

# Finding Meaning in Politics: When Victims Become Activists

Regina Bateson

Victimization is often associated with increased political participation, and victims are influential political actors in many countries around the world. 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? Based on ethnographic research with Families for Safe Streets, a group of victims-turned-activists in New York City, this article advances a new explanation for victims' participation in politics. I propose that for some victims, meaning-making is an in-process benefit of activism. My inductive research suggests three ways victims find meaning in politics. First, through their activism, victims can re-conceptualize the losses and harms they have suffered as policy problems, rather than random, inexplicable events. Victims may also seek to help others by changing laws to prevent similar tragedies from recurring, and some victims see their activism as a way of fulfilling important obligations to their communities, their families, and their deceased relatives.

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 Hsi-Pei Liao were not particularly active in politics. But in the months following Allison's death, Amy and Hsi-Pei spoke at rallies and press conferences, met with elected officials, and joined other victims of traffic violence to form a new advocacy organization, Families for Safe Streets. In collaboration with other activists, they embarked on a city- and statewide lobbying campaign, and within a year 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 Hsi-Pei'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. At the community level, high rates of violence can depress political participation (Trelles and Carreras 2012; Ley 2018; Condra et al. 2018; Córdova 2019). Yet at the individual level, personal experiences of victimization are often associated with increased civic engagement. Whether they have experienced wartime violence (Blattman 2009; Bellows and Miguel 2009; Bauer et al. 2016), crimes (Bateson 2012; Rojo Mendoza 2014; Sønderkov et al. 2022; Denny et al. 2024), political repression (Lupu and Pesaiikhin 2017), natural disasters (Sinclair, Hall, and Alvarez 2011), or serious illnesses (Jennings and Andersen 2003; Crisman 2020), victims tend to be more politically active than their peers.

To be clear, context matters, and the relationship between victimization and participation is not always positive (e.g., Coupé and Obrizan 2016; Córdova 2019). For instance, electoral violence can discourage voting (Collier and Vicente 2014; Condra et al. 2018; Birch, Daxecker, and Höglund 2020). Furthermore, people react heterogeneously to harm, violence, and loss: some reject the term “victim” in favor of “survivor” (Cole 2006, 2-3), while others disavow their victimhood altogether (Lacerda 2016; Acosta 2021).<sup>1</sup>

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doi:10.1017/S1537592724000872

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However, many people do self-identify as victims, and they play an important role in politics on both the left<sup>2</sup> and the right.<sup>3</sup> More than abstract facts or statistics, personal stories shape policy decisions (Newman 2003, 1426)—and victims speak with a moral authority no one can deny.<sup>4</sup> But despite their outsized impact, we know relatively little about the lived experiences and motivations underlying victims' activism. Victims-turned-activists are often described as “turning their grief into action,”<sup>5</sup> but how exactly does that happen?

In some ways, victims' activism traces a well-trodden path: people experience a harm or injustice, develop a grievance, and join together to take action.<sup>6</sup> Consistent with the social movements literature, resources for mobilization (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977; Jenkins 1983), political opportunity structures (Tarrow 2022, 140-146; Meyer 2004), and framing processes (Snow et al. 1986; Benford and Snow 2000) influence when and where victims' movements emerge. And as with most forms of political participation, socio-economic status (Verba and Nie 1972), civic skills, time, and money (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995) affect which victims get involved. However, these structural and demographic factors offer few insights into victims' perspectives and agency (Jenkins 1983, 530; Morris 2000)—in particular, how victims understand their own activism, and what moves them to pursue such a costly form of political engagement.

To gain traction on victims' political participation, researchers sometimes draw on post-traumatic growth theory (e.g., Blattman 2009). 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 account for victims' activism, for two reasons.

First, post-traumatic growth is very common, to the point that it would seem to over-predict victims' activism. Tedeschi estimates between one-half and two-thirds of people who experience trauma will subsequently report post-traumatic growth (quoted in Collier 2016).<sup>7</sup> Second, post-traumatic growth does not necessarily imply greater civic engagement. 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). Post-traumatic growth does not map neatly onto specific preferences or behaviors (Lowe, Carpenter, and Matthews 2020); it can manifest in many ways, including career changes, renewed spirituality, and deeper relationships with friends and family.

Compared to these avenues for post-traumatic growth, “direct, face-to-face adversarial politics is intimidating and

alienating for many citizens” (Woliver 1993, 4). To be sure, personal commitments can move people to action, even in the face of considerable obstacles (Han 2009). But for victims, the costs of advocacy are extraordinarily high: they tell and re-tell one of the most devastating experiences of their lives; parry with unsympathetic officials and commentators; and face stinging, deeply personal rebukes.

So why do victims sometimes wade into the rough-and-tumble world of politics? Based on ethnographic fieldwork with Families for Safe Streets, a group of victims-turned-activists in New York City, this article advances a new explanation for victims' activism. Politics, I argue, offers victims unique ways of finding meaning in the tragedies they have suffered. Building on Wood's (2001, 2003) and Bayard de Volo's (2006, 2007) research on the emotional benefits that can arise during collective action, I propose that for some victims, meaning-making is an in-process benefit of activism.

Scholars of social movements have long recognized that activism necessarily entails constructing new meanings about the social and political world (Kurzban 2008, 6; Tarrow 2022, 121-139; Polletta 1998, 422). I extend this idea to argue that activism can also enable victims to find meaning in their personal trauma. Indeed, meaning-making plays an important role in deepening and sustaining some victims' involvement in politics, fostering their development into dedicated activists.

Working inductively, I identify three types of meaning-making among the members of Families for Safe Streets. First, activism helps the group members reconceptualize their experiences as policy problems, constructing new causal stories that render their losses explicable and comprehensible, rather than random and meaningless. Second, by pushing for policy changes, the members of Families for Safe Streets find meaning in the belief they are helping others and preventing similar tragedies from recurring. Third, activism allows the group members to fulfill important obligations. Some feel a duty to be good public representatives of their families and communities. Others see their activism as fulfilling obligations to deceased loved ones—living as they would have wished, honoring their values, and creating lasting social change in their memories.

