Reading What Graffiti Has to Say:

A systematic approach to creating positive social and fiscal change through tracking and analyzing graffiti activity

Abstract:

Despite often being overlooked as a low-level crime, graffiti activity has tremendous negative impacts on communities. Employing a systematic approach to tracking graffiti activity, and seeking restitution from offenders, reduces the expense of abatement efforts and benefits neighborhoods, helps at-risk youth and families, and assists law enforcement in criminal investigations.

Introduction: Why Care About Graffiti?

In many law enforcement jurisdictions, graffiti is considered simply a nuisance and goes uninvestigated, with most other crimes are prioritized above it. This leaves city administrators with limited options: either ignoring graffiti or removing it. Ignoring graffiti leads to eyesores that reduce a neighborhood's desirability; residents are stressed and intimidated, new families avoid buying homes in the area, and businesses suffer. Merely painting over or removing graffiti may improve appearances temporarily, but it typically generates a significant cyclical expense which diverts funds from other vital programs.

By tracking, analyzing, and acting upon the information contained in the graffiti markings themselves, cities can experience many positive outcomes, including:

- Significantly reduced annual abatement expenses
- Increased restitution revenues
- Recovery of intelligence on gang activities
- Support for at-risk youth
- Positive, long-term relationships with community residents and businesses

In many cases, the cost savings from reduced abatement expenses will cover the costs of implementing a graffiti tracking and analysis program. For example, between 2015 to 2018, the City of Paramount, California experienced a 68%

reduction in graffiti incidents. In 2015, the city's public works department abated 21,044 graffiti incidents. The number dropped to 6,768 in 2018. With less staff time and supplies dedicated to graffiti abatement, the city can now allocate the cost-savings to programs like Graffiti Tracker and others public works related projects. The additional ancillary benefits of the program, where communities are strengthened and quality of life is improved, may be harder to measure but are no less significant.

Abatement Efforts: The Endless Cost of Covering It Up

A city can deploy abatement teams to scrub away or paint over new graffiti each day, and these efforts are indeed a necessary step in improving communities. However, unless the markings are analyzed and the taggers are identified, a city can easily end up spending a quarter of a million dollars or more per year, every year on painting over graffiti, and have nothing to show for it. No matter how much effort is spent repainting graffiti, new markings can appear in a matter of hours.

To illustrate this challenge, consider a typical scenario: A teenager walks to school in the morning. Along the way, he tags ten buildings with his unique moniker. Later that morning, an abatement crew spots the graffiti and paints it over. Things look fine for a few hours until school lets out. The student then walks home along the same path and tags ten new buildings. By then, the abatement crew is either located in a different part of town or they have ended their shift for the day, and the street looks as bad as it did earlier that same morning. If the city and law enforcement had had the ability to see the path of damage based on prior incidents, resources could have been allocated to be on alert for the particular vandal or moniker.

Many cities continue to direct large sums of money at graffiti abatement without seeing a year-over year decrease in graffiti activity. For example, Philadelphia removes more than 100,000 graffiti pieces each year at an annual cost of $1.3 million, and its administrators still expect the city to be "inundated" with graffiti if they reduce their efforts.[i] Los Angeles spent about $7 million per year cleaning 32.4 million square feet in 2014, with the expectation that graffiti activity would only increase in the future.[ii]

However, there is another solution: capturing evidence during the abatement process and analyzing the data, and using the intelligence to make proactive decisions. For example, the City of Pico Rivera, California saw its graffiti activity decrease by as much as half.[iii] In addition to reduced graffiti activity and reduced abatement expenses, this program has an additional benefit to jurisdictions: revenue via restitution.

Once the activity of a graffiti vandal is tracked, the perpetrator can be identified and held responsible for the damages they have caused, including restitution for each individual marking. The total square footage of damage can be calculated, resulting in restitution totaling thousands of dollars per offender (although some cities choose to accept smaller, token payments in exchange for a young person enrolling in diversion programs). In 2011, the first year San Diego started using the system countywide, the amount of restitution received for graffiti jumped from about $170,000 to almost $800,000.[iv]

In addition to collecting restitution, a city also symbolically profits from the reduced incidents of graffiti. Knowing that their actions are being tracked and tallied often takes the satisfaction out of graffiti for young offenders.

