

How to beat Graffiti Vandalism

**INFORMATION BOOKLET FOR STATE
AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS, COMMUNITY
LEADERS, RESIDENTS AND SCHOOLS.**



The difference between art and vandalism is permission.

Graffiti is a criminal act, along with its culture. Often to join a graffiti crew or gang, the budding vandal must prove loyalty by stealing the paint. The fame of an individual "tagger" or "crew" is measured by the number of tags, by the size of the area the graffiti covers and the degree of challenge required to place the graffiti. That's a lot of front fences. These vandals are seeking fame and recognition by spraying our businesses, homes and rail corridors. New ground to spray is the goal. The internet even offers a wider audience for these vandals who publish their mess on the web. So innovative are taggers, they often test paint to determine which is most effective and often seek road traffic paint because it is difficult to remove.

Gang graffiti is the most dangerous of all graffiti and can usually be found around our rail stations. It marks territory. Rival gangs challenge for turf by crossing out another gang's graffiti. Shopping trolley handles are a weapon of choice in disputes.

The danger to residents is real. Gang members take the messages they read in graffiti very seriously and the longer graffiti is left up in a neighbourhood or precinct, the greater the risk that the threats will be acted on. Graffiti is a gateway crime. Gang membership almost certainly guarantees a criminal record.

So street smart are these kids that they purposely recruit and depend on their youngest members to carry out crime knowing juveniles receive more lenient treatment when found guilty. What's the answer?

Residents Against Graffiti Everywhere (RAGE) is a community group that looks at social issues and works with local councils and Governments towards promoting a zero tolerance policy on graffiti.

GRAFFITI - THE BEST DETERRENT IS RAPID REMOVAL

To understand the deterrent effect, you must first understand why kids spray paint on walls, or whatever else is available. Most graffiti vandalism is done by “taggers” who are most likely damaging your property for very selfish reasons. (The term “tagger” is a slang term used for a graffiti vandal.)

Taggers seek recognition among their peers. Taggers will usually assume a name or moniker which they will practice writing, over and over again in notebooks, on school books or on private or public property. They practice it to make it look unique, as they not only assume a moniker, but also a unique, obscure way of writing it. This unique “signature” takes practice. “PARENTS NOTE: If you see some strange letters or writing on your children’s books, notebooks or in their room, they could be a graffiti vandal. So take note of it and ask your child what it means.” ** When the tag name is perfected on paper, they put it up so everyone can see-AKA: graffiti vandalism. What they are doing, is advertising to their peers, “This is me, look what I did”. When they put up a tag, it is normally put up in a conspicuous place where the tag will certainly be seen by their peers. Not surprisingly, we have found the most damaged areas in our municipalities to be near schools, commercial shopping precincts and train stations.

So why is this?

In a Department of Human Services survey of 9000 Victorian secondary school students, 17 percent admitted they had written graffiti. (*Herald Sun September 2001*) Graffiti vandals sometimes tag as part of a group, or a “crew”. Most tag graffiti shows the tag name and the tag crew. If you see graffiti that you don’t understand, try saying it phonetically, exactly how it is spelled. It will probably sound like a word you recognise. You see, taggers aren’t necessarily bad spellers, they write that way to be unique. Some think they do this so inquisitive adults can’t understand what they are writing. So it is now easy to understand the deterrent effect of prompt graffiti abatement. It’s like taking away a tagger’s identity. After all, he or she can’t say, “That’s me” if the tag has been painted over.

Communities must be vigilant in their efforts to eradicate graffiti, as the graffiti vandals will most certainly continue in their efforts. Thrill seeking is another motivating factor in some graffiti vandals. Taggers often damage property quite simply for the thrill of it. Taggers get their “thrill” from overcoming the fear of getting caught and in some cases, the fear of high places. Although this sounds odd to most adults, it is a very strong motivator for taggers. This is why we hear of graffiti vandals getting caught doing large amounts of damage, over a long period of time - they just can’t stop. This is a hard concept to understand for rational adults. My guess is that it is another form of “risk-taking” behaviour that is common to youth.

