

A PLANNED RESPONSE TO JUVENILE GRAFFITI VANDALISM

Journal Article

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This Command College Independent Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue in law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future, but rather to project a number of possible scenarios for strategic planning consideration.

Defining the future differs from analyzing the past because the future has not yet happened. In this project, useful alternatives have been formulated systematically so that the planner can respond to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing the future--creating it, constraining it, adapting to it. A futures study points the way.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College project are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

"A Planned Response to Juvenile Graffiti Vandalism"

Imagine it is ten years in the future and you can drive on freeways traversing the San Fernando Valley and see road signs and freeway signs clean of that garbled scrawling that annoyed you so in 1994. In fact, anywhere you drive in Los Angeles is now free of any visual vandalism. Finally, the police got after those kids who had nothing better to do with their time than deface public and private property. Right? Maybe. What made the difference in a City that in 1993 spent upwards of four million to clean up this mess? Was it an increase in penalties on the parents of the kids doing the damage? Was it better education and anti-graffiti programs in the schools? Was it increased volunteer community support in an organized effort to solve this problem? Or did changes in national economic policy provide strong economic growth along with controls over immigration?

This is just one scenario of what the future of graffiti may be like in the Los Angeles area in 2004. The problem might not be completely eradicated, but it could be a lot better than it is now, or it could be vastly worse. What is graffiti (it's more complicated than what you might think)? What causes it and *how can law enforcement help to reduce or eliminate this form of juvenile graffiti vandalism?*

Another ubiquitous form of graffiti has been with urban society since the 1920's and that is Hispanic street gang graffiti, which was augmented in the 1970's with the advent of

Black street gangs, who also adopted graffiti as a way to mark their turf¹. As other ethnic street gangs have emerged they have also relied on graffiti to establish their identities and turf as well².

Graffiti is a form of communication that has been around for centuries, from excavations at the ruins of Pompeii³ to the World War II famous announcement that "Kilroy was here."⁴ New York City subway cars, now mostly clean, have been spray painted since the fifties, and anti-war and other demonstrators have used this method to get their views seen by a large public, whether the public wanted to read it or not.

As graffiti has escalated in recent years, it has been broken down into different kinds of vandalism based on who does it and why. Ethnic street gangs, the Bloods and Crips as examples, adopted "turf marking" graffiti.⁵ This kind of graffiti is predominantly territorial. It is placed on sidewalks, sides of buildings and residences to mark the gang's territory rather than the more visible "non-territorial" tagging.

"Turf wars" are the result of gang members fighting over the

¹Robert K. Jackson and Wesley D. McBride, "Understanding Street Gangs," (Placerville, California, Custom Publishing Company, 1986, p32.

²Jackson, p47.

³Antonio Varone, "The Walls Speak", Harpers Magazine, December 1991, p33.

⁴"Kilroy," Webster's Third New International Dictionary, (1986).

⁵Jackson, p32.

geographical boundaries one or the other sprayed. Often violent as well as damaging, police frequently cannot prosecute individual gang members unless they are caught in the act. This kind of vandalism is localized in known gang areas and is not as prevalent as "tagger" graffiti.

Tagger graffiti is the latest and most common type of graffiti display. It has spread virulently over the last five years and is perpetrated mostly by male adolescents between the ages of 15 and 25 operating in closely knit groups. Each group has a "crew name", such as "Kids Rule Society", that is compressed to a three-letter acronym, "KRS". Within each group, individual taggers have their own tag names, such as "Spear" or "Native".

The game within the "tagger" groups becomes how many places can a group's crew name and individual tag names be sprayed. The groups gain more prestige for the difficulty of the location that show tag names, such as the top of the freeway signs. Many signs now have razor wire around the side access areas to discourage this kind of high wire act.

Tagger groups have their own kind of warfare, known as "graffiti wars." Two groups will get together for a specific period of time, such as 30 minutes between the hours of midnight and dawn, and the group that sprays the most area or creates the most impressive display wins. This is property damage done for entertainment and peer group acceptance reasons.

Community volunteers and Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) personnel currently help the San Fernando Valley area law enforcement arrest this kind of vandal. School District staff keep track of the students and their "tag names" and they are entered into a computer database. Community volunteers observe the neighborhood and take pictures of recently sprayed crew and tag names which they turn over to law enforcement personnel. The police are able to obtain a search warrant of the student's home which often contains evidence of the tag name on books and clothing. The juvenile justice system considers this enough evidence for an arrest rather than requiring that the juveniles be arrested during the act.

