

Are you ready to be tagged? Graffiti enforcement is not child's play.

By

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Introduction

The familiar children's game of Tag evokes glee and laughter whenever a tag is made. That same joy is missing in the real-life phenomena of graffiti tagging. When graffiti vandals tag an area with paint, markers or etching acid, the difference between an innocent children's game and criminal acts of vandalism becomes all too clear.

In the United States, the annual cost of graffiti abatement is staggering. "Southern California cities are spending \$100 million a year for cleanup, and the national cost may exceed \$4 billion," says vandalism expert Jay Beswick, founder of the National Graffiti Information Network. Public attitudes toward graffiti vandalism show no glee or laughter among taxpayers. To the general public, being tagged takes on a whole different meaning.

Citizens and criminal justice practitioners alike recognize the presence of graffiti has a dramatic influence on neighborhood fear and escalation of crime. Taggers, vying for the favor of gang members or simply operating as rogue vandals, use graffiti to mark or claim territory, gain recognition and show disrespect toward rival gangs or taggers. Territoriality among rival gangs continues to be a major source of gang violence. Graffiti as a primary form of communication and turf identification plays a direct part in feeding this violence. It is for these reasons that the public looks to law enforcement for action in stopping and arresting graffiti taggers.

Law enforcement agencies are continually examining new and innovative prevention techniques regarding public nuisance and various crimes that lead to neighborhood decline; graffiti is certainly among the concerns that draw attention. However, the challenge to law enforcement leaders is to find ways to combat graffiti vandals while dealing with limited staffing, tight budgets and competing priorities. Using the power of computers to their advantage is a strategy that police leaders should not overlook. This article explores the use of a statewide-integrated database as a tool for law enforcement agencies to identify, apprehend and prosecute graffiti offenders. It is a tool that is not for child's play.

Getting Tagged: The Problem of Graffiti

Graffiti can be found everywhere ---- on park benches and street signs, bus shelters, fences, utility poles, in parks, schools and various forms of public transportation. According to the Department of Justice, graffiti is widely found in various regions and in jurisdictions of all sizes. Although graffiti is a common problem, its intensity varies substantially from place to place. While a single incidence of graffiti does not seem serious, graffiti has a serious cumulative effect; its initial appearance in a location appears to attract more graffiti (Weisel, 1999). Anti-graffiti organizations such as NoGraf Network, Graffiti Hurts[®] and some police departments have described graffiti as blight on cities that result in the significant depreciation of property values and serves as a means of promoting fear (Sampson, 2000).

The Causes of Tagging

To try to explain the causes of tagging, it is important to know who is tagging and when and where crimes are being committed. This information is also important in evaluating crime-fighting techniques. The National Youth Survey, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Uniform Crime Report all show that young age is a characteristic that appears to be the predictor of criminal activity. Though not all young people commit crimes, graffiti offenders are typically young males between 15 to 23 years old (Weisel, p.15).

A number of theories point to what is learned in subculture settings and to youthful offenders having low levels of self-control or simply enjoy taking risk. Delinquency theories that focus on the individual can be classified according to two major groups---choice theories and trait theories (Siegel, 2003). Choice theory holds that people have free will to control their actions. Trait theories hold that personal and environmental factors dictate behavior choices, e.g., delinquents do not choose to commit crimes freely but are influenced by forces beyond their control. Other theories such as social disorganization identify factors in the social environment such as incarcerated parents, bad companions or a neighborhood suffering from broken windows, abandoned cars and graffiti. Social disorganization theory was first recognized by sociologists Clifford Shaw and Henry McCay, who found that delinquency rates were high in what they called “transitional neighborhoods.”

Political scientist James Q. Wilson and criminologist George L. Kelling introduced their now familiar “Broken Windows” thesis in a March 1982 article of Atlantic Monthly. The theory is an analogy used to illustrate how disorder escalates into more serious crime. One broken window, left unrepaired for any substantial length of time, instills a sense of abandonment and a feeling that no one cares. So another window gets broken. People start littering, graffiti begins to appear and unsupervised youth start

to congregate. Serious structural damage begins, and in a relatively short space of time, the area draws gang and drug activity. They wrote, "Disorder makes citizens withdraw from public places, ceding those areas to disorderly people who feel little restraint to commit additional crimes". Wilson and Kelling believe disorder and its message of tolerance for crime is contagious, spreading from citizen to citizen and neighborhood to neighborhood.