Tagging: A Signal from At-Risk Youth

Approximately 80% of graffiti activity is "tagging," with the motivation of fame and notoriety.[v] The tagger, most often a male between the ages of 12 and 17, will adopt a stylistic moniker and publicize it in as many places as they can, including re-tagging once cities scrub or repaint.

Once a city implements a system to track and analyze graffiti, the city can monitor which tags were made by which individual and where they occurred. The young people who leave these marks often walk along predictable paths. When a juvenile is caught leaving a tag, or if law enforcement notices the youth already has their moniker on their belonging, the city can investigate all the past recorded instances of that tag and present the tagger or their family with a bill for restitution of all incidents.

While full restitution from the tagger's family is ideal, this may not be as desirable as taking the opportunity to use civil means to bring the juvenile, their family, and the city into a supportive, long-term relationship that can positively impact the life of the young person. Once the tagger is identified, the appropriate city worker should meet with the family and child together. Suggestions for a conversation with the parent(s) of the offender include:

- Acknowledgement that while the child may have thought he or she was just being cool, or doing something artistic*, but they have actually caused significant financial damages to the city

- Noting that instead of arresting the child and charging him or her with a crime, the city would prefer that they simply stop defacing property and begin to pay back the expense of cleanup at a reasonable monthly amount.

- Encourage that, as part of the restitution agreement, the parent(s) agree to participate in any programs that a social worker believes will be helpful to the juvenile and/or the family, which may include parenting classes or community service hours.

In most cases, caring parents are stressed by work and financial burdens and have no knowledge of the illicit behaviors that have entangled their child. The taggers themselves may even be hoping for more guidance, even if they don't know it. A monthly restitution payment is a regular reminder for the parents to stay involved in their child's life, and for the child to remember that his or her actions have an impact on their loved ones.

In either case, the potential to change the behavior of these young people will be easier when they are teenagers engaged in low-level vandalism than when they are in their 20s and 30s and have moved onto more serious crimes.

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* The debate about whether graffiti should be protected as art is a separate matter for individual cities to decide, but the vast majority of tagging lacks any significant artistic merit. Cities that want to encourage artistic expression sometimes designate surfaces where graffiti is permitted, but then it is at the risk that property owners may lose the right to make changes to their own buildings if the markings are found to be protected under the Visual Artists Rights Act (V.A.R.A.).

Gang Activity: Don't Throw Away Your Evidence

The remaining 20% of graffiti activity is committed by gang members. The purpose of gang graffiti is to spread fear and intimidation, and its targets are the members of other gangs, neighborhood residents, and law enforcement officers. For this reason, the letters in this kind of graffiti are written out clearly so the messages are easily understood. When systematically tracked and analyzed, gang graffiti offers a tremendous amount of intelligence for law enforcement. Some of the information that can be uncovered includes:

- *Motive for murder.* Gangs will sometimes signal in advance their intention to kill someone. These written threats have been used in court to prove motive after murders have been committed. If the message is found and investigated earlier, the targets may be more willing to assist law enforcement in an attempt to protect themselves, and additional more serious crimes may be prevented.

- *Advance warning of new activity.* Gang graffiti can alert law enforcement as to which gangs are becoming more active, or which are beginning to have conflicts with others. Gang members use graffiti markings such as the gang name to declare their association and allegiance to a gang. Gang graffiti outside of the suspected gang territory could indicate that the gang is expanding to another area or challenging an existing gang's turf through "cross outs" or writing over the rival gang's graffiti.[vi]

- *Changes in membership.* Law enforcement can tell from the graffiti markings when new members jump into the gang or when former members rejoin after being released from jail. In most cases, gang members will claim a nickname or moniker.[vii] As a result, some gang graffiti will contain a gang name with monikers listed below it. Graffiti Tracker's founder, Timothy Kephart, refers to this type of graffiti as "roll call." The addition of a moniker to a roll call indicates a new member in the gang or the reappearance of a member after being absent for some time, due to an arrest, served prison time, or other circumstances.

