

TRANSPORTATION AS AN OPPORTUNITY LIFELINE

Examining the Interconnected
Forces Impacting Equitable Access
to Transportation for Youth

A report by
**THE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO
TRANSPORTATION ADVISORY COUNCIL**



TABLE OF CONTENTS

3

Introduction

11

Glossary of Terms

19

The Forces that Break Down
Access and Cause Gaps

40

Conclusion

7

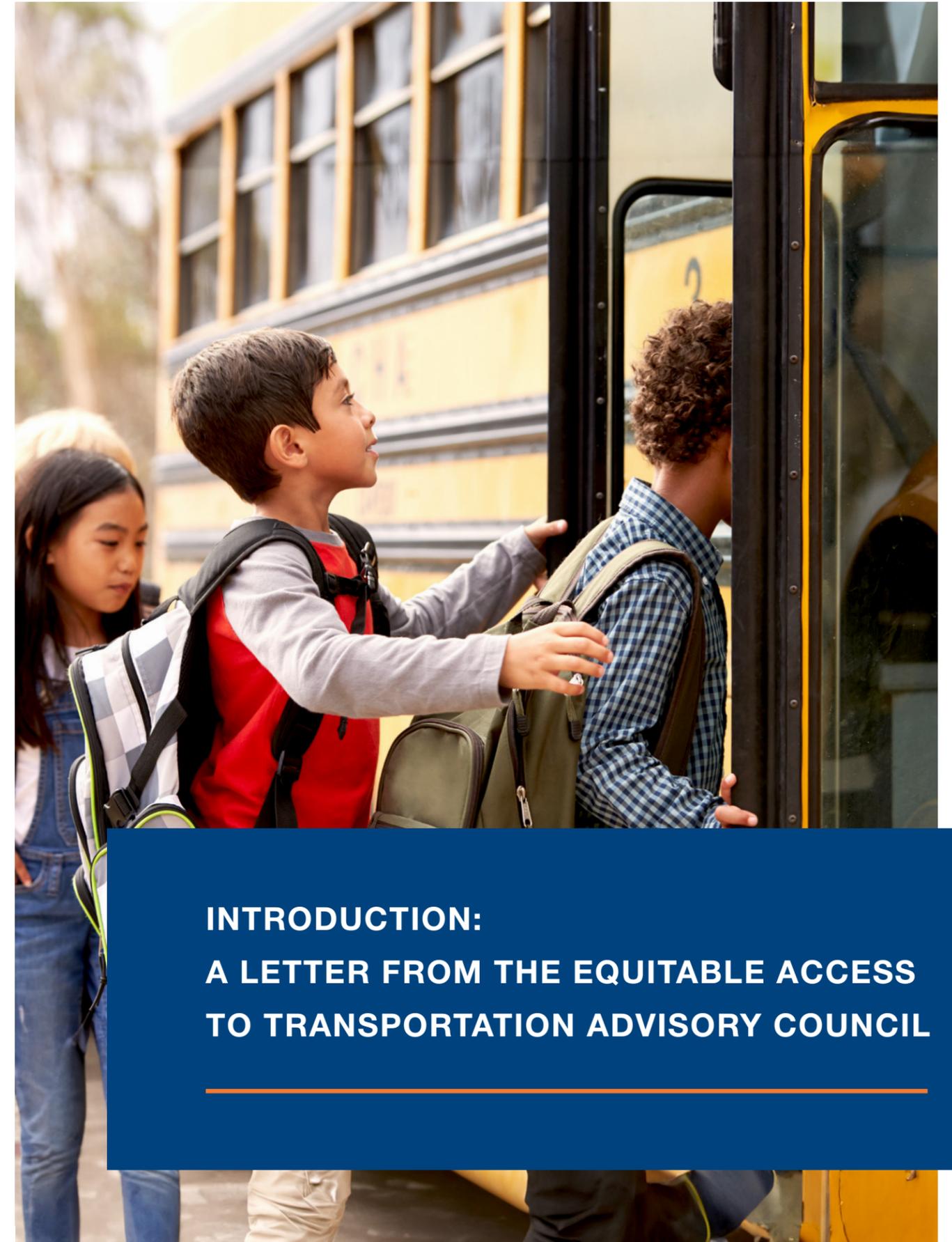
Meet the Equitable Access to
Transportation Advisory Council

14

How Kids Get to School and
the Differences They Face

30

The Devastating Impacts of
Transportation Disruptions



**INTRODUCTION:
A LETTER FROM THE EQUITABLE ACCESS
TO TRANSPORTATION ADVISORY COUNCIL**

Transportation is a lifeline to opportunity in the United States, but not all students have the safe, equitable access they deserve. This inequity is systemic — the result of compounding factors, some of which have been in existence for decades and some of which have been exacerbated in recent years, including by the pandemic. Regardless of its origin, inequity begs the questions “what?,” “why?,” and “how?,” presenting us with the opportunity to re-examine our traditional ways of doing things.

In recognition of these questions and this important issue, we have come together to form the first-ever Equitable Access to Transportation Advisory Council (EATAC) to address school transportation barriers and put forth ideas — and eventual policy recommendations — to help ensure every child has access to safe, reliable transportation to and from school.

Through collaborative research, advocacy, and policy recommendations, EATAC aims to create positive change and foster a more inclusive and equitable transportation system for all youth. Together, we’re taking an in-depth look at this issue in order to bring about a safer, more equitable, and more hope-filled future for children and our communities.

Each of us is devoted to transportation, child welfare, road safety, community planning, education, and technology. With backgrounds in child rights, road safety, foster care, technology, and urban development, each of us brings unique perspectives to the group. As we analyze the challenges children face in getting to school, we will remain cognizant of a number of core truths:

- Easy access to reliable transportation is a luxury that many children do not have.
- For those children without easy access to transportation, getting to and from school is only half the battle. Appointments, extracurricular activities, and even jobs also hang in the balance.
- Not every mode of transportation meets children’s needs equally.

