

Law Enforcement



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Graffiti Paint Outs

By
DANIEL SCHATZ

As the presence of gangs increases in cities nationwide, so does the problem of graffiti. Graffiti often broadcasts the activities of street gangs, such as whether the gang deals in drugs, whether they plan to kill, or whether they have already killed. Left unchecked, graffiti breeds crime, erodes community confidence, and substantially reduces property values.¹

In Los Angeles, a new police initiative—the Graffiti Abatement and Investigation Program—mixes traditional law enforcement techniques with community relations, neighborhood beautification, and youth counseling to help alleviate the graffiti problem. This article dis-

cusses how the program evolved, how it works, and how it affects neighborhoods plagued with the problem of graffiti.

POLICE INVOLVEMENT

Some argue that law enforcement should not involve itself in graffiti—community service organizations or private enterprise should handle the problem. However, administrators of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) believe that law enforcement should work hand-in-hand with the community to reduce or eliminate graffiti for several reasons.

First, community groups find it dangerous to remove graffiti in certain neighborhoods. For example, in

Los Angeles, several drive-by shootings occurred when citizen groups attempted to remove graffiti. This made a police presence at graffiti removal sites necessary.

In addition, a phenomenon known as “tagging” appears regularly in neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles. Tagging involves the scrawling of names, monikers, or symbols on area walls. Many taggers hope to join gangs, and the more times their names appear in different locations, the greater publicity they receive. This becomes their way of gaining the attention of gang members.

One Los Angeles area youth, for example, scrawled his moniker more than 10,000 times during a



“
**The extent of graffiti
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program started.**
”

*Captain Schatz is the commanding officer of the
Northeast Patrol, Los Angeles, California, Police
Department.*

vandalism rampage throughout southern California. Officials estimate that he caused more than \$500,000 damage to public and private properties. Moreover, this activity generated a cult following that spawned a wave of graffiti vandalism in the city.

Graffiti, whether gang-related or the work of a tagger, sends a message that a lawless element controls the community. However, when the police work with the community to take an active role in graffiti removal, law-abiding citizens take back control of the neighborhood.

POLICE-ASSISTED COMMUNITY ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM

The LAPD's Police-Assisted Community Enhancement Program (PACE) served as the forerunner of the Graffiti Abatement Program. PACE was developed on the philosophy that crime evolves when communities ignore the early signs of blight, such as rundown buildings, abandoned cars and houses, accumulating trash, and graffiti. Therefore, in order to deal with

these early signs of decay, each police precinct within Los Angeles assigned a PACE coordinator to handle public complaints and what are traditionally considered low-level crimes.

PACE coordinators often contacted other city agencies, such as the Department of Building and Safety, for help in dealing with community problems, such as graffiti. However, because city agencies were backlogged with work, expecting speedy assistance in graffiti removal became impractical. Knowing that graffiti caused a major concern to the citizens in the northeast patrol area of Los Angeles, officials implemented the Graffiti Abatement and Investigation Program, not only to remove graffiti but also to enforce and investigate graffiti violations.

THE GRAFFITI ABATEMENT AND INVESTIGATION PROGRAM

Under the Graffiti Abatement and Investigation Program, juvenile offenders referred to the program paint over graffiti found in many inner-city neighborhoods. How-

ever, before officials implemented the Graffiti Abatement Program, they needed to obtain special permission for the northeast patrol area, the first neighborhood targeted for the program, to act as a referral agency. This allowed juvenile detectives, probation department personnel, and juvenile courts to refer offenders to the abatement program as a condition of sentences and probationations that require community service. As a result, these officials immediately began to refer any "at risk" juveniles arrested for graffiti vandalism, theft, and in some cases, burglary, to the northeast patrol area for community service.²

Offenders can also enter the abatement program through parental referral. A parental referral usually occurs when officers identify a youth whose name appears in graffiti throughout a particular area. When this happens, officers ask the parents to refer their child voluntarily to the program, rather than having officers formally charge the youth with a graffiti violation. In these cases, officers must obtain parental waivers before the youths participate in paint outs.

Orientation

When juveniles enter the program, PACE officers meet with them and a parent or guardian for an orientation. At this time, officers explain the program and counsel the juveniles about the seriousness of the offense.

