

Curbing the Cost of School Vandalism

THEORETICAL CAUSES AND PREVENTIVE MEASURES

BY JIM COOZE

SCHOOL VANDALISM is one of the major problems confronting teachers, principals and school board officials in every school system across Canada. Millions of taxpayers' dollars are spent each year to repair or replace the willful and malicious damage caused by juvenile delinquents to school property. This writer recently carried out an investigation into the cost of school vandalism in St. John's, Newfoundland, and found, among other things, that the cost of glass, breakage alone (not to mention the cost of theft, arson, etc.) for each of the past five years has been rather substantial (See table 1).

Clearly, then, the cost of school vandalism is cause for concern, especially at a time when dollars for education are scarce.

Theoretical causes of school vandalism

During the 19th century, Jeremy Bentham and his utilitarian followers

perceived most criminals as rational calculators aiming to maximize happiness and minimize distress. Hence, during the early 19th century, criminal law in western Europe and America attempted to devise punishment for each offense just severe enough for a rational person to conclude that the gain from a crime would not be worth the penalty.¹ During the first half of the 20th century other crime-causation theories have been propounded, and have included psychiatric, biological, and sociocultural explanations; as well, the multi-causal theory has been postulated by many writers, including the prominent criminological researchers, the Gluecks.² Substantially

1. Cokman Phillipson, *Three Criminal Law Reformers: Beccaria, Bentham, Romilly* (London-Dent, 1923).

2. Sheldon and Eleanor H. Glueck, *Unravelling Juvenile Delinquency* (New York: Commonwealth Fund, 1950), and *Ventures in Criminology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).

Table 1
Cost of Glass Breakage in the Catholic and Integrated Schools
of St. John's, Newfoundland, over a Five-Year Period

| | 1989-90 | 1990-91 | 1991-92 | 1992-93 | 1993-94 |
|-----------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Total | \$102,895 | \$124,306 | \$149,452 | \$144,643 | \$149,475 |
| No. of Students | 30,868 | 30,518 | 30,510 | 30,361 | 29,909 |
| Cost / Student | \$3.33 | \$4.07 | \$4.90 | \$4.76 | \$5.00 |

different from these theories is the Aesthetic Theory of Vandalism proposed by Allen and Greenberger.³ These writers theorize that the variables that account for the enjoyment associated with socially acceptable aesthetic experiences (such as complexity, expectation, novelty, intensity, and patterning) are similarly responsible for the pleasure reaped from the destruction of an object. Giving credence to this theory are the results of studies carried out by Lloyd, and Pablant and Baxter,⁴ which suggest that little vandalism will occur at schools high in aesthetic quality.

A review of the literature on school vandalism reveals that it is a complex phenomenon. In fact, there is no consensus among social scientists about its causes, partly because of the different social values and different ideological proclivities held by these scientists. In fact, as Zwier and Vaughan⁵ point out, social scientists are not immune from holding preconceived notions about why a particular relationship exists and, therefore, in trying to solve a problem like investigating the cause(s) of school vandalism, they tend to seek support for their preconceived causal relationship. Although there are many causes of school vandalism, the literature suggests that the causes have to do with factors that are

3. Vernon L. Allen and David Greenberger, "An Aesthetic Theory of Vandalism," *Crime and Delinquency* 24:3 (1978).

4. R. Lloyd, "Ways of Fighting Vandalism," *Today's Education* 57:9 (1968), pp. 29-32; and P. Pablant and J. C. Baxter, "Environmental Correlates of School Vandalism," *American Institute of Planners Journal* 24:4 (1975), pp. 270-289.

5. Gerard Zwier and Graham Vaughan, "Three Ideological Orientations in School Vandalism Research," *Review of Educational Research* 54:2 (1984).

inextricably intertwined with the vandal, the school, the home, and the community.

The "typical" school vandal does not exist. Sociologists who have looked deeply into the problem find that there are reasons other than the vandal's dissatisfaction with his or her education. They suggest that the vandal may be one of the following (see Greenstein.⁶):

1. The vindictive, who carries a grudge against a particular teacher or other staff member.
2. The malicious, who commits his or her acts out of sheer devilry.
3. The ideological, who wishes to dramatize some particular stance or cause.
4. The acquisitive, who combines destruction with theft.
5. The bored, who has few constructive outlets for his or her energies.
6. The frustrated, who for one reason or another sees the easily accessible neighbourhood school as a symbol of a society, which he believes is callously indifferent to his needs and aspirations and against which he can express all his rage through school vandalism.

