

# Can Posting DWI Arrest Photos on Social Media Reduce Drunk Driving? An Evaluation of El Paso's DWI Friday Initiative (Durán, 2026)

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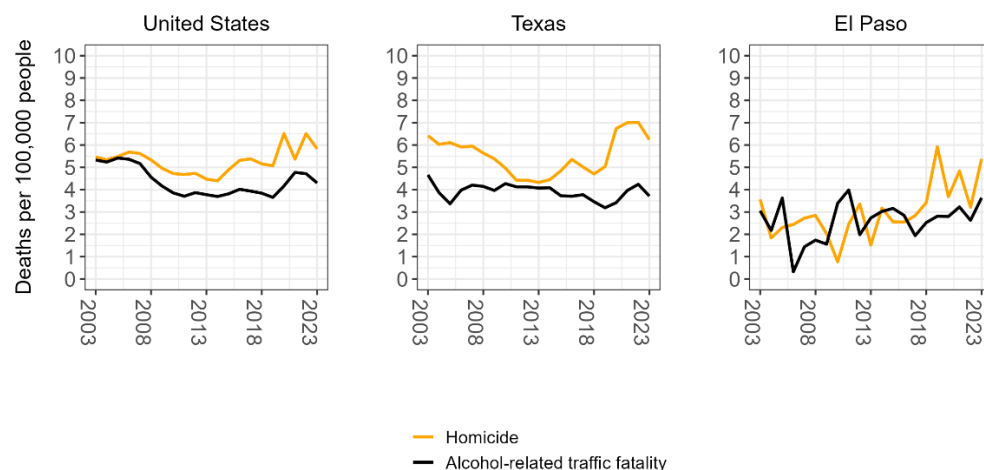
## Take Home Messages

- During its first year, the El Paso Police Department's DWI Friday social media campaign was associated with a reduction in alcohol-related crashes, suggesting that social media may be a useful addition to traditional DWI prevention efforts.
- The campaign appeared to have the greatest impact on drivers 31 years and older. For this age group, the analysis suggests a reduction of about 5.36 alcohol-related vehicle crashes per month; there was no evidence of a reduction among younger drivers ages 21 to 30.
- The potential benefit to public safety should be weighed carefully against ethical and legal concerns, especially if a police agency's internet-based campaign is co-opted by a community group operating without formal oversight.
- Police agencies should consider varying the message content to understand "what works" for younger drivers, the group that is disproportionately responsible for alcohol-related crashes

## Why did the researcher conduct the study?

Driving while intoxicated (DWI) continues to be one of the leading causes of preventable traffic deaths in the United States. As shown in Figure 1, for over twenty years, deaths caused by alcohol-related vehicle crashes has closely trailed behind the total number of homicides in the United States. For the city of El Paso, however, the total loss of life from alcohol-related traffic fatalities has sometimes exceeded the total number of homicides, indicating that the problem of drunk driving is one of the most serious public safety issues facing the region.

**Figure 1.** Trends in loss of life from 2003 to 2023. Counts were obtained from the FBI Crime Data Explorer, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, and Texas Department of Transportation. Rates were calculated using decennial census counts by the author.



While police agencies have traditionally relied on enforcement, checkpoints, and public education campaigns, relatively little is known about whether social media can help deter impaired driving.

In June 2024, the El Paso Police Department launched DWI Friday, a weekly social media campaign that posted booking photos of people arrested for DWI. Immediately following each weekly post, a large community social media account reshared these photographs to hundreds of thousands of followers in the study jurisdiction, greatly increasing public exposure. Because agencies are increasingly using social media to communicate with the public, it is important to understand whether social media campaigns actually improve public safety. This study examined whether the DWI Friday initiative was associated with fewer alcohol-related vehicle crashes during its first year.

### **How did the researcher conduct the study?**

The researcher analyzed more than four years of alcohol-related crash data collected by the Texas Department of Transportation before and after the campaign began. Monthly crash trends prior to the campaign were used to estimate what crash rates would likely have been had the campaign never occurred. To improve confidence that any observed changes were related to the campaign rather than unrelated events, the study also considered other factors known to influence impaired driving, including alcohol sales, fuel prices, unemployment, public transportation use, and overall crash trends. Additional analyses were conducted to determine whether the campaign affected different age groups differently.

### **What did the researcher find?**

Overall, the campaign was associated with a modest reduction in alcohol-related crashes during its first year. The strongest evidence of a reduction was found among drivers 31 years of age and older. For this group, the campaign was associated with an average reduction of approximately 5.36 alcohol-related crashes each month. Contrary to expectations, the campaign showed little evidence of reducing crashes involving drivers 21 to 30 years old, even though this age group is among the most active users of social media. This finding suggests that younger drivers may respond differently to fear of public embarrassment than older adults. The study also found that the results remained generally consistent even after several additional analyses ruled out alternative explanations (e.g., a downward trend occurring before the campaign began).

At the same time, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. The campaign was not implemented as a randomized experiment, meaning other unmeasured factors could have influenced crash trends. In addition, the study evaluated crash outcomes rather than directly measuring whether people felt shame, embarrassment, or fear after viewing the posts. Understanding how people felt about the campaign is vital, as the researcher argued that DWI Friday relied on fear of public embarrassment to deter others from drinking and driving. The researcher conducted an informal review of over 400 user-comments and found fear was one of many other emotions exhibited by viewers, suggesting DWI Friday did not necessarily function as a fear-based campaign.

### **How can the police use the findings?**

This study suggests that social media can be a useful addition to a broader impaired-driving strategy. Rather than replacing traditional enforcement, campaigns like DWI Friday may remind some segments of the population of the personal and social consequences of driving while impaired and encourage safer decisions.

Police agencies considering similar campaigns should recognize that the impact may differ across groups. Although younger adults are among the heaviest users of social media, this study found little evidence that they were more responsive to the campaign than older drivers. Agencies should therefore identify the audiences they hope to influence and evaluate whether their messaging is reaching those groups and being interpreted as intended.

Police administrators and local officials who post mugshots on the internet as a way to prevent drunk driving has historically raised ethical and legal concerns (see *Bursac v. Suozzi*, 2008; *Houston v. Maricopa County*, 2024). The legality of these practices remains an active area of litigation. An alternative strategy that agencies may wish to consider is designing message content that holds people accountable while also modeling the behavior they seek viewers to engage in. For example, campaign messages could demonstrate actors accepting responsibility, completing treatment, making safer transportation choices, and preventing future impaired driving rather than focusing solely on fear of public embarrassment. This approach may hold similar benefits to public safety while avoiding any legal concerns. It also presents an opportunity for future evaluations to understand what message content works for a younger demographic.

Finally, police agencies should routinely evaluate new prevention strategies. Collecting and analyzing crash data before and after implementation can help determine whether a campaign is producing meaningful reductions in impaired driving and identify opportunities to improve its effectiveness.

### **References**

- *Bursac v. Suozzi*, 22 Misc. 3d 328, 868 N.Y.S.2d 470 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. 2008).
- *Houston v. Maricopa County*, 116 F.4th 935 (9th Cir. 2024).
- Durán, M. J. (2026). Does public shaming deter drunk driving? A controlled interrupted time-series study. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-026-09775-z>