CENTER FOR TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The University of Texas at Austin

Prepared for the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT)

The TxDOT Don't mess with Texas Campaign 40th Anniversary: History, Benefits and Successes

Background

Introduced in 1986 by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), the Don't mess with Texas (DMWT) Campaign and slogan is one of America's most successful and enduring public awareness campaigns. By 1990, the campaign achieved a historic 72% reduction in highway litter by changing public perceptions and behaviors. However, litter composition has changed.

The DMWT slogan's success has been linked to the message which appeals to younger Texans who tend to litter more. Rather than relying solely on traditional messaging, the campaign used recognizable Texas figures, music, sports, and media placements to transform into a long-standing cultural symbol while continuing to reinforce anti-littering behavior among Texas residents.

Despite its historic success, the DMWT campaign continues to face new challenges associated with rapid population growth, increased daily vehicle miles traveled (DVMT), and changing media consumption habits. This study documents the history, past successes and future challenges as Texas' population and traffic volumes continue to grow at increasing rates.

Key Results from Surveys

In this study, two surveys were conducted with Texas' residents about the DMWT Campaign. Surveys were sent to over 9.4 million residents with 36,110 valid responses. Parents were asked to conduct a linked survey with their children under 18 about littering, resulting in 771 valid responses.

Texas Resident Results

- Very high level of awareness: 96.6% of adult respondents had heard of the DMWT slogan
- Traditional and highly visible media are the primary way adult residents hear/learn about the DMWT slogan – billboards (70.9%), TV commercial (62.5%) and bumper stickers (42.8%)
- 80.6% of adult respondents understand the meaning of the DMWT slogan correctly.
- For those adults who have heard the DMWT slogan, 92.0% reported the slogan was either very effective (32.4%) in prompting a conscious effort not to litter, or re-emphasized the importance of not littering (59.6%).
- 97.9% of youth (under 18) respondents know what littering is; 70.4% have heard of DMWT.

Key Findings

Litter, Population, and Age Demographics

The amount of litter on a section of roadway is related to traffic volumes, route type, regional population, urban or rural location, age demographics, and other factors. Texas has experienced significant increases in population and Daily Vehicle Miles Traveled (DVMT) over the past decade including individuals from other states and countries who might not be aware of the DMWT campaign.

Texas' population is expected to grow from 29.2 million people in 2020 to a forecast 42.6 million people in 2060 based on the Texas Demographic Center's Mid-Migration scenario. The Texas triangle urban areas of Dallas - Ft. Worth, Austin, San Antonio and Houston will gain population with reductions in rural counties. Highway litter is expected to increase within these metro regions and the surrounding counties. Further, age demographics will change due to decreases in birth rates and increases in 65 and older population. TxDOT litter behavioral surveys have determined that young men litter far more than other groups. Future litter amounts will change as a consequence.

Past Litter Composition Surveys

TxDOT has conducted periodic litter surveys using established survey locations along different routes, districts, and urban or rural locations. Litter composition has changed over the years with reductions in large litter (> 4" in size) piece counts which includes items such as plastic bottles, aluminum cans and fast-food packaging. However, there have been larger increases in the amounts of micro-litter (< 2" in size).

Micro-litter and Cigarette butts

Micro-litter now accounts for more than 70% of all litter pieces with cigarette butts being the single largest category. Cigarette filters are made of plastic and do not decompose, even though many smokers mistakenly believe they will break down and disappear. Lighted cigarette butts also pose a safety risk, as they can ignite roadside fires during Texas's hot, dry summers.

Litter amounts and highway route type

Based on past litter surveys, FM roads comprise the largest mileage of highway routes and also have the largest amount of litter (56% by piece count). State Highways account for 26% of litter and US Highways account for 8%. Interstate Highways have less total mileage and also account for 8% of litter volume, however they have a relatively higher litter density per mile. This is due to much higher IH traffic volumes.

Economic Considerations

TxDOT manages litter cleanup and litter prevention through distinct operational functions. Litter pickup is a maintenance activity delivered through maintenance crews and contracts, with current annual expenditures of about $50 million. *Don't mess with Texas* is a highly effective, flagship behavior-change campaign focused on preventing litter at its source and is funded at <10% of total litter pickup spending, underscoring its strong return on investment and value to Texas residents, businesses and tourism.

Approximately, 55.4% of adult survey respondents indicated they Hear or See the DMWT slogan either Frequently or Occasionally. Approximately 11.6% hear the slogan rarely and 33.0% used to hear the slogan frequently, but rarely now, see Exhibit 1.