But this is only the beginning of a more organized effort to reduce this seemingly cancerous assault on our surroundings. The incidence of "tagging" graffiti versus gang related graffiti is now 50 to 1. And most of the crimes go unreported. Property owners silently curse and clean-up the damage themselves figuring the police can do nothing about it. It is also the most expensive kind of vandalism to eradicate by both the private and public sectors. During Fiscal Year 1992/93, it has been estimated that government funded graffiti removal cost 3.5 million dollars in the City of Los Angeles alone.⁶

Obviously this is a complex problem that involves the kids, their home environments, schools, and their economic levels among

⁶Jones, Delphia, Director, Operation Clean Sweep, City of Los Angeles, telephone interview, 10, May, 1993.

many other factors. It is not a problem that the criminal justice system by itself can solve. How can law enforcement help find realistic ways to reduce and prevent this problem? A first step is to describe the individuals in the groups involved in this anti-social behavior and determine why they do it. Then, representatives of groups affected by this behavior such as law enforcement, the school system, social workers, and even ex-taggers themselves can get together to discuss and plan ways to change it.

The author and eight other members of an informal brainstorming group got together a couple of times in early 1993 to begin the first step of this process. Seven of the eight members were from the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and the eighth was a representative of the Los Angeles Unified School District.⁷ They discussed the evolution of anti-social behavior from inside the law to outside the law. Tagging fell just beyond the fringe of "normal" or "generally acceptable" adolescent behavior. Not all adolescents participate in this kind of activity, but those who do often expand their behavior into more serious crimes such as gang membership and substance abuse. This

⁷Members of the brainstorming group: In addition to the author, Lieutenant Richard Blankenship, Assistant Detective Division Commanding Officer, Detective III Craig Rhudy, Juvenile Coordinator; Ms. Merna Oakley, Adjutant; Officers Rudy Gonzales, Fernando Ochoa, Teresa Kahl, Van Nuys Area, Doctor Deena Case-Pall, Behavioral Science Services Section, Los Angeles Police Department; Mr. Joseph Luskin, Administrator, Los Angeles Unified School District.

group listed several reasons why the kids get involved in tagging.

In the 1990's young people between the ages of 15 and 24 do many other things in their lives for the very same reasons, such as listening to heavy metal music and wearing pants three sizes too big, but these activities do not infringe on other citizens property rights.

As a relatively new social phenomenon, there is little literature or written research on this subject, with the exception of the print media.⁸ Many articles focus on ways of removing the markings or how to prepare surfaces to prevent tags from sticking but provide little information on how to keep youth from putting them there in the first place. The New York Transit Authority even bought night vision goggles so its police officers can sneak up on vandals who creep into blackened subway tunnels.⁹ In Los Angeles an ordinance has been put in place, and has been upheld by the California Supreme Court, to keep spray paint cans and felt tip markers in locked display cases. These items can only be purchased with the help and witness of a store clerk.¹⁰ But very recently, with the publicity surrounding the caning of an American youth under Singapore law

⁸Glionna, John M. "Leaving Their Mark", Los Angeles Times, March 10, 1993, pB1.

⁹Bennet, James, "A New Arsenal of Weapons to Tag Graffiti Artists", The New York Times, September 27, 1992, Section E p2.

¹⁰Hager, Philip, "Justices Ok City Role in Fighting Graffiti", Los Angeles Times, February 5, 1993, Section B, p3.

for spray painting cars, public opinion returned to corporal punishment as a way of disciplining youth for this crime.

Assemblyman Mickey Conroy R-Orange, announced he is "preparing a bill to require the public paddling of juvenile graffiti vandals."¹¹ While Assembly Speaker Willie Brown Jr. stated that "We haven't had public whippings and lynchings since practically the Middle Ages around here," others welcome creative thinking on a subject that the penal system has failed to curb.¹²

Edward M. Levine, PhD of Loyola University wrote that "middle- and upper-middle class adolescents turn to vandalism for several reasons, all of which act in concert. First, such youngsters are often neglected or treated indifferently by their parents. This results in impulses dominating the will of adolescents, especially when they pass through puberty. Lacking effective self-controls, and living in communities that have lost much of their influence over those inclined to act in socially destructive ways, there is little to deter such youngsters."¹³

The next step in the process of helping law enforcement fight tagging was to gather representatives from groups affected by this blight and begin formal discussions and data analysis. This is known as the Nominal Group Technique (NGT). The NGT is a

¹¹"Does Paddling Have Its Place?", Daily News, May 16, 1994, p12.

