

Graffiti Prevention and Suppression—WINNING PROJECT

San Diego Police Department

The Problem: Gangs and graffiti throughout the Mid-City police division.

Analysis: Officers developed a better understanding of the motivations for graffiti in the area. They concluded that improved monitoring of chronic offenders, consistent removal of graffiti, and alternative activities for offenders could best respond to the problem.

Response: Officers used six approaches in a comprehensive response strategy:

- 1) Some chronic juvenile offenders received professional psychological counseling.
- 2) Convicted juvenile offenders painted over graffiti as a condition of probation.
- 3) Citizen volunteers monitored and cleaned graffiti-prone areas.
- 4) Police officers helped supervise juveniles on probation for graffiti-related offenses and enforced laws prohibiting graffiti.
- 5) Juveniles were encouraged to paint murals in select areas.
- 6) Police coordinated a juvenile bicycle patrol to monitor the neighborhood for graffiti.

Assessment

After the strategy was implemented, officers noted a 90-percent reduction in the more than 300 instances of graffiti in the division. Several chronic offenders who had received counseling stopped painting graffiti altogether. The murals remained free of graffiti.

Judge's comment

This project was exemplary for several reasons. For police, graffiti normally is not a high priority. However, these officers, in reaction to the concerns of the community, agreed to take on the problem and correct it. They went to great lengths to document the dimensions of the problem by surveying the community, counting the number of sites defaced, analyzing patterns of vandalism, and noting the prevalence of different types of graffiti. They distinguished graffiti reports from all other vandalism reports. After developing a better understanding of the motivations of graffiti vandals, police were able to design a multifaceted response plan. Rather than assuming sole responsibility for addressing the graffiti problem, they got the support of schools, juvenile probation, professional counselors, the juvenile court, youth services, and community volunteers. The officers studied reports on effective responses to graffiti elsewhere and incorporated what they learned into their local response. The response was creative and collaborative, and while it was difficult to determine precisely what impact each part of the response strategy had on the problem, the overall effect was dramatically positive.

Scanning

San Diego Police Department's Mid-City Division, which is densely populated and ethnically diverse, comprises 4 square miles of mixed residential and commercial zones. Thirty-eight languages are spoken in local schools, and the population includes lifelong residents and new immigrants. Housing consists largely of Section 8 apartment complexes and other low-income renters. The business district is primarily made up of churches and small family-owned stores, such as pawnshops, ethnic restaurants, liquor stores, automotive repair shops, and thrift stores. The area has a long history of robberies, drug deals, prostitution, auto theft, and other street crimes. Naturally, the Police Department concentrated on the crimes.

The division already had adopted wide use of problem-solving techniques, including weekly community meetings. At a community meeting in March 1999, an officer presented crime statistics for robberies, prostitution, and drug offenses in Mid-City. After listening to the litany, a member of the community asked, "What about the graffiti problem?" Several other community members chimed in, "How are you going to stop graffiti in our neighborhoods?" The officer was astonished, but had to concede that graffiti, and not other crime, was the greatest quality-of-life concern for the community. Describing how the increase in graffiti encouraged the increase of crime, one resident said, "Blight creates blight." From this point on, graffiti became a top priority for the Police Department's Mid-City Division.

A team of officers decided to quantify the extent of the problem. An officer and a detective charted on a map the amount, sites, and types of graffiti in the community. After 2 days of covering 2 square miles of the division, their findings were disturbing: upon reaching 300 instances, the officers discontinued their count. The community's concern, they realized, was well founded.

The stakeholders were identified as business owners and merchants, homeowners, local residents, the El Cajon Boulevard Business Improvement Association, shoppers, city government, the school district, and the Police Department.

Analysis

The community believed that graffiti ranked low on the Police Department's list of priorities. The community also believed that blight breeds blight: If graffiti were to continue unchecked, property values would plummet, personal safety would be jeopardized, and the neighborhoods would decay.

