

PUBLIC SCHOOL VANDALISM: TOWARD A SYNTHESIS OF THEORIES AND TRANSITION TO PARADIGM ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Public school vandalism was investigated with a sample of students in 7th through 12th grade. Vandalism was found to be the highest in Grade 7 and decreased progressively with each increase in grade level. Being from classes in the lowest academic track was the strongest predictor of school vandalism. For high school students, having committed acts of vandalism during their junior high year was the second strongest correlate of vandalism. Other correlates of vandalism were: coming from higher status families and being absent less from school. Vandals were no more negative toward themselves, their classes, and school in general than were other students. Vandals and nonvandals were rather uncritical of vandalism. While this research has relevance for several theories, it is suggested that delinquency and deviancy research move toward paradigm analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The conclusion that academic tracking of students is a potential factor in public school vandalism could follow from each of various major theories. Since they emphasize different aspects of deviant behavior and delinquency in particular, these theories largely arrive at this conclusion from different reasoning. Each of the theories, along with those not emphasized in the present study, have received major criticism, often from those with "opposing" theories.

Social learning theory emphasizes the acquisition of justifications for low-tracked students to engage in public school vandalism. As in much of deviant behavior, the acts of vandalism may require little learning due to their simplicity. These justifications would assist the vandals in rationalizing their deviant behavior. Social learning is based mostly on Sutherland's classic differential association theory. Akers (1985) illustrates the close connection between differential association and learning theory: "By chopping the last statement and combining the first and eighth statements in Sutherland's theory, the Burgess-Akers reformulation reduced the theory to seven statements consistent with the principles of modern behavior" (p. 41).

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A leading learning theorist, Akers recognizes that learning theory can be susceptible to charges of being tautological. The principles of learning theory can be true by definition and not by empirical test. This is somewhat like suggesting the truism: because the behavior occurred, it was therefore learned. However, the tautology can be avoided, and learning theory has important empirical potential. For example, would certain individuals commit a deviant act as a result of their learning rationalization for the deviance in differential associations? This question is especially relevant for the present study of whether the lowest tracked students are more likely to vandalize public schools than are other students.

Strain theory of juvenile delinquency is appropriate to the question of why some juveniles have a predisposition to acquire the rationalization for their delinquency. For the present study the question concerns the motivation of low-tracked academic students to commit acts of public school vandalism. Agnew's (1985) revised strain theory, which is especially applicable to the present study, suggests that delinquency results from the blockage of pain avoidance. Blockage of possible escape from aversive situations such as school has a direct effect on delinquency and an indirect effect through anger.

The more traditional strain theory concludes that delinquency is an outgrowth of blockage of goal-seeking behavior. Theoretically, lower-class youth would have fewer opportunities for success, and this situation would produce strain and increase delinquency. Schools are thought to intensify the strain felt by lower-class adolescents when away from school. This intensification results from lower-class youths' experiencing frustration in public schools, which are structured primarily for middle-class youth.

A major criticism of strain theory (e.g., Arnold & Brungardt, 1983) is the absence of consistent research findings which show that delinquents have not achieved their ambitions to the same extent as have nondelinquents. In fact, research sometimes shows that delinquents have less ambition regarding schooling and vocation, for example, than do nondelinquents. In fairness to strain theory, delinquent research subjects are studied *after* they have become delinquents or at least are in the process of becoming delinquent. Strain theory proposes that strain *precedes* delinquency. The delinquents' lower aspirations may have come about after the delinquency, as a rationalization for the delinquency. It might be that the youths adopted a delinquency lifestyle that was unaffected by prior aspirations and subsequently did not affect these aspirations. In essence, delinquent youths might segment their lives, i.e., their delinquency and their attitudes and behavior regarding the nondelinquent, legitimate world.

