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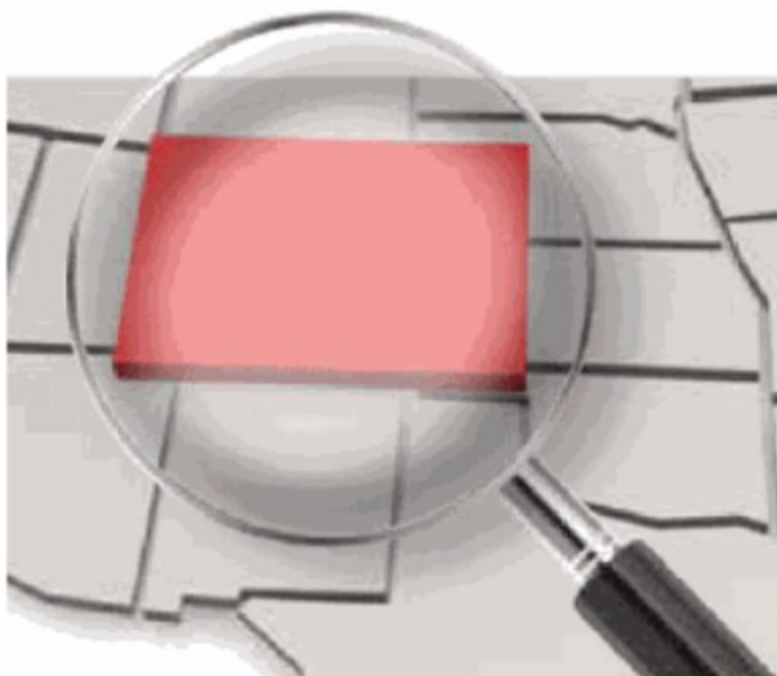


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Colorado sees increase in DUI deaths while enforcement drops

Impaired driving deaths increased 41% between 2013 and 2023, but DUI arrests and case filings decreased by about 30%

ZACK NEWMAN, special to The Gazette Feb 21, 2025 Updated 23 hrs ago 7 min to read



Impaired driving crashes killed hundreds of people on Colorado's roads from 2013 to 2023. The number of deaths has increased 41% in that decade, according to a Denver Gazette review of Colorado Department of Transportation data.

The Denver Gazette found that, at the same time, impaired driving enforcement has gone down. Both DUI arrests and case filings have decreased by about 30%, according to an analysis of Colorado Bureau of Investigation and court data.

Data shows DUI deaths are up, while enforcement is down.



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“It's a horrific statistic,” Howard Small, a DUI reform advocate and father of a Colorado Springs man who was killed in an impaired driving crash, said. “And quite frankly, it's completely unacceptable, as well.”

Arrests and new cases filed in driving under the influence cases dropped by a third in Colorado

Law enforcement officers made 32% fewer arrests and prosecutors filed 34% fewer DUI charges from 2013 to 2023.