Waging war on graffiti

One factor to consider when law enforcement and a community decide to “wage war” on graffiti vandalism:

The stepped up efforts can be taken as a challenge to taggers, enhancing the thrill they get. This may cause a temporary increase in the number of graffiti crimes, making the workload of those involved in abatement increase. Taggers will commit more graffiti, making an “in-your-face” statement to society. A damaging form of rebellion. Don’t

let this be a deterrent to aggressive graffiti abatement. If a wall is tagged, painted, and tagged over and over again, eventually the tagger will go somewhere else or give up. Vigilance is necessary and effective.

Social Apathy

Apathy, is seeing graffiti and not reporting it. If you don't make the call, then who will? It has been shown that graffiti left up attracts more graffiti. More importantly, graffiti left up sends a message that a community doesn't care.

What should you do if your property is graffitied?

Report the damage to the police. This assists them to develop profiles on where and when graffiti occurs. Take a photo of the graffiti before you clean it off and record the date, time and location. This will assist police in court if they apprehend the offender. You should also contact police if you see graffiti that is offensive or uses racist language, if there is an obvious "trail" of the same tag along the street, if you see an offence happening or, if you know or suspect someone who is doing graffiti.

What if you see graffiti on public or commercial property?

Report any graffiti on public property to your council and ask for it to be removed as soon as possible. Public property includes, for example, fence lines around our parks and pre-schools. If the property belongs to another authority such as Telstra, TXU Energy or Australia Post, ask your council to pass on the information, or ring the relevant authority and ask for their assistance in removing and cleaning the graffiti.

Graffiti - A Crime of Vandalism

Gangs

Graffiti is probably the most visible of gang criminal activity. It can be seen in neighbourhood parks, the backs and side walls of stores, fences, retaining walls, and any other prominent structure that is paintable. Graffiti is a crime, punishable by imprisonment and/or fines. Under the Graffiti Prevention Act 2007, vandals in Victoria can face fines of up to \$26,428, or up to 2 years imprisonment for “Marking publicly visible graffiti on property without the owner’s consent.”

Graffiti should never be taken casually and should always be removed as soon as it appears. Graffiti is done by two different kinds of groups for two different purposes and it is important that the differences are explained.

The difference between art and vandalism is permission!

Graffiti is usually done by a tagging crew or an individual. Many perceive this as a form of art work or social expression. It is usually very well done and vandals sign their work with some sort of nick name. The colours are bright and "painters" use different tip sizes and types to achieve the desired effects. It should be made clear however that it is most often done without the property owner’s permission or appreciation. Cost of removal can be very expensive.

Graffitists are usually caught because they are very proud of their work and they sign their piece. They call this throwing up a mural. Styles are very distinguishable and work is soon identified back to the "painter".

Another form of tagging is called Gang Graffiti and is done for an entirely different purpose. Gang graffiti is usually done to mark territorial turf. It often displays the

local gangs' name as a warning to other gangs to stay away. Sometimes tagging will take the form of a challenge to other gangs to show disrespect to them and make threats against their members. As an example; 187 CNB, would mean that someone has threatened a rival crew with the street name CNB (Cranbourne North Boys).

Graffiti is also used by gangs to brag about crimes they have committed or intend to commit. This type of graffiti is more territorial and therefore has the potential of being dangerous. Gang members will often use marking pens on personal items to identify themselves as well as spray paint on larger items. They are not as concerned with style as they are with making a statement. Gang graffiti often is done in a cryptic or Old English style and is always printed.

1. Tagging (Tagging Crews)

- Usually Social Gangs
- Less Violent
- Engage in Contests
- Perceived as "Artwork"
- Uses Same Network as Street Gangs

2. Gang Graffiti

- More Territorial
- Seen More Around Turf Areas
- Notoriety Driven, Intimidation
- Brag About/Announce a Crime
- To Challenge/Disrespect
- Threats (187 CNB)

Gang Communication and Graffiti

Street gangs communicate through their actions, language, clothes, hand signs, graffiti and tattoos. Unlike the gangs associated with organised crime which prefer anonymity, street gangs need and seek recognition. They want recognition not only from their community, but also from rival gangs. The gang's image and reputation depend on this recognition, and it is critically important to its members because such visibility enhances the reputation of the gang members.