For us, extending equitable access to transportation means that first, every child can access transportation; and second, they can access a transportation mode that meets that child’s unique needs, connecting them to school, support services, extracurricular activities, and other critical parts of childhood.

As a group, we’ve identified a myriad of forces that break down transportation access, causing significant gaps and a ripple of impacts, including:



Introduction

We're taking a socio-ecological approach to this issue that considers many of the individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and public-policy forces that influence transportation access, safety, and equity. These forces and their impacts don't exist in a vacuum. They influence one another, amplifying the challenges students and their families face. Their interconnectedness exacerbates existing transportation barriers and widens the gap in safety, accessibility, and equity for students across various socioeconomic backgrounds, geographical locations, and educational needs. Failing to address these forces early on creates a web of compounding difficulties that leads to systemic disadvantages, hindering future prospects and opportunities for generations of students. When we consider the various services children — including the most vulnerable youth, such as youth in foster care, students facing poverty, those experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, and youth from low-income households — are receiving through their schools, the forces that influence and reduce transportation access are even more significant.

EATAC will work together to uncover disparities in transportation access for vulnerable populations. Our mission is to not only bring attention to these gaps, but also help close them to ensure that every student has equal opportunities to access education and other essential services.

As experts in our respective fields, we are proud to put forward this report on the forces that impact equitable access to transportation. It is important to note that in exploring a topic as significant, widespread, and complex as equitable access to transportation, there is always more to say than can fit in any one report. We hope this report, and a forthcoming follow-up piece on solutions to address these challenges, accomplishes two goals:

1

Broadens the conversation so we look at the full picture of the forces and resulting gaps that prevent access to safe, reliable transportation for all students.

2

Inspires action to find policies and solutions that empower communities, schools, policymakers, and child advocates with more resources and information to get kids where they need to go.



**MEET THE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO
TRANSPORTATION ADVISORY COUNCIL**



Nadia Anderson, Ph.D.

Senior Vice President, Chief of Staff and Strategy

Silicon Valley Leadership Group (SVLG)

Anderson is an experienced government affairs and public policy professional with deep experience and research qualifications from the transportation, equity, and mobility sectors. She's a senior corporate leader, and in her current role, partners with her CEO to help execute high-priority programs, projects, and initiatives, and provide strategic guidance to SVLG's senior leadership team.



Kerry Chausmer

Programs and Member Services Director

Governors Highway Safety Association

Chausmer oversees the federal and private sector grant programs and the association's member services at this nonprofit, which represents the state and territorial highway safety offices that address behavioral highway safety issues.



Torine Creppy

President

Safe Kids Worldwide

Creppy works with partners, donors, legislators, and community leaders around the world leading this global nonprofit dedicated to protecting kids from preventable injuries.



Vanessa Davis

Manager

Foster Youth in Action

Davis's passion for bringing about durable change for overlooked communities can be felt by all who know her. She uses her lived experience and creative passion to design services that fill gaps for transition-age foster youth.



Natalie Draisin

Director of the North American Office

FIA Foundation

Draisin leads global efforts to advance evidence-based solutions that improve equity and public health. At the FIA Foundation — a global philanthropy dedicated to safe, sustainable mobility — she brings partners together across borders to address common challenges and creates initiatives to fill gaps in the field.



Kim Dvorchak

Chief Executive Officer

National Association of Counsel for Children

Dvorchak, with more than 25 years of experience advancing the rights of children in law and policy, leads a national team of policy and practice experts focused on improving legal representation and ensuring access to justice for children and families navigating the child welfare system.



Robert Enlow

President and CEO

EdChoice

Enlow works with his team of national experts to advance parental freedom and opportunities in K–12 education. He and his team disseminate research, undertake training, sponsor seminars, conduct advertising campaigns, and invest in and organize community leaders to address how education is innovating and evolving.



Ta'Londa Holland

Senior Director of Policy and Influence

Urban Strategies Inc. (USI)

A licensed clinical social worker, Holland leads policy and system change strategies to advance equitable outcomes to serve USI's children and families. Holland is a founding board member of Kentucky's Race, Community and Child Welfare (RCCW) initiative.



Zahra Marin

National Policy and Organizing Director

National Foster Youth Institute (NFYI)

Marin specializes in positive youth development, community engagement, and leadership development, and has worked with several organizations and networks committed to the empowerment and advancement of current and former foster youth and minorities.