¹²Daily News, May 16, 1994, p12.

¹³Levine, Edward M., PhD. "The Parent's Guide to Teenagers." New York, MacMillan Publishing Co., In., 1981, p63

small group process used to define all significant trends and events on a single, usually complex, issue to achieve agreement on a solution. This multi-disciplinary group, including the author, consisted of a cross section of eleven people directly affected by the tagging problem, most of whom are outside of law enforcement.¹⁴

The group projected that historical costs of vandalism would steadily rise from approximately 4.5 million dollars today to over 6 million dollars in 2004. This contrasts with the projected decrease in youths in the 15 to 24 year age range from approximately 1.35 million today to only 1.25 million five years from now. However, the group predicted a steep increase in this population to nearly 1.5 million in the year 2004.

In forecasting other trends that cannot be quantified as easily as costs and population, the group looked at the magnitude of the trend relative to a level of 100 today. Both the Value and Social trends will be less important in the future as a reason for juvenile vandalism. Peer Pressure does not appear to be increasing and neither is the Population Profile as a strong influence even though the population will be increasing. However, the Networking and Role of Community Oriented Policing

¹⁴Members of the Nominal Group/Modified Policy Delphi: Paula Campbell, Southland Corp.; Doctor Deena Case-Paul, PhD.; Tom Cody, Metropolitan Transit Authority Police; Don Giddings, Department of Water and Power; Jack Gold, Commissioner Superior Court, Juvenile Division; John Kordosh, Major Paint Co.; Thomas Mlinek, former tagger; Ken Paine, explorer scout; Craig Rhudy, Detective, Los Angeles Police Department; Ed Viramontes, YMCA Director.

shows much higher levels of influence in the future than today and could be a way of approaching a solution.

The probabilities of the listed events happening five years and ten years from now revealed more interesting information. An increase in penalties, in making parents liable for their kids behavior, in requiring a 24 hour clean up of graffiti, and an increase in making community service a requirement for graduation or for obtaining a drivers license showed very positive impacts in reducing this vandalism over the next ten years. While the probability of adding a D.A.R.E. type program in the grades of kindergarten through 8th grade showed the highest probability of occurring among all of the events, it did not show as high of a positive impact on reducing the problem. The least influential and the least likely event to occur was the Graffiti Summit.

So, after all of this discussion and statistical projection, are we any closer to our scenario of 2004--Elimination of tagging in the Los Angeles area? This could be the result of increasing penalties for acts of vandalism, banning aerosol products, mandating 24 hour clean up and making parents liable for the vandalism of their children. What about other scenarios? We might not do as well as total clean up, but graffiti could be gone from, for example, all areas of the San Fernando Valley. Increased long term behavior modification programs, such as a quasi D.A.R.E. program known as Rapid Action Against Taggers (RAAT), in conjunction with well organized community volunteers empowered to support the police could have made the difference.

The kids would no longer find this activity entertaining or necessary to meet their social needs. Those needs would now be met elsewhere in more positive ways.

Imagine graffiti as even more of a blight than in 1994? Immigration growth could escalate out of control and the resulting pressure on a local economy already at the breaking point could eliminate the community based programs in place now. Lack of personnel to enforce the new laws banning aerosol products and requiring 24 hour clean up could leave the adolescents in control to create even more damage and to retaliate against anyone who tries to stop them.

But even with the trends and events determined above, there are financial and political factors both national and local that will impact this problem, far beyond the control of the police. With the same or a different President, our economy could change radically over the next ten years. Even decisions being made now, revolving around gun control and national health care, could affect law enforcement's response to graffiti. So what next? How can the other factors be considered and become a part of a master plan that gives law enforcement the tools to work within our community today?

The foremost opportunity in the Van Nuys Area is that the residents are incensed by graffiti. This emotional reaction and its appeal has spurred community leaders to pressure local, county, state, and federal legislative bodies to get them to do something about it, and bills and ordinances have been passed.