Families for Safe Streets is composed of people whose loved ones were struck and killed by drivers while walking or cycling, as well as a smaller contingent of people injured in crashes. While this research may offer insights into other victims' activism, the group members' experiences are context-specific, subjective, and socially constructed. Moreover, Families for Safe Streets operates in a consolidated democracy, and its activism does not risk sparking state repression or retaliatory violence. Caution is warranted before generalizing to other groups of victims-turned-activists, especially in authoritarian or conflict settings (as in Zulver 2022 and Javeline 2023). My hope

is that this is the first of many projects on the mechanisms underlying victims' activism, not the last word on the subject.

In this article, I begin by introducing the data, methodological approach, and case study context. Then I describe the group members' pathways to mobilization, and I illustrate the costs of their activism. Next, I present the idea of meaning-making as an in-process benefit of victims' activism, and I discuss three ways the members of Families for Safe Streets find meaning in politics. Subsequently, I consider generalizability and scope conditions, as well as several caveats and directions for future research. I conclude by reflecting on the persistence and intensity of victims' participation in politics.

## Data and Methods

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork with Families for Safe Streets, including 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. I conducted this research intermittently over 18 months, while Families for Safe Streets was being established.

### Research Design

This project intentionally focuses on victims who have become politically active; it is not a comparative study of participants and non-participants. Other researchers (e.g., Javeline 2023) have profitably employed large-N data to understand who, among a population of victims, becomes politically active. Here, I make a different contribution: I use an ethnographic, interpretive approach to explore the experiences and perspectives of those victims who choose to mobilize—"to glean the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality" (Schatz 2009, 5). This research design is appropriate if we seek to understand the worldviews and motivations of a group of people whose agency and beliefs are driving important policy outcomes. After all, political science is not just about "macro structures, large processes, or social institutions, but also about people: living, breathing, flesh and blood, real people" (Shehata 2014, 209). This project offers a glimpse of the "insider perspectives" (Bayard de Volo and Schatz 2004, 267-8) of a group of victims-turned-activists, using ethnography to "see inside" a movement (Fu and Simmons 2021, 1699). Empirically, I pursue this goal through two inter-related types of fieldwork: participant observation and in-depth interviews.

### 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 two to twelve hours. The participant observation allowed close "access to participants' experiences—of grief and fear, monotony and exhaustion, or solidarity and laughter" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 65). Even downtime was informative (Wedeen 2010, 256). Whether carpooling or sharing a meal together, informal interactions increased my exposure to the research setting (Small and Calarco 2022, 18-20) and shed light on group members' dark humor, camaraderie, and patterns of self-reflection.

Although I am not a New Yorker, I am a parent and cyclist, which facilitated rapport with Families for Safe Streets. The group members knew I was a researcher interested in how and why victims become active in politics, and I sought their consent before beginning this project and before attending events. But like Curry (2015, 211-212), I found it impractical to introduce myself to everyone I encountered in the field. So I identified myself as a researcher to non-group members only when we had extended conversations. My participant observation was 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, but I did not have any formal role within Families for Safe Streets.

### Interviews

My fieldwork 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.<sup>8</sup> These interviews were intertwined with my participant observation, which provided the contextual knowledge and interpersonal trust needed to elicit rich, detailed reflections. The participant observation also helped me perceive "meta-data" (Fujii 2010) and see "how individual comments fit together as parts of a more meaningful whole" (Soss 2014, 162).

The interviews were open-ended but consistently covered several themes: prior involvement in politics, recruitment and mobilization, experiences with traffic safety advocacy, and the challenges and rewards of activism. The participants gave written consent and had the opportunity to provide feedback on this article. One asked to be identified with a pseudonym, but as in Staggenborg (2020, 219-220) most wanted to use their full names—a choice I have respected here.

Although grief and loss are sensitive subjects, 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 from a posture of care and compassion (Ellis 2017). None of the participants became distressed—perhaps because they already had experience speaking about their ordeal, and months to years had passed since their loss or injury.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, bereaved individuals can find it beneficial to reflect on their experiences (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). The participants' tears never seemed to reflect panic, fear, or despair. Rather, they 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 the same 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 200 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 being hit by vehicles (City of New York 2022).<sup>10</sup>

In recent decades, New Yorkers have vigorously demanded safer streets. 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. The momentum intensified under Mayor Bill de Blasio, who had embraced Vision Zero during his campaign. Vision Zero, which originated in Sweden, is a package of policy reforms and design strategies to reduce pedestrian and cyclist fatalities to zero.<sup>11</sup> Upon de Blasio's inauguration in January 2014, the new administration worked aggressively to make Vision Zero a reality, and officials like Transportation Commissioner Polly Trottenberg allied themselves with the traffic safety community—including Transportation Alternatives (TA), the oldest pedestrian and cyclist advocacy organization in New York City.<sup>12</sup>

Against this favorable political and organizational backdrop (Tarrow 2022, 140-145; Meyer 2004), a new set of actors emerged in 2013 and 2014: the victims of crashes. Some intrepid victims had previously spoken out, but they had never coalesced into a movement. Eventually those early activists “just tired out, really; it was a different moment in that time.”<sup>13</sup> By 2013, however, TA's growth

and de Blasio's enthusiasm for Vision Zero had created a “perfect storm.”<sup>14</sup> So when tragedy struck the Liao and several other families, they did something unprecedented: they banded together and became advocates for traffic safety. By February 2014, this nascent group of victims-turned-activists had a name: Families for Safe Streets.

### 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 receptive, and Mary Beth began speaking at press conferences, TA events, and city council hearings.

Less than a year later, 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 succession. Two days after Allison Liao's death, a driver hit 12-year-old Sammy Cohen Eckstein in Brooklyn, on the edge of Prospect Park. A partner at the law firm representing the Liao happened to know the Cohen Ecksteins, and he realized both families had lost children under eerily similar circumstances. 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.

Soon, social networks (Dorff 2017; Ley 2022) and groups like Make Queens Safer and Make Brooklyn Safer helped the Liaos and the Cohen Ecksteins meet others 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 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 [Department of Transportation]. 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.

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 "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 Hsi-Pei Liao replied. "He was just incredible," Judy remembers. "I mean, it was like, 'Oh my God, he actually understands.'"