Social control theory (e.g., Arnold & Brungardt, 1983) considers academic tracking to be an important factor in school misconduct. Essentially, low-track students are likely to have weak social bonds to the school, education, and adult values in general. Social control exerted by the school is therefore weaker for these students. Low tracking appears to be associated with lower participation in extracurricular activities; such activities afford schools potential control of student conduct. Being placed in a low track increases the contact with other low-track students.

Other theoretical perspectives such as power, conflict, Marxist, and labeling theory are less relevant for the study than are those just discussed, since they are more concerned with the problem of why academic tracks exist. However, the present study accepts track placement of students, and does not investigate the rationale. Of these theories, secondary deviancy, a part of labeling theory, seems most pertinent in spite of the fact that the concept is very controversial among scholars. Secondary deviance is a concept of the role of individuals' reactions to their negative label. This societal reaction may motivate them to participate in deviant subcultures. Those who are labeled develop deviant roles and behaviors which they would *not* have developed without having been labeled in the first place. Somewhat consistent with this reasoning is the notion that if students were not placed in a low track, delinquent behavior such as school vandalism would not have occurred.

This paper advocates the use of a paradigm rather than any test that is likely to be followed by debates over whether the empirical results support one theory over others. School vandalism is suggested as a research topic which readily lends itself to a paradigm because more than one theory appears applicable. Delinquency is a complex phenomenon and probably no single theory will ever suffice. The various theories often emphasize different aspects and more than one theory is probably needed. A paradigm can facilitate the use of more than one theory without concluding that one theory is intrinsically superior to another.

The basis for the present paradigm has these components: (1) students' motivation for learning school vandalism, the behavior, and the justifications; (2) opportunities for learning school vandalism; and (3) opportunities for school vandalism which include the behavior and social support of peers. A central question of the paradigm is the role of academic tracking for each of these three components. What is the relationship of parents' socioeconomic status to school vandalism? Do school absences decrease vandalism? Do the attitudinal variables of self-esteem, satisfaction-dissatisfaction with school and curriculum,

and beliefs as to whether school vandalism is justified contribute to school vandalism? What effect does grade level (7-12) have on school vandalism?

VARIABLES

Dependent Variable: School Vandalism

Most scholars probably would agree that public school vandalism is a very important topic. Likewise, most scholars probably would agree that public school vandalism has received inadequate attention in the scientific literature. Kratcoski and Kratcoski's (1986) review of the meager literature on the subject emphasizes vandalism's nonutilitarian nature. Vindictive youth are responding to what they perceive as "wrongs" by "repressive systems" and "unjust" school personnel.

Strain theory, especially revised strain theory, would conceptualize school vandalism as a nonutilitarian response to frustration which the youth cannot avoid. The vandal experiences no economic gain from the vandalism. Further, vandalism is not a crime which may lead to a criminal career as an adult. Rather, the youth appears to be reacting to what is perceived as a source of frustration, the school.

The present study is similar to Richards's (1979) pioneering study of middle-class school vandalism. The two major categories of vandalism were school defacement and property damage. Examples of defacement were writing, painting, and drawing on school buildings or property. Examples of property damage were breaking windows, equipment, and plumbing. Consistent with Richards's study, these respondents were asked, "In the six months or so since school began, about how many times (if ever) have you. . . ." Preliminary data analysis showed that the results were similar for the school defacement and property damage categories. Therefore, these categories have been combined into an overall index.

Academic Tracking

One of the very few studies to directly investigate tracking and delinquency is by Wiatrowski et al. (1982), who investigated delinquency in general rather than school delinquency or school vandalism. Low tracking was defined basically as noncollege track placement. The present study, however, is concerned with the possible effects on students of being placed in the *lowest* rather than just a noncollege track. In fact, the Wiatrowski et al. data failed to demonstrate a relationship between noncollege tracking and delinquency in general.