Inscriptions in the form of graffiti can be found in every large city in Australia, including Melbourne and throughout our suburbs. Graffiti is an important part of gang tradition. It is not just graffiti - it proclaims to the world the status of the gang and offers a challenge to rivals. By studying the graffiti itself, certain basic elements are found. For example, the main body of the writing will usually contain the gang's name or logo. Also, close by will be the nickname or street name of the author of the inscription. Frequently, assertions of the gang's strength or power will also be included.

Valuable information relative to police work may be gained from gang graffiti. For instance, police may be able to determine what gang is in control of a specific area by noting the frequency of the unchallenged graffiti on a wall. When writing is left unchanged, it reaffirms the gang's control. Normally, the closer one moves to the centre of a gang's area, the more unchallenged graffiti can be found. Conversely, as one moves away from the centre or core area of a gang's power and territory, the more rival graffiti and cross-outs are observed. Thus, if one gang had its graffiti on a building crossed out by another gang's graffiti marked nearby, it would indicate a contested location. A cross-out is a type of asterisk that covers a rival's graffiti and, in gang jargon, is often referred to as "dogging".

Contested areas are common, and when both gangs arrive at the same place at the same time, a confrontation often occurs. These have resulted when gang members were caught desecrating a rival's territory with their own graffiti. Serious injuries have resulted when gang members were caught desecrating a rival's territory with their own graffiti.

Government, the law, and what needs to be done.

Graffiti is a criminal offence in Victoria, and can see vandals sentenced to up to 2 years imprisonment, and fines of up to \$26,428 for ‘Marking publicly visible graffiti on property without the owners consent’. However, police often do not have time to investigate all vandalism complaints. The community and neighbourhood watch groups must assume a serious role in the observing and reporting of vandalism. Police do respond to graffiti crimes in progress.

The community cannot expect the police alone to solve the graffiti problem.

Graffiti **IS** a community issue and the police are just one integral part of the solution. Make it easy for the police to help by getting good descriptions of suspects and suspect vehicles (make, model, licence numbers etc.).

Councils need to combine their graffiti abatement program with their crime prevention programs.

Graffiti abatement requires cooperation between residents, police, courts, local and State governments.

Political leaders will sometimes not agree their municipality or electorate has a graffiti problem until;

- 1) Locals bring proof and pressure to bear
- 2) The politicians are victims themselves
- 3) Businesses become enraged (money talks)
- 4) It is so obvious it cannot be ignored.

Responsible elected officials in touch with the community will see the damage and arrange for appropriate action. It is easy for a community to determine just how serious governments are about graffiti abatement. Lip service does not eliminate the complaints or the graffiti. If you have been talking to your elected representatives for some time and graffiti remains, all you are getting is lip service. The ballot box is an effective tool. Vote politicians out of office that do not have a long term commitment to ending vandalism.

Banning aerosol paints - does it work?

Banning of aerosol paints is frequently topical and very controversial. It is an attempt to remove the vandal's primary tool. The effectiveness of this method can be debated. In general, the vandal will go wherever he or she needs to get their paints or markers including mail order, the internet, and especially petty theft or burglary. Felt tipped markers are also utilised, and glass etched as alternatives to spray paint.

Have we really reached a point where we must inconvenience the law abiding resident because we are not able to control the distribution of paints at the point of sale? We should be encouraging business to lock up paints and supplies. It needs to be recognised that part of graffiti culture is to steal the paint, so let's put a stop to theft, and lock it up.

Successful graffiti abatement strategies

• RAPID RESPONSE

Removal or covering of graffiti within 24-48 hours (preferably 24 hours) of its appearance or reporting by using either paint out, high pressure cleaning or chemical

removal. This counteracts one aim of the offender which is linked to peer recognition, namely to position the graffiti in a prominent public place where it will be seen by many. Rapid response also dispels the sense of disorder which can evolve in communities where graffiti remains. Depending on the site, graffiti should be removed by council maintenance staff, volunteers, residents, private contractors, offenders through Community Service Order programs, and Neighbourhood Watch. It is imperative that a strategy include **private**, as well as public and commercial property.

- **'CLEAN SLATE'**

This involves an initial intensive 'removal' and 'paint out' of all graffiti within a given locality, such as a local government area. This is done by moving across the area in a highly co-coordinated manner until graffiti has been removed from all sites and structures at least once. New incidents and 'tags' can then be monitored.