The families started having regular conference calls, forming an incipient organization. They demonstrated at Bill de Blasio's inauguration and organized a vigil for the anniversary of Ella Bandes' death. Then in early February, Amy Cohen secured a meeting space, and a professional facilitator helped about 35 family members set priorities. Some participants were overwhelmed by the grief in the room. As one recounted, 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."<sup>15</sup>

On February 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. Bearing photos of their loved ones, family members came forward to tell their stories. Tears flowed, both onstage and among the assembled journalists.<sup>16</sup>

In the months that followed, the members of Families for Safe Streets met with officials, testified at hearings, and worked to pass laws related to traffic safety. Underscoring the importance of institutional resources (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977), Families for Safe Streets did not have to apply for nonprofit status because they were able to raise funds as a program of TA.<sup>17</sup> TA served as an "influential ally" (Tarrow 2022, 145-146) for Families for Safe Streets,

securing permits for events, connecting family members with elected officials, and even hiring lobbyists at key moments.

By March 2014, Families for Safe Streets was a key 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: from the "hurrying human tides" in Walt Whitman's "Broadway" (1888, line 1) to the New York minute, speed has long been romanticized as part of the city's culture, identity, and allure.<sup>18</sup>

The speed limit campaign was also complicated by Albany's control over New York City. State law sets 30 m.p.h. as the default speed limit in urban areas across New York. To adopt a lower speed limit, New York City needed the approval of the Assembly and the Senate, casting the issue as yet another downstate versus upstate power struggle.<sup>19</sup> All spring, Families for Safe Streets walked the halls of Albany, lobbying for New York City to be allowed to lower its speed limit. Despite considerable opposition, the necessary bills cleared both houses in June, and on November 7, 2014, New York City's default speed limit dropped to 25 m.p.h. Families for Safe Streets had scored their first major victory, and they rocketed to prominence as "a heroic club that no one wants to join" (Reeves 2014).

## The Puzzle of Victims' Activism

Although Families for Safe Streets' first campaign was successful, the path to that outcome was anything but smooth. Consider the experience of lobbying in the Empire State Plaza, which looms over downtown Albany. The vibe is *Jetsons* meets the Rust Belt: elevated highways arc between crumbling industrial buildings to deposit vehicles into the belly of the Death Star-like complex.<sup>20</sup> 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, with little hope of food or rest.<sup>21</sup> But for Families for Safe Streets, lobbying is 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."<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, when group members meet with legislators, organize press conferences, or testify at hearings, they run the risk their loved ones could be blamed for their own deaths. When Judy Kottick and Ken Bandes attended a community meeting after the death of their daughter, Ella, the police spoke, and they

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—whose nine-year-old son, Cooper Stock, was struck and killed by a taxi driver—recalls testifying at 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 know basic traffic laws, which "really, really upset me very much.... I was furious." Dana wondered, "who are these people who are voting?" and "felt devastated." Meanwhile, Aaron Charlop-Powers, whose mother was killed cycling in the Bronx, finds it difficult to share a "gut-wrenching story" with elected officials who are "visibly disinterested":

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 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 out of synch with the mundane, dental-office-like surroundings. "Killed." "Run over." Voices rose. The pleading became anxious and desperate, but the official's responses were terse and guarded. Soon the group poured out, emotions exploding in the hallway. "He doesn't fucking support 20 m.p.h.!" Their ask seemed both obvious and urgent, yet he'd said no. The group was incredulous: after all their preparation, and after a heart-pounding tense conversation, they'd gotten nowhere.<sup>23</sup>

Why do the members of Families for Safe Streets voluntarily put themselves in these situations? Unlike most activists, the members of Families for Safe Streets did not come together through shared passions, but rather due to "bad circumstances."<sup>24</sup> For Hsi-Pei Liao, their work feels like "climbing a mountain," except "it's a mountain you never wanted to climb in the first place." So why do it?

For some members, social networks facilitated their mobilization.<sup>25</sup> In the Bronx, Belkys Rivera had known Councilmember Ydanis Rodriguez for years. When Belkys' son Josbel was killed in a hit-and-run, Ydanis was among the first people to come to the family's apartment. As Belkys told me, "Ydanis was there with us from the beginning; he never abandoned us."<sup>26</sup> Ydanis helped Belkys communicate with the prosecutors and police, and he invited her to join Vision Zero meetings at City Hall, which is how Belkys connected with Families for Safe Streets.

In Brooklyn, meanwhile, the Cohen Ecksteins lived in a neighborhood "teeming with journalists and politicians"<sup>27</sup> and attended the same "teeny-tiny" synagogue as Councilmember Brad Lander. When Sammy was killed, Amy e-mailed Brad, who 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 public relations firm and arranged meetings with U.S. Representative Caroline Maloney and New York State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver. One day, Amy Cohen even happened to spot U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer on the sidewalk. A truck barreled by at what seemed like 60 m.p.h., 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?'"<sup>28</sup>

Amy's chance encounter was productive but anomalous; most other members of Families with Safe Streets were less immersed in the world of politics. To be sure, Judy Kottick and Ken Bandes had phonebanked for Barack Obama and demonstrated against the Vietnam War. Rebecca,<sup>29</sup> a crash survivor, also volunteered for Obama and went to reproductive rights rallies with her family. And when Mary Beth Kelly suggested Families for Safe Streets charter buses to Albany, she was inspired by memories of bussing to antiwar marches in her youth. But others were turned off from politics, aside from voting.<sup>30</sup> As Dana Lerner said:

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.

Likewise, Lizi Rahman describes herself as "not a political person.... I'm not interested in politics, at all." 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.... Except for now. After this, I've changed."

What accounts for this transformation? Aggrieved people typically join social movements when they have longstanding ideological or issue commitments and pre-existing relationships with fellow activists and relevant organizations (Klandermans and Oegema 1987; McAdam 1986, 1988). McAdam further suggests individuals are "biographically available" for high-cost activism when they have few constraints and commitments (see also McAdam 1988, 44-45, 53, 55; Wiltfang and McAdam 1991; Petrie 2004; and Beyerlein and Hipp 2006). Neither of these theories align well with the experiences of the members of Families for Safe Streets, who have hurtled themselves into a new type of activism at an especially taxing time in their lives.