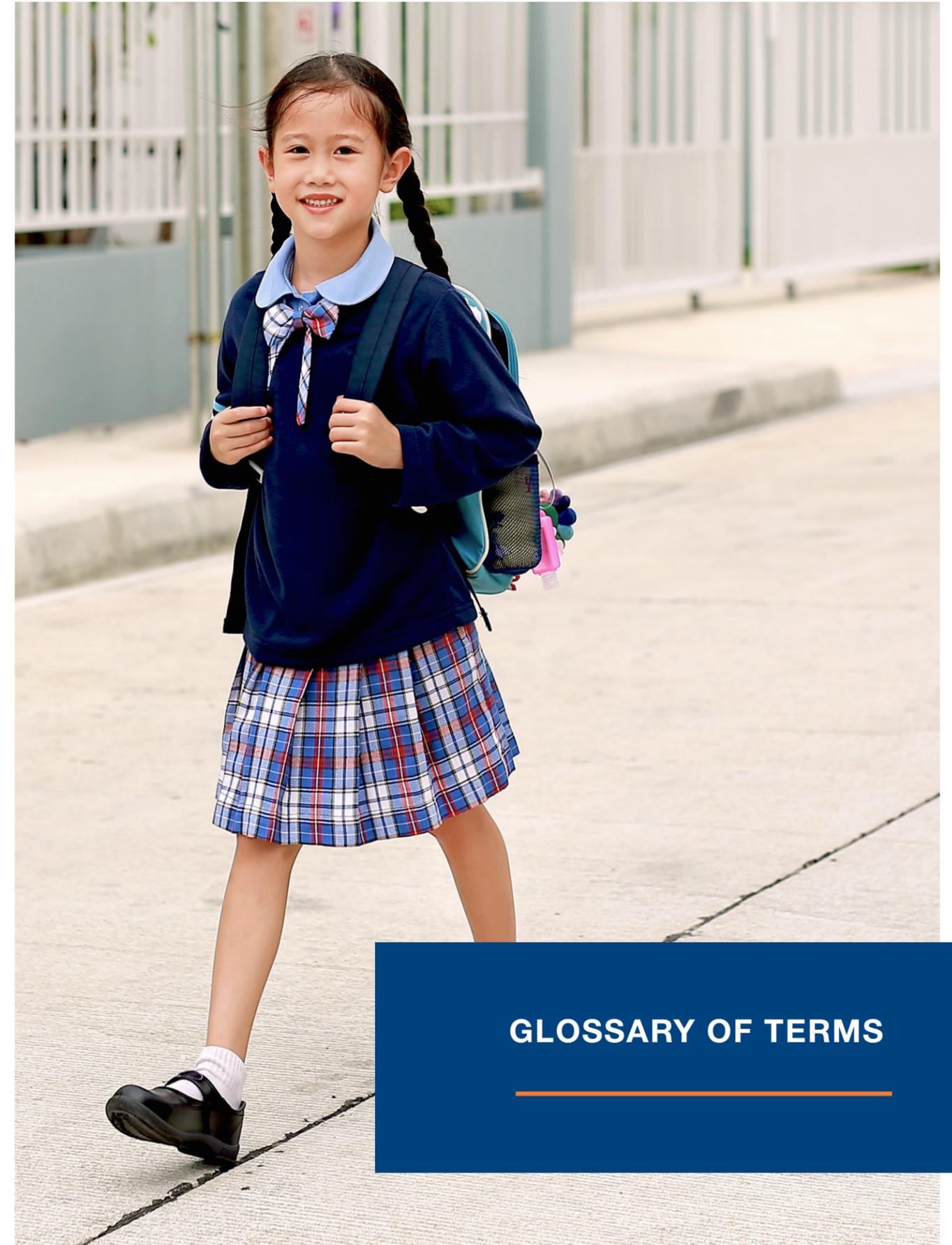


Kristie Stutler

Vice President of Policy and Influence

Urban Strategies Inc. (USI)

Stutler leads USI's policy and influence division, which focuses on advancing policy and system change to drive equitable outcomes for the families that USI serves. Stutler was a Class 10 fellow in Annie E. Casey's Children and Family Fellowship program.



GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Equitable access

Every child can access a safe, reliable transportation mode that meets their unique needs and addresses systemic barriers. This includes a focus on connecting that child to school, support services, extracurricular activities, and other critical parts of childhood.

Transportation mobility

Providing pathways for students to have equal opportunities to choose from accessible, safe, and reliable transportation options for getting to and from school, support services, extracurricular activities, and other critical parts of childhood.

Opportunity for all

Ensuring any child — regardless of their socioeconomic background, gender, race identity, zip code, or physical or intellectual challenges — can access true educational success.

Socio-ecological approach

A [framework](#) that considers the complex interplay between individual, relationship, community, and societal factors.

Supplemental transportation

Refers to additional transportation services provided by school districts, nonprofits, or government agencies to transport youth, in addition to standard school buses. This can include contracted services, care-centered marketplaces of vetted drivers in small sedans, vehicles for students with disabilities, or transportation for students living in remote areas.

Vulnerable populations

Students and families who face multiple layers of instability involving socioeconomic factors such as housing, food, or transportation insecurity; restraints in personal mobility; and medical conditions. This can include students in the foster care system or those experiencing homelessness.



How Kids Get to School

According to data from a 2022 survey, there are three primary ways students get to school: 53% rely on a personal vehicle, while 33% take the bus and 11% bike or walk. We also recognize that a portion of students leverage public transportation. However, there are a myriad of differences students face that can further impact how accessible and reliable these forms of transportation are for getting them to school.

For some kids and families, getting to and from school is a no-brainer. If their primary mode of transportation fails, they easily have a backup, whether that's a personal vehicle, public transit, a traditional rideshare service at the tap of a button, or a support network of others who can step in to help. However, this is not a luxury shared by all.

With 54 million students enrolled in U.S. schools, tens of millions are dependent on modes of transportation over which they have no control. What happens if a student's bus route is cut? Or walking to school becomes unsafe? Or if there are public transit changes to service areas, or reduced funding translates to reduced routes? These are very real issues that highlight the disparities in safe transportation access. Those who regularly use a private vehicle are simply less reliant on modes of transport that are out of their control.



**HOW KIDS GET TO SCHOOL AND
THE DIFFERENCES THEY FACE**

HOW KIDS GET TO SCHOOL*

53%

PERSONAL VEHICLE



33%

BUS

11%

BIKE OR WALK



3%

PUBLIC TRANSIT
OR OTHER

*National Household Travel Survey

The Differences Students Face

Many families don't have access to a private vehicle. Those that do may rely on a single vehicle for work, medical appointments, and other essential activities, which limits their ability to transport their children to and from school consistently. In fact, 20% of low-income families own no vehicles and 70% of children from those families rely on the bus to get to school. This means a disproportionate number of low-income students rely on buses, and are therefore most impacted when buses are unavailable or routes become inefficient.

It is also important to note the dramatic impact that living in rural, urban, or suburban areas has on safe, reliable access to transportation. Many urban areas have numerous modes of transportation available by nature of the city's infrastructure (though there may be other challenges in the form of cost or available space), while rural areas lack various modalities and require travel across longer distances. Where a student lives in this country presents significant differences in transportation access.

Housing insecurity is also a significant contributor to transportation and education instability. Families experiencing housing insecurity often face frequent moves, unstable living conditions, and financial stress, all of which can disrupt a child's ability to easily access education.

