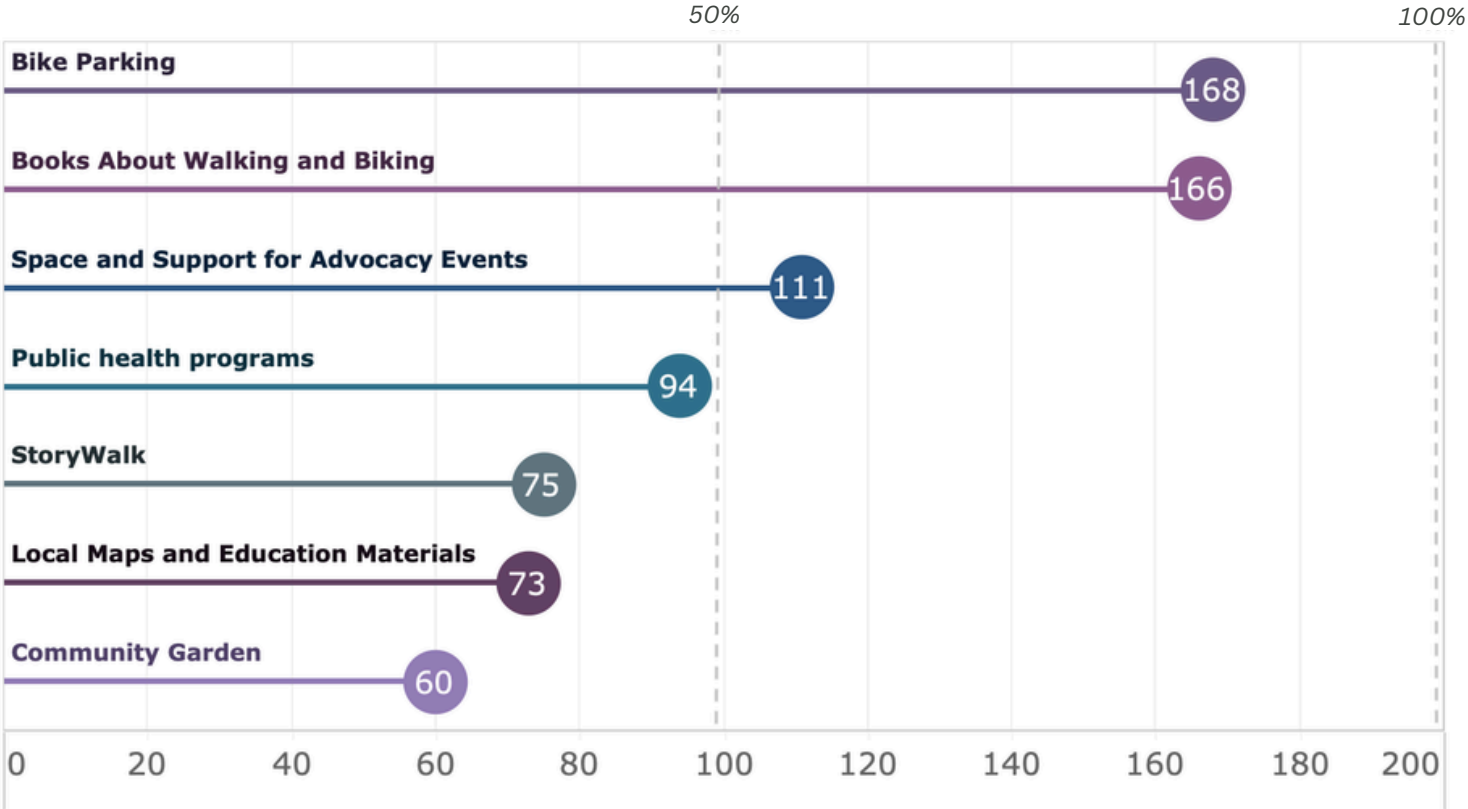
Photo Credit:
Billings Public Library, MT



The Library Approach to Safe Routes

While library systems do not currently identify amenities as Safe Routes amenities, libraries today are still working toward more walkable and bikeable communities. The most common library amenities, which also share common goals with Safe Routes, include bike parking (85%), collections related to walking or biking such as books, maps, and education materials (85%), and the space and support libraries provide for advocacy events (55%). Libraries also reported hosting a StoryWalk installation, which engages communities by blending literacy, art, public safety, and physical activity (37%). Figure 2 shows all the most common library amenities which support safer access.

Figure 2. Top Reported Library Amenities





Impact Snapshot: Salt Lake City Public Library, UT

“We’re increasingly thinking about how the library can help weave the entire community together. Creating safe routes to libraries is a key way to help set the city up for success in tackling other issues that will shape its future.”

-Daniel Neville-Rehbehn, Chief Service and Impact Officer, Salt Lake City Public Library, Utah



Four distinct approaches related to Safe Routes work emerge when looking across the resources, partnerships and community engagement activities systems reported.