The members of Families for Safe Streets sometimes say they value their advocacy because it helps them keep busy,

and because they find mutual support in the group (echoing Bayard de Volo 2006). Although the members were previously strangers, to some extent they have developed a collective identity as “their political activity itself provides ... solidarity” (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 291). Additionally, their activism 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. That said, the members of Families for Safe Streets also find social support, belonging, and remembrance outside politics, in less conflictual realms such as the arts, religious communities, and bereavement support groups.<sup>31</sup>

The specific appeal of Families for Safe Streets, by contrast, is that it is focused on policy change. Amy Tam-Liao remembers that after her daughter Allison was killed, she Googled to see how parents memorialize their children. She learned 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. Amy wanted to do something more, something different.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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 2023). The members of Families for Safe Streets sometimes express anger 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 feel outraged when crashes happen again and again, and anger seems to play a role in motivating them to prevent similar harms to others. But as in Gould (2009), the full spectrum of emotions is present within Families for Safe Streets, not just rage.

More commonly, the group members’ conversations are marked by the reflection, rumination, and introspection typical of post-traumatic growth. In fact, some group members explicitly frame their involvement in Families for Safe Streets as a form of post-traumatic growth, which they are aware of because they work in social services or counseling, or because they read about it. In 2013, a van hit and seriously injured Lindsay Motlin while she was walking in Brooklyn. Explaining why she participates in Families for Safe Streets, Lindsay 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, how would this lead them

to become activists? For the members of Families for Safe Streets, the answer appears to lie in the importance of finding meaning after loss and trauma.

## Finding Meaning in Politics

In Wedeen’s conceptualization, meaning-making is “the way that people attempt to make apparent, observable sense of their worlds—to themselves and to each other—in emotional and cognitive terms” (2002: 721). Meaning-making is relevant for anyone “confronting highly stressful life events” (Park 2010, 257), but all the more so for victims of sudden, paradigm-shattering events (Davis et al. 2000, 517; Lichtenthal et al. 2013, 327; Park 2010). After a traumatic event, meaning-making and post-traumatic growth often occur concurrently; the two processes are complementary. Among trauma victims, meaning-making typically has two components: sense-making and benefit-finding (Lichtenthal et al. 2013). Some victims do not search for meaning (Davis et al. 2000; Bonanno 2013, 152), but many do—and politics offers them unique ways of finding meaning in their experiences.

For some victims-turned-activists, I propose that meaning-making is an in-process benefit of activism. Wood (2001, 2003) and Bayard de Volo (2006, 2007) show how emotional in-process benefits—such as mutual support, pride, and agency—can arise from, motivate, and sustain participation in social movements.<sup>34</sup> Bayard de Volo emphasizes that emotional in-process benefits produce “profound” and “valuable” changes among the participants themselves (2006, 152-3). In effect, “personal transformation can be an outcome of participation in collective attempts at social transformation” (Bayard de Volo 2006, 150).

Meaning-making is not purely emotional, but it is a similarly transformative in-process benefit that can emerge during activism. Meaning-making is social and relational (Wedeen 2002, 717; Klass and Steffen 2017, 8), and in an activist group, victims find a supportive, likeminded community with whom to debate, acknowledge each other’s feelings, and even entertain “silly fantasies” (Graeber 2009, 12). Furthermore, victims of trauma often make meaning through *action* (Hobfoll et al. 2007). As Bonanno explains, “sometimes meaning is to be found not in cognition about meaning, but in behaviors that are meaningful” (2013, 152). By creating a space that is social and action-oriented, grassroots activism offers fertile terrain for victims to find meaning. My research with Families for Safe Streets suggests three ways these meaning-making processes can unfold.

## Policy Context

Before tragedy struck their families, the members of Families for Safe Streets had never seriously considered traffic safety as a policy problem. As Mary Beth Kelly

observes, most people do not follow these issues closely —“and until this happened to us, we didn’t either!” For example, although the Cohen Ecksteins enjoyed cycling and were TA members,<sup>35</sup> Amy Cohen told me she “really had no idea people died by cars. I had no idea.”

Over time, however, the members of Families for Safe Streets have become self-taught experts. They compile crash statistics. They exchange articles. They study and do research, to the point that they can speak extemporaneously about Barnes Dance crossings, red light cameras, and S-1 Guards (which Debbie Marks Kahn enthusiastically calls “cow catchers” for buses).

Activism is not just about changing policies; it is also a process of growth and learning. Families for Safe Streets’ work often places them in settings where they hear technical briefings and see street design proposals—like in November 2014, at the Vision Zero for Cities Symposium. Throughout a large wood-paneled lecture hall at Brooklyn Law School, heads snapped to attention when the group members took the stage. But Families for Safe Streets was not just there to share their stories; they were also there to listen. As they watched presentations and mingled with academics, engineers, and policymakers, their notepads quickly filled with diagrams of intersections, lessons from Sweden, and updates from the de Blasio administration.<sup>36</sup>

Marinating in these policy discussions changes how the members of Families for Safe Streets understand their own experiences. Sometimes new knowledge just deepens their outrage.<sup>37</sup> But it can also expand their notion of the possible. Hsi-Pei Liao recalls feeling inspired when fellow group members told him about the latest developments in Europe. He thought, “If Sweden is able to [implement Vision Zero], we should join them. London, they’re going to make this big rally; let’s figure out how to make that happen!”

Learning new information also situates personal experiences as part of broader trends. Dana Lerner remembers sitting at her first Families for Safe Streets meeting, looking around, and realizing, “This happens. This has happened to other people. Other people have gone through this.” Similarly, Rebecca felt being hit by a car was *sui generis*. But then she met another crash survivor at a Families for Safe Streets meeting, and “it became like, ‘Oh, this happens all the time, all over the place.’”

The more the group members learn, the more they see that crashes are not random, unavoidable accidents.<sup>38</sup> Rather, they are “caused by human actions and amenable to human intervention” (Stone 1989, 281). This reframing contributes to meaning-making in two ways. First, when a victim constructs a coherent narrative with a plot, they are creating a story with a meaningful internal logic (Polletta 1998, 421). Second and more significantly, new causal narratives recast their experiences as public policy problems, with discernable causes and potential solutions.