Some students take the bus because they simply don't have any other options available to them, even when the bus is not suited to their individual needs. For students with disabilities, the bus can be a noisy, crowded, anxiety-inducing space. Taking the school

bus can also be challenging for students who are highly mobile, such as youth in foster care and those experiencing homelessness. These students are frequently moved to a new placement with little notice, often multiple times, and sometimes they are moved outside of their school's boundaries. Federal law requires that transportation be provided for children in foster care so they can remain in their home school. However, the burden falls to individual schools and child welfare agencies to figure out an alternative option, which is sometimes done by a foster parent, sometimes public transit (if possible), and sometimes through private transit companies. When service is reduced in any capacity — whether due to budget cuts, route changes, or driver shortages — these vulnerable student populations bear the brunt of the consequences.

For a smaller percentage of students who rely on options outside of a personal vehicle or bus, there are other challenges. Some kids walk or bike to school — around 11%, as indicated in the 2022 survey referenced above — but these aren't realistic options for students in rural communities who live several miles away or for those living along unsafe routes that aren't suitable for pedestrians and cyclists.

These barriers that prevent students from accessing the safe, reliable transportation they deserve aren't isolated forces. Recognizing the interconnectedness of transit challenges and their many impacts is the first step in understanding the inequities they perpetuate. Addressing these issues early on is essential to breaking the cycle of transportation inequities and paving the way for a more equitable and accessible educational experience for all students. Only then can we set all students up for success in school and beyond the classroom.



**THE FORCES THAT BREAK DOWN
ACCESS AND CAUSE GAPS**

When examining the breakdowns in transportation access, one can see that forces create pressure points both upon the transportation systems themselves, and on the communities they serve. These, of course, go hand-in-hand in a constant cycle of perpetuation.

Forces on Transportation Systems

Bus Disruptions

The yellow school bus is an American icon that has long represented our educational system. Unfortunately, it's not immune to challenges that can disrupt students' learning experiences. While the school bus continues to serve many students successfully, it's those students who rely on it the most who suffer the greatest when these systems break down.

1. School bus driver shortage is at a crisis point

The school bus driver shortage has been widely covered in public discourse, but the impact — especially on vulnerable and underserved populations — cannot be overstated. Ninety-two percent of school leaders say their operations are constrained by bus driver shortages, according to HopSkipDrive's 2023 State of School Transportation Report. When combined with insights that show that 74% of school leaders see a connection between transportation access and attendance, it's clear the shortages are having a real impact on whether children can access the critical services schools offer.

Regulatory hurdles: Many policies are contributing to our lack of qualified school bus drivers in the U.S. For example, school bus drivers must obtain a Class B Commercial Driver's License (CDL) to operate a bus, ensuring adherence to strict safety standards and protocols. One of the requirements to pass the exam is physically being able to lift the hood of the bus. This requirement is a dealbreaker for drivers who may be older or shorter in stature.

2. Driver shortages lead to routing difficulties

Cutting or changing bus routes can have significant effects on students. No school district understands the consequences of these decisions better than Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Kentucky, where [route changes](#) left [96,000 students](#) stranded without transportation, while many buses showed up to their planned stops well after dark. The district, unfortunately, was forced to cancel classes for several days as they revised and resolved the transportation challenge.

Lyndon Pryor, interim president of the Louisville Urban League, [highlighted the racial inequities](#) this issue exposed. He pointed out that much of the district remains segregated, with some students traveling more than an hour each way to school even before the catastrophic busing fiasco.





Nothing happens in a vacuum, nothing happens by itself. What has been shown and discussed today echoes that. JCPS has a transportation issue, because Louisville has a transportation issue, because Louisville has an economic depravity issue, because Louisville has an infrastructure issue, because Louisville has a segregation issue.

Lyndon Pryor

Interim President, Louisville Urban League

3. Policy mandates designed to benefit vulnerable students conflict with resources made available to comply with those mandates

For youth experiencing homelessness or in foster care, sudden, frequent movements to new placements are common. Federal and state mandates such as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and other supports mean that youth experiencing homelessness and youth in foster care are entitled to remain in their school of origin, where they may also receive extracurricular, enrichment, and other support services. In addition, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act entitles students with disabilities to transportation to access support services, even if those may not be at their attending school.

To remain in compliance with these federal and state requirements, school districts and county agencies may be required to provide transportation that crosses city, county, or even state borders, transporting a child from one district to another. However, hardworking school districts and county agencies are rarely — if ever — provided the resources needed to meet these needs in a dynamic and individualized way. As a result, while school districts grapple with meeting these needs amidst budget cuts, bus driver shortages, and more, vulnerable students often face the largest disruptions in transportation.

Why Taking a Private Vehicle Isn't Always Possible

Leasing or owning a private vehicle isn't as straightforward as it sounds. Many barriers prevent families from having a vehicle that allows them to transport their children to school, appointments, extracurriculars, and other critical parts of childhood. Below, we lay out some of the obstacles families must overcome to own or lease a car.



The high costs of personal vehicles

For a country made up of car-dependent communities, lack of vehicle ownership is a significant barrier to education, employment, social mobility, and access to essential services. However, the cost of buying a car has skyrocketed in recent years, leaving many families in a difficult position.

In fact, 80% of U.S. drivers feel they have “no choice but to use cars as much as they do” because viable alternatives simply don't exist. For low-income families who don't see another option, this is a serious problem that often means spending much higher proportions of their budgets on transportation. Recent data from the Bureau of Transportation shows that some households spend one-quarter of their entire budget on transportation, leaving cash-strapped families with little room for other essential expenses such as housing, food, and healthcare.



Lack of information can make keeping up with car maintenance difficult

Even when families do have access to a private vehicle, they may not have proper information on car insurance, registration policies, and maintenance requirements in their states. This information isn't readily available in one convenient area, and it can be confusing — particularly for families who already lack the time and disposable income to navigate these processes efficiently. Without readily available access to this information, these families may have a private vehicle that they can't safely and legally drive.



Limitations to safe and healthy walking, biking, and public transit in a car-centric society

There are a number of positive community and health benefits that arise when children have safe, healthy options for getting to school via walking, biking, or taking public transit. These include, but are not limited to, a deeper community connection, physical activity, and less air/noise pollution. However, our society's increasing reliance on cars, which has been perpetuated by urban planning that ignores pedestrian needs, has created a cycle where families feel that driving is the only safe alternative for getting their children to school.