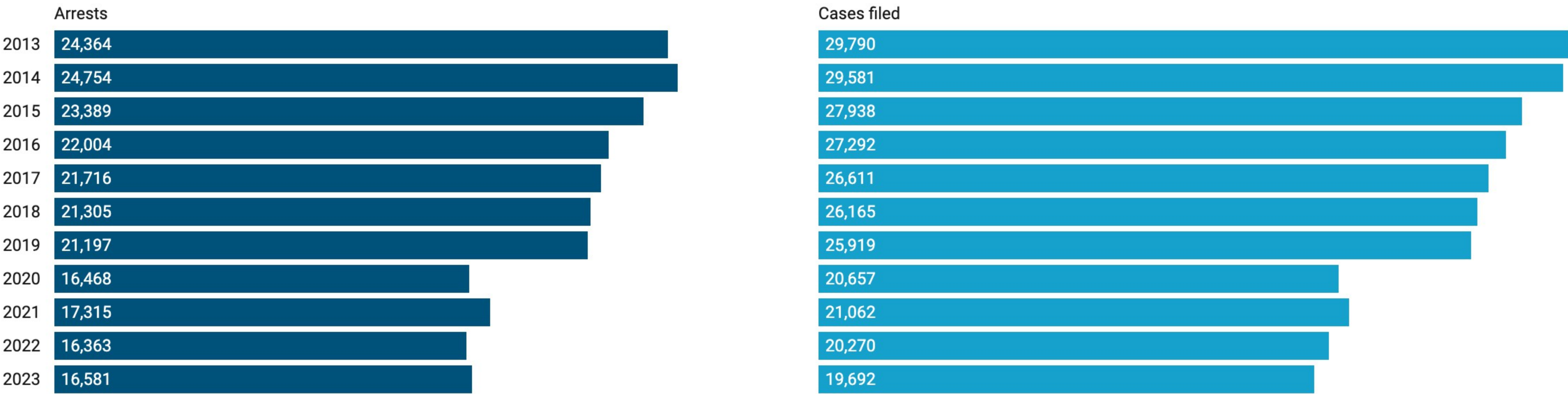


Chart: Zack Newman • Source: Colorado Bureau of Investigation, Colorado State Courts and Denver Courts. • Get the data • Download image • Created with Datawrapper

Ethan Small’s parents said the 28-year-old often kept track of the day’s blessings in a lime-green gratitude journal adorned with soaring birds. Small wrote on January 17, 2019 that he was grateful for life’s gifts, including human connection, beautiful views, food and a warm bed to sleep in.

Most importantly, he wrote that he was glad he got where he needed to go as a Lyft driver.

“Arriving safely to my destinations, driving, especially with so much time in the car and seeing lots of accidents today,” Small wrote.



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Polli Small with her son, Ethan Small, who was killed by a drunk driver. She recalls that he was her "cheerleader," who used to encourage her when she fell behind during hikes.
Courtesy photo

Two days later, Ethan Small dropped off passengers near Colfax and Osage Street in Denver. A [drunk driver](#), high and drunk on a cocktail of substances, drove 90-miles-per-hour into Ethan Small’s car — killing him. Polli Small, Ethan’s mother, said she is frustrated at a system that let this happen.

“I always thought that I could protect Ethan,” she said. “You know, as a parent, that’s what you want to do. You always want to protect your child from harm. And I was probably a little overprotective of him. But when it comes to this situation, you need society and government to protect innocent citizens from this type of crime from happening.”

Among all of the memories Polli Small said she wishes she could still make with Ethan, she especially misses the way her son would be her “cheerleader.” On hikes across Colorado, Ethan would find his mom at the back of the group, put his arm around her and encourage her.

“He was wonderful that way, and that was really special for me,” she said. “I miss that. I miss that terribly.”

Where?

The analysis by The Denver Gazette found fewer arrests and prosecutions of impaired driving cases occurred across the state. DUI arrests dropped off by at least half at more than a dozen law enforcement agencies from 2013 to 2023.

Sheriff’s deputies at the Adams County Sheriff’s Office arrested 78% less people in 2023 than 2013 for impaired driving, per CBI data. Sheriff Gene Claps, the former head of the county’s traffic unit, blamed the decline on a lack of manpower and his predecessor’s decision to reduce the staffing of the ACSO traffic unit.



Ethan Small to the left was killed in a drunk driving accident. His father, Howard Small, and his mother, Polli Small, are to the right.
courtesy photo



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“Because our staffing levels were so low, they didn’t have room or time to be proactive because they went from call to call to call,” Claps said. “So, as we have been increasing staff, we have more of that ability.”