For Ken Bandes, a major shift occurred at a press conference with Mayor-Elect de Blasio:

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 began 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 activism. Once Ken 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*

The members of Families for Safe Streets differ in many ways, yet they all feel driven to stop similar harms from befalling others. As Harold Kahn explains:

If we can hope for another family not going through what we’ve had to go through, that’s—we don’t have a lot of money, but this is something important. . . . No one should go through this. I know; I read the local paper all the time. And you would read stories: this one [struck by a vehicle], that one . . . 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.

Combined with an understanding of crashes as the preventable result of bad policies, the feeling of “never again” is both a powerful impetus to act and a way of finding meaning in a tragic loss. As Belkys Rivera told me, she keeps “fighting to change these laws, so what happened to me doesn’t happen to another mother.”

People who have experienced trauma tend to feel empathy for those suffering similar harms (Staub and Vollhardt 2008, 275; Vollhardt 2009: 68-70, Lichtenhal et al. 2013, 336), and group members often say they feel a special responsibility to prevent crashes like the ones they experienced. Rebecca remembers the day she came home, and her parents told her a child, Cooper Stock, had been killed by a taxi driver 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 “e-mails to random politicians, like, ‘Can I work in your office?’ Just trying to find something, some way to be involved.” But nothing came of it. Then when Cooper 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.<sup>39</sup>

Beyond Rebecca's experience, the pace and proximity of crashes in New York City spurred multiple group members' activism. Aaron Charlop-Powers felt compelled to act when he saw crashes happening

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.

Lindsay Motlin agreed: "You don't want to this to happen to other people, ... [but] it just keeps happening, so I feel responsible to, like, be part of the movement." Speaking intensely, 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.

These feelings align with the idea of altruism born of suffering, which suggests that "one of the ways to derive meaning from suffering is to help others" (Staub and Vollhardt 2008, 275). Consequently, victims may take "action in the social world to mitigate similar losses for others" (Lichtenthal et al. 2013, 336).

Several interviewees explicitly rejected the notion that everything happens for a reason, but survivors Lindsay Motlin and Rebecca consciously try to use their new perspective to help others. And for bereaved families, working to prevent further harm is a way of imbuing a tragic event with a note of hope. In 2008, a truck hit Asif Rahman while he was biking on Queens Boulevard—a road so dangerous, it is known as the "Boulevard of Death." After her son was killed, Lizi Rahman resolved:

If we get a bike lane, it will be [Asif's] way of helping other people. ... A bike lane is going to help save lives.... I want to see it done before I die, I'm really telling you that.<sup>40</sup>

By shifting the emphasis to helping others, activism offers the possibility of writing a new ending to one of the worst chapters of victims' lives—and sometimes, it works. For Mary Beth Kelly, activism provided a renewed sense of optimism amidst death and devastation. After her husband Carl was killed, she realized that she "could influence whether or not this happens to other people," which was "energizing" for her. As pedestrian deaths dropped in the years after New York adopted Vision Zero,<sup>41</sup> 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 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 sometimes marvel at the leadership and initiative they've been able to undertake, asserting themselves in spaces previously closed to them.<sup>42</sup> For example, Greg Thompson Jr. 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 when 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 experience more of a sense of agency. Previously, he explains:

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.

Personal growth and agency are themes echoed by several group members, but even more emphatically, they understand their work as fulfilling obligations to others. Some group members feel a duty to be good public representatives of their families and communities. Amy Tam-Liao and Hsi-Pei Liao feel "a bit of pressure" to represent the Chinese-American community well. Relatedly, Greg Thompson Jr., who is Black, feels a responsibility to represent his "sister and the rest of his family properly." After 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.... 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.

Yet the same time, Greg also decided to participate to fulfil 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.” 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.

For Greg, Renee's death was a “waste of potential,” and if he can represent “what legacy she would have built, then I feel like I'm doing my job as a big brother.”

As Greg thinks about and participates in politics, he is in dialogue with his sister's values and interests, actively considering how she would want him to act. This is consistent with Klass, Silverman, and Nickman's (1996) theory of “continuing bonds,” which argues that people often maintain bonds with deceased loved ones—and doing so enhances meaning-making (Klass and Steffen 2017, 9).

In this vein, activism helps Aaron Charlop-Powers find meaning by acting as his mother, Meg Charlop, would have wished. Meg was a community organizer and public health advocate. After she was killed, the city dedicated a street to her; it is called “Meg Charlop Way.” His voice heavy with emotion, Aaron told me he often thinks 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.” Reflecting on his mother's values, Aaron said he has come to realize

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 sees her activism as furthering the values and dreams of her daughter, Ella. Through tears, Judy 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.

For Judy, activism allows her to make meaning by feeling close to her daughter, acting in accordance with her goals, and creating positive change in her memory. Likewise, Gary Eckstein explained that although advocacy is hard, it makes him feel

that Sammy's death wasn't in vain, that something good could come of it, and that we can make a difference in his memory.... That's certainly a piece of it, a big piece of it for me. I mean, I struggle with the fact that he had a lot to offer the world, and he's not here to do it. So it's up to us to do it for him.

## Beyond Families for Safe Streets

Although this project privileges depth over breadth, insights from Families for Safe Streets may shed light on other victims' activism. Two questions can help assess whether and where these findings might generalize: First, which types of victimization and political contexts are most comparable to Families for Safe Streets? Second, do similar processes of meaning-making occur among other victims-turned-activists?

### Close Comparisons

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) is perhaps the most obvious analog to Families for Safe Streets, and the members of Families for Safe Streets sometimes draw on the example of MADD.<sup>43</sup> However, there are also parallels with a broader range of bereaved families in democratic societies who have suffered sudden, traumatic, seemingly preventable losses that are not intensely politicized. Events like drug overdoses (Chiwetelu and Dineen 2021; Titlestad et al. 2021, 515-6), unsafe consumer products,<sup>44</sup> suicide (Weale 2022; Three Dads 2021), plane crashes (MacGillis 2019; Jackson 2022), and drownings (Ross, Eslocker, and Gassiott 2008; McDowell 2022) have all sparked victims' lobbying. Like Families for Safe Streets, these victims-turned-activists face opposition from industry or other critics, but their advocacy is not deeply mired in partisan divides. As Harold Kahn sees it, traffic safety “has nothing to do with Republicans or Democrats. It has to do with saving a life.”<sup>45</sup> So too for preventing furniture tip-overs, making pool drains safer, and improving airline pilots' working conditions.

