Many youth gangs use graffiti to mark territory, send messages, and intimidate rival gangs and community residents. But graffiti is not just the work of gang members. "Taggers" are young people who are not necessarily gang affiliated but still engage in graffiti vandalism. They are seeking recognition from their peers for their daring. Only 10 percent of graffiti is thought to be gang-related; the remaining 90 percent is done by taggers. Most graffiti vandals are between the ages of 14 and 17, but some are younger. They often tote backpacks in which they carry the tools of their trade—spray paint, paint sticks, etching equipment, and the like.

Whether done by gang members or taggers, the presence of graffiti in a neighborhood can increase residents' fears about their safety and even reduce property values. Its presence can also signify to criminals that residents don't care about their neighborhood. It costs communities thousands of dollars in removal and clean-up.

What You Can Do

- Report all graffiti vandalism to law enforcement. Before you remove graffiti, notify the police department so they can document it with photographs. This helps build cases against these vandals. Most taggers sign their work in the same way and often target the same area.
- Clean-up often has to be done again and again, but patience and persistence pay off. If an area you have cleaned up becomes covered in graffiti again, remove it as quickly as possible. The goal is to deny the vandal the chance to display his work. Successful programs remove graffiti within 24 hours.
- If the graffiti is on your property, remove it immediately. If it is on county or state property, law enforcement should be able to help you contact the owners. Your community may even have a graffiti hotline to report vandals. If not, help get one started.
- Landscaping is an attractive, natural deterent to graffiti activity. If an area is continually hit by graffiti, consider planting the area in a way that discourages access.

What the Community Can Do

- Check out local antigraffiti ordinances that can hold youth, and sometimes their parents, legally accountable for damage and for possession of graffiti implements such as spray paint. If your community doesn't have an ordinance, help get one on the books.
- Notify property owners of ordinances that require them to keep their property graffiti-free.
- Coat walls with special paint products and surfaces that do not allow spray paints to stick or make them easier to clean up.
- Contact merchants and request that they not sell items that endorse or glorify graffiti, such as t-shirts, posters, or other items that feature graffiti in their design.
- Ask local hardware stores not to sell spray paint to minors. Request that they place spray paint and paint markers in areas where they can be monitored by employees.
- Ask utility/power companies to remove graffiti from their property and equipment. Request transportation companies such as bus, metro, and train services to do the same.
- Organize a community clean-up. This can be a great community-building activity. Have a block party afterward to celebrate and spend time getting to know one another.

The most effective anti-graffiti initiatives go beyond clean-up.

- Help start a school-based curriculum on gang prevention in local schools. Help teachers incorporate vandalism prevention messages in English, civics, math, and other classes.

- Provide counseling for gang-involved youth and their parents.
- Ask local radio stations to broadcast anti-graffiti public service announcements.
- Work together to provide positive activities for youth in your community.
- Start a Neighborhood Watch group in your community. Start patrolling the neighborhood for incidents of vandalism and expand your group to encompass activities that improve quality of life for residents.

Enlist the Help of Partners

- Law enforcement are important partners in the fight against graffiti. They can help you set up hotlines to report vandalism; they can document the damage and arrest the vandals. They often help set up programs to get graffiti removed for people who cannot afford the supplies or don't have access to the labor.
- To get the supplies you need you can ask local paint stores to donate paint remover, paint, and other supplies.
- Include teens in your clean-up. Teens who are involved in clean-up are less likely to become involved in vandalism.
- Ask local merchants to donate refreshments and even small gifts to give to your volunteers.
- Distribute crime prevention and antigraffiti materials at your clean-up.

TAKE A BITE OUT OF CRIME®

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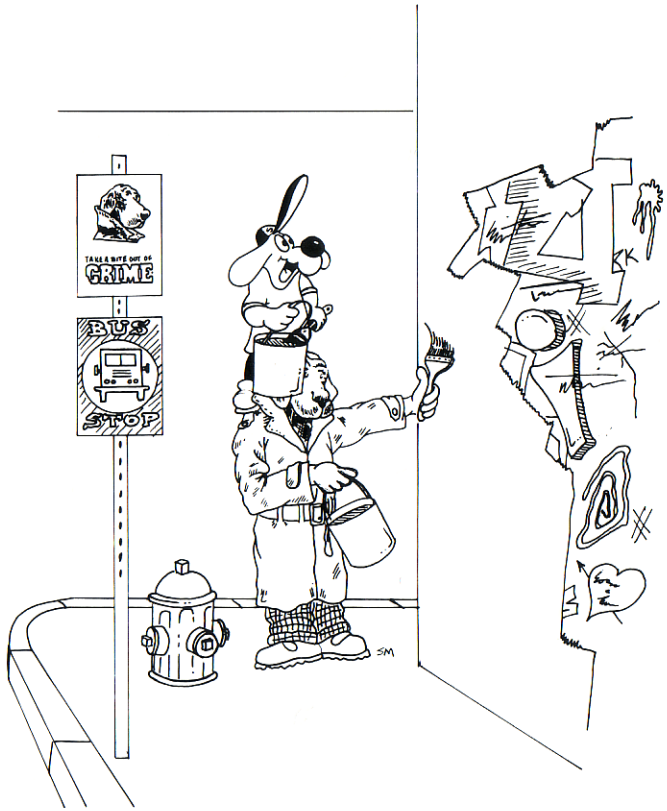
Graffiti— Often the First Sign of Trouble



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