- **REPORTING - TOLL FREE HOTLINES**

The facilitation of increased and timely reporting is fundamental to the success of a rapid response strategy. Mechanisms by which this has been achieved are: the establishment of a **'graffiti hotline'**, enlisting the assistance of community groups such as Neighbourhood Watch, establishment of a two way reporting process with local police, interaction with public utilities, promotion to the community of a reporting process, and the establishment of a streamlined system for all relevant council departments and/or State Government Departments.

- **TAG REGISTER**

This involves the photographing of tags and the cataloguing of details related to incidents. This enables the identification of tags and the eventual linking of incidents to apprehended offenders. It also enables mapping of incidents to identify patterns, and for cost recovery from vandals.

- **Monitoring of frequently targeted or highly vulnerable locations and structures for rapid response.**

- **SURVEILLANCE**

Surveillance of hot spots via covert cameras, security patrols and police patrols, with a view to facilitating apprehension of offenders.

- **IDENTIFICATION AND CONFRONTATION OF OFFENDERS**

Identification via video evidence, reports from local residents and schools, and by linking into local youth networks.

- **RESTITUTION**

Young offenders can be ordered to do community service work, either as a consequence of having received an undertaking after attending a Family Conference or after receiving a police caution, or via receiving a Community Service Order (CSO) through the Youth Court. Adults can also receive Community Service Orders via the adult court system. In dealing with offenders, councils can adopt a policy of not only accountability, but also cost recovery, and/or fines.

- **GRAFFITI RESISTANT SURFACES**

Surfaces applied to public and council property. Also strategies involving subsidized purchase of anti graffiti coatings for business etc. operating in a municipality.

- **CRIME PREVENTION THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN**

CPTED encompasses a range of design strategies such as: alterations to the design of a site, including improved lighting and landscaping, to facilitate natural surveillance; incorporation of surfaces and materials which will not attract graffiti; and site/building design that will limit access to vulnerable aspects such as walls.

Recent moves have seen the beginnings of the incorporation of CPTED principles into Local Development Plans. This will result in crime prevention principles being incorporated at the design stage of a development proposal.

• **ADOPT-A-STATION/A-BUS-SHELTER/A-PARK**

This involves a local group such as a school, Neighbourhood Watch, or a residents group, adopting a local facility to maintain in good repair, preferably practicing the strategy of rapid response. Councils, public transport operators and local businesses often are quite keen to assist. Ongoing support will be needed, and council support with the donation of paints and plants will help maintain community support.

• **LEGAL MURALS/SITES - DOES THIS WORK?**

Graffiti artists or artists, are permitted or funded (hence the term "legal") to work with young people to paint murals on public sites/walls. It is argued that the aim is to deter graffiti artists from offending, or deter graffiti artists from repeatedly targeting specific sites. There is little evidence to suggest that this will assist in reducing graffiti other than at the immediate location, and even then, there are examples where the site continues to be targeted. It needs to be remembered to achieve peer recognition and status, the graffiti artist needs to tag on numerous locations.

Obviously, as graffiti is about exposure, risk taking, and marking territory, free walls will not work, and are advocated through a lack of understanding of graffiti vandalism.

• **PUBLIC EDUCATION CAMPAIGNS**

Campaigns can be effective when targeted to a specific audience, and incorporated into a range of other strategies. Not seen to be effective when in isolation.

• **SCHOOL CURRICULUM**

Modules that examine property damage, graffiti, and vandalism are included in the curriculum of local schools.

• CODE OF CONDUCT FOR GRAFFITI PREVENTION

A voluntary code that provides retailers of potential graffiti implements with a series of measures for monitoring or minimising immediate access to those implements.

Some Local Government areas undertake strategies to encourage local retailers to adopt a voluntary code.

Key elements of "successful" programs addressing graffiti vandalism

• RAPID RESPONSE

This counteracts a major goal of the graffitist; namely, to place their graffiti in a prominent public position to ensure that it remains visual to the general public for long periods of time.

It can be undertaken in a variety of ways using a variety of personnel (e.g. volunteers, council depot staff, contractors, community groups, etc.) approaching it from the position of having limited resources available (particularly financial), the following strategies would assist a 'rapid response' process: monitoring of regularly targeted sites and structures, community and/or volunteer involvement in both reporting and rapid response, commitment by utilities to establishing an easily accessible reporting mechanism and a commitment to responding to graffiti vandalism within a determined time frame (recognising that twenty-four hours may be unrealistic). This could also mean that councils take the initiative to determine a process with the various utilities.