The library approach to potential Safe Routes work...

- **As a Public Health Catalyst**
- **To Center Bike Education**
- **For Community Access and Safety**
- **To Accelerate Connections**

The following page details the key characteristics of each approach. Each approach sometimes shared activities but differed in how the activities tended to appear together.

Two techniques (Principal Component Analysis and Clustering) were used to determine these approaches. Additional information about this process is available within Appendix I.



Through community engagement, resources and library services, libraries are guiding local Safe Routes work with **Four Distinct Approaches...**

To Accelerate Connections

Defining Activities:

- Offering Biking or Walking groups,
- Providing space and support for advocacy events.
- Teaching Learn-to-Ride Workshops & Bike Rodeos



As Public Health Catalyst

Defining Activities:

- Partnering with local public health officials.
- Offering walking or biking groups.
- Hosting walking or biking celebrations.
- Contributing space and support for farmers markets.



For Community Access & Safety

Defining Activities:

- Performing walk or bike audits.
- Facilitating a walking school bus programs.
- Participating in Safe Routes to School/Safe Routes to Parks.



To Center Bike Education

Defining Activities

- Hosting bike education events & bike repair classes.
- Dedicated bike repair stations.
- Lending bikes to patrons.



Impact Snapshot: Athens County Public Libraries, OH



“The **Book-a-Bike program** is one of the most popular things our library does for the community. Libraries exist to provide resources and connect patrons with what they need to be successful in their lives, whatever form that may take. Programs that like this, focused on safety information and opportunities to explore new or different resources, sit squarely in the zone of what libraries can and should be doing.”

-Nick Tepe, Director, Athens County Public Libraries

Photo Credit: Athens County Public Libraries, OH

Continuing Libraries and Safe Routes

Libraries are central to an ecosystem of community resources and engagement. About half of the libraries surveyed have existing partnerships with their local Parks & Recreation Department (53%), Public Health Department (38%) and about a third with their local Police Department (33%) – each an essential partner for Safe Routes work. Less common partners were the local Planning Department (14%) or Transportation Department (18%), which could indicate a barrier or limitation between the library and these partners.

Such collaborations often require intentional outreach by directors. “Often, libraries are left out of planning decisions for things like transportation, health and wellness, or other infrastructure at the state and local level,” said Nick Tepe, director of the **Athens County Public Libraries** in Ohio. “However, in order to meet the information needs of our communities around these resources, it’s the role of the librarian to get out into the community and build relationships to ensure libraries are thought of as critical community infrastructure. If we didn’t build the relationships we now have, these programs would look very different or maybe not happen at all. But thanks to those relationships our programs are popular and successful.”