A Safe Routes to School [report](#) found that as motor vehicle traffic increases, parents become more convinced that they must drive their kids to school to protect them. This move, in turn, adds more traffic and bottlenecks to already-congested roads, perpetuating safety concerns like traffic crashes and pedestrian hazards. It also has significant impacts on health, adding to noise and air pollution in the surrounding communities.

While safety remains a central barrier to walking and biking to school, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [highlighted](#) the

number one reason why many parents continue to drive: distance.

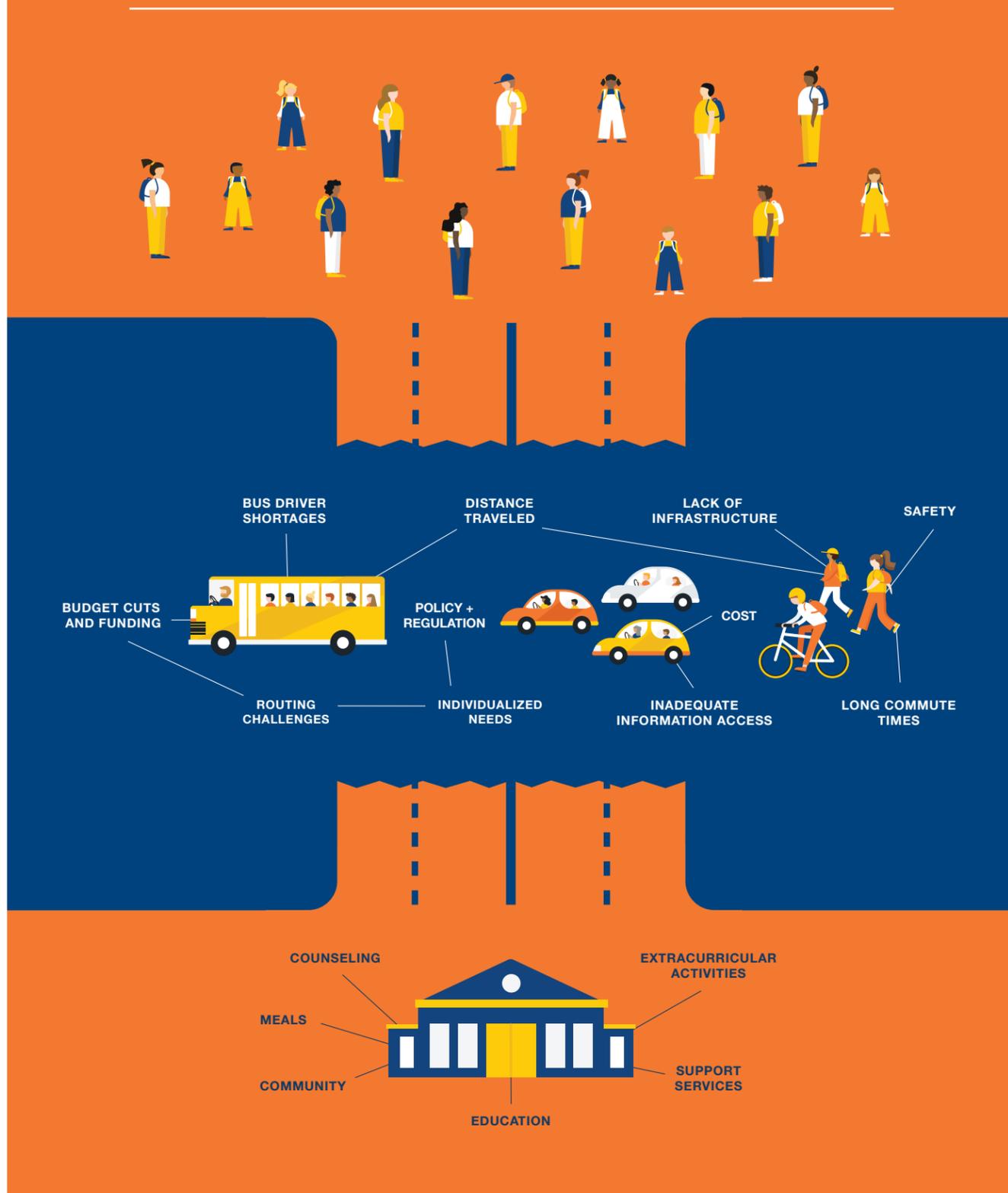
There are [systemic reasons](#) for this. Schools used to be at the center of communities, but starting in the 1970s, districts began building new schools toward the edge of communities, where land is often cheaper. Setting schools along the outskirts of communities, without also providing adequate infrastructure for safe walking or biking, has forced students and their families to travel farther distances, increasing reliance on private vehicles, school buses, and public transit. As a result, between 1969 and 2009, the number of children walking and biking to school decreased by 35%.

Even when distance isn't a factor, decades of systemic racism inherent in our highway planning have resulted in high-speed roads that divide communities and decrease safety, making walking and cycling unsafe. In fact, pedestrian fatalities have increased [62%](#) since 2009. These hazardous road conditions [disproportionately affect](#) marginalized neighborhoods, exacerbating social and economic inequalities while limiting residents' access to essential services and opportunities.

Although public transit can, in some instances, be a viable option — especially for older students traveling straightforward, short distances — that does not mean it is the safest or healthiest option for all. One Bay Area-based organization found, through work with focus groups, that girls [faced](#) incidents of sexual and verbal harassment on trains, in stations, and on walks to/from stations. So while public transportation is too often used as a necessary backup for school transportation, it's not always the best for all kids.