The Internet has displayed a significant influence on entrenching a worldwide graffiti subculture. Taggers can communicate instantly and with no trouble through email, chat-rooms, and instant messaging. There are a vast array of graffiti web sites that keep artists in touch with each other and each other's work. Graffiti artists regularly photograph their works and put them on the web for the enjoyment of other graffiti aficionados. Graffiti works can be seen by people who never would have had a chance to see them otherwise. I have personally used the website GraffInc.com to link to over 100 other web addresses that are devoted to tagging. Among the many sites that provide personal pages, forums and chat rooms are *Robotswillkill*, *Bombit* and *Fatcap*. *Graphotism* is a site that describes itself as "the international graffiti writer's website", and is a good example of how tagging has no geographic borders.

The nationwide proliferation of hip-hop has spread tagging as an acceptable form of expression among youth (Light, 1995). That hip-hop form of expression has often run afoul of gang members who commonly mark their territory or turf with their own symbols and monikers. Vandalizing property has given way to violence as tagging crews arm themselves for protection from gang members or rival crews. The City of Pomona, California has experienced tagging rivalries that have resulted in violence and even death. Other cities have had citizens and city employees threatened while trying to paint over or remove graffiti, and there have been incidents of taggers being injured by property owners.

Many large urban cities in America are faced with the blight of graffiti. Infrastructure units being vandalized by taggers include public buildings, light poles, utility boxes, fountains, sidewalks and even trees. The cost of graffiti varies depending on where the graffiti is and how large of an area is covered. Graffiti cannot always be cleaned up by painting over it. Depending on the surface that was damaged, graffiti often has to be cleaned off with special equipment. Often times when the tagging is painted over or cleaned, the discolored mismatch remains a reminder of the damage left behind. Acid etching is worse in that it cannot be easily removed and usually is permanent.

The Costs of Tagging

Tagging is a form of vandalism that cost taxpayers money. In 1992, the City of Los Angeles spent more than \$15 million on graffiti eradication. This figure does not include the volunteer time devoted to graffiti cleanup or the estimated millions of dollars spent by private businesses taking care of the problem themselves. In addition, the Southern California Rapid Transit District spent \$12 million on graffiti removal during the same year (Graffiti Hurts, 2005). The State of California's Department of Transportation, commonly known as CalTrans, reports that in the 80s and 90s tagging use to only appear on walls, but over the last decade has increasingly shown up on overhead signs, retaining walls, bridges and emergency call boxes. CalTrans recognizes the importance of quickly removing graffiti in order to discourage further vandal activity. Graffiti removal is scheduled by highway route segments for intensive clean-up. Graffiti that jeopardizes motorist safety, is obscene in nature, or politically-oriented is removed as soon as possible. The agency estimates it removes an average of 150,000 square feet of graffiti a month at an average cost of \$20,000. With increasing costs for graffiti removal, the price tag for taxpayers begins to quickly mount.

From Los Angeles to New York, cities across the nation have marshaled their resources to fight back. Many cities have implemented special police teams, public works graffiti-removal programs and other broad-based initiatives that include educational efforts, graffiti telephone hotlines and extensive public relation campaigns. Because of its rising prevalence in many areas---and the high costs typically associated with cleanup and prevention---graffiti is often viewed as a persistent, if not intractable problem (Scott, 1989). Deborah Lamm Weisel the director of police research in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at North Carolina State University states, "...for many people, graffiti's presence suggests the government's failure to protect citizens and control lawbreakers".

Interestingly, a wide variety of laws do exist in many jurisdictions. In some communities, the courts may impose restitution, and parents and offenders are sanctioned with fines and clean up costs. Others use community service for graffiti clean up and impose jail time for chronic offenders. Chronic offenders often commit graffiti offenses over a multi-jurisdictional area, but law enforcement's inability to track and compare open cases thwarts a focused effort. In spite of these efforts, however, the problem continues to vex law enforcement professionals and those who suffer from the blight of graffiti on the walls and buildings of their cities.

Fighting Back Is Not Easy

Surveys such as the 2004 Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood survey conducted by the Rand Research Group show that in the eyes of the general public, graffiti is a nuisance and infringement upon the lives of innocent citizens. It has become a major problem in most cities, causing an uproar and driving law enforcement to instigate a “war on graffiti” (Austin, 2001). Unfortunately, few graffiti offenders are apprehended, and some taggers change their methods and locations in response to possible apprehension and clean ups (Weisel, p. 38). Ideally, a highly visible patrol presence is supposed to cause the offender to believe that there is no reasonable opportunity to violate the law successfully. This is the concept of deterrence. Graffiti, however, is characterized by anonymity, which protects the offenders from detection and apprehension. Most offenders work quickly and prefer times and locations when few people are around such as in the middle of the night.

