

TAKING BACK THE STREETS... ONE WALL AT A TIME



Winning the war on Toronto graffiti

by Heinz Kuck



The Toronto Police Services' Graffiti Eradication Program, officially launched October 27, 2000, unveiled dynamic strategies, new partnerships and innovative methods to reduce crime, fear and disorder as it relates to graffiti vandalism.

The program has completed its first challenging year of operation, meeting and, remarkably, in most cases surpassing expectations. More than 52,000 square feet of surfaces were cleaned and reclaimed, 122 people were arrested and 312 criminal charges were laid and 1.5 million Toronto and area residents were informed about the program through an aggressive radio, TV and literature campaign. For the first time we established a secure and sustainable toehold into the arcane world of urban graffiti.

Despite the challenges, there was an overriding commitment to continuous improvement, with reviews of what worked, what didn't and what needed to be changed.

Toronto's graffiti scene involves seven distinct and identifiable styles but 'hip-hop' is the most common, accounting for approximately 80 per cent. Born out of the New York ghetto experience of the 1970's, it can be seen in all urban centres, large and small. It involves 'tagging' — single colour initials or symbols, 'throw ups' — two dimensional, two colour bubble style lettering and 'pieces,' also known as master pieces — large, multi colour, multi dimensional murals often done by a group or crew of taggers.

Gang graffiti makes up about five per cent

and is generally lettering with a single colour and simplistic style spelling out the actual name of the gang or a derivative of its initials. It demarcates boundaries and is used for inter-gang communication, recruitment and, in a growing number of instances, to issue threats.

Hate crime graffiti accounts for another five per cent. The most frequent occurrence of hate crime was mischief to property, and within that the use of graffiti, according to a 1999 year-end analysis by the Toronto Hate Crime Unit.

Is there anything more sinister than a swastika spray-painted on the side of a synagogue or racist slogans scrawled throughout a culturally diverse neighbourhood? In these cases it's not just the owners and residents of the buildings targeted who become victims but the entire community.

The remaining 10 per cent is made up of 'latrinalia' (from the word latrine, drawn in public washrooms), folk epigraphy ('Bobby loves Suzie,' for example, painted on a bridge overpass) and graffiti done by satanic cults and political activists.

Whether scripted for hatred or recognition, demarcation or destruction, graffiti applied to a surface, public or private, without permission, is one dimensional; it is a criminal offence.

Toronto's program has five parts:

- Eradication: Physically removing graffiti from surfaces by using property owners, prisoner work programs, students, volunteers and social service recipients.
- Education: Running anti-graffiti campaigns in the media and programs in schools, community centres and faith groups.
- Empowerment: Working with business improvement associations, rate payer groups, community police liaison committees and lo-

cal politicians.

- Enforcement: Arrests and prosecutions, surveillance, informant information, Crime Stoppers and municipal by-law enforcement.
- Economic Development: Urban beautification, city funded, council initiated graffiti transformation programs and entrepreneurial youth focused mural businesses.

Each of our 16 Toronto Police Service divisions has a Graffiti Eradication Program coordinator who has taken on program responsibilities in addition to their regular duties. They guide personnel and resources in designing, developing and executing strategies and seek out new partnerships. The strength of the program lies not in what each coordinator achieves as an individual but in the collective action of all coordinators and community partners at any given time.

Eradication

The first year of the program saw 52,762 square feet of heavily graffiti-vandalized surface painted out, chemically cleaned or blasted away. For the most part, community groups, faith groups and schools pitched in to clean up their neighbourhoods. Supplies were often donated by Business Improvement Associations, property owners, paint dealerships and, in some cases, by area ward councillors.

One of the true success stories involved a partnership with the Ontario Ministry of Corrections allowing us to use provincial inmates through a work program. Prisoners selected have volunteered for the program, are serving time for non-violent, non-drug offences and are considered low escape risks. They're accompanied by corrections staff while working for us.

Prisoners were especially valuable when it came to cleaning up gang graffiti, which some

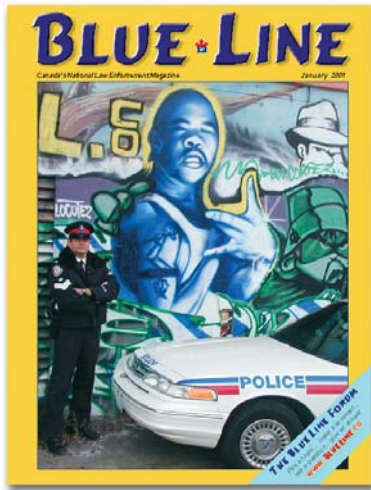
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volunteers were reluctant to touch because they feared retribution. Inmates had no such concerns and cleaned up more than 10,000 square feet of surfaces.