Media reporting suggests that like Families for Safe Streets, these types of victims can have a major impact on legislation. This is particularly clear in the realm of aviation safety. By the 1990s, families who had lost loved ones in plane crashes were a “crusading” presence with “growing clout” on Capitol Hill, and “airline and government officials [said the] family associations have had a significant impact on the industry” (Kovaleski 1996). Today, families affected by the Boeing 737 Max crashes

(MacGillis 2019) and other aviation disasters continue lobbying. After Continental Airlines Flight 3407 crashed near Buffalo, NY, in 2009, for example, the victims' families made more than 75 lobbying trips to Washington, DC,<sup>46</sup> playing a key role in passing the Aviation Safety Act of 2010 (Zremski 2022).

When considering where the processes of meaning-making described in this project are most likely, it makes sense to look at groups like the Families of Continental Flight 3407, Parents Against Tip-Overs (PAT), or Moms Stop the Harm, a Canadian organization that works to stem the opioid epidemic. Serious, apparently random losses propelled these families into advocacy, and like Families for Safe Streets, they operate in democratic settings.

### ***Partially Comparable Cases***

The next most proximate comparison is with victims of targeted or politicized violence in democracies, including hate crimes, police violence, and gun violence. Many of these victims also lobby, march, and run for office (e.g., Camia 2013), but they face a different matrix of opportunities and challenges. Because their advocacy slots into pre-existing political debates, they often confront opponents who are well-funded, savvy, and influential, and they may find it hard to make policy changes. On the flip side, politicians sometimes recruit these types of victims to join high-profile events, catapulting their message onto the national stage. During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, for example, Hillary Clinton campaigned with the Mothers of the Movement (Chozick 2016), while Donald Trump campaigned with his Angel Families (Vogel and Rogers 2018).<sup>47</sup>

Additionally, victims of police violence and hate crimes have to fight multiple battles at once, as they contend with the systems of oppression that led to their victimization in the first place, while pushing for change and honoring their loved ones (Roberts 2020). In particular, African American mothers' grief is shaped by their "sociopolitical location, the historical significance of their struggle for liberation, and experiences with trauma and loss" (Al'Uqdah and Adomako 2018, 97). Even as bereaved African American mothers process their own losses, their "political mourning" simultaneously serves a broader role of advocating for and uplifting their community (Al'Uqdah and Adomako 2018; see also Cheng 2001).

### ***More Distant Comparisons***

Finally, victims of state repression and wartime violence operate in a markedly different political and security context than Families for Safe Streets. In conflicts, victims face a choice between peaceful political participation or armed retaliation (Javeline 2023). Fear of reprisals can constrain victims' activism, while a lack of democratic

accountability limits their effectiveness. In El Salvador, for instance, the members of MOVIR (the Movement of Victims of the Regime) hold marches and press conferences while brandishing photos of relatives in arbitrary, indefinite detention as part of President Nayib Bukele's war on gangs. MOVIR's tactics mirror other victims' movements around the world. However, Bukele's government pays MOVIR little heed, and organizers say other Salvadorans are afraid to join them (Acosta 2024). In Colombia, meanwhile, Zulver (2022, 5) shows how women's activism puts them "directly in harm's way," both because they are challenging armed actors, and because their activism transgresses gender norms. Future researchers may want to explore how operating in an undemocratic setting or amidst ongoing violence affects processes of meaning-making among victims-turned-activists.

### ***Meaning-Making among Other Victims-Turned-Activists***

Further fieldwork would be needed to rigorously assess whether and how meaning-making occurs beyond Families for Safe Streets. However, anecdotal evidence suggests other victims-turned-activists sometimes reframe their experiences as policy problems, seek to prevent similar harms from befalling others, and view their activism as a means of fulfilling perceived obligations to deceased loved ones.

Crystal Ellis, a member of Parents Against Tip-Overs (PAT), recounts that when her son was killed by an IKEA dresser, she "believed it was a freak accident" (quoted in Peachman 2021). But then she learned the furniture industry had long been aware of the danger of tip-overs, which could be prevented with better design choices—as PAT aims to require, through new federal legislation (Peachman 2021). This reconceptualization is reminiscent of how Ken Bandes and other members of Families for Safe Streets developed new understandings of their losses as policy problems.

In addition, victims-turned-activists frequently voice a desire to prevent similar harms from befalling others,<sup>48</sup> and there are striking parallels in the ways other victims discuss fulfilling obligations to their deceased loved ones, or acting as they would have wanted. Kevin Kuwik, who lost his girlfriend, Lorin Mauer, in the crash of Continental Airlines 3407, explains why lobbying in DC has "been something [all the families] have been able to rally behind":

You start to think, "Hey, maybe our loved ones didn't die in vain. We can make a difference here." ... I know [Lorin] 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)

Here, Kevin shares how activism has helped him to find meaning in his loss, both by fulfilling obligations and by helping others.

Meanwhile, for some parents bereaved by political violence in Israel/Palestine, activism is a way to make sense of their children's deaths and to fulfill perceived obligations to them. One father says that when he speaks at public events:

I see my daughter in the crowd and she laughs, and it gives me strength.... I feel that I have to speak out, and I feel that my daughter is with me when I speak. She laughs and she says, "Go ahead. Do it fast. Spill it." (quoted in Barak and Garber 2022, 1460)

Another father involved in lobbying explains, "I often feel that I do it for [my son]. I feel that he is present and that he knows what I am doing and that he tells me: 'Dad, go on with what you are doing'" (quoted in Barak and Garber 2022, 1460). Barak and Garber's qualitative research shows that even in a very different context, some victims find meaning in ways that echo the experiences of Families for Safe Streets.

## Directions for Future Research

Ethnographic, interpretive research is valuable not just for its close engagement with the people and communities being studied, but also because it encourages "the work of imaginative theorizing, of crafting genuinely new and exciting ideas" (Pachirat 2014, 431). In this spirit, several limitations of my research with Families for Safe Streets suggest promising avenues for future research on victims' activism.

