

# **MANAGING GRAFFITI AND DISORDER**

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*“We need to understand graffiti in order to control it”*

(Knox City Council, 2002)

### **Brief Description:**

The following sections will provide a background into the graffiti sub culture, including early intervention in relation to harm minimisation, and notions of community.

### **Section 1 Understanding graffiti, a process of acculturation**

Graffiti is often considered a form of vandalism. “*Vandalism*” is the act of destroying or defacing property, whether it is private or public. It is a criminal offence, and constitutes a form of wilful damage, yet punitive approaches have proved to be ineffective.<sup>1</sup> To achieve long-term results, it has been suggested that it is necessary to provide a number of strategies that also address social and economic factors (Sharratt, 2002, and McDonald, 1999).

Traditional crime models relating to graffiti and vandalism, reiterate the notion that crime breeds crime (McDonald, 1999). That is graffiti attracts more graffiti, and an act of vandalism such as smashing a window, will incite similar behaviour such as more smashed windows and further defacements. This theory, as revisited over the past two decades, is commonly known as the Broken Windows Theory (McDonald, 1999)<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> There are some arguments that suggest graffiti is not a form of vandalism, but either an art form or a quest for place and belonging in the context of an individual’s community. These arguments are further developed later in the discussion (McDonald, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> The development of solely-focused fast removal strategies across the world have been largely incited by this Broken Window Theory. They have proved to be a short-term and politically attractive solution to graffiti and vandalism. Long term evaluation and accountability has indicated that this is an expensive and counter productive process (McDonald, 1999).

### **Grffiti and Young People.**

To contextualise this paper, it is important that definitions pertinent to the sub culture of graffiti are clarified from the outset. Some definitions relate to commonly known graffiti, others imply artistic merit in the medium known as aerosol art.

“*Grffiti*” comes from the Italian word ‘graffito’ meaning scratching. The act of graffiti is to cause damage or destruction to property through the use of written, scribbled, scratched or painted messages upon public or private property without permission (Sharratt, 2002). It is also an underground activity because of its degree of secrecy.

In the context of graffiti, or more accurately, a subculture of Aerosol Art, “*Hip Hop Graffiti*” is generally found on train carriages, or properties adjacent to or facing train tracks. Aerosol art cannot be objectively defined as art or graffiti, however it does have artistic vigour in the domain of the ‘hip hop’ culture. ‘Hip hop’ graffiti may be found in highly visible locations such as rail locations and main roads (Csiszer, 2002). The art form is a complex, multifaceted hierarchy requiring a range of responses (Knox City Council, 2002).

“*Murals*” and “*Pieces*,” short for the word masterpiece, are large-scale, multi-coloured features including characters, backgrounds and letters. It is these pieces, of large proportions, that escalated to entirely cover the New York Subway system (Sharratt, 2002). Of course, these pieces were a collaborative work, put together by groups of graffiti writers who have a great deal of mutual respect and trust in one another, and whom are able to work together (Sharratt, 2002).

“*Hierarchy*” is the organisation of persons in a ranking system based on experience and personal attributes. Hierarchy is a key component of the “hip hop” sub culture, as it is generally considered that cutting edge artists practice this form of graffiti. The more permanence and fame they receive, the further they progress in the hierarchy (Kelling and Coles, 1996). Hip Hop graffiti and its subway culture had its genesis in New York (Knox City Council, 2002).

The notion of the “*Clean wall*” meaning the implementation of policies to ensure all structures are free of graffiti, was therefore favoured by New York’s governing bodies, in an effort to curb their perceived graffiti problem (Sharratt, 2002). It became known as a rapid response involved the removal of, or covering up of graffiti within twenty-four to forty eight hours of appearance or reporting (Knox City Council, 2002). The approach was one of intolerance; a notion that is to be further discussed.

Generally, extensive murals and pieces are not undertaken individually. ‘Crews’ are groups involved in the sub-culture whose main purpose is to ‘put up’ their work either through tagging, piecing or both. ‘Crews’ are the main groups who participate in physical violence and this is a result of rivalry and protection of territory. Halsey and Young (2002) discovered interconnectedness between belonging, risk and violence as accepted ‘norms’ of the graffiti culture.

“*Hotspots*” are the areas regularly targeted by graffiti writers (Knox City Council, 2002). In a similar vein, “*Bombing*” is the targeting of a particular area or building by graffitiists by throwing paint onto walls and surfaces (Sharratt, 2002). Such bombing activities could involve a collation of “*Tags*”.