FORCES THAT BREAK DOWN TRANSPORTATION ACCESS AND CAUSE GAPS



Forces on the Community

The forces that affect access to safe, equitable transportation are deeply intertwined with broader decisions made by policymakers, government officials, and urban planners at the highest levels. The conditions they establish set the foundation upon which people build relationships with one another and their surroundings. In thriving communities, these bonds nurture interconnectedness among residents working together to strengthen their ties. However, without thoughtful deliberation and inclusive strategies, the bonds that tie individuals to their communities can weaken or break, further exacerbating existing inequalities and compromising safety for vulnerable populations.

Transit Inequities in Underserved Communities Have Existed for Decades

The concept of “Race and Place” plays a significant role in the many systemic inequities as it relates to viable, reliable, and consistent transportation options in systematically disenfranchised communities. These marginalized communities are often located in areas with limited public transportation options, which creates transit deserts that make these areas less walkable, dependent on private vehicle transportation, and often with inadequate public transportation services.

To better understand systemic inequities in transportation, we must look at the history of redlining, eminent domain, the construction of highways, and other discriminatory practices that continue to have a lasting impact on equitable access to student transportation in black and brown communities. These systemic inequities have created barriers that hinder the ability of students in historically disenfranchised areas to access quality transportation, which ultimately leads to increased disparities in education access and mobility.

Redlining, a practice that denied access to loans and housing based on race, has led to the segregation of communities along racial lines. As a result, these segregated clusters across the U.S. have resulted in some communities being located further away from schools and transportation hubs, making it more difficult for students in these underserved communities to access reliable transportation options. Students in redlined communities often face longer commute times or have limited access to transportation options. This

lack of access to reliable transportation can make it difficult for students to attend school consistently and participate in after-school activities, impacting their academic performance and overall well-being.

Furthermore, eminent domain, the practice of the government taking private property for public use, has also had a disproportionate impact on black and brown communities. The construction of highways and other public infrastructure projects in these communities has often resulted in the displacement of community residents, further exacerbating transportation challenges. Highways built as a result of eminent domain continue to divide neighborhoods and disrupt existing transportation infrastructure. This displacement can disrupt social networks and community ties, making it harder for students to access transportation options and support systems that are vital for academic success through transportation methods such as carpooling to get to school.

The systematic erasure of transportation in disenfranchised neighborhoods further perpetuates inequities in access to education. Often unchecked or just blatantly overlooked, systemic inequities within existing transportation infrastructures around the United States have historically led to displacement, lack of access, and barriers to equitable access in transportation — which has prevented educational access and equity that creates opportunity for all students, regardless of their race or place of residence.

Transportation isn't the only thing that's been affected; districts in [high-poverty areas](#) receive less funding than those in low-poverty areas. These shortcomings trickle down throughout the community, leaving children without the support and resources they need to thrive in their local schools.

As we'll dive deeper into later, consistently long commute times, expensive transportation methods, and lack of access to safe and reliable transportation can affect nearly every aspect of a person's physical, mental, emotional, and educational well-being — and this is true for students and their caregivers.



How and Where Kids Learn Is Changing

[Schools](#) have long been the heart of our communities. Beyond the educational opportunities they offer, schools are community hubs that nurture socialization and help children understand peers who may be different from them. However, the landscape of education is changing, and more and more families are seeking additional options for choices in education.

School choice, which allows students to attend schools beyond their local options, is one way to address disparities in educational quality and provide students with access to better opportunities. But what happens when a student's commute time increases substantially to attend their school of choice? A report published by [EdChoice](#) highlights how steps to close the gaps in education, like school choice, have actually widened gaps in transportation — potentially bringing the issue full circle.



THE DEVASTATING IMPACTS OF TRANSPORTATION DISRUPTIONS

Transportation is more than a means to an end that connects people from Point A to Point B. It opens up opportunities that most people don't understand until that lifeline is cut.

Severing transportation access for students and families interferes with every aspect of their lives, disrupting daily routines, limiting access to essential services, undermining educational opportunities, and worsening socioeconomic gaps. Those already facing vulnerabilities are especially at risk of heightened challenges, isolation, and marginalization. Cutting transportation abruptly leaves these populations with few, if any, alternatives, compounding the obstacles they already face and magnifying the short- and long-term effects on their lives.

As we examine how transportation disruptions to and from school, extracurricular activities, support services, and other critical experiences shape students' lives, we see the many impacts fall into three categories: Equity and Access, Well-Being, and Safety.

Equity and Access

When vulnerable populations struggle to access safe, reliable transportation, it can have a domino effect in their lives that widens educational inequities and heightens socioeconomic inequalities.

The breakdown in transportation can impede a student's ability to attend class regularly, setting off a chain reaction. When students consistently miss class due to transportation issues, they become more susceptible to chronic absenteeism.

Chronic Absenteeism and Widening Education Inequities

A student is generally considered chronically absent when they miss 10% or more of school days. This phenomenon has been a widespread issue for students of all ethnicities and backgrounds since before the pandemic, and chronic absenteeism rates remain heightened over pre-pandemic rates. However, vulnerable populations are at an increased risk of missing school, which widens inequities in education and beyond.

The Devastating Impacts of Transportation Disruptions

Some factors related to transportation barriers that lead to increased rates of chronic absenteeism include:



Distance

As discussed earlier, [distance and long commute times](#) can significantly impact a student's ability to consistently attend school. For students in rural areas or those relying on a bus to get to a school outside of their community, a missed bus often means a missed day of school.