- *Groups within a gang.* A gang can have 40 or 50 active members, but a roll call may only list four or five gang monikers. If two or three gang members always put their names up together, it indicates that they probably hang out regularly. If one member is later found to be involved in a crime, law enforcement often finds it worthwhile to question the others in the group as well.

With all of the information that can be extracted from gang graffiti, simply painting over it without documentation and analysis is futile. By quickly tracking the markings before painting them over, the city can easily preserve gang-related evidence while still improving the appearance of the neighborhood.

Designating a Graffiti Officer: A Chance to Build Relationships

Instituting a comprehensive program for reducing graffiti at its source has the ancillary benefit of improved relationships among law enforcement and other members of the community. We recommend creating **a full-time, graffiti officer position** who can be responsible for implementing and building support for the program.

In addition to arranging meetings with the families of taggers and directing gang-related information to the proper personnel, the graffiti officer can be active in the neighborhood with an effective foot patrol strategy. For some residents, this may be their first positive interaction with law enforcement, which may help build a sense of unity and trust and possibly jump-start deeper conversations about community policing.

Graffiti officers should make time to meet with school administrators, small businesses owners, and residents, along with any other individuals or groups impacted by local graffiti. Suggested topics of for positive discussion with community members include:

- The "downward spiral" of not combating graffiti in the community
- How to report new graffiti
- The financial burden that taggers bring upon their families

- The philosophy of counseling taggers, rather than arresting them
- Alternate recreational outlets for taggers
- The risk of chemical exposure to aerosol spray and harmful cleaning chemicals

The initial expense of creating this position and implementing a graffiti tracking program can be measured against the costs incurred by the city though its abatement efforts. If the abatement costs significantly decrease over time, the position and program can be regarded as items that have positive fiscal impacts on the city budget.

How Graffiti Tracker Works

Graffiti Tracker is more than a repository of graffiti photos; staff analyze the photographic data provided by local government agencies and a free mobile application is provided to abatement crews, which can be used to record each instance of graffiti before they removal. With the mobile application, abatement crews also have the ability to see and edit the precise location of a graffiti incident and can input surface type, total surface area damage, removal method used, clean-up time, and total cost to abate a graffiti incident. Photos are then uploaded to highly-trained staff who analyze any gang information or tagging monikers within 24 hours of receiving the images. The end result is the correct cataloging and analysis of graffiti incidents, regardless of volume or complexity.

Graffiti Tracker uses the Google Maps platform to map the location of each graffiti incident. A user of the mobile app can search the database to view activity from individual vandals or specific crews or gangs, as well as identify the path of damage, trends or migration. Cities and counties also have the ability to search the graffiti intelligence of multiple cities or regions contracted with Graffiti Tracker, making information-sharing efficient and effective.

The data in Graffiti Tracker is centralized and stored in a web-based location accessible at any time, day or night. The web-based system makes it easy for city and law enforcement personnel to instantly generate reports that show the most active taggers and gangs, or any vandal who has committed acts of graffiti in a specific region. Individual graffiti vandals can be linked to multiple incidents, and full restitution charges can be calculated. Users can also compare the frequency of graffiti vandalism in a particular area over time.

About Graffiti Tracker

Graffiti Tracker has helped over 60 cities and unincorporated areas collect over $9 million in restitution since 2006 through its highly-rated system of graffiti tracking and analysis. Timothy Kephart, founder of Graffiti Tracker, holds a Master of Science in Criminal Justice from California State University, Long Beach. Drawing on 18 years of expertise in graffiti tracking and analysis, Timothy is a court-certified graffiti expert and has been consulted in many media interviews and events. For more information, contact Graffiti Tracker at (877) 678-3872 or graffititracker.net.

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