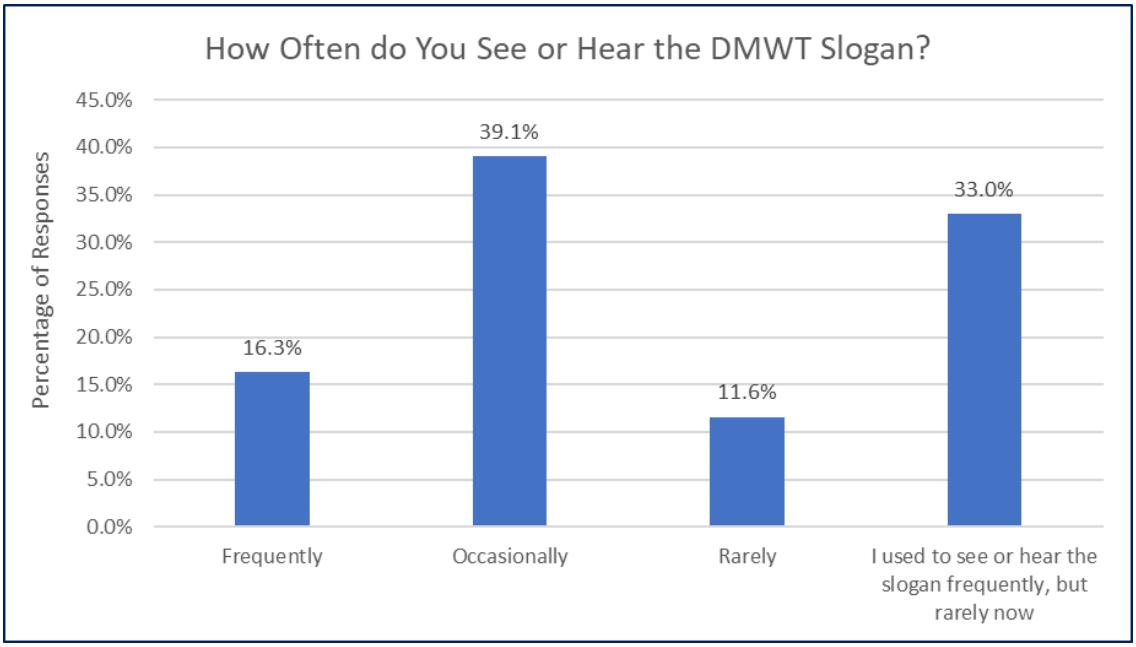


Exhibit 1. Adult resident responses to survey Question 9 'How frequently do you see or hear the '*Don't mess with Texas' slogan*?

TxDOT's 40th-anniversary materials note that DMWT launched in 1986 with high-profile TV and radio spots featuring artists like Willie Nelson. Surveys continue to show high exposure to television advertising, but the audience skews toward long-time residents and older adults, with 36.6% reporting they have never lived outside Texas and many aged 65 or older. As broadcast placements have declined and population growth has increasingly come from new residents, TxDOT has proactively modernized the campaign by expanding its media mix to include PSAs featuring Post Malone and use of digital and community channels. This strategic shift strengthens TxDOT's ability to reach newcomers and younger audiences through multi-channel outreach, including social media, K–12 lesson plans, and community engagement.

The Youth survey indicated that 19.6% of respondents see or hear the DMWT slogan Frequently, (46.4%) Occasionally, and (34.0%) Rarely. The three methods Youth have seen or heard the DMWT slogan are billboards (53.1%), Relatives or Friends (44.4%) and Bumper Stickers (34.0%). Currently, social media is ranked 8th among slogan sources at 26.5%.

Further, Youth have formed different ideas about what the DMWT slogan means. The top three meanings are: 'Texans are tough' (46.9%), 'Don't Litter' (44.4%) and 'Texans are Proud of their state' (38.6%). Thus, the DMWT slogan may present a mixed message to Youth who have not grown-up seeing TV commercials by Stevie Ray Vaughn or Willie Nelson about not littering.

The adult resident survey responses to the top three meanings of the DMWT slogan are 'Don't Litter (80.6%), Texans are Proud of their State (45.9%) and Texans are Tough (30.8%) which includes the same three meanings as the Youth survey but with different percentages and meaning priorities.

The study also highlights the importance of adapting campaign communication strategies to changing audiences. Traditional outreach methods such as television commercials, radio advertising, and billboards continue to perform well among older and long-term Texas residents. However, younger audiences increasingly rely on digital media, social media platforms, community engagement, and peer-based communication. Continued expansion into multi-channel outreach, including digital campaigns, educational materials, community events, and partnerships with public figures, may help strengthen long-term awareness and behavioral influence among younger generations and newly arrived Texas residents.

Overall, the DMWT campaign continues to provide substantial benefits to Texas through litter prevention, improved roadway appearance, environmental stewardship, reduced maintenance costs, and support for tourism and community pride. The campaign's ability to remain culturally relevant over four decades demonstrates the value of combining strong messaging, recognizable public figures, behavioral change, and consistent public outreach. Continued evaluation and modernization will help ensure that DMWT remains an effective campaign in public awareness and behavioral change toward littering.

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