Research which directly relates tracking and school vandalism is^s

scarce. Arnold and Brungardt (1983) interpreted Richards's (1979) study as support for the existence of a relationship between tracking and middle-class school vandalism. However, Richards's study did not measure tracking per se. Rather, that data showed a relationship between vandalism and students' peer relationships. These results could have resulted from tracking, but such findings were not ascertained in the study.

Tracking might be a significant mechanism by which school vandalism occurs. A dictum of the pioneering studies of delinquency of the "Chicago school of the 1920s" is that delinquent acts almost always are committed by youths acting with other youths rather than alone. Grouping students in classes according to academic ability and/or achievement seems likely to increase interaction among these students outside of classes. Low-track students may perceive the school as a significant source of their difficulties.

Kratcoski and Kratcoski (1986) conclude that there have been two common elements to school vandalism over the last several decades: (1) the vandals view their actions as striking back against an "unjust" or "repressive" school system, and (2) school vandalism is committed in the company of other youths. Tracking would seem to contribute to these two elements as well as to rationalization of vandalism. Kratcoski and Kratcoski report data indicating that 71% of school vandals did *not* feel that they had committed a criminal act.

The present research measured tracking in terms of the percentage of students who were in classes in the *lowest* track. The literature seems to suggest that being placed in the lowest track was more important for prediction of misconduct than not being placed in a high track. High school students in the present study are placed in one of four tracks for each class taken. The highest track consists of college preparatory classes. It is possible for students to earn college credit and/or receive advance placement in college. The next higher are the X classes. The Y classes are next and usually are average classes. The Z classes are the lowest tracks. The Z classes appear to have some stigma attached to them by students, who make remarks such as "Z classes are barely classes."

Exploratory data analysis supported the importance of lowest track placement. It was possible to extend the measurement of this variable by including a consideration of classes taken in high tracks. Such extensions did not improve the explanatory power of the tracking variable.

Parents' Socioeconomic Status

Gibbons and Krohn (1986) point out that students of lower socioec-

onomic parents are more likely to be placed in low tracks than are higher status students with similar achievements and abilities. Students from higher status families in the lowest track are of specific concern for the present study. Higher status parents are more likely than lower status parents to demand high academic performance from their children and insist that they remain in school. Students from upper status families in low tracks could thus develop the motivating anger and pain avoidance blockage that might lead to school vandalism.

In the present study, student family status was measured by parents' educational attainment and occupation. As expected, these measures were very highly intercorrelated. Therefore, the subsequent analysis results were the same using the items separately or combining them into an overall measure.

School Absences

Gibbons and Krohn (1986) have come to understand that schools can be a fertile context for delinquency for some youth. Since schools are a source of problems for some youth, would their not being in school reduce delinquency, especially school delinquency? Elliott (1966) and Elliott and Voss (1974) suggest some affirmative response to this question. This research found that delinquency rates for boys were higher in school than after they dropped out of school. Delinquents from lower income families had considerably lower delinquency rates *after* they dropped out of school. Delinquents from middle-class families had similar rates after dropping out of school. The Elliott research is consistent with the position that youths' family status and school context can be combined to increase delinquency. Apparently, dropping out of school was more of a problem for middle-class youth than for poorer youth since middle-class delinquents did not commit fewer acts after leaving school as did poorer youth.

The present study uses absences from school as an extension of the concept of dropping out. Whether the youth is called "absent" or a "dropout," the youth is not in school. Younger children cannot legally quit school. Besides, the present study concerns students who are in school.

Attitudinal Variables

The basic argument connecting tracking and delinquency conceptualizes a cluster of attitudes as intervening between the student track placement and delinquency. To illustrate, Wiatrowski et al. (1982) state: "Students in noncollege curricula are believed to suffer losses in social status in school, decreased commitment to educational goals,

lower self-esteem and poorer self-concepts, and are thus likely to become more delinquent than college-bound students" (p. 151).