Significant factors of schools vandalism

The *Safe School Study* carried out by the United States Department of Education⁷ provides systematic data concerning schools, communities surrounding

6. R. Greenstein, "Can We Lessen Vandalism?" *Instructor* 79 (1970) pp. 90-91.

7. United States Department Health, Education and Welfare, National Institute of Education, *Violent Schools: Safe Schools* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987).

schools, families of the student-vandal, peers, and other factors; these data are provided for the purpose of assessing the causes, extent, and costs of student vandalism. According to the study, the following 12 factors are consistently related to school property losses:

1. The crime rate in the attendance area.
2. Residential concentration around the school. The school's proximity to students' homes may make it a convenient target for vandalism.
3. The presence of non-student youth around school, cited by principals as a problem. Evidently, they increase the school's risk of property loss.
4. Family intactness and family discipline. Schools having higher proportions of students from families in which both parents are present, and in which discipline is firm, suffer less property loss because of vandalism and other offenses.
5. School size. In larger schools, where there is more to steal or destroy, property losses will be higher.
6. Rule enforcement, classroom control, and non-classroom supervision. These again indicate that the more firmly a school is run, the fewer offenses it has.
7. Co-ordination between faculty and administration. This is another measure of how well the school is run.
8. Hostile and authoritarian attitudes of the teachers toward students. As a response to such attitudes, students apparently take it out on the school.
9. Students' valuing their teachers' opinions of them. Schools in which students identify with their teachers have less vandalism.
10. The manipulation of grades as a disciplinary measure. This practice may be seen by students as arbitrary and unfair, with the result that the school again is the victim.
11. The importance of grades to students. Schools where students strive to get good grades have *more* vandalism.
12. The importance of leadership status to students. Schools where there is

intense competition for leadership have greater property losses.

In summary, the *Safe School Study* and other studies since the 1950s have clearly revealed that there is no single factor that fully explains student vandalism. The causes are complex and at times interrelated. Depending on the basic approach used to explain vandalism, causal factors that have been cited include society itself, the individual vandal, and influential institutions like the school and the family.

Possible preventive measure to combat school vandalism

However, despite the lack of empirical evidence upon which school decision makers might rely, I have outlined below a synthesis of strategies (extracted from the literature) that may be usefully employed by school district administrators in combating school vandalism. For simplicity, these strategies have been grouped under three headings: the physical environment, the school system, and the community.

The physical environment

- Illuminate school buildings to make suspicious activity more visible.
- Use electronic gadgets, such as microwave and ultrasonic sensors, infrared alarms, closed circuit television and sophisticated alarm systems.
- Replace exposed glass with something less breakable, such as Lexan.
- Enhance the aesthetic quality of school buildings and surrounding school property.
- Encourage the school custodian to move quickly to repair a vandalized area. Allowing damage to remain visible makes it an attractive target for more vandalism.
- Store and secure valuable equipment.

The school system

- Have the school psychologist use behaviour modification techniques on truculent vandals. These techniques could involve token economy, contin-

gency contracts, and group guidance meetings, among others. Such behaviour modification techniques have proven to be successful by Haney⁸ and Brooks.⁹

- Strict adherence to school rules.
- Teach conflict resolution skills.
- Place emphasis on consistent rewards for students rather than on consistent punishment.
- Provide in-service education for teachers, emphasizing instructional and management techniques that may be useful in helping to reduce school vandalism.
- Have a system of student evaluation that emphasizes individual achievement rather than interpersonal competition.
- Encourage a feeling of belonging among the student body.
- Involve student groups such as the student council, athletic teams, etc., and make use of the student newspaper, the student handbook, and parent newsletter, in efforts to help reduce school vandalism.
- Emphasize behaviour expectations and discipline procedures at orientation meetings for new students.

The community

- Enhance school vigilance by encouraging neighbours to report suspicious activity around the school.
- Use the school more often after hours for extended recreational activities to keep children and youths occupied and off the street.
- Involve the co-operation of police — have local police train some respected junior and senior high school students to watch over school property during the summer months to help reduce vandalism incidents. As well, the local police might make sporadic checks of school premises on their nightly rounds.

- Involve the education community in local efforts to help reduce school vandalism; for instance, form anti-vandalism committees and have students serve on these committees along with adults.

- When school vandals are apprehended by the police, it is important that they be held accountable under the *Young Offender's Act* for their actions.

Conclusion

Although several solutions to school vandalism have been presented, there is no one foolproof prescription. Since the school is an open system within society, the solution rests in a meaningful balance among such key variables as the design of the school building, the curriculum, school personnel and the students, and exogenous factors such as the police, the courts, and the attitudes of the community toward the neighbourhood school. Obviously, the relative importance of these variables changes from school to school and from province to province. Therefore, since the magnitudes and interactions of these variables would be different for each school system, it is unlikely that a successful solution to vandalism in one school would automatically work in another. Notwithstanding that, school vandalism, like so many other negative forces in society, must not be allowed to flourish; however, it must not be thought of as an insurmountable problem, for by utilizing all our resources effectively school vandalism can be substantially reduced.

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8. S. Haney, "School District Reduces Vandalism 65%," *American School and University* 46:4 (1973), p. 29.

9. B. C. Brooks, "Contingency Contracts with Truants," *Personnel and Guidance Journal* 52:5 (1974), pp. 316-320.