Graffiti and Crime

Apprehending and prosecuting graffiti offenders is difficult for understaffed police forces. It is generally too difficult to catch stealthy taggers in the act. There is a concern taggers believe the police will never catch them, leading to a false sense of bravado. Unfortunately, their actions serve only to embolden others who also are of interest to those who protect and serve.

Graffiti is not an isolated problem. It is often related to other crime and disorderly problems, including shoplifting of materials needed for graffiti and gangs and gang violence (Weisel, p.3). Participation in tagging may be an initial or gateway offense from which offenders may graduate to more sophisticated or harmful crimes. Using data from the Pittsburg Youth studies conducted by Rolf Loeber, there is evidence that in juveniles’ development less serious forms of delinquency precede the onset of more serious delinquent acts. This reflects the basic hierarchical and developmental feature of psychopathology—less serious manifestations precede the more serious manifestations of deviance (Cicchetti, 1990). This was a common finding in earlier research on sequences in the development of delinquency undertaken by Huizinga (1995) and Elliott (1994) in their analysis of longitudinal data from the National Youth Survey.

Researchers have found that some delinquency behaviors occur before the onset of others. Authority avoidance such as truancy leads to the onset of minor covert acts such as lying and shoplifting which occurs before property damage such as vandalism and tagging. The onset of moderate to serious crime follows such as fraud, burglary and serious theft such as stealing a car (Tolan, 1998). Graffiti, then, serves at times as a “gateway” offense for those who are moving through an escalation of their criminal behavior. Whether tagging for recognition, or to express membership in a particular

group, it is neither an innocuous activity nor an act isolated from more serious crimes in the same locale.

Gang and Ideological Based Graffiti

The primary motive for gang graffiti is to mark turf, identify cliques and convey threats (Klein, 1995). To claim their turf, gangs mark their neighborhoods with graffiti. They leave their mark on fences, schools, sidewalks, walls and even homes. Primary gang hangouts are usually heavily covered with graffiti, including streets and street signs. Different types of gangs create different types of graffiti. Typically, graffiti will include the name of the gang, nicknames of the members of the gang, slogans or symbols exclusive to the gang, the territory claimed, and even the names of affiliated gangs. Graffiti also includes threats and challenges to rival gangs. In addition, graffiti can be used to show disrespect for rivals. Because members of different gangs often live in close proximity to one another, graffiti can provoke confrontations. When graffiti is not cleaned up immediately, it will multiply as different gangs cross out rivals and add their own graffiti messages.

Gangs use graffiti to gain recognition or to express the identity of the gang. Gang members are motivated to put up graffiti because it reflects their loyalty to the gang. In some cases, new gang members or associates may be ordered by their gang to put up graffiti to show their worthiness to join, and to prove that they are "down for" (loyal to) the gang. Gang members often use nicknames to identify each other, and it is common for these names to show up on graffiti "roll calls" or "placas." Graffiti is used to promote or enhance the names and reputations of the gang and gang members. In some cases, gang members use graffiti to brag about crimes they have committed. American gang graffiti has even shown up in Iraq's war zone prompting some military personnel to worry about working alongside gang members (Main, 2006).

Types of Graffiti

Distinguishing between types of graffiti and associated motives is a crucial step in recognizing one from another. Though conventional graffiti may arise out of youthful delinquency, ideological graffiti often is linked to adult grievances or hostility (Weisel, p.3). Such graffiti is usually identified by its political messages, religious, ethnic or racial slurs. Offenders may strategically target certain locations to further the message of their cause or belief (Wardlaw, 1989).

Eco-terrorists such as the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) and its sister group, the Animal Liberation Front, have left graffiti symbols and messages at SUV dealerships, research labs and housing developments while committing arson crimes. Anti-abortion

extremist groups utilize graffiti to threaten reproductive clinics, patients and medical personnel (National Task Force, 2002). Some authorities believe the resources and influence of such groups may be growing as the criminal elements within them increase their vandalism and violence (Fein, 1998).

Racially and ethnically motivated prejudice, hatred and violence are often reflected in graffiti symbols left by skinheads, neo-Nazis and white supremacists. Organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League and Southern Law Poverty Center provide training to law enforcement on how to identify and understand the meaning of such graffiti symbols. This includes the graffiti of race-based groups within the prison system.

According to FBI Congressional testimony of Special Agent in Charge Diego Rodriguez, "Gangs and other criminal enterprises, operating in the U.S. and throughout the world, pose increasing concerns for the international law enforcement and intelligence communities"(2006). The potential use of local gang graffiti to provide intelligence information to federal agencies should not be overlooked.