Adams County Sheriff Gene Claps
Zack Newman

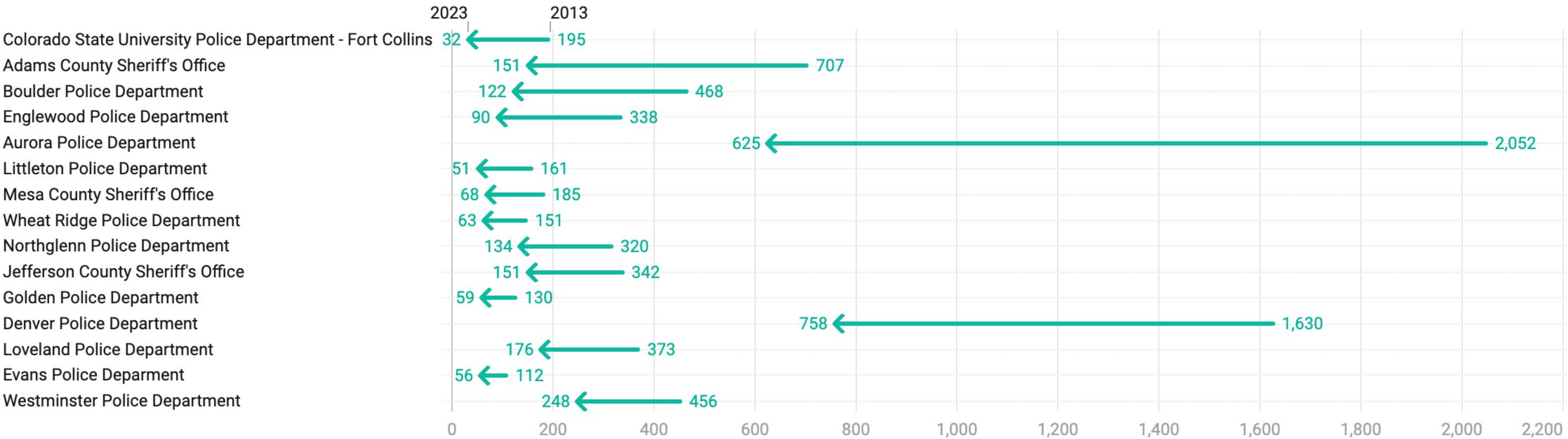
Claps said the ACSO is now at “full force” and DUI enforcement is a priority.

“I would encourage the community and community members just not to drink and drive because we will — and we are out there — proactively seeking DUI and drunk drivers,” he said. “Whether they’re on alcohol or drugs. We are in that proactive state where we are looking for those individuals.”

ACSO reported adding 5% more officers to 380 from 2013 to 2023, according to the most recent tally from Federal Bureau of Investigation data.

Agencies with the largest decline in impaired driving arrests

DUI arrests dropped off by at least 50% at more than a dozen law enforcement agencies from 2013 to 2023 that made at least 1,000 DUI arrests in that decade.



Counts of impaired driving arrests as reported to CBI. Data was downloaded as of November 2024.
Chart: Zack Newman, • Source: Colorado Bureau of Investigation • [Get the data](#) • [Download image](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

The number of driving under the influence cases filed each year dropped in almost every judicial district across Colorado. Two of the most significant declines were in Denver’s 2nd Judicial District and Arapahoe County’s 18th Judicial District.

The number of new cases in Denver dropped by 58% from 2013 to 1,144 cases filed in 2023.




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Matt Jablow, spokesperson for Denver District Attorney John Walsh, declined an interview and wrote in a statement that the decline in DUI cases filed was because of the decrease in arrests made by the Denver police.

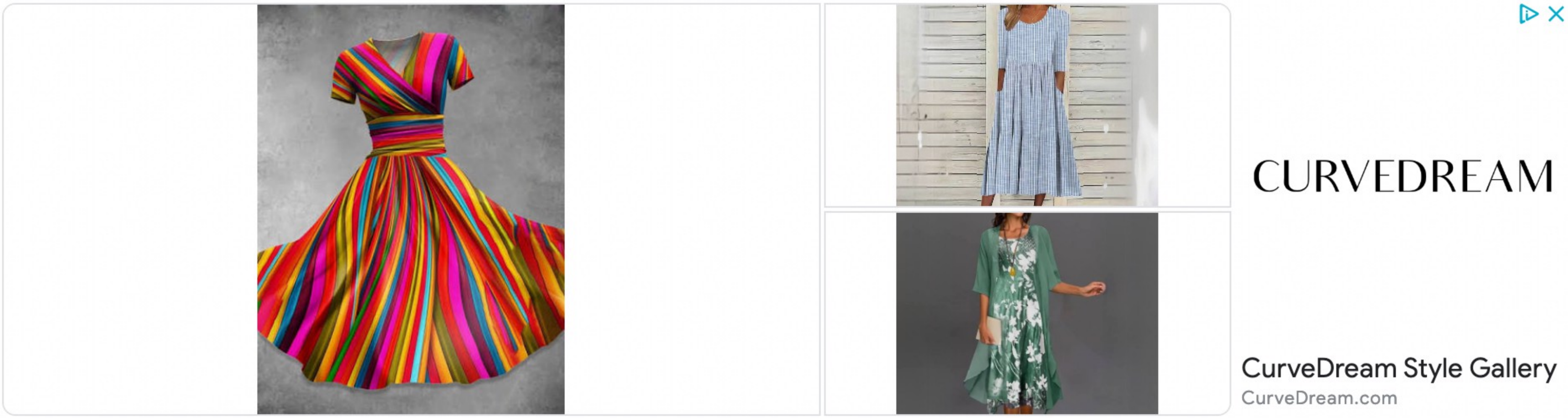
“Our commitment to combatting drunk driving did not change between 2013 and 2023, nor has it changed since,” Jablow wrote. “Drunk drivers have killed far too many people and caused far too many injuries over the years and it remains a significant public safety issue. As in all of our cases, we file charges only when we believe we can prove a defendant’s guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.”

