



## Step Over the Line; Beat a Sign

*Dealing with Sign Vandalism*

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### **Presenters:**

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### **What is Vandalism?**

- “Willful destruction or defacement of public or private property.”<sup>2</sup> (Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, December, 1998)
- “Willful or malicious destruction, injury, disfigurement, or defacement of any public or private property...without the consent of the owner.”<sup>3</sup> (FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Program, 1996)
- What’s the cost?<sup>2</sup>
  - \$15 billion a year for all vandalism (Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, December, 1998)
- What’s the problem?
  - Reduces or eliminates interpretive messages, directions, identifications, or important rules and notices
  - Visitors feel less comfortable and safe; the area is not being watched
  - Existing vandalism encourages more vandalism
  - Degrades the natural and cultural appearance of an area

### **Who Are Vandals?**

- Original Vandals were an East Germanic Tribe who lived in an area south of the Baltic Sea. The tribe overran Gaul, Spain, and northern Africa in the 4th and 5th centuries AD. They sacked Rome in 455, destroying buildings and ransacking artwork. This eventually resulted in our current definition of *vandalism* as “senseless destruction.” However, historians agree that the Vandals were no more destructive than other invaders during this time period.
- Federal Bureau of Investigation: 1996 Report<sup>3</sup>
  - Males (89%)
  - Younger than 16 (63%)
  - Caucasian (83%)
  - All socio-economic backgrounds represented equally
  - 141,600 arrests of persons under the age of 18 for vandalism

## **Why Vandalize? Categories of Vandal Motivations**<sup>1</sup>

1. **Inexplicable Vandalism:** Utter disregard for societal values
  - A. Wanton: Sheer joy of destructing and annoying
  - B. Psychotic: Mental disorder
  - C. Inebriate: Intoxicated (alcohol or drugs)
  
2. **Deliberate Vandalism:** Willful, premeditated, and deliberate. May account for more cases than are known.
  - A. Anger or Frustration: Anonymous revenge (citation, other users, imagined complaint)
    - i. Vindictive: Hatred toward particular individuals or groups
    - ii. Malicious: Bitter sport or sadistic joke-vandal obtains malicious satisfaction
  - B. For Gain: Profit or material benefit
    - i. Predatory: Desire for material gain-selling parts
    - ii. Acquisitive: Removal for personal use or souvenirs
  - C. Directed: Willful, ulterior motives, perceived “right”
    - i. Expedient: Damage to gain entry; not theft, but to use
    - ii. Tactical: Advance some end or cause- ideological, political, occupancy rights (gangs)
  
3. **Incidental Vandalism:** Unaware of consequences of actions. Casual, incidental, and unpremeditated. Often avoidable and preventable, unlike other categories. Cause progressive damage that accumulates.
  - A. Play: Unintentional part of childish fun
  - B. Inquisitive: Curiosity... “what would happen if...”
  - C. Imitative: Copy the action of adults/stars
  - D. Boredom: Seek entertaining diversion-impulse. Written off as inevitable
  - E. Negligent: Damage due to thoughtlessness, indifference, disregard
  
4. **Institutionalized Vandalism:** Tolerated, accepted, “normalized”
  - A. Ritual: Halloween, homecoming, graduation-expected
  - B. Sanctioned: Employees have permission

## **Types of Sign Vandalism: Classification of Damage Categories**<sup>1</sup>

1. **Breakage (Destruction):** Fracturing, shattering, smashing, penetrating, puncturing or crushing
  - Implements: Hammers, rocks, firearms
  - Gunfire is the most reported sign vandalism<sup>5</sup>
  - Place: Rural areas, campgrounds, hunting areas especially near urban areas<sup>5</sup>
  - Study: Wisconsin-metal signs attract more gunfire than others<sup>5</sup>
  - Time: Increased during hunting season (fall, winter), Halloween, special events<sup>5</sup>
  - Vandals: Vindictive, malicious, play, negligent
  - Prevention Techniques
    - Use strong materials difficult to break
    - Use materials that are inexpensive to replace

- Avoid materials that shatter
- Wood signs are still legible after shots
- Avoid metal signs that bend and have scrap value

2. **Surface graffiti or marking:** Superficial writing or drawing on, or discoloring the surface of a sign

