



Graffiti Task Force

Introduction

The prevalence of graffiti in our community - and communities across the country - is not new, and despite considerable energy and expense it remains an inescapable symbol of crime and disorder. Unlike most crimes, the presence of graffiti is a crime that affects nearly everyone; the scourge of graffiti contributes to blight, fear, frustration, and withdrawal of the community from public places, and the lowering of property values. The costs associated with removing graffiti and investigating graffiti crime consume monies that could be spent for a variety of City programs. Graffiti is a crime that touches nearly everyone.

The City of Santa Ana uses a multi-faceted approach toward combating graffiti that brings together a number of significant resources to attack this problem using the following agencies:

- Police
- Public Works
- Parks, Recreation and Community Services
- City Manager's Office
- City Attorney's Office
- Santa Ana Unified School District
- Orange County District Attorney's Office
- Society of St. Vincent de Paul

As one of the key participants, the Santa Ana Police Department devotes considerable resources toward the graffiti problem with a comprehensive approach that includes the following strategies:

- Education
- Eradication
- Enforcement

This report outlines the methodology used by the Police Department in an ongoing effort aimed at reducing the harms associated with graffiti by discouraging vandalism and holding accountable those who engage in this criminal behavior.



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Background

The Santa Ana Police Department formed the Graffiti Task Force in 1992 after the city and most of southern California began to first experience the phenomenon of “tagger” graffiti. Prior to this new form of vandalism, graffiti consisted largely of written form of announcing turf by criminal gang members. Gang graffiti was, and remains, problematic but was generally limited to areas where gang members reside and the amount of graffiti was within the existing capacity for removal. Tagger graffiti differed dramatically from gang graffiti as suddenly, no public or private space was free from vandals.

“Taggers” use graffiti as a way of expression and more importantly as a means of obtaining recognition and status. A tagger’s goal is simply to place his “tag” on as many places as possible with visibility being a top priority. Thus, suddenly high rise buildings, billboards, freeway signs, and even trees became a canvas for the vandal. Taggers often operate in “crews” whose members share a common goal of advancing the crew name by affixing it in as many places as possible. As crews began to grow, “battles” were held between rival groups to establish dominance over another. Soon, crews consisting of several to several hundred members were attempting to surpass one another by defacing as much private and public property as possible.

By the mid nineties, Santa Ana was spending over a million dollars a year to remove graffiti from the community. The Police Department devoted two full-time investigators to investigate graffiti and apprehend those responsible for an epidemic of destruction. Teaming with other City agencies, the Police Department focused on identifying vandals and saw them serve criminal sentences and pay restitution for their crimes. In just the first six months of operation, the Graffiti Task Force made over 600 arrests and coordinated restitution exceeding \$11,000.

By the end of the 1990s, Santa Ana had significantly reduced the amount of graffiti by aggressive eradication and enforcement efforts. Although nearly 25 tagger crews had been active in the city, many members had felt the sting of arrest and restitution - often imposed against their parents. Tougher prosecution and an increased awareness of the sanctions imposed against offenders helped reduce the popularity of tagging and brought the problem to more manageable levels. But like the spread of a virus that is slowed down by new medicines, the form of graffiti that was curtailed did not stay dormant and the new strain that has hit the community is worse than the original form.



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The Problem Today

Santa Ana and most surrounding communities are once again awash in graffiti. Like many fads or cycles of the past, tagging has reemerged as a trendy lifestyle for the person looking to gain recognition by leaving his mark, or that of his crew, in as many places as possible. Since 1993, the Graffiti Task Force has identified 500 tagging crews. These crews vary in size and longevity. Some have ceased to be active, while other crews once dormant have reappeared. Still others morph into new crews as members change allegiances. Today, Santa Ana is coping with destruction caused by hundreds of active tagging crews competing for status via the spray can or etching tool.

If that was not enough, many of today's tagging crews are active in criminal gang activity. It can no longer be said that taggers represent non-violent behavior. The line between taggers and traditional criminal gangs is increasingly blurred. Today's tagger may be armed, may be involved in violent and/or drug related crimes and may associate with or be a rival with gangs that have been long associated with serious criminal activity.