Jay Casillas, a spokesperson for the Denver Police Department, also declined an interview but wrote in an email that DPD attributes the DUI decline to staffing problems and additional 911 calls.

“The Denver Police Department continues to address impaired driving in a focused manner but also faces challenges that other departments around the country are also facing, which is the number of officers patrolling the streets and an increase in calls for service that sometimes prevents proactive police activity,” Casillas wrote.

DPD will target areas with frequent impaired driving and pull from upcoming recruit classes to increase staff on the DUI unit, according to Casillas. The exact numbers of DUI arrests differ from CBI and internal DPD statistics, but the broader trend aligns statewide and locally.

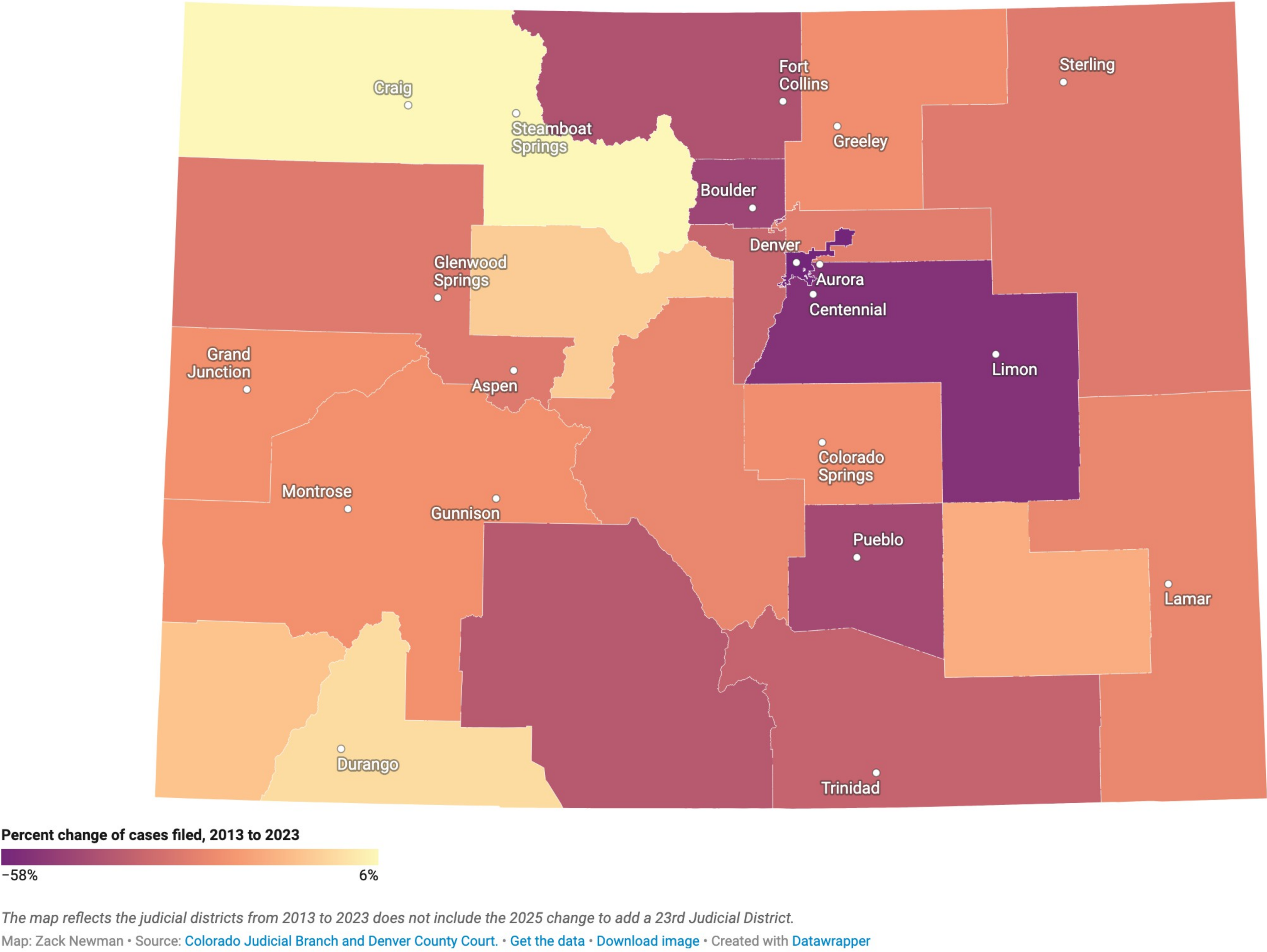
Natalie Olson, a CBI spokesperson, wrote in an email that the discrepancy could be because of what DPD submitted or a difference in how an incident was coded — a crash could be logged as an assault instead of a DUI because of the severity of the accident.