A team of two officers and a detective researched the problem. The team calculated the local dollar costs related to graffiti and compared the costs nationwide. In 1998, the San Diego City School District spent \$500,000 on paint alone to cover graffiti. The city spent \$24,000 to cover walls, curbs, and other city property. Additional money was spent on sandblasting, which is a more common method of graffiti removal.

Research also disclosed that the demographic profile of taggers (graffiti writers) in Mid-City roughly matched national findings.

While reviewing the data, police discovered numerous Web sites that promote tagging. Taggers can boast about their activity, showcase their work, gain information about the "best" tagging locations in any city, and find stores with tagging supplies.²

² See, for example, <http://www.mearone.com>.

The team analyzed the information from the 2-day mapping survey and found the following:

- 265 of the 300 instances of graffiti were concentrated on rented multifamily housing that bordered business districts.
- 35 of the 300 instances of graffiti were at single-family homes.
- Business corridors were tagged on any blank wall and within the first 30 feet of an alley so the tag would be visible to passing traffic and the taggers could see if anyone was coming.
- Alleys, dumpsters, telephone poles, electrical poles, and boxes were prime tagging targets because they rarely got painted over.
- School walls were tagged daily.

The officers next studied graffiti-related calls-for-service, out-of-service time, number of graffiti arrests compared to crime arrests, times of day for tagging, types of graffiti (gang, crew, or solo), age of suspects, and the proximity of tagging to suspects' homes. The crime analysis unit of the San Diego Police Department supplied the data. An examination of graffiti-related calls showed:

	1998	1999
Calls for Service	218	149
Out of Service Time	264 hours	227 hours
Arrests	16	18

The decrease in calls-for-service may suggest that the graffiti problem was getting under control. However, based on the intense community concern and the incomplete survey that found more than 300 instances of graffiti, the team concluded that the problem was under-reported because of the complacency of residents who felt that the problem couldn't be solved and that there were serious shortfalls in enforcement and arrests. The 300 instances of graffiti were concentrated in 2 square miles of the division, and only 70 percent of the graffiti tags were reported. Police found the crime cases for graffiti difficult to extract because all vandalism cases were logged under the same Penal Code Section: 594(b)(4). (See appendices on pages 22 and 23).

Common aspects of graffiti in Mid-City began to emerge as the analysis continued:

- Tagging is geocentric—that is, it is concentrated near the taggers' homes and along routes to and from school.
- Tagging is a multiple-suspect activity (gangs and crews).
- Time of tagging is most likely from 5 to 8 p.m. during the week and all hours on the weekend.
- Tagging by scratching—for example, by scraping a sparkplug on Plexiglas—is rapidly growing.
- Graffiti is prevalent near multifamily housing and adjoining alleys.

The survey disclosed three types of tagging in Mid-City: Gang, crew, and solo. The three types form a type of hierarchy, where solo taggers work to form a group, called a tagging crew, that has an identified name. The crew then works to be asked to join a tagging gang, which is the aspiration of most taggers. Gang graffiti and crew graffiti mark the tagger's home territory. The gangs and tagging crews "bomb in packs"—that is, they work in groups to ensure an extensive attack. The crews often cross out tags by rival crews and rewrite their own tag over it. The solo tagger attacks anywhere to promote his tag name. The team identified the sources of most of the graffiti. The top two gang graffitis were identified as the Oriental Boys Society (OBS)

and the Holy Blood Gang (HBG). The top two tagging crews were identified as Running the Show (RTS) and Van Dyke Krew (VDK). The top two solo taggers were identified as Clever and Rascal.

Gang and tagger crews comprise 90 percent of the problems in Mid-City, as they all mark territory, bomb in packs, and cross out rivals. The solo tagger causes only 10 percent of the problem, is considered a “lone wolf,” and tags everywhere.

After analyzing the graffiti survey, police looked at the social aspect of graffiti. They found that tagging is part of a natural progression to gang activity. Tagging begins at school with children tagging on paper, ball caps, and backpacks. Tagging is part of social learning through negative behavior. The behavior is learned in small, intimate settings with people who have “influence.” By watching the taggers in focus groups, police found that they exert negative social control, which means that the tagger lacks control and is at the mercy of others who teach criminal behavior.