Housing Insecurity

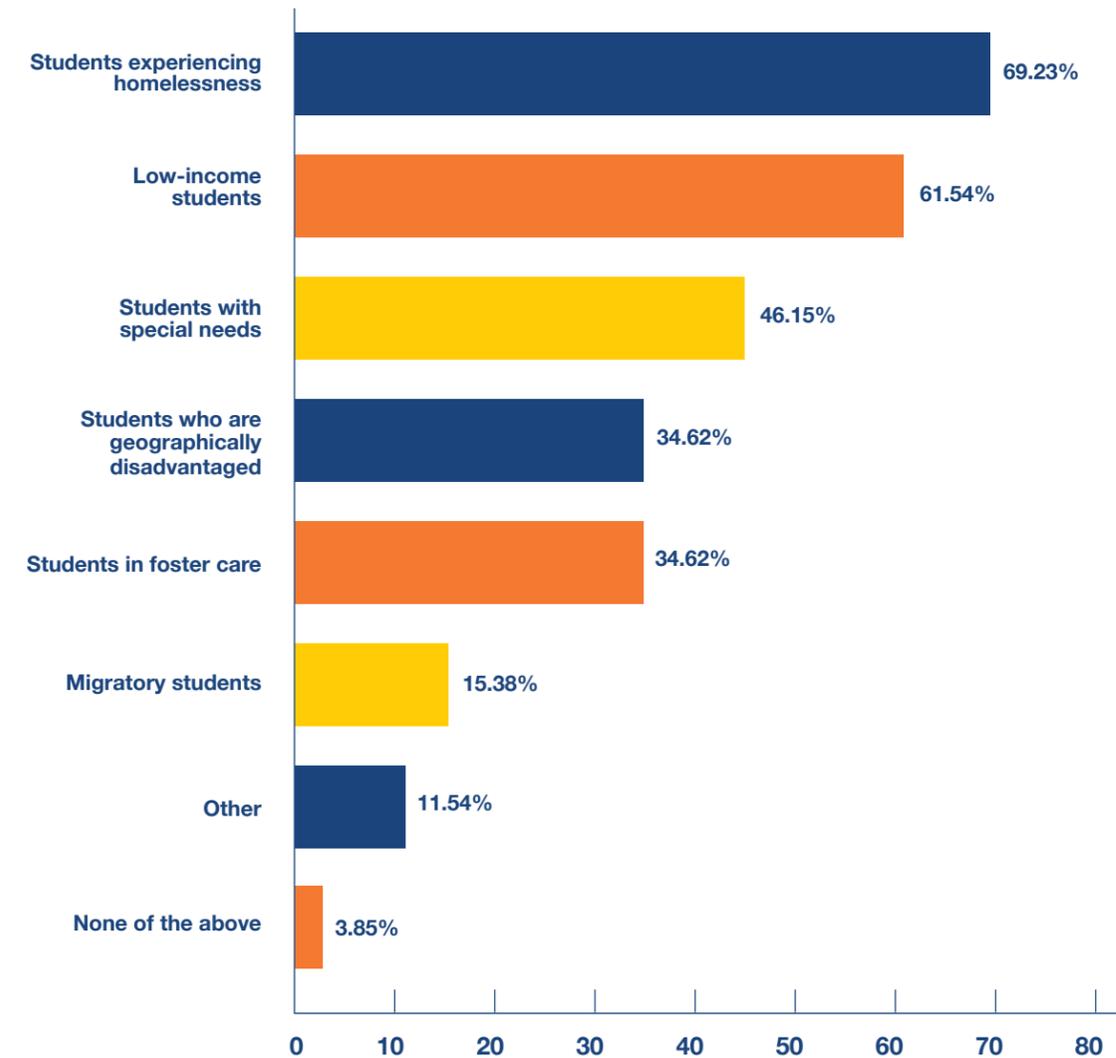
According to a [recent report](#), students experiencing homelessness are more than twice as likely to be chronically absent than their housed peers. The connection between unstable housing and chronic absenteeism is also prevalent for youth in foster care. In California, only [65%](#) of youth in foster care remain in the same school for most of the year, compared to 90% of their peers. These gaps can lead to lower academic performance and higher rates of chronic absenteeism for students who already face housing insecurity, changing placements, long commute times, and many other socioeconomic barriers.



Additional Factors

Students with disabilities are about [50% more likely](#) to be chronically absent than students without disabilities. Chronic absenteeism is also 15% more likely with English learners.

PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOL LEADERS WHO SAY THE FOLLOWING STUDENT POPULATIONS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE ABSENT COMPARED TO THE GENERAL STUDENT BODY*



*HopSkipDrive's 2023 State of School Transportation Report

Research shows that chronic absenteeism and frequent school changes during childhood can actually increase the [high school dropout rate](#) for youth in foster care, perpetuating a cycle of educational disadvantage and hindering their long-term success.

The ramifications of this disconnection extend beyond academics, influencing students' engagement in extracurricular activities, which are vital for social integration and personal development. As students become increasingly socially distant and disengaged, this can lead to broader societal challenges, including perpetual cycles of poverty, widening educational inequalities, the hindrance of social mobility, and increasing instances of court involvement. For example, children who are chronically absent between preschool and first grade are less [likely to read at grade level](#) by third grade than their peers. Chronic absenteeism may even be a greater predictor than test scores that a student will drop out of school.

In addition, as EATAC member Kim Dvorchak noted through the National Association Counsel for Children, children who are chronically absent have an increased risk of entering the juvenile [justice system](#). The earlier we address chronic absenteeism, the better chance we have of preventing its far-reaching consequences on a student's academic success and future opportunities.



Ensuring seamless, safe, and reliable school transportation promotes positive youth development and protects against unnecessarily punitive responses to absenteeism and school disengagement.

Kim Dvorchak

Chief Executive Officer, National Association Counsel for Children

Well-Being

School participation isn't the only aspect of education that lack of transportation affects. Going to school regularly also primes children for reaching important [social milestones](#), such as making friends, learning how to communicate with others, and meeting people who are different from them — all of which have a major impact on a student's overall well-being.

Transportation as a Bridge for Extracurriculars and Key Social Milestones

Without a mode of transportation to get to school, students also can't participate in extracurricular activities like sports, clubs, and other after-school programs, which play a vital role in their overall development and socialization. [A survey](#) of students in Burlington, Massachusetts, emphasized transportation's role in social and extracurricular activity participation.



Forty-five percent of students say they would participate in more activities if they had access to transportation – that says it all.