“CBI’s numbers only reflect what has been submitted to us, so if for some reason Denver’s data was not submitted to us, was miscoded, or had other data errors in it, they won’t reflect in the stats you pulled,” Olson wrote.

Impaired driving case filings dropped in Colorado

Impaired driving case filings declined 34% from 2013 to 2023 in judicial districts across the state, according to a Denver Gazette analysis of court data.



Ryan Brackley, an assistant district attorney, did not dispute the decrease in DUI cases filed in the 18th Judicial District in a statement to The Denver Gazette.

"We acknowledge the recent downward trend in DUI-related arrests and case filings," Brackley wrote. "However, we remain fully committed to supporting our law enforcement partners in their proactive efforts to ensure safer streets. Our office thoroughly reviews each DUI-related case presented, and we will continue to hold offenders accountable when they selfishly put others at risk of serious bodily injury or death."

Why?

Multiple organizations said the increase in deaths was tied to less arrests.

Brittany Janes, the impaired driving enforcement coordinator at the highway safety office within the Colorado Department of Transportation, said the data bears out the classic calculus.

“As the data shows, when enforcement is down, fatalities go up,” Janes said. “It’s been that way since the beginning of time, since the beginning of impaired driving.”



DUI deaths in Colorado rose by 41% from 2013 to 2023

Crashes killed 161 people in 2013 and 227 people in 2023.

Number of people killed in an impaired or alcohol-related accident

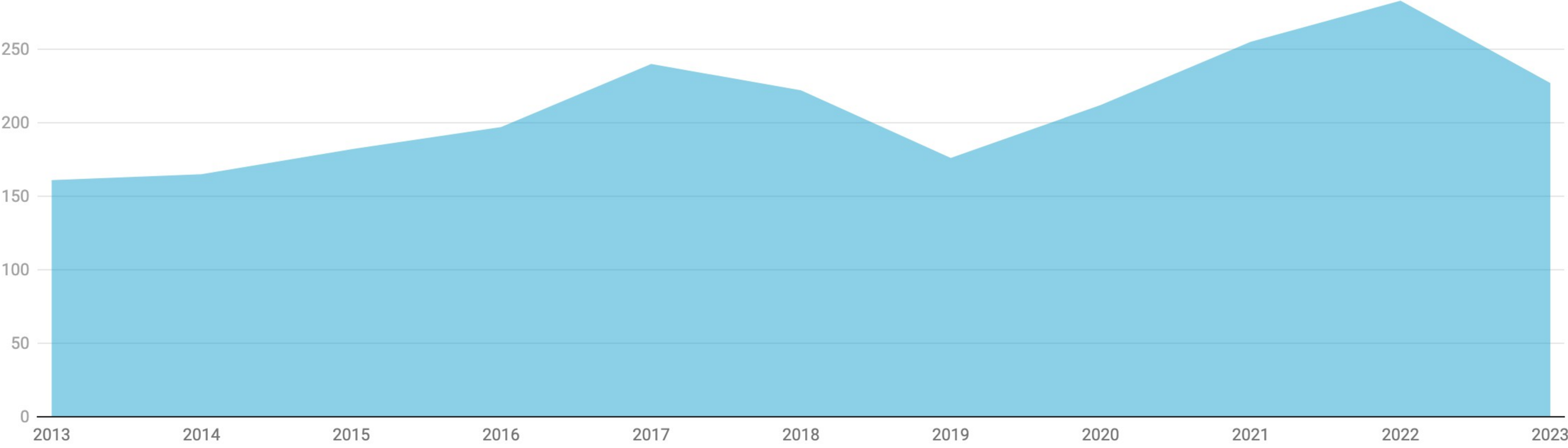


Chart: Zack Newman • Source: Colorado Department of Transportation • Get the data • Download image • Created with Datawrapper

Rebecca Green, the state executive director of Mothers Against Drunk Driving for Colorado and Wyoming, echoed the sentiment and said law enforcement lacked the resources and training across the department that they needed to pursue impaired driving cases.