This has also generated strong volunteerism among area residents to help paint out graffiti, as well as the aforementioned tagging observation and computer data base coordination with the LAUSD. According to Deputy Chief Martin Pomeroy, Chief of the San Fernando Valley operations since November 1, 1993, in a recent interview, "We have over 3,000 block captains, about 360 community police representatives and tens of thousands of citizens who volunteer their time to serve their community in conjunction with the Police Department."¹⁵

Even in these economically strapped times, cash donations have been forthcoming to help solve this problem. But this fledgling financial support is not enough to fund the technological research in progress to create graffiti-resistant surfaces, such as films that are placed over plate glass windows to prevent etching or coatings that can go over painted surfaces that allow graffiti to be washed off. The next best opportunity and a major player in providing the future with a vandal-less society is the educational system. Paramount to this are the parents of current teenagers and of future teens to help them teach their children to respect the property of others.

Some of the above opportunities could also be threats to eliminating graffiti. While property owners and building designers support the creation of products to prevent graffiti from permanently damaging walls and windows, new products are

¹⁵Meyer, Josh. "Community Ties Key to Fighting Crime, Says Valley Police Chief", Los Angeles Times, May 17, 1994, pB6.

also being produced to make graffiti even more permanent than it is. Paints or markers that cannot be washed off without more property damage and even small laser devices to sear the surfaces beyond repair could be available in the future. The media could help or hurt. By choosing to make folk heroes out of some of these kids, it only makes the problem worse.

Legislative efforts could hinder enforcement by creating laws to protect graffiti as "art" or "free speech", or other more pressing problems could shove graffiti prevention to such a low priority as to ignore it. And worst of all, a major catastrophe, such as a magnitude 8.0 earthquake, could stop graffiti clean up efforts altogether. Within a month after the Northridge earthquake in January 1994, taggers mobilized again to attack available clean surfaces left standing.

The Van Nuys area has many strengths that have already been responsive to this problem. The Van Nuys LAPD possesses a great deal of flexibility and is already involved in a strong partnership with the Van Nuys community. Also, the level of individual commitment is high along with initiative in problem solving. In this fast paced, "get it done yesterday" work environment, these are especially valuable traits. The Ham Watch program is an excellent example of the strengths of the Van Nuys division and the community coming together. The Ham Watch is group of volunteers highly trained in video surveillance/ham radio, who along with a group of officers stake out areas with numerous incidents of tagging. Enough arrests have been made to

result in significantly cleaner areas of Van Nuys. Local governments have also offered rewards for a variety of crimes to stimulate the public with cold hard cash to help catch criminals. The Los Angeles' graffiti reward program has been highly successful since it began in 1991. Since that time, the City has paid out \$85,500 to more than 100 individuals to apprehend graffiti vandals.¹⁶

Lack of financial resources is the most common weakness in the 1990's to solve most any public problem, and it is also true of the Van Nuys area. There are some things that Van Nuys division can do here but nothing compared to what economic growth in the Los Angeles and southern California areas would do. Since money is so tight, extensive prioritization of functions must constantly go on which often leads to the conflict of what "must be done" versus what "would be nice to do."

Before going on to brainstorming specific strategies it might be worthwhile to briefly describe exactly who the "stakeholders" are in this issue. Who are the groups that are most affected by graffiti vandals and who would most benefit by their eradication? Hopefully, once identified, representatives from these groups would be the logical participants to help law enforcement generate new funding and carry out the new strategies.

¹⁶ Martin, Hugh. "Rewards Are a Lure, But Few Come Forward", Los Angeles Times, May 16, 1994, pB1.

The visible benefactors of cleaner streets are the property owners and tenants in the area. As already shown, they are very willing to get involved. The business community as a whole recognizes the importance of being more organized and has already exerted pressure on elected officials to make progress. Law enforcement and the juvenile/adult justice system are obvious stakeholders and also believes in an organizational commitment to solve the problem and recognize the importance of front-end intervention as well as the consequences of failure.

Unfortunately, the schools view themselves as the victim in this problem and often resist outside influence on their curriculum. While you would think that community organizations and government would be as willing as businesses and property owners to help, they represent many diverse interests that may not see vandalism as the same priority of a problem. Taggers are the ones who created graffiti and still receive a good deal of individual expression and peer recognition as well as recreation from continuing to spread it.

Parents believe that discipline can control this problem, but also consider that this is the school system's responsibility rather than their own. Graffiti Specific Businesses and Graffiti Suppliers are affected by this problem but would be harmed not helped by its demise since their bottom lines thrive on it. And lastly, the media can help stir more attention either positive or negative to impact tagging. It has a strong ability and desire to manipulate issues for its own financial success.