Another new facet of the modern tagging crew is the ability to easily shift allegiance to other crews or for crews to form new identities. This means the tagger can now gain acceptance by another crew to promote his work. Today's tagger may choose to move to a crew that is more active or more prestigious rather than rely on formal membership structures of the past. This means a tagger crew is often more prolific and makes it harder to link individuals to specific incidents of vandalism. With the advent of the Internet, e-mail, digital cameras and cell phones, taggers today enjoy rapid communication and the ability to showcase their work. Taggers enjoy a new resurgence of popularity among a large subculture in the community. Ironically, many taggers participate in this criminal activity in part because of the potential sanctions that await those who get caught. Being involved in risky behavior is part of the mystique of this lifestyle that involves mostly the juvenile or young male adult.

Despite the resurgence in the popularity and prevalence of tagging crews, the Police Department continues to make impressive strides toward their demise. Using updated and enhanced strategies, SAPD is committed to identifying and apprehending taggers as effectively as possible. These strategies are outlined in this document to provide an overview of the Police Department's objectives and how these strategies compliment the overall approach against graffiti by the City of Santa Ana.



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Strategies for Graffiti Abatement

Strategy #1: Education

The Santa Ana Police Department uses a two-pronged policing philosophy that includes resources for the rapid response to calls for service and a problem solving approach seeking to identify causal factors that contribute to crime and disorder in the community. In a similar fashion, the Graffiti Task Force seeks not only to arrest vandals, but also to identify tools that can attack the root causes of the graffiti problem.

To understand graffiti, we must first understand some of the factors contributing to the problem. Graffiti can generally be attributed to criminal gang activity or tagger activity; both behaviors are primarily associated with young males. Santa Ana is a unique community that is home to more young people than any city in America. In addition, Santa Ana is the second most densely populated city in California, second only to San Francisco. This densely packed young community is home to a number of criminal gangs that are responsible on average for over half of reported robberies, 20% of reported serious assaults, and 50% of the homicides in the city. Although they represent a very small part of the population, the gang lifestyle is nevertheless entrenched in Santa Ana and gang graffiti is a traditional and very visible part of this subculture.

Many young people seek to identify with anti-social behavior as a means of rebellion and a means to establish a “bad-boy” reputation that separates them from the crowd. The gang lifestyle may be attractive to some, but may be too violent for others or too difficult to gain acceptance. Tagger crews offer many of the same perceived advantages; recognition, camaraderie and strength in numbers. A recent phenomenon is the transition from tagger to gang member or “gang banger,” and the metamorphosis of tagger crew to tagbanger crew - a blend of tagging and criminal behavior that may include violence. Whether originating from gang or tagger activity, the typical vandal is young and male and searching for identity and respect.

The Police Department is one component of a larger City strategy designed to deter juveniles from criminal activity by providing alternatives to unlawful activity and to give guidance as to the sanctions associated with this behavior. These efforts include community programs, Parks and Recreation, schools, and public information campaigns. The Police Department has developed several methods of raising public awareness as to the consequences associated with being apprehended for graffiti crime and also methods for the public to use to report graffiti, including the incentive to earn a reward.



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The Police Department's education strategy uses the following tools:

- Cable television to air information on graffiti eradication, the reward program and a documentary about the Graffiti Task Force;
- Local news media including featured articles in the Spanish language press;
- Informational materials distributed via the school's student handbook that includes restrictions on possession of graffiti tools and the sanctions associated with arrest;
- Information letter from the Chief of Police delivered to businesses that warn of the municipal code provision that restricts sales of paint and other designated items to minors;
- Poster campaign that uses a variety of youth-centered designs to warn of the sanctions associated with arrest for graffiti vandalism and method for the public to report graffiti and obtain a \$500 reward;
- Community education seminars that instruct parents how to recognize the signs that their children are involved in gang or tagger activity and positive steps to take to intervene;
- Mediation program through the Society of St. Vincent De Paul that brings parents, offenders, police, and trained mediators together to educate parents as to the harms of graffiti and their responsibility for the actions of their offending children. Financial restitution is often a component of this program;
- Meetings with business owners and neighborhood associations regarding steps to take to reduce the likelihood of graffiti, how to report incidents that do occur and how to participate in the prosecution process including the reward program and restitution where applicable;
- Marketing of Graffiti Hotline;
- Resource and reporting information posted on the Police Department website page.