In the present study, subjects were asked to indicate how good or bad they usually feel about themselves on a ten-point scale. Also, respondents were asked to indicate their degree of satisfaction-dissatisfaction with their classes and the school in general on a ten-point scale. On a ten-point continuum, respondents were asked to indicate their approval-disapproval of school vandalism. At one end of the continuum was, "school vandalism sometimes is justified when school officials such as administrators and teachers don't treat students right." At the other end of the continuum was the item, "school vandalism is a crime and those who do it should be treated like anyone else who commits a criminal act."

School Grade Level

Along with high school students, the present study is interested in the junior high school grade level. The junior high, perhaps even more than for lower or higher grade levels, is suggestive of blockages of avoidance of aversive environments. Junior high schools often seem more demanding to students than do elementary schools. The junior high student, unlike the older high school student, cannot leave school legally. Wiatrowski et al. (1982) suggest that junior high schools be researched for causes of later high school delinquency. This suggestion followed from the finding of these researchers that sophomore-year delinquency was the best predictor of delinquency during the senior year and one year after graduation. Also, more school vandalism was found among junior high students than senior high students in Richards's (1979) study of school vandalism.

The present study analyzes junior and senior high students both separately and together. Relative amounts of vandalism for each of the two school grade levels are noted as well as the relationship among variables within the two grade levels. The present study asked high school students about their vandalism in junior high school. Such recall questions are subject to problems of unknown selectivity. However, it was felt that the Wiatrowski et al. suggestion was important enough to warrant at least an attempt to probe whether junior high vandalism contributes to later high school vandalism.

Respondents

The respondents to the present study were enrolled in schools of a single district of a Southern California suburb during the spring semester of 1986. Similar to that of Richards's (1979) study, the present school district is of relatively high status. It was anticipated that stu-

dents from higher status families would experience strain of doing poorly academically in school. Also, high-status parents would be less willing for their children to drop out of school or be absent than would lower status parents.

The present school district is above the 80th percentile in terms of "base revenue per average daily attendance" as well as census data. The base revenue is an effective measure of the wealth of a school district. From census data, the present school district is similar to Richards's (1979) data. Almost half of the adults were college graduates. Median years of schooling completed was 15.1. Median family income was slightly under \$50,000 per year. Over 90% of the respondents were Anglo. One hundred males and 100 females from each grade (7-12) were randomly selected; 171 completed the instrument during the spring semester.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Frequency Distribution

Interestingly, the frequency distribution of student vandalism of the present data appears similar to Richards's (1979) data, with the present sample perhaps showing a little more vandalism. Table 1 shows that the majority of students committed no acts of vandalism. School de-

Table I
Frequency Distribution of Students' Acts of School Vandalism

Number of Acts of School Vandalism Since School Started	Percentage of Sample
never	61%
1	14%
2	6%
3	5%
4	4%
5	4%
6 - 10	7%

•Respondents were given the option of selecting "over ten" acts but the option was not selected.

(N - 1171) The total differs from 100% due to rounding.

facement is more common than property damage. As with Richards's study, the present study found no consistent difference between males and females regarding vandalism. Females were a little more likely to report school defacement, while males reported more acts of school property damage than did females. Overall, sex differences were not significant and did not correlate significantly with any other variables. Also, the male-female variable did not make a contribution to the explained variance in multivariate analysis.

Even though only a minority of students (39%) engage in acts of vandalism, these acts are a serious problem for a school district. Among the student vandals, about 20% do approximately 80% of the acts of vandalism. The majority (56%) of those who did deface property did not do property damage. However, 89% of those who report acts of property damage admit also doing acts of defacement.

Tracking

Tracking is moderately correlated ($r = .51$) with acts of vandalism. The more of a student's classes which are in the lowest track, the more likely is the student to commit school vandalism. As with students in general, many of those who have the lowest track classes are not vandals. However, among the approximately 4% who commit most of the vandalism, 88% of these students had at least one of their classes in the lowest track. Thirty-one percent of the sample had at least one lowest track class. Fifty-one percent of the students who commit the bulk of school vandalism had all of their classes in the lowest track; this compares to 7% for the entire sample. Moreover, these data seem to indicate that low tracking occurs prior to school vandalism. Among the low-track high school vandals, 94% indicated that they had prior junior high low-track assignments.