### *Who Does Not Participate?*

Because this project focuses on a group of victims-turned-activists, it is not well-equipped to draw conclusions about victims who do not become involved in politics. During my research with Families for Safe Streets, I sometimes heard second- and third-hand stories of people who had declined to join the group, or who could not attend events. I did not attempt to meet or interview those non-participants, which could have been an unwelcome intrusion. However, group members speculatively attributed others' non-participation to logistical problems (such as work schedules), a lack of emotional readiness or well-being, or simply a preference for privacy. Even among committed group members, their activism ebbed and flowed through cycles of burnout and renewal, and their paths to mobilization were not necessarily linear or immediate—suggesting that the participant/non-participant distinction among victims may be more fluid than often assumed. Several related questions are ripe for further investigation: Who responds to loss and trauma by withdrawing from public life? How, if at all, do they find

meaning in their experiences? Do their perspectives change over time?

### *Is Finding Meaning in Politics Specific to Bereavement?*

Families for Safe Streets is an organization primarily founded by and for families who have lost loved ones to traffic violence. This creates tensions within the group; survivors sometimes wonder if it's "weird" they lived, amidst a group so focused on people who died. Potential differences between injured and bereaved victims also create tensions in this analysis. To what extent are the processes of meaning-making described here specific to bereaved individuals, as opposed to survivors of violence and trauma? This question is difficult to answer within this project, and it merits additional study.

### *How Do Gender Roles and Norms Shape Victims' Activism?*

Unlike some victims' groups (Bejarano 2002), Families for Safe Streets is not a "motherist" organization; it is intentionally called Families—not "Mothers"—for Safe Streets. Nonetheless, journalists and the group itself sometimes privilege the voices of mothers who lost children. There may be benefits to this framing; maternal grief resonates powerfully (Bayard de Volo 2007; Cook 2021). However, "mandatory Mom-ism" constrains the range of acceptable political engagement by mothers, while sidelining others (Eliasoph 1998, 200). Future researchers may want to explore the intersection of gender, politics, and victims' activism.

## Conclusion

Based on ethnographic research with the founding members of Families for Safe Streets, this article proposes that for some victims-turned-activists, meaning-making is an in-process benefit of activism. Even as the members of Families for Safe Streets pay steep emotional costs during their forays into politics, they simultaneously find new meaning regarding their personal experiences of loss and trauma. The story of Families for Safe Streets suggests this meaning-making can happen in several ways: by reframing traumatic events in a policy context, by helping others, and by fulfilling perceived obligations to one's community and family—including, most significantly, to deceased loved ones.

This project makes three contributions. First, political scientists are tremendously interested in the links between violence, trauma, and political participation (e.g., Blattman 2009; Bateson 2012; Dorff 2017; Ley 2018, 2022; Sønderkov et al. 2022)—but this is a highly quantitative area of scholarship, with a dearth of proposed mechanisms. My ethnographic fieldwork complements the existing literature with a new explanation for the relationship between victimization and political participation: activism

can provide opportunities for victims to find meaning in their experiences.

Second, immersion with a group of victims-turned-activists teaches us several new and different things about how and why people participate in politics. In particular, meaning-making can motivate and sustain high-cost activism. Beyond illustrating how closely the personal and the political are related, the experiences of the members of Families for Safe Streets also show that activism is not just driven by anger, but a range of complex emotions, including love (Gould 2009, 3; Jasper 1998, 406). Positive emotions are important for meaning-making, for the internal functioning of activist groups (Della Porta and Giugni 2013, 147), and for recovery after trauma (Bonanno 2004, 26).

Finally, this study helps us understand the motivations and trajectories of an influential set of actors in real-world politics: victims-turned-activists. Recognizing the importance of meaning-making provides a new analytic framework for understanding the persistence and intensity of victims' activism. Meaning-making does not have a clear end point; it is an iterative, indefinite process. Indeed, even after grieving family members say they have found meaning in a loved one's death, they often continue looking for meaning (Davis et al. 2000).

In the case of Families for Safe Streets, the organization has only grown in the years since its founding. Today Families for Safe Streets has chapters in cities from San Diego to Washington, DC. and Nashville to Toronto. Back in New York, many of the 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 (Kim 2022). This may be because for some victims, activism is less a choice than an imperative. As Debbie Marks Kahn explains:

It feels right, it's the right thing to do. It makes us feel better. It fulfills 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.

Among the members of Families for Safe Streets, 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).

## Supplementary material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724000872>.

## Acknowledgments

This research was conducted with financial support from the MIT Department of Political Science. I would especially like to thank the members of Families for Safe Streets for their participation and collaboration. Additionally, I

am grateful for research assistance from My Seppo and Blair Read and feedback from Bree Bang-Jensen, Dara Kay Cohen, Danielle Jung, Zoe Marks, Ragnhild Nordås, Vanessa Navarro Rodríguez, Richard Nielsen, Mallory SoRelle, Nicholas Rush Smith, Jessica Stanton, Graham Denyer Willis, and audiences at Boston University, the George Washington University, the University of Ottawa, the University of Colorado–Boulder, and APSA 2022.

## Notes

- 1 Oxford Languages defines a victim as "a person harmed, injured, or killed as a result of a crime, accident, or other event or action." This article uses the term "victim" because the group studied, Families for Safe Streets, intentionally asserts their status as victims. On language, refer to [online appendix section 2](#).
- 2 Victims of human rights abuses often lobby for accountability, and groups like March for our Lives and Sandy Hook Promise advocate for gun control in the United States. In Canada, the families of women killed in the École Polytechnique shooting waged a multi-decade campaign for stricter gun laws (Picard 1992; Bruemmer 2019).
- 3 Crime victims' movements frequently push punitive, illiberal political agendas, though Barker (2007) finds that "apparent link" is "not only historically contingent but dependent upon specific state structures and patterns of civic engagement" (623). Relatedly, Gottschalk (2006) argues the U.S. crime victims' and women's movements furthered the carceral state because the institutional context precluded greater support for victims.
- 4 Throughout my fieldwork, political operatives, elected officials, and activists often repeated this refrain.
- 5 For example, "Bentley's Law: A Grandmother Turns Grief into Action Against Drunk Drivers" (Gattoni 2023) and "Families of Police Brutality Victims Gather to Turn 'Grief into Action'" (Alfonseca 2023).
- 6 A vast literature emphasizes the role of grievances in social movement mobilization (e.g., Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Shultziner 2013; Bergstrand 2014; Simmons 2016; McKane and McCammon 2018). Walker (2020, 6) argues that "a sense of systemic injustice" is a "pivotal factor" motivating participation, even for people harmed by the carceral state.
- 7 More than 50% of U.S. veterans report post-traumatic growth, jumping to 70% among those diagnosed with PTSD (Tsai et al. 2015).
- 8 [Online appendix sections 3–5](#) offer more information on the interviews. Unless noted otherwise, all quotations are from interviews with the members of Families for Safe Streets.
- 9 Hynson et al. (2006) suggest interviewing bereaved families at least six months after a loss (808). My