• ALL PROPERTY TYPES

The majority of councils limit their physical response to council and public property. This means a rapid response throughout the whole council area is not achieved.

Private and **Commercial** property must be included.

Community ownership and responsibility is regarded as a critical component, particularly if a program is to be sustainable. To achieve successful community involvement requires a coordinated and well managed program.

• **REPORTING**

A coordinated, well structured reporting process is necessary to ensure that graffiti incidents are responded to rapidly.

"Hotline" - highly successful both as a reporting mechanism and as a promotional tool. Limited resources and/or a limited graffiti problem however, makes this either not feasible or unnecessary for some councils. Those councils that do not have a 'hotline' but do appear to have reliable reporting and response procedures have established a process to ensure that all reports, no matter how they come into the council, are channeled rapidly and consistently through to one point. Customer service or counter staff are well briefed regarding a procedure for responding to reports from the community, and skilled with advice. Council staff themselves, particularly those who move around the council area regularly and council contractors who are not involved in providing a direct response to incidents, know who to report to and understand the importance of reporting. All reports are channeled to one point (which tends to be a key manager or a team leader in the Works Depot).

• **CLEAR MANAGEMENT -**

A DEDICATED PERSON TO OVERSEE AND COORDINATE THE RESPONSE.

The word 'dedicated' has two contexts. The person's own attitude towards graffiti, in that they are personally motivated to ensure a successful response to graffiti incidents. One person is formally assigned to coordinating the program or response.

Councils may experience difficulties in program implementation and then in management of a rapid response, if the budget and/or program is split across at least

two departments or sections, hence, creating a lack of consistency and commitment and inefficient use of resources.

• A DEDICATED TEAM OR PERSONNEL FOR RESPONDING RAPIDLY

This can be internal and/or contracted and involve the following groupings or individuals (determined by financial resources available);

- Council staff who are assigned responsibility for responding to graffiti incidents
- Individuals
- Specifically dedicated teams
- A contractor who is employed to respond to all graffiti or only when high pressure cleaning or chemical removal is required, with the latter working rapidly whilst volunteers and council do 'paint out' by a trained, supported, and dedicated volunteer group
- A weekly contract with a community organisation such as Department of Corrections, to attend to particular site types such as parks, regularly targeted locations, public toilets, bus shelters, parks etc.

• A POLICY

Formal (endorsed by council) or informal policy (endorsed within council departments) ensures a mechanism for being clear about council's response to incidents of graffiti.

- Ensures a framework from which to create a program
- Results in a greater commitment by staff to ensuring it works
- Provides a clear basis for promotion in the community.

The Broken Window Theory

The “Broken Windows Theory” espouses that if a broken window in a building is left un-repaired the other windows will also soon be broken. An experiment to test this theory was performed by Wilson & Kelling (1982), whereby a car was abandoned in two neighbourhoods – one ‘respectable’ and the other ‘run-down’.

1 In both of these neighbourhoods, the car was vandalised, showing that vandalism can occur anywhere once informal social controls are lowered by signals that no-one cares. The authors also suggest that “untended” behaviour can lead to breakdown of community controls (i.e. if a place is left untended, weeds will grow, windows may be smashed, young people will congregate, public drinking may occur etc.) This breakdown may not lead to increased levels of crime, however, it will lead to increases in resident’s perceptions of crime. The level of disorder will lead them to assume that crime, especially violent crime is rising, making them feel less secure and more fearful. The suggested result of this is that people will avoid using the streets and have less contact with others, thus reducing community bonds, and installing individuals isolation. The resultant effect is that these environments also make a neighbourhood more vulnerable to crime.

2 The work of Wilson & Kelling (1982) highlights the integral part that local residents can play in maintaining a sense of order through Neighbourhood Watch organisations and the like, and by increasing community involvement, and partnerships between police and community.

¹ Wilson, J.Q. and Kelling, G.L. (1982) Broken Windows, *Atlantic Monthly*, March, pp 29-38

² Bland, N. & Read, T. (2000). Policing Anti-social Behaviour. *Police Research Series 123, Policing and Reducing Crime*, British Home Office, London, UK.