Photo Credit: Billings Public Library, MT

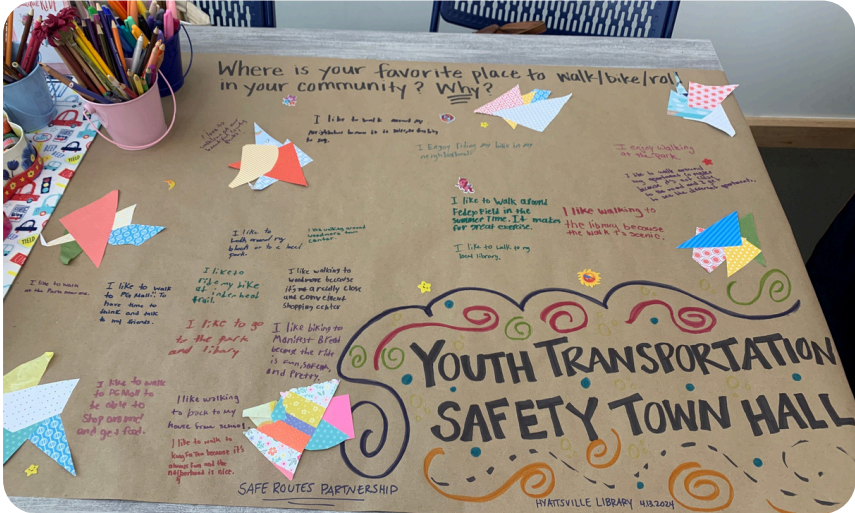
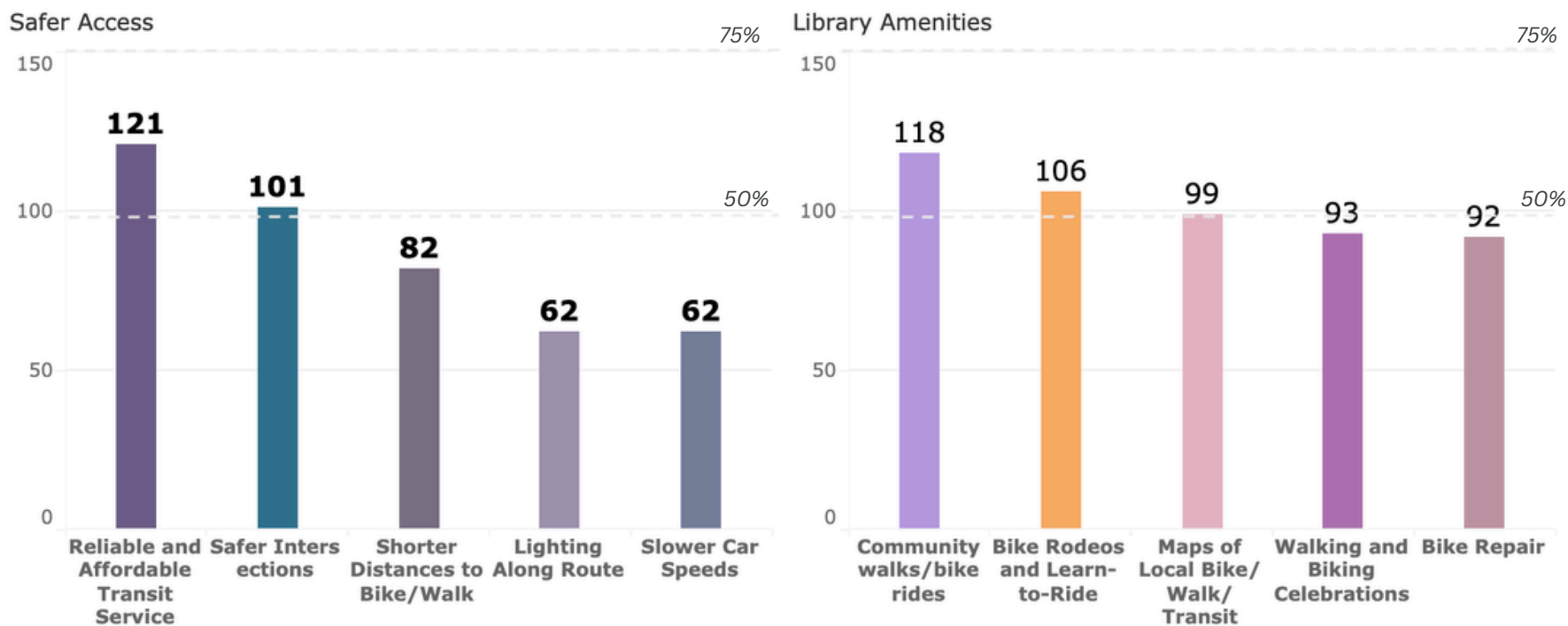


Photo Credit: Prince George’s County Memorial Library System, MD; Safe Routes Partnership



To continue Safe Routes work, libraries expressed strong interest in increasing community engagement offerings, including adding Community Walks/Bike Rides (59%), Bike Rodeos and Learn to Ride events (53%), and hosting walking and biking celebrations (46%). Respondents also suggested more reliable and affordable transit services (60%), as well as increased safety along routes. The top responses for both engagement and safer access are displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Community Needs: Safer Access & Library Amenities



Libraries are both uniquely positioned for and already engaged in Safe Routes efforts. The long-term vision of Safe Routes to Libraries is the adoption of the model by public libraries across the country, increasing access to vital library facilities, as well as greater state and federal funding opportunities for libraries to do this work.



Appendix I: Determining the Library Approach

Two machine learning techniques, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and K-Means Clustering, were used to identify library approaches. The survey included multiple selections across amenities and programs, partnerships and partnership methods, safety considerations, and barriers to participation. This resulted in a dataset with a high number of variables (high dimensionality).

First, [Principal Component Analysis](#) was used to reduce and combine variables into components which effectively capture the patterns within the dataset. Then, [K-Means Clustering](#) iteratively grouped the data into clusters. The process determined which libraries had responses most similar to each other (within cluster) and the most distinct from each other (between the clusters). Finally, the defining features of each cluster were evaluated thematically by the authors, resulting in the four approaches.

Appendix II: Safe Routes Resources

Eager to get started? Interested libraries can learn more about bringing Safe Routes to their communities by visiting <https://www.urbanlibraries.org/initiatives/community-health-safety/safe-routes-to-libraries>.



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The Urban Libraries Council is an innovation and impact tank of North America's leading public library systems. ULC drives cutting-edge research and strategic partnerships to elevate the power of libraries as essential, transformative institutions. Across the U.S. and Canada, nearly 200 member libraries rely on ULC to identify significant challenges facing today's communities and provide new tools and techniques to help libraries achieve stronger outcomes in education, digital equity, workforce and economic development, and race and social equity.

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The Safe Routes Partnership is a nonprofit organization working to advance safe walking and rolling to and from schools and in everyday life, improving the health and well-being for everyone, and building healthy, thriving communities for everyone. The Safe Routes Partnership is the national leader in the Safe Routes to School movement.

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