

Graffiti vandalism linked to urban decay

by Heinz Kuck

His body was heavy with the fatigue that comes with age. Simple things were now hard – walking, moving, lifting; looking at his hands, he wished they were strong and tanned like when he was young. His gaze moved to the ever-present blue tattooed numbers on his forearm, and he forced himself to look away.

Suddenly there was the sound of running feet and the pungent smell of fresh paint. He turned to see a large, bright, freshly painted swastika and began weeping. He despised that symbol even more today than he had in 1942.

Large cities and small towns alike are visually immobilized by the ever present “writing on the wall” – urban graffiti. Graffiti, from the Greek word *Graphion* (to write), can be produced by etching, spray paint, markers, pencils, stencils and slap tags and includes everything from hate crime scrawls to political activism, gang graffiti, Hip Hop Tagging, folk epigraphy and even commissioned works.

Studying graffiti is challenging. One can focus on its history, types or styles, societal costs, trends or even enforcement initiatives such as the Toronto Police Service’s Graffiti Eradication Program. I am often asked about its link with urban decay. To fully understand this association, it’s necessary to look at the community costs of illegal graffiti, which includes:

- Removal: Most projects involve simple paint overs but others require elaborate restorations using chemical solutions or sand blasters. Either entails time, labour and material, including anti-graffiti solutions/coatings to make future clean ups easier.
- Courts: Arrest, prosecution, sentencing, imprisonment and probation. International law enforcement agencies estimate that there are approximately 1,000,000 ‘taggers’ plying their trade in North America – and each year a new generation of youth joins the ranks.
- Psycho-social consequences: Decreased respect for authority, citizen fear and diminished use of public and private places. Evidence also suggests there’s an increase in other physical disorder issues, including littering, transients, public drunkenness and urination and street level prostitution. These were identified by Wesley Skogan and other researchers as precursors to neighbourhood decline. In their book *Fixing broken windows*, authors Kelling and Coles apply the ‘broken window theory’ to describe the spiral towards urban decay.

“We used the image of broken windows to explain how neighbourhoods might decay into disorder and even into crime if no one attends faithfully to their maintenance,” they state. “If a factory or office window is broken, the passerby observing it will conclude that no one cares or no one is in charge.

“In time, a few will begin throwing rocks to break more windows. Soon all the windows will be broken and now the passer-by will think that, not only is no one in charge of the building, no



one is in charge of the street on which it faces. Only the young, the criminal, or the foolhardy have any business on an unprotected avenue and so more and more citizens will abandon the street to those they assume prowl it.”

- Collateral or associated crime costs: These include the theft of supplies, sniffing paint vapour before and during vandalism, trespassing on private property, underage drinking and assaults while fleeing citizen arrest.
- Intra-group dangers: This relates to the ever-present risk of death or injury from climbing bridges and water towers or being hit by trains. Toronto recorded its first death directly associated to the propagation of graffiti vandalism when writer ‘Alpha’ was struck and killed by a freight train as he was completing a piece on a stationary box car.

Axel Thiel (Germany) and the Graffiti Hurts Program (US) estimate these societal costs at \$50 billion globally – \$15 billion in the US and \$1.4 billion in Canada. A 2003 study by Steve Gibbons, a lecturer at the London School of Economics, suggests urban residential property values decrease by 1.6 per cent for every 10% increase in property vandalism.

Why do our youth continually engage in this activity? Ethnographic researchers (Brewer, Christensen, Miller, 1992 and Ferrell, 1993) focused on urban youth subcultures and certain dynamics came to the forefront as to the ‘why’ in assessing this physical disorder crime. It comes down to four basic motivators for the writer:

- Fame: Seen as the primary motivator for youth perpetrators. It appeals to the ‘tagger’ to hit as many locations as possible, since this not only garners recognition from the general population (who view and comment on the work) but also from other graffiti sub-

culture members, who will witness the tagger’s proliferation and territory. This explains the ‘multiplicity phenomenon.’ Once a clean surface is tagged and not immediately cleaned, it attracts other taggers, who, in a frenzy, will soon fill the wall to display subculture existence, legitimacy and strength.

- Artistic expression: Most ‘taggers’ limit themselves to one colour, stylized monikers. The more skillful create two-dimensional ‘throw-ups’ and then advance to complex, multi colour ‘pieces.’ They use ‘piecebooks’ — bound sketchbooks which act as a repository for developing their ideas and early works which often include photos of their finished works. Writers also take time to develop their free hand style, working on things such as the symmetry of letters and how they fold and join, and take care in selecting their colour and medium.
- Power: While graffiti writers come from all socio-economic backgrounds and educational levels, there is a trend toward the triune of urbanization — the young and economically challenged. Teens see graffiti as a means of societal power. When they tag a private surface, they symbolically own it; the more property ‘hit,’ the more powerful the tagger. Power involves yet another hidden danger, the high or rush from the act. Jeff Ferrell describes it best in *Crimes of style: Urban graffiti and the politics of criminality, 1993*:

“Graffiti writers have told me, time and time again, that they do graffiti for the rush one gets when piecing or tagging illegally — a rush more exciting and pleasurable than any drug they know — and they emphasize that this feeling comes not from just being out at an illegal location, but from the act of painting itself, from the intersection of creativity and illegality as the paint hits the wall.”

- Rebellion: Specifically, rebellion against conventional society — urban art versus corporate art — the battle between the haves and have nots. Rebellion is also against authority and involves the erosion of elitism, such as the tagging of postal and hydro boxes, telephone booths and corporate buildings.

We need to teach youth about the criminality of graffiti and its associated societal/consequential costs and provide alternative ways they can seek and achieve recognition, non-deviant expression and non-intrusive power, all in a constructive, lawful and meaningful way. One of the most potent ways of dealing with this crime and reversing urban decay is to embrace, educate and empower our neighbourhoods, as a whole, to reclaim, rejuvenate and revitalize; this seems to be the new focus in combating urban graffiti and reversing urban decay.

S/Sgt Heinz Kuck has been a member of the Toronto Police Service since 1979 and is currently the lead co-ordinator of the service’s graffiti eradication program. He will present more on Project MORE in his *Unmasking Urban Graffiti III* course at the *Blue Line Trade Show* April 25, 2006. Register at www.blueline.ca/tradeshow. He can be reached at 416 808-5354.