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Strategies for Graffiti Abatement

Strategy #2: Eradication

- The Police Department is often the first point of contact for persons reporting the presence of graffiti. Although the Public Works Agency is directly responsible for removing graffiti, the Police Department handles referrals to streamline the process. Police dispatchers forward complaints to Public Works as well as to the Graffiti Task Force to ensure the problem receives adequate attention. In addition, the Task Force works closely with Public Works, Parks and Recreation, the School Police, and private services to document incidents of graffiti for subsequent prosecution and restitution.
- The Parks, Recreation and Community Services Agency also assists with eradication in designated areas by using offenders serving community service to remove graffiti on weekends. Parks and Recreation personnel typically bring team of 20 juveniles to paint out graffiti under staff supervision. About one half million square feet of graffiti is removed each year by these teams.

Documenting (photographing) graffiti is essential for successful prosecution as it provides the necessary proof of the crime and the extent of damage caused by the vandal. Damage in excess of \$400 is a felony and carries additional penalties. The Police Department and Public Works Agency are currently contracted with a privately held Southern California software company called Graffiti Tracker. Ricoh GPS enabled digital cameras have been issued to Graffiti Task Force Detectives, Public Works, Parks and Recreation and School Police. Whenever graffiti is located or removed, the GPS coordinates are encoded on the digital photographs and stored on the camera's Secure Digital (SD) Card. The card is then removed from the camera and placed into a SD card reader attached to a personal computer with Internet access. The user then accesses the Graffiti Tracker's company website and uploads the photos onto the company's computers. Graffiti Tracker's in-house analysts then examine each photograph and enter the names (monikers) of all gang, tagging crew or tag bangers into their software database. The GPS information is then imported into the Google Map program to create an "electronic pin map." The use of the Graffiti Tracker software provides the following benefits:

1. Potential increase in arrests;
2. Potential increase in restitution rates;
3. Reduction in graffiti;
4. Reduction in City graffiti-related costs to include savings of over \$50,000 annually;



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5. Eliminate the need to fill out graffiti tracking forms;
6. Simplify Graffiti Removal Crew duties related to handling and forwarding photographs and tracking forms to the police department;
7. Eliminate the booking of Polaroid photographs into the Santa Ana Police Department's Evidence Section;
8. Provide relational database capabilities to provide graffiti and gang intelligence information leading to increased apprehension rates.

The City's goal is to remove graffiti as soon as possible. Tagging and/or tagging related incidents can be reported using the following means:

- The **STOPTAG** hotline (**1-877-786-7824**) provides direct access for the public to report graffiti to the Graffiti Task Force who follow up on every report. Photographs are subsequently taken but can result in delays.
- E-mail reporting at graffititaskforce@santa-ana.org provides residents and business staff with a method to send text and photographic documentation of vandalism for investigation. Documentation is immediate and removal can begin at once.

Strategies for Graffiti Abatement

Strategy #3: Enforcement

Arrests are not a cure for the graffiti problem, but for many offenders there is no better tool than the certainty of arrest and prosecution. Serious gang members and taggers live a lifestyle that includes vandalism; stopping this activity may be impossible. That said, arrests can reduce the opportunity for serious offenders to deface the community and the deterrent effect of arrest, although impossible to measure, must surely deter less committed vandals from emulating them. Arresting these offenders, however, is not an easy task.

Graffiti is an easy crime to commit. It takes little time and requires little preparation. A can of paint, a marker, or even a sharp rock can be used to quickly cause hundreds or thousands of dollars in damage. Even the most unsophisticated criminal can scratch his mark on someone's property. Anonymity is another challenge to the investigator who must identify a vandal based on a moniker, symbol, or style of writing. With many vandals using the symbol of their tagging crew, identification of individual members is further complicated.



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The Graffiti Task Force is comprised of a minimum of three specially trained investigators who devote full-time attention to graffiti. In addition, the Task Force partners with additional resources to maximize their effectiveness, including:

- Officers work proactive overtime graffiti suppression on a weekly basis;
- Directed Patrol Officers that target high-problem areas;
- Police Department's Gang Crimes Unit;
- Police Department's Crimes Against Persons Division;
- Santa Ana Unified School District Police;
- Orange County Probation Department;
- Orange County District Attorney's Office.

In addition to investigating graffiti crime, the Task Force is also responsible for:

- Mediation references;
- Probation searches;
- Community Service programs;
- Restitution programs;
- Education programs;
- Rewards Program;
- Business inspection program to ensure compliance with SAMC 177.