“So, we did see a direct correlation, too, between that lack of resource or even a lack of enforcement,” Green said. “When we see DUI enforcement go down, we see fatalities and injuries go up almost at the same amount.”

According to FBI data, there were 8% more officers in Colorado law enforcement in 2023 than in 2013 — up to 12,897 officers.

Janes said the solution to stem off the increase in deaths is to increase enforcement in a more visible way. State law enforcement officials need to “claw their way back,” since traffic enforcement was discouraged during COVID.

“During regular check-ins with police departments who receive funding we were just told verbally from the majority of police departments that this was direction being given from top down,” Janes wrote in an email.

Denver was part of a nationwide trend, in which overall traffic enforcement declined, [according to The New York Times](#).

Janes noted that the data shows a slight decrease in DUI deaths from the high watermark of 283 deaths in 2022, and she said she believes recent efforts to bolster enforcement have made a difference.

“Still high, still unacceptable, but we’re hoping that we’re finally moving in the right direction,” Janes said.

Some researchers have found a link between increased enforcement and decreased deaths from wrecks by impaired drivers. A [2021 research](#) team found that increased police enforcement in rural areas led to less alcohol-impaired fatal crashes. Another [2015](#) study found an increase in DUI arrest rate and sworn officers led to a reduction in the drinking driver crash rate.

Others found that the connection was more tenuous and there was a “point of diminishing returns,” where more arrests stopped decreasing deaths at a certain juncture, although the exact point was not determined.

Those interviewed by The Denver Gazette repeatedly questioned whether the approximate 30% decrease in arrests and cases could be attributed to a growing Colorado population and declining number of law enforcement officers. Colorado grew by 12% since 2013 to 5.87 million people in 2023, according to data from the state’s demographer.

Tami DePalma, the mother of 17-year-old DUI crash victim Dominic DePalma, said she wants law enforcement to prioritize impaired driving arrests. A [drunk](#) driver ran a red light, drove onto an off-ramp near the city of Lafayette and into a semi-truck. The collision killed Dominic, who was a passenger. His mother said an arrest could be a wake-up call.



Tami DePalma holds photos of her son, Dominic, who was killed in a drunk driving accident. He had the nickname Diesel, which he received for his energetic play on the soccer field.
[CHRISTOPHER OSHER chris.osher@gazette.com](mailto:CHRISTOPHER.OSHER@denvergazette.com)

“In reality, a DUI is the best thing that can happen to you,” DePalma said. “So, if you look at a DUI as if it’s the best thing that can happen to you if it puts you on a path to realize the consequences that could have happened because you drove impaired, the hope is that that stops it from happening, at least for that one person.”

DePalma said she misses hearing her son’s laugh as he played video games with friends and his assertive style of playing soccer that earned Dominic the nickname of “Diesel.”

