



Graffiti Vandalism in New South Wales

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This bulletin reports the findings of a survey conducted to address the information gap that exists in relation to graffiti vandalism, the public polices on its management and the attendant social and monetary costs to the community. The survey also identified issues in relation to recording mechanisms that warrant urgent attention as well as further areas in need of research.

Background

Graffiti vandalism is a longstanding problem in the community, the incidence of which is reported as being on the increase over recent years.²

In May 2006, the NSW Attorney General reinstated the Government's commitment to tackling graffiti vandalism and announced a comprehensive strategy that aims to reduce the incidence of graffiti vandalism on trains, public transport infrastructure and other community facilities. A major component of the strategy was the establishment of the Anti-Graffiti Action Team (AGAT) to coordinate existing actions and drive new measures across NSW. The NSW Attorney General's Department leads the AGAT, with a broad membership from various government agencies, public utilities, transport providers, local government and the paint industry.

In recognition of the need for an evidence-based approach, the Crime Prevention Division (CPD) of the NSW Attorney General's Department collaborated with the Department of Local Government (DLG) and seven other AGAT members on designing a survey to:

- measure the extent of graffiti vandalism across NSW;
- identify current polices and management practices for dealing with graffiti vandalism;
- assess the impact of graffiti vandalism on these agencies; and
- assess the costs associated with graffiti removal.

Data used in this study

The survey was administered to the seven AGAT members and to all NSW local councils (n=152). The AGAT member survey commenced in July 2006. The DLG distributed the council survey, by e-mail, in September 2006 and returned the collated survey results to CPD for analysis.

All seven AGAT members provided a response to the survey. A total of 116 councils responded to the survey, equating to a response rate of 76.3%.

Reported incidents of graffiti vandalism

There is significant variation in the number of graffiti incidents reported by NSW councils over the five-year period from 2001 to 2005, ranging from 1 incident to incidents in the thousands. The overall trend, however, is an increase in the number of reported graffiti incidents over time. This reported increase coincides with an overall increase in the number of recorded graffiti incidents reported by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research over the same period.

There are two inherent problems associated with counting the number of graffiti incidents that need to be considered.

The first is that recorded crime data represents only those incidents that are reported to an authority. As a result, the incident numbers reported do not reflect the actual number of events that have taken place. Different types of crime are reported at different rates, and graffiti vandalism is a notoriously under-reported crime. This is a fact borne out by the results of the survey that follow.

The second is whether a reported increase in the incidence of a particular crime reflects a real increase in the incidence of that crime or whether it reflects an increased rate of reporting due to increased public attention to the crime.

Primary concerns in relation to graffiti vandalism

Respondents were asked to report their primary concern around graffiti vandalism. For around half of the councils (n=47, 46%), the primary concern was the costs associated with graffiti removal.

For a third of the councils (n=35, 34%), the primary concern was the effect graffiti vandalism has on the community. It refers to the negative effect that graffiti vandalism has on the perceptions of crime and safety as well as the indirect costs related to devaluing of property and the loss of business revenue in areas with high volume graffiti vandalism.

The concerns reported by the AGAT members mirrored those of the councils – but with an understandably greater emphasis on the damage that graffiti vandalism causes to their assets.

Graffiti vandalism policies

All seven AGAT members and 69 (60%) of the councils reported having implemented policies to prevent or reduce graffiti vandalism. These policies were often a combination of risk management, regulatory, and educative and community strategies.

For councils, the most commonly used policy was rapid removal (n=62, 90%), followed by encouraging the reporting of graffiti incidents (n= 70%) and the use of anti-graffiti paint and/or protective coatings (n= 67%). The implementation of community programs, such as murals and legal walls, was a strategy employed by over half of the councils (n= 55%). Just under one-third of the councils used surveillance techniques (n= 29%).

Monitoring graffiti vandalism policies

Fundamental to reducing the incidence of graffiti vandalism is having the knowledge of which policies and strategies work, and which do not.

An important finding of the survey was that under half (n=30, 44%) of the councils that had implemented graffiti management strategies reported having monitored the strategies to assess their impact.

The most common method of assessment was to compare the number of recorded graffiti incidents prior to and post the intervention. A reduction in the number of recorded incidents was considered to be evidence of a successful graffiti management policy. The monitoring of graffiti removal for re-occurrence was also noted.

Outcomes of graffiti vandalism policies

Fifteen of the councils reported having implemented graffiti reduction strategies that were not successful in reducing graffiti vandalism. Six indicated that legal walls and murals increased the incidence of graffiti vandalism rather than decreasing it in the areas close to the mural/legal wall site.

Community education was considered to be ineffective by two councils, with one reporting a lack of community interest in the programs, the other considering the programs to have encouraged rather than discouraged the perpetration of graffiti vandalism. All responses provided by the councils are detailed in the full graffiti report.

Conversely, some councils reported successful graffiti management strategies. For example, one council reported that rapid removal, as long as the 24 to 48 hour time limit was observed, reduced the incidence of graffiti vandalism in their local government area.

Another council highlighted the importance of attending to Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles. Specifically noted were the benefits of increased lighting and the use of preventative treatments.

Figure 1 shows that 40% of councils are currently meeting the rapid removal of 24 to 48 hour removal standards.

Figure 1: Council graffiti removal response times



Graffiti vandals

Graffiti vandalism is, by its nature, a faceless crime. Being typically conducted in areas that are remote or isolated from public view means that graffiti offenders are rarely seen, and even more rarely called to account for their behaviour. While the majority of the councils have a police referral policy in relation to identified graffiti offenders, there are very few incidents where an offender is identified.