- earliest interview occurred at ten months; most were one to three years later.
- 10 This is consistent with NYPD data. In July 2022, for instance, 618 pedestrians were injured by vehicles (City of New York Police Department 2022). Nationally, pedestrian fatalities are highest in the Sun Belt; refer to [online appendix section 1](#).
  - 11 New York pioneered Vision Zero in the United States. Since 2014, it has been adopted by cities including San Francisco, Boston, and Washington, DC.
  - 12 TA was founded in 1973. As of 2022, TA had 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.
  - 13 Interview with Amy Cohen, describing a mother whose son was killed in 1997.
  - 14 Multiple group members and other activists used this term to describe the political climate in 2013 and 2014.
  - 15 Interview with Mary Beth Kelly.
  - 16 Fieldnotes, February 23, 2014.
  - 17 Interview with Lindsay Motlin.
  - 18 *Time Out* warns new residents, “Life in New York is fast-paced and busy ... if you’re not keeping up with our breakneck pace, kindly let us pass you in peace” (Rules of New York Life 2012; see also Paumgarten 2014).
  - 19 Interviews with Aaron Charlop-Powers and Harold Kahn.
  - 20 Built in a “mix of International, Brutalist, and Modernist stylings,” the Empire State Plaza is “one of the few complexes in the United States that exist on such a grand scale” (Schulman 2019).
  - 21 Fieldnotes from daylong visits to the Empire State Plaza on March 18 and May 6, 2014; interview with Sarah Charlop-Powers.
  - 22 Interview with Mary Beth Kelly. Offering a dissenting view, Rebecca said she does not 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.”
  - 23 Fieldnotes, March 18, 2014.
  - 24 Interviews with Lindsay Motlin and Sarah Charlop-Powers.
  - 25 Interviews with Belkys Rivera, Amy Cohen, Gary Eckstein, Greg Thompson Jr., Judy Kottick, Ken Bandes, and Lizi Rahman.
  - 26 All quotes from Belkys were translated from Spanish by the author.
  - 27 Interview with Amy Cohen.
  - 28 The meeting happened on January 10, 2014, and is corroborated in Kleinfeld 2014.
  - 29 Rebecca is a member of Families for Safe Streets who chose to be identified with a pseudonym.
  - 30 Interviews with Hsi-Pei Liao and Harold Kahn.
  - 31 For instance, Lizi Rahman organized a memorial for her son Asif at a school, staged exhibitions of his photos, organized performances by his friends, and distributed books of his poetry and drawings.
  - 32 Interview with Amy Tam-Liao and Hsi-Pei Liao.
  - 33 Interview with Sarah Charlop-Powers.
  - 34 In expressive theories of participation, the individual derives benefits from expressing an identity or preference that is already well-established (Schuessler 2001). Emotional in-process benefits, by contrast, are transformative.
  - 35 The Charlop-Powers, Cohen Ecksteins, and Mary Beth Kelly previously participated in TA’s recreational cycling events. Most group members—including Greg Thompson Jr., Belkys Rivera, Debbie Marks Kahn, Harold Kahn, Judy Kottick, Ken Bandes, Lindsay Motlin, Lizi Rahman, Amy Tam-Liao, Hsi-Pei Liao, Dana Lerner, and Rebecca—had never heard of TA or other traffic safety groups.
  - 36 Fieldnotes, November 14, 2014.
  - 37 Interview with Amy Tam-Liao.
  - 38 Traffic safety advocates largely reject the term “accident” in favor of “crash.” Refer to [online appendix section 2](#).
  - 39 Rebecca subsequently joined Families for Safe Streets, lobbied in Albany, advised a councilmember about Vision Zero, and helped pass Cooper’s Law.
  - 40 Lizi Rahman got her wish. In November 2021, elected officials recognized Asif while dedicating a new bike lane on Queens Boulevard (Parrott 2021).
  - 41 Nationally, pedestrian fatalities rose during the COVID-19 pandemic, but in New York City they remain 30% lower than before Vision Zero (NYC DOT 2023).
  - 42 Interviews with Dana Lerner, Lizi Rahman, Judy Kottick, Ken Bandes, Greg Thompson Jr, Debbie Marks Kahn, and Harold Kahn.
  - 43 Interview with Judy Kottick and Ken Bandes.
  - 44 Such as furniture that can crush children. Parents Against Tip-Overs (PAT) lobbies for safety regulations like the federal STURDY Act. PAT is chaired by Brett Horn, whose son was killed in a tip-over (Peachman 2021).
  - 45 Rebecca agrees: “It’s not gun violence. It’s just: cross the street and do it safely.... [Politicians] can’t be like, ‘No, I don’t want to make the street safer.’ That doesn’t look good,” whether they are a Republican or a Democrat. Similarly, a recent *New York Times Magazine* article concluded that “in contrast to, say, stricter gun laws, road-safety initiatives are less likely to be seen by politicians and their constituents as a partisan issue” (Shaer 2024).
  - 46 According to Flight 3407 family member Kevin Kuwik on Twitter, <https://twitter.com/kevinkuwik/status/1397607765615407104>.
  - 47 The Mothers of the Movement were politically active before the Clinton campaign contacted them, and

their political involvement continued long after (Mothers 2021). One Mother, Lucy McBath, was elected to Congress in 2018. The Angel Families, meanwhile, emerged from The Remembrance Project, which was founded in 2009 (Golshan 2016).

- 48 After his daughter was killed in a small plane crash, Greg Sewell spent years lobbying Transport Canada to require shoulder harnesses in small aircraft. He says he works “to improve the safety of the flying public,” because “I would not wish any family to have to go through what we did” (quoted in Nair 2017).

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