The issue question developed for this study was, "What Will Law Enforcement's Response to Juvenile Graffiti Vandalism Be By The Year 2004?" Using the Nominal Group Technique and subsequently acting as a Modified Delphi Policy Panel, an experienced group of law enforcement officers, members of the school district and the business community met; developed and forecast a series of trends and events related to juvenile graffiti vandalism.

A cross-impact analysis of the trends and events was completed as well as a stakeholders analysis, and a set of strategies to combat this problem into a future window of ten years was developed. The strategies developed included: developing community impact teams, made up of law enforcement, other public agencies, property owners and the community itself with a defined area to reduce graffiti; developing a front end intervention strategy through the schools to ensure a systematic education of school children in staying away from tagging; changing laws relating to possessing the implements of graffiti and the punishment of graffiti offenses; requiring graffiti removal within 24 hours; and creating a "Fast Track" within the juvenile justice system for graffiti vandalism offenders.

Both strategies have pros and cons. The Community Impact Team (C.I.T.) works best in a narrowly drawn geographical area but is expensive to set up. It also depends on the various personalities of the community volunteers to work together, which can be a problem. However, if successful it can be turned over

completely to the community to maintain needing no further government support. It has been used successfully in reducing Van Nuys area drug activity and gang violence. It is a recognized model, is easily duplicated and flexible.

The front-end intervention program would be similar to the D.A.R.E anti-drug program and the Jeopardy anti-gang program. Again, an expensive project to start but hopefully one with long lasting effects on the youth and future youth in the community. This approach would involve significant changes in the way the criminal justice system, parents, schools and politicians think about the current methods used to modify juvenile behavior. Both strategies suffer from the disadvantage of not showing quick results. These programs need patience and time to take hold, which stakeholders and politicians (who depend on votes for re-election) may not want to give. When mission objectives are considered, the tactic of combining the micro approach of the C.I.T. with the macro approach of front-end intervention holds the most promise for goal achievement.

Implementation of the C.I.T. could be done immediately since modest financial resources would be available. A front-end intervention would not be as affordable by the Van Nuys area at this time. The C.I.T. members would be representatives from the law enforcement community; the Departments of Police, Building and Safety and Probation; social services, the Departments of Mental Health, Community Development and Community services; business community, community representative, universities and

community based organizations. All of these members would be thoroughly trained in the C.I.T. principles and would also be involved in front-end intervention activities as well. The Probation Department has already assigned probation officers in local high schools. Their duties could be modified to include working more with students who display pre-criminal behavior.

Of the numerous stakeholders described previously, five of these contain key participants in any successful anti-vandalism program: (1) law enforcement, (2) schools, including student government, (3) business, (4) the criminal justice system, and (5) the media. Also critical are local residents and community churches. Representatives from each of these groups will form a committee to support the C.I.T. and front-end intervention programs. This committee will choose a spokesperson from outside the group, preferably a celebrity, to be a catalyst to move the strategic plan forward. The group will also select a Project Manager to add stability and structure to the project which, either initially or some time in the future, could be a paid position. Three sub-committees would then be formed to add more organizational structure to the C.I.T. These sub-committees would be Program Development, Marketing, and Administration committees. Each of these committees will have its own chairperson. A "Responsibility Chart" will be drafted, following some initial team building among the six committee members, and the project is on its way.

Well, perhaps some of the questions initially raised about how graffiti might have disappeared by the year 2004 have been answered. As a result of this futures study, it was determined that law enforcement has some tools under its control, but it will not solve this problem without substantial community involvement. National and local policy changes may help or hurt. Some of the ways of controlling graffiti, such as restricting the display of aerosol paint products, have already been implemented with some success.

The C.I.T. combined with front end intervention holds the most promise in achieving the goal of eradicating tagging. Major stakeholders in the affected communities must get involved and stay involved over a long period of time. This includes property owners, school officials, parents, and even the kids themselves. Hopefully, the strong emotions that continued tagging generate in the business and residential communities will spark volunteers to help law enforcement find reasonable, workable, and cost effective action plans. The outlining of the trends and events in this study is a first step toward that goal. Once this partnership between the community and law enforcement becomes a reality, law enforcement will be better able to respond to changes in this vandalism problem and continue to work toward its elimination from our society.

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