Tags are the writer’s name or alias developed over a period of time. Tags are illegible scrawls. It is likely that one who is not immersed in the sub-culture could not identify them. Tags could be representative of an individual or gang. Most often, they deliberately involve mis-spellings, a social comment toward those they do not wish to be identified by (Knox City Council, 2002).

### **Space, Place, Graffiti and People**

The graffiti sub culture has significant implications for individual citizens in the context of their community and in public space, thus related definitions must also be clarified.<sup>5</sup>

This section shall endeavour to contextualise notions of graffiti in the geographically designed community. It will do so by examining issues of young people, public space, and individual’s preferences for the use of public property.

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<sup>3</sup> A “*citizen*” is a person by birth, naturalisation or otherwise who is a member of an independent political society, called a state, kingdom or empire, and as such is subject to its laws and entitled to its protection in all of their rights incident to that relationship. (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 1994). “*Citizenship*” originates from the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. Its expansion and development is linked to the emergence of the modern nation state, with modern concepts of citizenship reflecting the political, legal and social complexities of the modern age (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 1994). Any given graffiti “*Policy*,” the complex interplay of values, ideas, and resources, guided by institutions and mediated through politics, has significant repercussions for a locality’s citizens. (Davis, Wanna, Warhurst, and Weller, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of this research community shall be defined as a neighbourhood where a collection of people of various age, race, gender and beliefs reside. It is a geographical area clearly defined by environmental boundaries such as roads and waterways (Carr, Francis, Rivlin, & Stone, 1992). This somewhat limited definition is adhered to, as the study is confined to youth and the graffiti culture, in the context of what will be regarded as a broader and infinitely complex community (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 1994). “*Community development*” is the process of empowering communities to actively participate in decision-making processes. Many localities do not address this component, via research and consultation, in the development of graffiti policies (Knox City Council, 2002).

“*Public Space*” refers to the open, publicly accessible places that individuals or groups can go to participate in activities that are formed in an ad hoc fashion, or they may be as a result of a deliberate plan. Obviously, communities<sup>4</sup> are the key stakeholders of public space, and there are many and varied definitions of community in a sociological framework (Ife, 1999).

Public space provides an opportunity for people to interact and socialise in a common place, and the opportunity for groups to form together to promote public action because it is owned by all. Occupiers of public space can vary depending on the particular resource concerned. Generally, stakeholders will include a range of demographics, young and old, male and female, culturally diverse groups with various interests in, and perceptions of a given resource. These groups possess a critical intelligence as to how functional those facilities and assets are (Carr, Francis, Rivlin, & Stone, 1992). Obviously, public space is not independent of any graffiti debate, as a significant consideration must be valuing the amenity of local areas. Public space concerns areas such as playgrounds and other forms of recreational space (Carr, et al 1992). There is strong argument to suggest that nobody should have greater claim to a voice in the management of public space than young people, as they walk, ride, skate, and catch transport around in it. A study undertaken in New York City by Francis, Cashdan and Paxson identified that direct participation by persons involved in decision making and site development enhanced attachment towards the site (Carr, et al 1992). Whilst consideration needs to be given to the property of others and the right not to have it defaced or damaged, graffiti cannot be considered a generic term for all work undertaken with an aerosol can, or indeed the work of predominantly young people. Clearly for some, aerosol work does not have artistic vigour or aesthetic value in any capacity. However it is useful to remember those previously explained sub-categories, which suggest diversity and sophistication in the type of work that can be produced with an aerosol can. As with other art forms, appreciation is perception based (Halsey and Young, 2002).

The impact of changes to public space and consideration of changes to environments to meet user needs are important when looking at access and utilisation of public space (Halsey and Young, 2002). Already, some distinct approaches to graffiti management and control have become apparent. Opting for inclusion and empowering young people as decision makers in matters pertaining to public space may be one approach to graffiti management. Making one site less attractive to relevant groups, so that they invariably seek out an alternative venue, is another approach. It involves the displacement of perceived graffiti problems. Graffiti and community murals (in the context of aerosol art) are examples of permanent change to public spaces which can positively or negatively contribute to the distinctiveness of an area, dependent upon an individual’s perception (Halsey and Young, 2002).

Community Aerosol Art initiatives have been undertaken by Knox Council. They are produced by groups of local artists (particularly young people) to lift derelict areas, which are underused and perceived as unhappy and unsafe areas by neighbouring residents. Community Art generally deters future graffiti attacks, particularly subsequent tagging or bombing (Knox City Council, 2002).