One of the better methods of deterring criminals is the “Pulling Levers Theory,” which involves advance warning of enforcement, meticulous follow through, and alternatives to criminal activity.³

The team looked at the best solutions adopted by other police departments throughout the Nation to control graffiti. The research showed:

Murals: Philadelphia and Reno have painted murals around the city to prevent tagging. Police in both cities discovered that taggers normally leave murals alone. Therefore, taggers on probation paint the murals in highly tagged areas. The murals were left alone because all taggers view the murals as artwork that conveys a sense of ownership.

Colorizing: A national study found that a graffiti site covered with paint the same color as the graffiti was 10 times less likely to be retagged. Officers in San Diego found, however, that taggers daily hit high-visibility sites (freeway access), even after “colorizing.” Alleys were slow to be retagged after “colorizing.”

Counseling: Counselors in a graffiti abatement project in Cathedral City, California, identified reasons for tagging and then treated it as an addiction.⁴ San Diego police endorsed counseling, but asserted that tagging is criminal behavior, not an addiction.

The team developed a survey in conjunction with the San Diego Association of Governments. Police asked juveniles who had been arrested for tagging to explain their motives. Of the 59 juvenile taggers in custody, 25 admitted to tagging.

The primary motives given by the taggers were boredom, recognition/popularity, member of a gang, and personal tag identification.

The team looked nationwide at the percentage of vandalism arrests handled by the juvenile justice system. Statistics showed that 53 percent of vandalism cases were handled as informal probation and that the rest, 47 percent, were dropped. In Mid-City Division, 75 percent are handled informally and the rest, 25 percent, go to formal probation. None are dropped. The chart below shows the judiciary response. The team spoke with a San Diego juvenile probation officer, Carmen Kneile, who said, “We do not have enough case workers to handle

³ Kennedy, David. “Pulling Levers: Getting Deterrence Right,” *NIJ Journal* 236 (June 1998): 2B8 (NCJ 184871).

⁴ Sgt. Bill Jones, *Counseling for Taggers*, Cathedral City, 1997.

the number of juvenile offenders. We need help if we're going to keep on top of the taggers. We carry case loads of up to 100 probationary juveniles at a time.”

Judiciary Response for Offenders	
National	Mid-City Cases
53 percent of the tagging cases are handled informally	100 percent of the cases are handled by probation
47 percent of the informal cases are dismissed	75 percent get informal probation, meaning some type of community service
17 percent agreed to informal probation	25 percent of those attend court for formal probation

Finally, police analyzed past responses and their effectiveness. The responses included surveillance, citizen paint-outs, random patrol, crime reports and arrests, restorative justice, juvenile court, and probation. None of these responses seemed to deter taggers. The officers at Mid-City knew they had to look for both a different response and new resources.

Response

After in-depth scanning and analysis, officers realized that the best problem-solving approach would be to target both active taggers and potential future taggers. Youth-oriented resources would have to be the primary partners in this effort.

The Police Department joined with the Community Advisory Board, youth mentoring programs, city schools, the Code Compliance-Graffiti Control Program, Juvenile Probation, and Juvenile Court.

Based on the analysis, officers set up six steps to stop graffiti in Mid-City.

- 1. Counseling:** Two social workers volunteered to help in these sessions, which were informative for the police, but also designed so the taggers were counseled by the social workers in an attempt to get them to stop tagging. Ten juvenile taggers, who were chosen because they were responsible for 10 percent of the tagging in the area, set goals to stop their tagging. Each week, the taggers would meet with the counselor to discuss methods to prevent tagging. The hours would count toward their community service. Three of the 10 juveniles completely stopped tagging. The group was effective, but due to lack of funding, it is no longer being implemented.
- 2. Paint-outs:** Juveniles on probation for tagging clean up graffiti with bimonthly paint-outs at heavily tagged sites. Police and Juvenile Probation, working with SAY (Social Advocates for Youth), supervise the paint-outs. Paint and supplies come from the city's Graffiti Control Program. Community members contact the Police Department to identify newly tagged sites. Officers drive around the community to identify the tagged areas. The paint-outs “colorized” the graffiti.
- 3. Adopt-a-block:** Community stakeholders volunteer to keep a block free of graffiti for 6 months. The Graffiti Control Program provides the paint and supplies.