Tracking was not a successful interpreter of the attitudinal variables. Students with classes in the lowest track did not differ from the other students regarding self-esteem, satisfaction-dissatisfaction with school in general, and satisfaction-dissatisfaction with their classes. Students with classes in the lowest track were very slightly more likely to be sympathetic toward school vandalism. This relationship ($r = .16$) is statistically significant, even though very small in magnitude. Apparently, low-track placement is not important for learning negative attitudes about the school. Probably there is plenty of opportunity for students to learn negative attitudes outside of the lowest track classes. Many other factors besides class tracking might contribute to how students feel about themselves, e.g., sports, parties, clothes, "personality" and success with the opposite sex. Higher track classes might be more difficult for students and have, in some cases, more of a neg-

ative effect on self-concept than lowest track classes. Also, lowest track students may be relatively successful when they compare themselves to other students in the lowest track.

Family Social Status

The students' index of family social status was weakly correlated ($r = .21$) with school vandalism. Even though students from higher status homes were only slightly more likely to commit school vandalism, the results are statistically significant; with a large sample size a very small correlation coefficient is statistically significant. As expected, students from high-status families were less likely to have low-track classes ($r = .38$). In forthcoming multivariate analysis it will be ascertained if students from higher status families in low-track classes have higher rates of school vandalism than do lower family status students in low tracks.

School Absences

As with family social status, students' school absences have a weak but statistically significant relationship to school vandalism ($r = .20$). However, students in low-track classes were no different in absence rates from the other students. As mentioned earlier, higher status parents may be less likely to tolerate school absences by their children. Students from higher status homes were a little less likely to be absent from school than were students from low-status homes ($r = .26$).

Attitudinal Variables

As discussed earlier, students in low-track classes were not very different from other students in their feelings about themselves, their classes, school in general, and school vandalism. Likewise, the attitudinal variables were not correlated with school vandalism. It might be that sufficient "negative" attitudes exist within the general student subculture for vandalism behavior. Thus no *different* learning of attitudes within the low-track classes is necessary for acts of vandalism. To illustrate, only 11% of the present respondents chose the response, "School vandalism is a crime and those who do it should be treated like anyone else who commits a criminal act." Also, attitudes favorable to school vandalism might *not* be an important prerequisite for students to commit acts of school vandalism. Lack of opposition to school vandalism might be attitudinally sufficient for acts of vandalism. Therefore, school vandalism is influenced largely by variables other than attitudes among students who are not firmly opposed to school vandalism.

School Grade Level

The relationship between vandalism and school grade level was $-.45$, which is just a little less than the relationship between tracking and school vandalism. This relationship is consistent with Richards's study which found more school vandalism in junior high school than high school. Moreover, the present study found the highest school vandalism rate in the 7th grade; the rate progressively decreased with each year increase in grade level. The 12th-grade vandalism rate might have been higher had the study included the end of the school year graduation activities when vandalism sometimes occurs. Starting with the 7th grade, the respective percentages of this study's total vandalism were 34%, 29%, 16%, 10%, 7%, and 4%.

Discussed earlier was the influence of the Wiatrowski et al. study on the present study with regard to the influence of the junior high years on high school delinquency. Since the present study is not longitudinal as was the Wiatrowski et al. study, the selectivity of memory of high school students recalling their junior high school years is unknown. For high school students in the present study, those who committed acts of school vandalism during the 7th grade were more likely than other high school students to commit vandalism. Those high school students who started vandalism during their 8th-grade year were the next most likely to commit acts of vandalism in high school. None of the high school students who reported 8th-grade vandalism indicated having done so in 7th grade. Seventy-nine percent of high school vandals reported committing acts of school vandalism during junior high school. Although longitudinal data would be needed for direct evidence, the decrease in high school vandalism from junior high might be a result of the junior high vandals' having dropped out in high school.