Another outstanding way to eradicate graffiti is with murals. Studies have shown that surfaces simply painted over are often re-tagged, since a newly cleaned area is like a blank canvas. Tasteful murals however, done in consultation with the community, are less likely to be touched since taggers often express awe for the large, colourful paintings and aspire to such skills. They will often leave the murals unscathed as a symbolic gesture of approval, moving off to find another, more enticing blank canvas.

A unique partnership with Canada Post tackles the approximately 10,000 Toronto-area mail and relay boxes, referred to as 'street furniture,' which are routinely hit by taggers. The post office has limited maintenance personnel and cannot paint over the many boxes hit so we developed project T.A.G. (Teens Against Graffiti), which recruits students to help.

Ontario students, who now require community service hours to graduate from high school, provide the elbow grease to clean the boxes and



ONE YEAR LATER: An article in *Blue Line* last January is credited with giving this program national attention.

Canada Post donates cleaning supplies and provides liability waivers. Students trek to hard hit areas and scrub away; they've cleaned and refurbished more than 200 mailboxes so far.

Education

Our two-pronged educational program teaches front line officers to identify types of graffiti, its criminality and social costs while showing the community how to "record, report and remove." We created two web sites, one internal and one external, and both are updated regularly with new research material, social cost commentary and trends.

We also designed and printed 25,000 colourful anti-graffiti brochures and 10,000 stop graffiti Crime Stoppers magnets and posters, which were distributed through each division to the community.

As the program increased in scope, the next stage was an aggressive marketing campaign using Toronto's vast media network. Feature pieces were done in the *Toronto Sun*, commentaries in the *Toronto Star*, and reports in the *Globe and Mail*, as well as *Eye* and *Now* magazines. Eradication events were shown on TV newscasts and several radio stations showcased it on their call-

in shows - the radio shows alone had a listenership of more than one million people.

The January 2001 article published in *Blue Line Magazine* highlighting the start of the program drew enquiries from across Canada. Information packages were sent out coast to coast and an RCMP officer from Surrey, BC was even sent to Toronto to gather information so he could start up a similar program in that city.

Empowerment

Letters were sent out to all Toronto ward councillors, area MPPs and public and private schools explaining the program vision and mission and asking for their support and participation.

Enforcement

The demographics of the offenders, and the tools they used, neatly dovetailed into what our research suggested — that most graffiti artists are young, live in an urban area and are poor. Ninety per cent of those arrested were male and the average age was 17.6 years old — the youngest offender was only 12.

Most of the charges (209) related directly to graffiti vandalism while the remaining 103 charges involved drugs, weapons and violence. The tools used to produce the graffiti proved interesting too — 59 used aerosol spray paint, 50 used markers, nine had house paint, three used a sharp object to scratch out their message and one had a paint roller.

Most of the arrests were the result of officers conducting regular patrols, 911 calls by witnesses/victims and pro-active surveillance of areas with high incidents of graffiti. The map showing city wide arrest locations illustrates how widespread the problem is — no community was spared the intrusion of graffiti vandalism.

Economic Development

The police program has a partnership with the 'Graffiti Transformation Program,' a city funded, community-wide economic development effort designed to create full and part time employment for youth. Artists meet with residents of communities hit hard by graffiti vandalism to create and complete community sensitive murals which are often sought out by Toronto tourists.

The Future

From eradication to enforcement, empowerment to education, the first 12 months have been stellar. A toehold has been established and the program continues to raise the bar in combating vandalism. The challenge now, it seems, is one of swaying popular opinion.

Toronto is one of the most culturally diverse cities in Canada, with over 150 ethnic and cultural groups, and with that comes strength of choice and opinion. There seem to be as many groups opposed to graffiti as feel it's acceptable.

Researchers say youth turn to graffiti to rebel, achieve fame and recognition and for a sense of power and artistic expression. The challenge next year won't only be 'taking back the streets one wall at a time' but also winning the hearts and minds of the apathetic property owner, youth, criminals and the uninformed.

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