- Implements: Pens, flow markers, crayons, lipstick, paint brushes, spray paint, chalk, egg throwing, bottles of ink, mud, stickers, caustic substances (eggs, tomatoes, pumpkins)
- Study: Spray painting is the most prominent form of graffiti<sup>5</sup>
- Place: More common in urban areas, especially residential areas and schools<sup>5</sup>
- Time: Increase during political campaigns and outdoor activities<sup>5</sup>
- Vandals: Tactical, play, imitative, boredom, ritualistic
- Prevention:
  - Dark color surfaces less likely to be marked
  - People have strong urge to immortalize their visit by leaving names; registration systems help<sup>5</sup>
  - Use nonporous materials or finishes so markings do not fill pores<sup>5</sup>
  - Apply protective coat to sign faces
  - Use post-incident product cleaners

A. Direct contact application (markers, crayons, pens): impulse and opportunity

B. Sprayed/thrown application (spray paint, ammunition): premeditated

3. **Disfigurement:** Scratching, cutting, denting, carving, gouging, penetrating, or reorientation

- Implements: Knives, nails, sticks and rods, firearms, missiles (rocks, bottles)
- Place: More common in urban areas, especially residential areas and schools<sup>5</sup>
- Vandals: Vindictive, tactical, play, imitative, boredom, ritualistic vandals
- Prevention:
  - Avoid using soft surface materials
  - Cover signs with inexpensive Plexiglas (if high vandalism area)
  - Remove small stones and projectiles from area-pave trail if feasible<sup>5</sup>

4. **Disassembly and Removal:** Unfastening screws, bolts, nuts, nails, or hinges to take apart

- Implements: Tools, knives, eating utensils, fingernail files
- Study: Used for home decoration, relation to individual's name or interests, scrap value, firewood, uniqueness<sup>5</sup>
- Study: This makes up 1/3 of all reported vandalism<sup>5</sup>
- Study: Wood supports are used for firewood-more susceptible to removal<sup>5</sup>
- Place: Urban areas, especially around schools/colleges. Also recreation areas/campgrounds.<sup>5</sup>
- Time: No apparent pattern<sup>5</sup>
- Vandals: Profit, expedient, inquisitive, boredom
- Prevention:
  - Coat entire back of sign with grease to discourage collecting
  - Use special fasteners

- Require special tools
- Countersink and fill exposed flathead screws/bolts
- Replace standard bolt nuts with vandal-resistant nuts
- Paint/stencil signs directly on boardwalks, doors, buildings
- Engrave identification on signs: one of the most cost effective countermeasures... include penalties, rewards, inventory #, hotlines<sup>5</sup>
- Use better supports to protect sign: cement supports, add cross members, post drive (instead of drill)<sup>5</sup>

#### 5. **Burns:** Combustion, charring, scorching, or singeing

- Implements: Cigarettes, matches, lighters, embers, magnifying glass
- Vandals: Vindictive, malicious, tactical, or negligent
- Prevention:
  - Use noncombustible materials for sign and base materials instead of wood
  - Avoid placing signs near campfire rings or grills

### **Controlling Vandalism: Vandalism Control Management**<sup>4</sup>

Purpose is to reduce unnecessary expenses by using cost effective social and physical strategies... not to eliminate vandalism completely.

Quick repair or replacement is *vitaly important*. Parks in poor condition are more vandalized

#### A. Social Strategies

1. **Public Information/Education:** Press releases, brochures, displays, media. Wisconsin reported favorable results with public information campaign to reduce vandalism to road signs.
2. **Rule Enforcement:** Enforcement: little information on magnitude or time patterns
3. **Cooperation:** Interagency and community groups, "Neighborhood Watch," "Adopt-A-Park"

#### B. Physical Strategies

1. **Stop 'em from doing it:** Prevent/limit access to signs: closed hours
2. **Make it difficult and time-consuming:** Much vandalism is from impulsive actions.
3. **Let 'em do it, but to something else:** Provide a tempting legal alternative or expendable targets for carving, writing, etc.
4. **Protect and strengthen targets:** Stronger materials, durable products, heavy-duty construction (higher initial cost)
5. **Make it easy to fix afterwards:** Use materials that allow for easy removal of graffiti or fixing of scratches, inexpensive replaceable materials
6. **Take away masks of secrecy:** Use electronic or personal surveillance in highly vandalized areas.