The Graffiti Task Force targets offenders by using their vandalism and "signature" against them. Just like a fingerprint can identify a burglar, the tagger's unique moniker or mark connects them to their crimes. The challenge of course is to determine who is responsible for the hundreds of marks that appear on properties throughout the city. The Task Force is adept at interviewing and interrogation that provides key pieces of information that can lead to a vandal's identification. The Task Force also works with businesses to develop the use of video technology to capture vandals at work.

Another investigative tool is the use of searches - via warrants, consent, or terms of probation - to seize evidence that links vandals to their work. Gang members, taggers, or both, commonly keep articles containing graffiti in their homes. Many keep records of their exploits and even computer files or Internet accounts are used to provide a testament to the prevalence of their work in the community. Juveniles commonly "tag" their books and personal effects, which can be linked to destruction in the city.

Most arrestees are juveniles and most arrests are for misdemeanor vandalism (damage below \$400). As a result, the most common sanction administered by the Juvenile Court is home probation. Although many juveniles are placed on a search condition that allows officers to monitor them, they rarely stay in custody. Many arrestees re-offend and some do so quite quickly. The court may also order restitution and/or community service. Juveniles who are arrested and opt to participate in the Society of St. Vincent De Paul



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mediation program are typically sanctioned with 200 hours of community service and restitution. Persons not completing the program are forwarded to the court for prosecution that can include the following sanctions:

- Loss or delay of issuance of a driver's license for one year;
- \$250 fine plus court assessment penalty;
- 180 days in custody (stayed pending completion of community service program).

Arrests are an important tool to disrupt the volume of graffiti and to hold persons accountable (including financially), but arrests will not deter all persons from continuing the tagger or gang lifestyle. The past arrest of an adult illustrates the challenges of deterring the committed vandal:

“Brian” was arrested for tagging. He was released from Los Pinos Juvenile Detention Center after serving 200 days for tagging new homes in Santa Ana. He was out of custody less than a month when he was arrested for tagging Sandpointe Park. Within a couple of weeks, he was arrested again for tagging, but by then had turned 18 years old. The court placed Brian on informal probation, with 200 hours of community service and 10 days at the Orange County Jail. When Brian was released from jail, he was arrested the following morning for tagging. Brian stated he was addicted to tagging and planned to resume his habit of graffiti as soon as he was again released. Brian is an active member of a tagging crew and his exploits earned him status and respect amongst his peers. To stop Brian and others like him is a difficult task.

Restricting access to graffiti tools is another responsibility of the Graffiti Task Force. They randomly inspect area businesses for compliance with Santa Ana Municipal Code 177, which prohibits the sale of aerosol cans of paint, etching devices, and certain markers to persons under 18 years of age. The Task Force works to educate businesses on approved methods to restrict access to these items, but also makes arrests for violations when businesses fail to meet code requirements. By limiting access to graffiti supplies, it becomes harder for juveniles to get the paint and other supplies they need to damage property. Taggers, however, are resourceful and engage in theft to obtain these supplies or get adults to buy supplies for them. When supplies are not available, taggers have been known to use rocks to etch into glass and painted surfaces.

Despite the very real challenges facing the Graffiti Task Force, they nevertheless are successful in arresting significant numbers of vandals. Monthly arrest rates range from 25 to over 100 persons. The majority of these arrests are juveniles that will spend approximately one year on weekends painting out graffiti throughout Santa Ana under the supervision of Parks, Recreation and Community Services Agency staff. During this yearlong process, city staff mentor and coach these youth in an attempt to raise their



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awareness about the harm they cause the community, themselves and their parents, and the importance of education to provide them with productive alternatives to crime. The recidivism rate for these offenders is about 30%, and considering many of these juveniles consider tagging as their way of life, the fact that nearly 70% have not re-offended a year after they leave the program is quite an accomplishment.

Summary

The Graffiti Task Force is a key component of Santa Ana's multi-faceted approach to the complex problem of gang and tagger graffiti. Although predominately enforcement based, the Task Force is committed to education and prevention efforts that deter vandals, restrict access to graffiti tools, and encourage reporting of incidents for prompt eradication and investigation. The Graffiti Task Force also supports restitution and community service programs that hold offenders accountable for their actions and encourages them to examine their participation in this unlawful and destructive behavior.

The Graffiti Task Force and their partners (School Police, Public Works, Parks and Recreation, Probation, Society of St. Vincent De Paul and the community) are working hard to tangibly improve the quality of life in Santa Ana. Graffiti is not a problem that can be eliminated, but the results of these partnerships can be seen throughout Santa Ana - or perhaps it is what cannot be seen that best exemplifies their work.