Multivariate Analysis

Since the variables are different, the multivariate analysis for the data as a whole differs from the multivariate analysis of junior high and high school grade levels. In the whole sample, grade level is used as one of the explanatory variables. For the high school level, students' junior high vandalism experience was utilized in the analysis.

For the entire sample, tracking had the strongest relationship to vandalism at both the bivariate and multivariate levels of analysis. The next strongest variable at both the bivariate and multivariate levels was school grade level. While school absences were slightly less than family social status for vandalism in bivariate analysis, school absences increased in strength at the multivariate level of analysis.

Family social status remained in about the same relationship to vandalism at the multivariate and bivariate levels of analysis. The attitudinal variables did not gain significance at the multivariate level. Fifty-three percent of the variance was explained in multivariate analysis for the entire sample. (See Table 2)

For the high school sample, the relative strength of each explanatory variable in its bivariate and multivariate correlations is similar to what exists for the whole sample. The high school students who report vandalism while they were junior high students emerged as the second highest correlations after tracking. The patterns of bivariate and multivariate influences of the other explanatory variables for vandalism were like that of the entire sample. Forty-eight percent of the variance was explained in multivariate analysis for the high school sample.

For the junior high sample, tracking was an even more powerful interpreter of vandalism than was the case for the high school sample. Tracking seems to gain much of the variance that the prior junior high vandalism experience explained for vandalism in the high school sample. The present data makes somewhat plausible the trend of low-track placement and school vandalism starting in junior high school and continuing into high school, at least into the 9th grade. Fifty-one percent of the variance for vandalism was explained in the junior high sample.

CONCLUSION

Within the limitations of the data of the present study, the following emerges as the "outlines of a portrait" of a public school vandal. A junior high student who has classes in the lowest track is the most likely vandal. The next most likely is a high school student (9th or 10th grade) who was a junior high vandal and has classes in the lowest track. Vandals are a little less likely to be absent from school than are other students. Also, vandals come from slightly higher social status families than do nonvandals in their school. Vandals are about as likely to be males as females.

Vandals feel as good about themselves as do other students. Vandals are no more critical of their classes and school in general than are other students. As with students in general, vandals are not very critical or disapproving of school vandalism. Vandalism appears as behavior which a student can perform without expectation of condemnation by other students. Therefore, vandals do not need to lose self-esteem as a result of their acts. Further, it probably is not necessary for a

student to learn any special justification or rationalization for vandalism in order for the behavior to be consistent with his/her attitudes toward vandalism.

Table II
Relationships of Explanatory Variables to Acts of School Vandalism

Explanatory Variables	Entire Sample		High School		Junior High School	
	Bivariate	Multivariate	Bivariate	Multivariate	Bivariate	Multivariate
Family Social Status	.21	.16	.20	.17	.22	.16
School Absences	-.20	-.22	-.17	-.18	-.23	-.25
Tracking	.51	.32	.42	.29	.53	.44
Grade Level	-.45	-.29				
High School Students			.40	.32		
Junior High Vandalism						
	R = .74		R = .69		R = .71	

* - The attitudinal variables were not significant at the .05 level

The present data may have the luxury of relevance and support for several theories. It is advocated, however, that delinquency research attempt to synthesize theories and move more to a paradigm approach, although paradigms may *not* be superior to theories per se. Advanced sciences seem to employ both theories and paradigms. Often, delinquency research and deviant behavior research is subsumed by debate over whether a given theory is supported. The basic goal of science, then, gets lost. Establishing basic principles of behavior is the more central goal. Theories (or paradigms) are helpful to the extent that they move a discipline toward establishing scientific principles.

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