Community art works also facilitate a quest for place and belonging by those stakeholders responsible for producing the mural. They can be instrumental in demonstrating a commitment and validation of young people’s, stake on community property. Current political and social systems promote the privatisation of people’s lives, particularly in cities, where there is a focus on individual rather than collective concerns. Consequently, people of all ages become insular with decreased levels of communication, such that crime is perceived to have increased within communities (Mouffe, 1992).

The formation of groups by younger community members to undertake illegal activity, such as graffiti, indicates the diminishing opportunities for specific groups to legitimately express themselves (Farrington, 1996). Many studies support the idea that the health of individuals is promoted by social interaction. It has also been suggested that the removal of public space creates sub-cultures that provide the same stimulation and relationship base as participation in social action. Quite often, graffiti is about establishing place or belonging in the context of the built environment.

Graffiti might be deemed a political activity because of its hierarchy and complex sub cultures (McDonald, 1999). Inherent in this is stakeholder access to public space. This includes activity by both aerosol art advocates, and those groups intolerant of graffiti in any capacity. The notion of dominance can lead to a lack of recognition for minority views. This must be taken into account when implementing a policy with significant implications for youth (Young and Halsey, 2001).

Graffiti in some form (such as 'pieces') has been described as art and there is evidence to suggest there is a public want for outdoor art and described above (Young and Halsey, 2001). However there are limits to what the public will often accept, and inconspicuous art (such as traditional landscape painted murals) blending into the background is less controversial (Carr et al, 1992).

Because of the debate ignited in many local communities around issues of young people, graffiti, and vandalism, it is consecutively necessary to examine some of the philosophical underpinnings and responses to these issues

### **Managing the Diversity: Towards Sustainable Approaches in Graffiti and Art**

Debate continues over the best way to manage and control graffiti. It is for this reason that a variety of theoretical and practical approaches to graffiti and vandalism management must be outlined. Zero Tolerance has been referred to in earlier sections, and is a more traditional crime 'reactionary' model. Its applications were underlined in rapid removal explanations and in reference to 'Broken Windows'. A more pertinent approach applies notions of minimising the harm that is perceived to occur as a result of graffiti and vandalism. This harm minimisation approach has many and varied applications to be developed. One particular method to be expanded upon symbolises a deviation from traditional punitive approaches and embraces models of a social justice framework.

### **Zero Tolerance: A 'Not Here, Not Now, Not Ever' Approach to Graffiti and Vandalism.**

*"Zero Tolerance"* is the implementation of approaches that do not tolerate the visibility of any graffiti within a local area. It is a concentration on restitution and punishment of offenders after the performance of illegal activity such as graffiti (Knox City Council, 2002).

Non tolerance, as the title suggests, has been applied at a national level in regard to driving offences, particularly drink driving. National drink driving policies operate on the premise that the fear of losing ones license to drive should have a significant deterrent effect (Department of Human Services (DHS), 2001). Specific deterrence refers to the direct consequences and effects for an offending individual. It aims to prevent and preclude a certain behavior that is unfavorable in a social and/ or legal capacity for that particular person (DHS, 2001). General deterrence refers to the wider effects of deterring a behavior in an individual. It is about complete non-tolerance of deviant behaviour. Simply, the wider general public will be suitably deterred from engaging in an illegal or anti-social behaviour, given the repercussions suffered by exemplified individuals (DHS, 2001). Different state governments in Australia dictate that they will not tolerate certain behaviours and adopt punitive approaches to enforce such measures (DHS, 2001). This is then made explicit in the context of the broader community.

## **Harm Minimisation**

The term ‘Harm Minimisation’ has been applied across a variety of disciplines, however in Australia, it is predominantly used in the drug sphere. The willingness of some state governments to adopt a harm minimisation approach to drug issues has been a direct result of the climate created by illicit and licit drugs (DHS, 2001). The scope of harm identified was deemed beyond criminal realms. Rather, both psychological and physical consequences of drug misuse were identified, and it was clear that punitive approaches could not solve these complex issues. Thus minimising the harm was the next step (DHS, 2001). The scope of harm identified by the Victorian Government is important as it identifies psychological, physical, and social consequences, for individuals and families.