Graffiti Task Force Contact:

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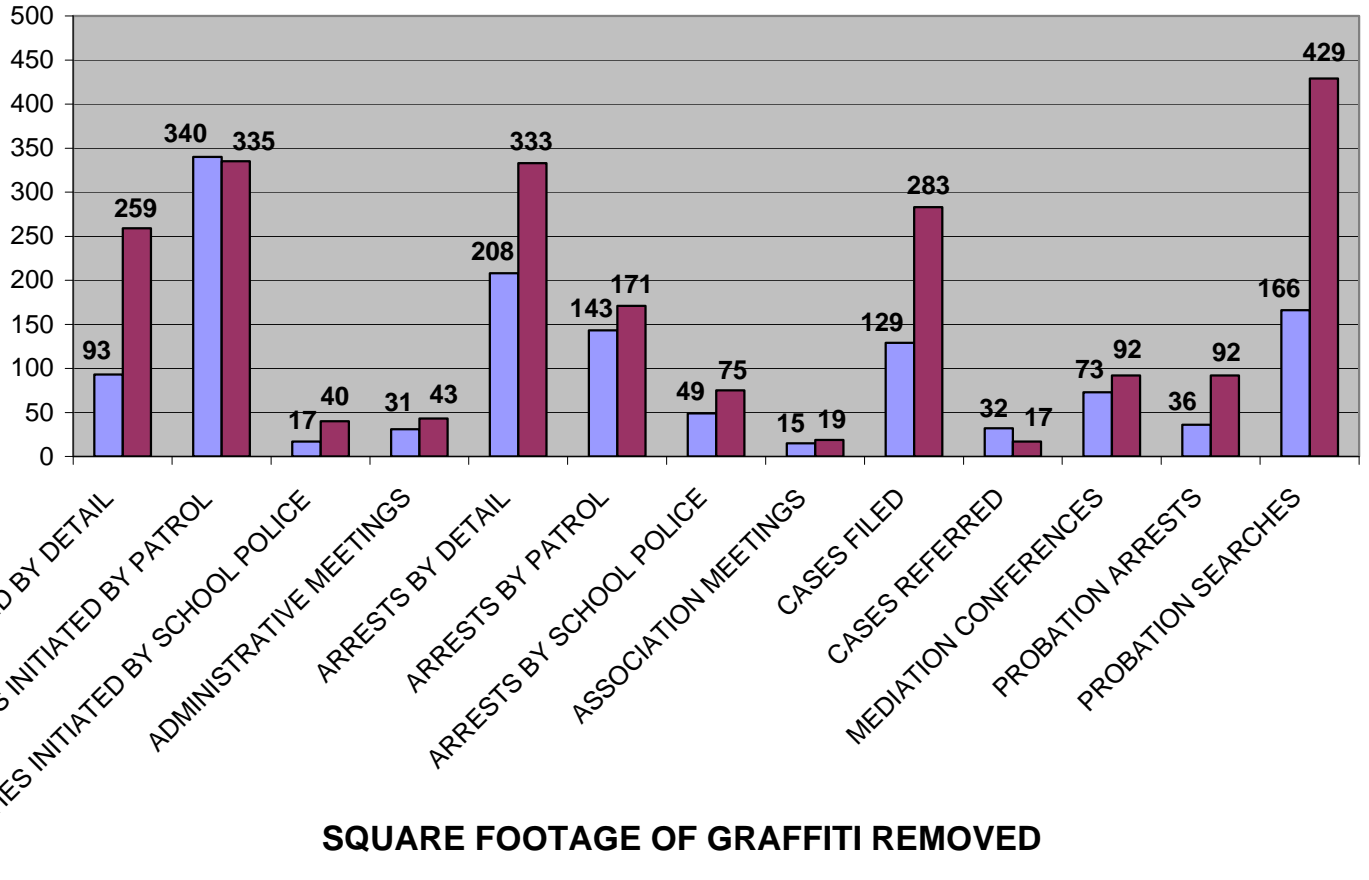


Graffiti Task Force

2006 - 2007 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF G.T.F. TEAM ACTIVITIES AND SQUARE FOOTAGE OF GRAFFITI REMOVED

ACTIVITIES

2006 2007



SQUARE FOOTAGE OF GRAFFITI REMOVED