Figures from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research indicate that in any given year, there is an identified person of interest in around one quarter of all graffiti incidents reported to the NSW Police. There are even fewer persons of interest who are proceeded against to court.

Recording graffiti vandalism

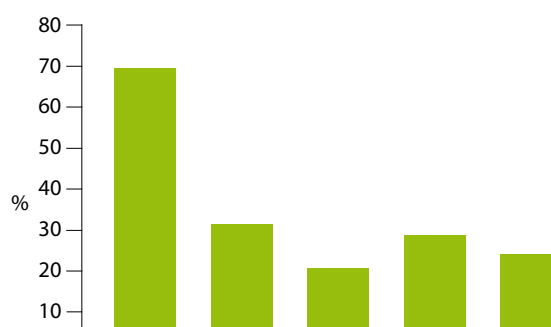
The information provided by councils in relation to the recording and reporting of graffiti incidents clearly demonstrates that the quantification of graffiti incidents is a task fraught with difficulty.

Recording systems

All seven AGAT members reported having a system in place for recording and monitoring graffiti incidents. However, just over two-thirds of the councils (n=80, 69%) reported having such a system in place. Five AGAT members reported having had a recording system in place for five or more years, and two members, for three to five years.

There was considerable variability reported in relation to the operational period of the councils' recording systems (Figure 2). The recording system of one-fifth of the councils had been operational for less than one year (n=15, 20%) and for around one-third (n=22, 29%) for one to less than three years. Just under one-quarter of the councils reported having had a system in place for three to five years (n=18, 24%) and just over one-quarter (n=21, 28%) for five or more years.

Figure 2: Council graffiti recording systems



Counting rules

The survey revealed that councils apply different counting rules to the recording of graffiti incidents. Of the 80 councils that had a graffiti recording system in place, 51 (64%) indicated that all graffiti incidents are entered into the system.

For 11 (14%) councils, only major incidents were recorded, for 7 (9%) only incidents that had been removed were recorded in the system and for a further 14 (18%) recorded only incidents that occurred on certain property types, which were primarily council assets.

Reporting to police

There was even less reporting of graffiti incidents to the police – highlighting how under-representative the available recorded crime statistics are in relation to graffiti vandalism. Two-thirds of the councils indicated that they reported only some of the graffiti incidents that come to their attention to the police (n=76, 67%). Equivalent numbers (n=19, 17%) either reported all incidents or no incidents.

For the councils reporting only some incidents to the police, the incidents reported were typically major, offensive or threatening graffiti occurrences.

Graffiti removal

As is the case with graffiti incident numbers, there is considerable variation in relation to the removal of graffiti incidents and in the recording of graffiti removal costing information.

Removing graffiti

Just under three-quarters (n=82, 71%) of the councils, and all of the surveyed AGAT members, reported that all identified graffiti incidents were removed. There was some prioritising of incident removal, with priority being given to the removal of offensive or threatening incidents, major incidents, and incidents in public places.

The cost of graffiti removal

There are claims that graffiti removal costs taxpayers a significant amount of money annually. A recent media release reports that "...at least \$25.3 million a year is spent on cleaning graffiti off public property in Sydney, Newcastle, the Central Coast and Wollongong". However, based on the information provided by councils in the survey, it is difficult to quantify the actual amount of money that is spent dealing with graffiti vandalism.

Just over one-third of the councils (n=43, 37%) reported keeping accurate records of how much was spent cleaning up graffiti. An issue here may be that the cost of graffiti removal is often tied up in the total cost of dealing with incidents of malicious damage more generally.

Discussion

While graffiti vandalism is recognised as being a pervasive and costly crime within the community, it remains a subject about which there is little reliable information to base policy decisions. A survey was conducted by the Crime Prevention Division, in partnership with several AGAT members, to address the information gap in relation to quantifying the incidence of graffiti vandalism in the community, the policies that have been implemented as counter measures and the social and monetary costs associated with graffiti vandalism.

The survey highlights the difficulties associated with quantifying the incidence and costs of graffiti vandalism and the need for the introduction of a systematic method of recording and reporting such incidents and their removal.

The identification of graffiti vandals is problematic. Graffiti vandalism is a crime that is premeditated and conducted in locations that are typically remote or secluded from view. To be able to combat graffiti vandalism, a greater understanding is needed of how and when graffiti vandalism is committed, and more importantly, who the graffiti vandals are and what motivates their behaviours.

The survey identified that 3 AGAT members and 40% of councils are undertaking rapid removal within the 48-hour standard. It also demonstrated that attention has been given to Crime Prevention Through Environment Design (CEPTED) principles in an attempt to hinder the application of graffiti vandalism. Further attention needs to be given to evaluating the CPTED strategies that have been implemented with an aim to develop a best practice model.

Notes/ References

1. Williams, S., & Poynton, S., 2006, "Recent Trends in Recorded Incidents of Graffiti in New South Wales", Crime and Justice Statistics, Issue paper no. 34, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, NSW Attorney General's Department.
2. The seven AGAT team members were the Department of Education and Training, Energy Australia, RailCorp, Roads and Traffic Authority, State Transit Authority, Sydney Water and Telstra.
3. Persons of interest are alleged offenders or persons who the police suspect have been involved in a criminal incident. Some persons of interest are formally proceeded against by police and some are not. Criminal incidents involving multiple offenders can have more than one associated persons of interest. Correspondingly, no person of interest information is recorded for criminal incidents in which there is no known suspect.
4. \$25m cost of graffiti", The Daily Telegraph, 21 May 2007.