Katherine Bond

Liaison, Burlington High School Committee

While about 25% of students said they had taken the late bus to participate in after-school activities, the routes proved to be longer than usual and buses were often unavailable when needed most. Some students attempted to walk or bike to and from school, but many revealed there weren't enough crosswalks or sidewalks. Others said they felt unsafe walking through certain areas. Lack of safety and infrastructure remains a major reason why walking and biking have fallen out of favor as the top modes of school transportation, and without access to a private vehicle or reliable bus, students often can't participate in social activities beyond the classroom.

By stifling students' opportunities for social growth and extracurricular enrichment, poor transportation options deprive them of a well-rounded educational experience that prepares them for success in all facets of life.

Long Commute Times Negatively Affect Sleep, Exercise, and Overall Well-Being

Beyond limiting the ability to access essential educational opportunities, long commute times and unreliable transportation can take other mental and physical tolls on a student's life.

Some children, particularly students from low-income households, travel an hour or more to get to school. [Many rely on the bus](#) in major cities like New York or New Orleans, which can compound stress in an already-stressful situation for students and their families. When families are constantly in survival mode, navigating the maze of public transportation becomes yet another burden they have to take on.

One study found that [adding one minute](#) to a student's commute time led to a 1.3 minute reduction in sleep. That means a student who traveled 15 minutes longer than another would get 20 minutes less sleep each night. Along with getting less sleep, students who have longer commutes — especially if they take the bus — typically don't have as much time for physical activity. For many students, this activity comes in the form of extracurriculars — a critical part of being a child. Incorporating walking or cycling into a safe commute to school can compensate for the lack of physical activity and help children arrive ready to learn.

These extended commute times also impact learning outcomes. [Research](#) has also found

that longer commute times can harm attendance for many students, and even lead to higher rates of chronic absenteeism. The daily hurdles of reaching school can significantly add to the stress and strain experienced by students and their families, taking a toll on their overall well-being.

Safety Is Jeopardized

Breakdowns in transportation can leave children in unsafe situations, exposing them to undue risk. Transportation issues like the severe bus driver shortage, lack of private vehicle access, and hazardous walking or biking conditions can increase students' risks of crashes and harm. In fact, according to [one report](#), students who had to walk through unsafe conditions in areas of Chicago arrive at school in "high-alert mode," and the time needed to decompress can disrupt learning hours, hurting learning outcomes.



Creating a safe, equitable transportation system for our children will require us to meet kids and families where they are, understanding that no 'one-size-fits-all' solution can meet all needs. We must commit ourselves to ensuring that all children have access to safe, reliable means to get around, whether in a motor vehicle, by transit, on foot, or by bicycle.

Torine Creppy
President, Safe Kids Worldwide

Students Left Stranded

Unfortunately, numerous children and families have seen the impacts of school bus driver shortages when schools have worked hard to find solutions. In some of the most extreme cases, like in Jefferson County, Kentucky (referenced earlier in this report), rearranging buses into new routes left children stranded and delayed in getting home. In Palm Springs, reducing routes left many students waiting at their bus stops, arriving more than an hour late to school. While these are some of the most extreme cases, a shortage of bus drivers has led to delays or canceled routes, impacting vulnerable students most given compounding factors like living further from school distance, reduced access to personal vehicles, and more. In these moments, sole parents and caregivers, foster parents, and parents without stable work schedules are left scrambling to identify alternative transportation methods, which can make arranging childcare, maintaining employment, and ensuring their children’s safety extremely difficult.

Increase in Traffic Crashes

Grants awarded by the [Governors Highway Safety Association \(GHSA\)](#) underscore the need



Our youngest road users have a right to be safe on the road even if a car isn’t part of their journey. Unfortunately, dangerous driving and poor or missing infrastructure mean youth are at risk every time they walk, bike, scoot or skateboard near motor vehicles.

Jonathan Adkins

Chief Executive Officer, Governors Highway Safety Association

for safer transportation options and road conditions for youth in the United States. Traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for the country’s youth, and both deaths and injuries rose significantly in 2021, according to the most recent data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Poor road safety outcomes are particularly prevalent in underserved communities and disadvantaged areas with limited resources — and our youth are paying the price.

Fostering a safe environment for students to get to and from school will take more than simply optimizing routes and hiring more bus drivers. There are a variety of factors — from bus stop lighting and location, transportation infrastructure, distracted driving, and expanded safe transportation options — that need to be addressed to provide students and their families with safety and peace of mind.

These disparities in transportation access not only limit students’ ability to reach school and essential destinations but also perpetuate broader inequities in society. By addressing these systemic issues and prioritizing equitable transportation solutions, we can work toward creating a more just and inclusive society where every child has the opportunity to thrive.



Where a student lives or how they choose to get around shouldn’t dictate whether they can get to their destination safely. Together, we can improve roadway safety for all students, whether they’re in a motor vehicle, using their feet, or riding on wheels.

Kerry Chausmer

Programs and Member Services Director, Governors Highway Safety Association





CONCLUSION

Conclusion

In examining the intricate web of factors influencing how children get to school and the repercussions of transportation disparities, it's evident that no force stands on its own. Each factor's interconnected nature underscores the need for holistic solutions that not only address transportation infrastructure but also extend far beyond logistics. Transportation disruptions impede access to education, exacerbate existing socioeconomic inequalities, jeopardize safety, hinder socialization opportunities, and perpetuate systemic discrimination.

The inequities in transportation access also reflect broader societal disparities, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage for marginalized communities. These disparities — many of which are rooted in historical injustices and systemic discrimination — must be addressed through a multifaceted approach that prioritizes equitable transportation solutions; challenges urban planning norms; and advocates for policy changes promoting safety, accessibility, and inclusivity.

As we navigate the complexities of transportation access and its impact on educational outcomes, we must center the voices of those most affected, and collaborate across sectors to develop solutions that address the root causes of transportation disparities. By fostering a safe, reliable, and inclusive transportation system, we can empower all children to access the education, opportunities, and resources they need to thrive, fostering a more just and equitable society for generations to come.

In our next report, we'll highlight potential solutions aimed at addressing these barriers and ensuring equitable transportation access for all students.



EATAC

EQUITABLE ACCESS TO TRANSPORTATION
ADVISORY COUNCIL