4. Handler program: Officers are assigned to repeat juvenile offenders. The officers established a list of known chronic taggers by talking to patrol officers and detectives. The list is kept in a secured cabinet, but is accessible to all officers dealing with taggers. An officer, called a “handler,” visits weekly with the tagger to monitor his behavior. The handler checks on the juvenile’s school, home, and street contacts. The handler updates the juvenile’s file after each visit. A zero-tolerance policy is in effect for repeat offenders. If they are not at school or at home when they are supposed to be or if their tag shows up anywhere, they are sent back to the probation officer and are ordered to perform paint-outs in the neighborhood or other community service. The purpose of the program is to let taggers know that the community and Police Department will no longer tolerate graffiti. The handler program has greatly assisted Juvenile Probation with its large caseload.

5. Murals: Students at the local junior high school paint murals on heavily tagged walls. The students work with teachers, businesses, and residents to plan and paint murals that reflect positive images of the community. The students have painted seven murals so far. Except for some minor pen marks, the murals have escaped tagging.

6. Joint Patrol: “Kids in Control,” a youth bike team, joins police, also on bikes, to patrol highly tagged sites. The program improves the relationship between youth in the area and police officers. The youth are taught how to work together to solve crime problems, such as graffiti, in their neighborhood. Officer David Tos wrote a grant for Mid-City for Youth to raise money to buy bikes for the youths. Based on the crime statistics for graffiti, the officers concentrated on youth aged 13 to 18.

The Probation Department put 10 convicted taggers in a graffiti focus group. A psychologist counseled the taggers to find out their motivations. The taggers gave these reasons:

- Need for attention and acceptance.
- The thrill of risk taking.
- Competition.
- No adult role models.

After working with the taggers for 3 months, the psychologist theorized several probable underlying causes for tagging:

- Lack of intimate adult interaction and direction.
- Lack of self-discipline.
- Poor self-esteem.
- Unresolved life trauma.
- Impulsiveness.

An erroneous belief is that taggers come from single-parent homes. The survey showed that 60 percent of the taggers live in two-parent homes.

Assessment

In the past 16 months inspections of the neighborhood recorded a 90-percent decrease in tagging.

The counseling program was effective, resulting in 30 percent of graffiti taggers in the program ultimately stopping tagging. However, the unbudgeted program ended after the volunteers had finished working with the youths.

Juvenile Probation continues to work with the Police Department on the paint-outs. Probation assigns 10 juveniles to bimonthly paint-outs in Mid-City.

The handler program has 10 chronic graffiti taggers assigned to officers. Police have arrested two of these taggers after visiting the taggers' homes, one for drugs found in his room during a routine visit and the other for curfew violation. The police are adding more handlers to the program.

Seven murals have been painted in the popular graffiti tagging locations. So far, only one mural has been tagged. Additional murals are being planned. The youth in "Kids in Control" have identified 20 graffiti crews and have identified the neighborhoods in which they tag. The program currently has 10 youths involved and is expected to expand to 20 by the end of June 2001. The program is still in its infancy and has yet to be evaluated.

As a result of these newly formed partnerships among existing agencies, the amount of graffiti has been reduced in Mid-City Division. Ongoing efforts and programs will continue to expand. The goal of removing graffiti as the community's biggest concern is closer to being achieved.

For More Information

For more information about the San Diego Police Department's activities, contact Dan Albright, Officer; Corinne Hard, Officer; or David Tos, Officer of the San Diego Police Department, Vice; Mid-City Division; 1401 Broadway; San Diego, CA 92101; phone: 619-531-2438 for Officer Albright; 619-531-2423 for Officer Hard; and 619-516-3083 for Officer Tos.