Collaboration is Key

Whether graffiti originates as a result of neighborhood delinquency, gang activity, or ideology, it should not be viewed as a simple issue. Crime and disorder problems are complex, and need to be understood within not only a local context, but a regional and expanding geographic and jurisdictional perspective. Collaboration with other criminal justice agencies is critical.

In the children's game of tag, one child tries to tag another usually with some chaotic results. That rate of success would change dramatically if that same child cooperated with others and established a group effort to go after the same potential target. This same premise should guide law enforcement's efforts to go after a criminal tagger.

Though highly elusive in nature, graffiti taggers would find that collaboration among police agencies increases the prospect of being caught. Expanding the level of cooperation and coordination to include prosecutors, probation officers and other stakeholders strengthens the outlook of a broader geographic and jurisdictional perspective. No single agency alone can control crime and disorder.

MAGIC

A successful collaborative effort occurring in southern California is reflected in an organization called MAGIC (Multi-Agency Graffiti Intervention Committee). The MAGIC task force, formed by CalTrans in 1991, brings agencies together to combat the growing problem of graffiti in the greater Los Angeles area. The organization has developed into a very active committee whose goal is the eradication of graffiti through enforcement, prevention, education, and the expeditious removal of existing graffiti. The committee includes broad-based representation from organizations throughout the Los Angeles/Inland Empire area including the Pomona Police Department, Riverside Police Department, California Highway Patrol, Los Angeles Unified School District, Los Angeles County Probation and CalTrans.

While this group has reached many of its goals, such as educating the public about vandal-proofing graffiti prone locations, expanding their work (and work similar in scope) to include an integrated computer database that identifies and tracks the offenders would be a significant asset in their work to combat graffiti. The ability to search quickly for graffiti subjects associated with specified characteristics is a strong argument for computerized systems and a better use of technology. Fighting graffiti isn't a child's game, and law enforcement must harness the power of information technology to gain a competitive advantage over culprits who have demonstrated skill in using the Internet to share information.

Tagging and Technology

There are currently several cities and jurisdictions that use computer systems to track graffiti. Most focus on managing the rapid removal of the offensive images, though, rather than for investigative purposes such as tracking patterns, M.O., monikers and other information that can lead to identifying culprits. While such systems appear to be more public works oriented than police oriented, tracking the location of reported graffiti vandalism does help identify "hot spots" and the cost of removal can be logged in and used when charging a graffiti vandal. Removal costs for each site help to charge offenders with the exact amount of damage for each "tag" incident and cumulative amounts can add up very quickly.

To address issues of graffiti and gang affiliation, the MAGIC group began exploring the concept of modifying the State of California's CAL/GANG database to facilitate the tracking of graffiti criminals in the Spring of 2005. The CAL/GANG[®] system is a cooperative automation project amongst the California Department of Justice

(DOJ), Hawkins Data Center, local law enforcement and Orion Scientific Systems® to electronically share information on criminal street gangs and gang members via a statewide automated Intranet.

Though the CAL/GANG® system is an excellent model of collaborative crime fighting effort, it is not an integrated system by definition. Using Cal-Gang as a starting point, any future law enforcement systems for tagging and other crimes will have to re-engineer operations in substantial respects.

Designing an Integrated System

Current information systems contained among law enforcement agencies range from predominately paper driven to highly automated and interactive systems. The integration of justice information systems and information sharing are not new ideas. Agencies and jurisdictions throughout the nation have long recognized the importance in integrating information and systems. Despite the increasing use of information technology, duplication of effort, delays in information transmittal and barriers to accessing information remain as common bottlenecks. Many of these problems are the product of implementing individual technology solutions without integrating these solutions across the broader scope of the criminal justice system.

Today's technologies, applied in an integrated fashion, hold the promise of capturing information quickly, then transmitting that data across a broad spectrum of interested criminal justice users. Currently, commonly accepted stakeholders benefiting from integrated criminal justice systems for graffiti and tagging include police, probation officers, prosecutors and the courts. To better fight graffiti in the future, law enforcement might consider linking with school administrators and social service providers as components of the system. Depending on the problem's growth, it might even be necessary that community-policing partners such as neighborhood watch, citizen volunteers and private security have limited access to assist in the reporting of crimes and identification of possible suspects.