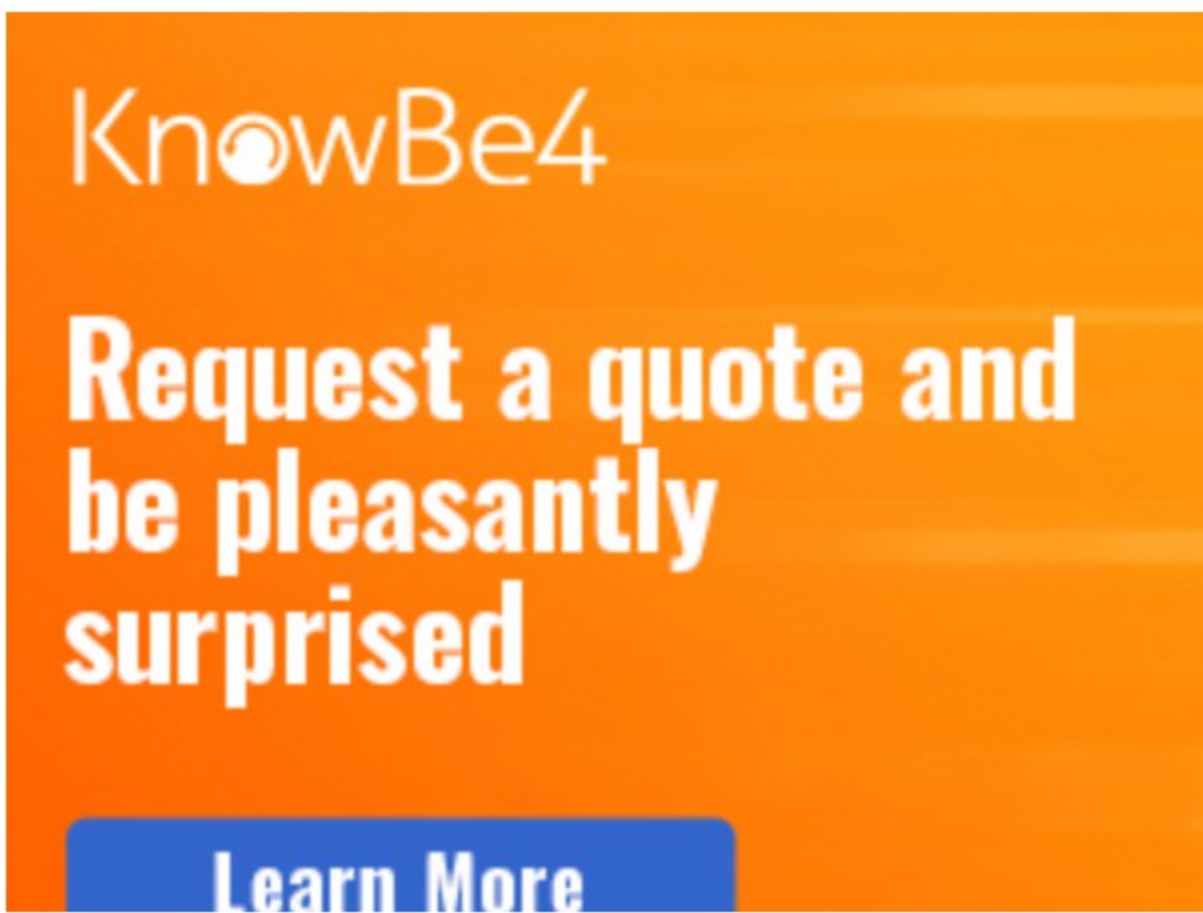
“Everything about him was a diesel truck,” DePalma said. “If he wanted to go from here to that goal, if you were in his way, he was going to clear you away.”

She created green wristbands that she gave to Dominic’s friends with a reminder to “never forget” that “your D.D. will get you home.” When she notices the forest-green loops in Instagram posts, it fills her with optimism.

“My hope is that they are not only remembering Dominic, they are remembering not to drive after they drink,” she said. “Hopefully, they’re not drinking, but, if they do, they’re not going to drive and hurt themselves or anybody else.”

As the president of a [foundation](#) in Dominic’s honor, DePalma [speaks](#) at high schools across Colorado to tell teens about the heartbreak drunk driving caused

her family. She stresses that parents are not the enemy and tells those listening to her that they can remove themselves from dangerous situations while saving face.



She said she misses Dominic not just through the memories made, but his on-going absence.

“What I think people don't tend to realize is that you also miss all of the future that you will never have with them,” DePalma said. “The future memory that you will never get to create.”

Outside of what law enforcement does or doesn’t do, Green, of MADD, said she wants people to make a plan for how they are getting home before they start drinking.

“There's still the human piece of people making the choice to make a plan while sober,” Green said. “Which of course, if everyone were doing that, we wouldn't be in this situation to begin with.”

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MORE INFORMATION



[Is Colorado cannabis safe? Testing for potency, contaminants riddled with loopholes](#)
Colorado's cannabis testing loopholes have led to consumers being deceived about the safety of the products they buy, with some labs exploiting loopholes to manipulate test results. Despite a putative regulatory framework, the industry is plagued by inconsistencies, loopholes, and allegations of manipulation. The state's Marijuana Enforcement Division has issued health and safety recalls more than 40 times in the past three years, but the average time from the first sale to when a recall is issued is nine months.

[Colorado judges face calls for new domestic violence training after survey finds child abuse concerns ignored](#)

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