

Teaming Up Against Graffiti

Graffiti is nothing new. Communities across the country, and around the globe, have long seen this visual blight. What has changed is law enforcement's evolving focus on graffiti. From South Yorkshire in the United Kingdom to Indio, California, police departments are making use of community policing partnerships and recognizing the long term benefits of reducing graffiti to the economic health of their community. "Graffiti abatement is a mechanism jurisdictions are using to keep and attract new businesses," said Lt Phillip Han from the Indio Police Department. "Less graffiti gives a perception that a town is safer."

Three years ago, with graffiti being the number one quality of life issue plaguing Indio, Chief Bradley S. Ramos created a collaborative graffiti abatement program with the Department of Public Works to tackle the problem. The city invested in a state of the art truck and assigned two full-time graffiti abatement technicians to it who spend their days responding to reported graffiti incidents, cleaning them up, and documenting them for investigation purposes. Once on location the graffiti removal team has the capability to match paint colors before removing the graffiti. The goal is to remove graffiti within 24 to 48 hours, as rapid removal is one of the best deterrents. "The graffiti removal team has taken their work to heart," said Lt. Han. "They can recognize patterns and help on many arrests by reporting kids watching the clean-up - often they are the offenders." They, too, are capturing images of their handiwork to post on facebook, twitter, and/or myspace before all traces of their tagging is gone.

In addition to removal, the abatement team documents the graffiti with a GPS-enabled camera. This geographic information helps track graffiti patterns, locations, and offenders while aiding law enforcement and prosecutors to build strong cases against the vandals. The images are then downloaded into a Graffiti Removal & Interception Program (GRIP) database that participating agencies can access. GRIP helps local departments share relevant graffiti-related information with each other. As Sgt. London Pickering said, "Graffiti is akin to a forgery investigation, you can identify strokes and unique symbols made with paint cans instead of pens." Disseminating the photos through the database helps investigators identify taggers and trends.

Just as the city allocated personnel to the graffiti abatement effort, so did the police department with one officer dedicated to graffiti prevention, education, and enforcement. That officer also works closely with the department's school resource officers. Research showed that a majority of the graffiti in Indio resulted from taggers 10 to 18 years old whose primary motivation was to seek fame and recognition through their tags. By working in partnership with the Department of Public Works, the school system, and local community members, approximately 300 taggers, mostly juveniles, have been arrested in Indio over the past three years. "Every year there is a new crop of vandals," said Sgt. Pickering. "We try to do a lot of work in schools, particularly in the middle schools to stop kids from tagging." The message is 'Graffiti is Not Art. Graffiti is a Crime.'

In South Yorkshire, England, the police were dealing with the same problem – chronic tagging. They, too, wanted to focus on reducing the chance of juvenile reoffending. They did so through a comprehensive media and education campaign entitled “Operation Blight.” Key messages that were expressed through the advertising included “Name that Tag: For up to £1000 Reward” and “What A Mess: Is this really how you want your village to look?” The goal of the posters was to raise awareness about the graffiti problem and seek information from the community. However, one of the unintended benefits of the publicity campaign was that it shamed some of the young offenders so much that they no longer vandalized local property.

Phase two of the project focused on intelligence gathering and enforcement through surveillance, photographic evidence, situational crime prevention, and tips from the community. Results included reductions in graffiti and increased detection rates with more than 40 tags identified, dozens of arrests, and double digit declines of graffiti incidents.

One of the keys to success was police officers who went into the schools and gave presentations about the negative impact of graffiti, the fact that it was a crime, and there were consequences. This last point was reenforced when arrests were made during school, with the permission and cooperation of school officials. The arrests demonstrated that graffiti is a serious crime and you can be arrested. Shame, however, proved to be the most helpful deterrent as the young offenders didn’t want their families to know about their crime and, according to offenders interviewed, the shame of their actions and awareness of the community damage curbed their deviant behavior.

Indio and South Yorkshire shared common approaches in their successful graffiti abatement programs. Through community policing efforts they were able to do outreach in schools; share information; collaborate; and emphasize that graffiti is a crime. Now in both communities the most noticeable difference is there are street signs, buildings, and bus stops that are graffiti-free, increasing the sense of safety and improving the quality of life.