During this orientation period, officers also attempt to obtain information regarding other graffiti suspects. Because the majority of taggers work with other suspects and may even belong to tagging clubs, information gained from

offenders enables officers to contact other juvenile suspects before graffiti outbreaks occur.

The "Paint Outs"

After the orientation period, the juveniles complete their community service time by painting over graffiti found throughout the area. Paint outs, which usually occur on weekends or during other nonschool hours, target specific neighborhoods in order to make the most efficient use of community service worker hours.

City agencies and private businesses donate paint for the program, while other community groups donate funds to buy paint. Because of the tremendous amount of paint used—from 500 to 700 gallons of paint per month—these donations contribute significantly to the success of the program.

Counseling Program

All offenders in the program receive counseling from police officers, from professional counselors, who offer their time pro bono, or from ex-convicts, who volunteer to counsel offenders on the ultimate consequences of their crimes. Because the youths in the program are not hardcore criminals, they respond well to the counseling program. They enjoy the interaction with the police officers and begin to see them in a different light. Many also begin to see that the vandalism they committed was senseless, and they see how much effort goes into removing graffiti. After painting out

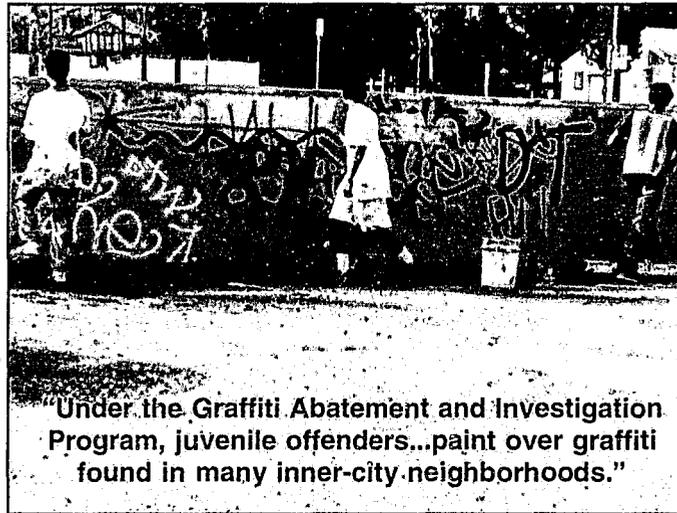
the same areas four and five times, they understand the frustration experienced by the community.

ENFORCING THE PROGRAM

With the program in place, officers need to enforce graffiti violations stringently. To accomplish this, PACE coordinators work with plainclothes officers, who patrol areas of repeated graffiti problems. The plainclothes officers keep the restored areas under surveillance

school personnel, who many times identify individuals who write graffiti, as well as their particular "tags." The officers often use this information to decide which areas to keep under surveillance so they can refer these eligible arrestees to the graffiti abatement program. This ensures a continual pool of workers and breaks the cycle of vandalism for many juveniles.

Also important to the success of the abatement program is the liaison between the PACE officer and the senior lead basic car plan officer (SLO) of the area. SLOs serve as community policing officers within certain assigned areas. They form close liaisons with community members, and since they patrol only their assigned areas, they always know what areas need paint outs. They then have the opportunity to use program workers to cover graffiti found in their areas of responsibility.



"Under the Graffiti Abatement and Investigation Program, juvenile offenders...paint over graffiti found in many inner-city neighborhoods."

and arrest any repeat violators, while the PACE coordinators follow up any citizen or officer complaints regarding areas that need attention. They also maintain a list of locations that need attention, as well as locations that juveniles have already painted over.

In addition, PACE coordinators actively recruit "at risk" youths into the program, follow up on leads, and contact possible suspects, who often provide names of other offenders, their tag names, and the schools they attend. To assist them in this effort, PACE officers stay in contact with

CONCLUSION

The extent of graffiti in the northeast area diminished greatly after the abatement program started. Areas previously vandalized on a daily basis now go months before new graffiti appears.

The success of the program also promotes cooperation throughout the community. Fast food franchises now provide meals for the youths in the program, and a city councilman provided both a power spray painter and a van to transport the workers.