Analyzing the type, quality and capability of such systems will contribute to developing an integrated graffiti database. Typical systems that have been successfully integrated are records management, offender history, and computer aided dispatching. Functions normally considered in integration efforts are the ability to automatically *query* local, regional, statewide and national databases. The capability to automatically *push* and *pull* information to another agency is a feature of integration. Being able to *publish* information regarding people, cases and events and provide *notification* of key actions are also essential elements of integration.

According to a recent integrated information study sponsored by the Department of Justice, some of the major obstacles to establishing integrated systems have less to do with technology and more to do with funding and governance structures. Based on their experiences with justice information system integration, respondents to the study offered a number of suggestions for overcoming these obstacles. Several central themes emerged:

- Ensure equal involvement/participation from all agencies/jurisdictions involved.
- Explore and secure funding.
- Set realistic goals and objectives with a reasonable implementation timeframe.
- Keep ongoing, open lines of communication with all agencies/jurisdictions involved.
- Have support of elected officials.
- Have well trained technology users.
- Standardize and network all software, hardware, and protocols.

One of the challenges of an integrated system is the formulation of data dissemination policies. Not only must such policies adhere to federal, state and local laws, they must prevent untimely disclosure of police operations and preserve citizen confidentiality and privacy. With this in mind, it is feasible to design an integrated system that preserves appropriate levels of access and input and could include newly identified stakeholders.

System Compatibility

Over the years, many law enforcement agencies have acquired IT systems that are incompatible with newer systems. Computer hardware and software programs were often developed without envisioning future needs or changes. The rapid growth of technology has unlimited potential for supporting not only an integrated graffiti database, but also increasingly sophisticated crime mapping software, digital photography and image recognition programs.

In an optimistic scenario, a police officer in one jurisdiction could use a new generation of Web-browsing cell phones with color displays to uplink the digital image of a tag and send it to a wireless application protocol that is integrated with a platform that performs shape and image recognition analysis. Comparing the image against a comprehensive database of known taggers and tags, police officers could carry out their investigation with greater efficiency and effectiveness. Built into the system could be a computerized data management system designed to store, maneuver, update, and output geographically referenced data. In addition to quickly producing up-to-date maps, the officer would be able to perform spatial analysis of tagging incidents. As soon as a

suspect was arrested, an automatic notification would be made to persons or agencies that need to be made aware of subjects, events and cases.

Successful change occurs when a leadership coalition is present that shares commitment and vision. In failed transformations, you often find plenty of plans and programs, but no vision. A vision should go beyond mere numbers and guide the coalition towards the bigger future picture. Searching for ways to exact higher performance from police agencies requires a test of both current activities and future ideas.

Conclusion

Arriving at a consensus on how best to approach the complex issues surrounding establishing an integrated graffiti databases will not be easy. There are a multitude of organizational, political, legal, technical and policy issues that need to be resolved. Funding is obviously one of the most important hurdles to overcome.

Searching for ways to exact higher performance from law enforcement agencies is a fundamental responsibility of police leaders. The effective use of information technology is one of the biggest tools for performance change. Using the power of modern IT systems to our advantage is a strategic skill that police leaders can utilize to deal with limited staffing, restricted budgets and competing priorities. Just as the essential needs and operational demands of law enforcement continuously evolve, the elements of integrated information sharing, particularly for computerized graffiti information must also. Once jurisdictions have defined a realistic definition of an integrated graffiti database, they must also follow established strategic planning principles and establish an effective governance structure to achieve successful implementation.

Certainly, technology changes daily (particularly the best technology). Keeping up with options, pricing, and opportunities is not an easy task. Police decision makers can enhance their ability to gather information about current trends, programs and products through a wide variety of private and public organizations including the Police Executive Research Forum, International Association of Chiefs of Police and JustNet's Justice Technology Information Network. Police executives must have vision and leadership to set new expectations for fighting tagging and reach out to available resources.

One particularly good resource is the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center-West located in El Segundo, California. The center is a program of the National Institute of Justice and provides technical assistance, education and training. The NLECTC-West makes available no cost engineering assistance and outreach programs to guide law enforcement and corrections agencies with their current needs as well as future requirements.

Graffiti perpetrators seem to have mastered the use of technology for keeping tabs on their handiwork; unfortunately, law enforcement's use is yet to be fully developed. Law enforcement systems that process graffiti data are not rare, but they lack integration and are often restricted by proprietary rights and end user agreements. Developing a comprehensive solution in the high-tech environment is the necessary "next step" to equip those fighting this problem with the tools necessary for success.

Without such vision and leadership, law enforcement will appear stuck at the level of a child's game rather than demonstrating its full capabilities to deal with the problem of graffiti tagging.

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