Harm minimisation traditionally aimed to reduce the adverse health, social and economic consequences of the misuse of a certain substance, predominantly illicit drugs. More recently, this application has been applied to wrongful application of a certain activity. The approach lends itself to minimising or limiting the hazards or harms at a community level. It focuses equally upon the individual with the problem. Such policies are not necessarily concerned with eliminating certain activities, for example, graffiti (DHS, 2001).

Identifying this ‘harm’ is indeed imperative for deciding the framework of service delivery at a local level, particularly in regards to graffiti and vandalism. Contemporary harm minimisation policies are concerned with ensuring access for all (DHS, 2001). They aim at eliminating barriers to services for young people, for those with linguistic differences, for those with cultural barriers, and for those previously unable to gain access to existing services (Walter, 1999).

Harm minimisation is concerned with early intervention and prevention. This might involve the development of a framework for the provision of services or setting a standard of specifications to ensure consistency of services (DHS, 2001).

In the context of graffiti related policies, harm minimisation could be concerned with; specialist services for young people, strengthened community based treatment services, training for local professionals, and community education and information campaigns, via local media (DHS, 2001).

Four main principles underpin harm minimisation at a state level (these principles were developed under the Kennett policy and thus reflect the priority for decentralisation). They are as follows; to put people first, and not to over prioritise institutions or systems, to ensure a fairer distribution of limited resources, to obtain value for the coveted tax payer dollar, and to provide individuals with a better health status (DHS, 2001).

There remains no debate about the fact that graffiti is an unlawful, criminal act, not permitted on private property without owner permission. Despite this, there are opportunities within communities to create a more positive, welcoming environment, through implementing the principles of harm minimisation (Walter, 1999).

## **Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design**

“*Crime Prevention*” is the formation of strategies to reduce the incidence, severity and impact of crime through understanding and explaining types of crime (Gardner, 1995). Strategies are centred on community based responsibility and involve state and federal governments. Federal, State and Local governments have implemented strategies based on minimising the harm. One such strategy is “*Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design*” (CPTED). This is based on the philosophy that proper design and effective use of the environment can lead to a reduction in the incidence and fear of crime, thus contributing to the wellbeing and safety of the community (Knox City Council, 2002).

CPTED falls beneath the realms of harm minimisation, but is also based on “*Early Intervention*, which aims to prevent the development of criminal potential in individuals (Farrington, 1996). It does so by reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors. These work most effectively with a multi-level approach (Farrington, 1996). Therefore notions of early intervention cannot be deemed independent from harm minimisation approaches. Strategies in the CPTED approach encourage community influence, such as via passive surveillance, to reduce crime. This may also be considered a form of early intervention.

CPTED approaches create an awareness of how individuals can alter their physical environment to discourage criminal acts, such as graffiti. The use of lighting and landscaping, and appropriate security devices are ways individuals can take responsibility for their local environments and reduce the incidence or perception of.

### **Diversionsary Graffiti Theories**

The information above suggests that there are a range of options and strategies to respond to young people and graffiti. It alludes to some of the earliest forms of intervention possible. Diversion programs are also a form of early intervention, as they aim to break the cycle of re-offending and crime. They offer alternative sentencing options to low level offenders, and are of a social justice framework. Options cover a range of conditions to which offenders must agree with, in order to demonstrate their capacity for rehabilitation and remorse. Programs can include a combination of medical treatment, counseling, anger management, compensation, apology to the victim, community work, mental health support, curfew and so on. Such options can be available at the discretion of a participant, or might be included as a compulsory program condition. The programs might address underlying issues such as unemployment, which may contribute to individual engagement in criminal activity (*Sentencing Act, 1991*).

Diversion, in the context of local initiatives, most often involves clean ups facilitated by low level offenders in a supervised capacity. This might involve the painting over of hot spot locations in a given locality. It might also involve more creative mediums, such as the creation of a legal and supervised mural via the co-operation of youth counsellors and community support networks as described above (Knox City Council, 2002). Theoretically, diversion represents a whole of Government response to young people, Youth Service Professionals, Criminal Justice Practitioners, the Courts, Victoria Police, and Community Safety Networks (Hunter, 2001). In essence, diversion programs targeting graffiti aim to discourage recidivism, redirect anti-social behaviour, provide adequate support networks for young people, and build practical skills (Knox City Council, 2002). The existing Diversion program in Knox Council is run with the co-operation of Upper Yarra Community House and Ringwood Magistrates Court. It facilitates clean up programs throughout the municipality on both council and private property (Knox City Council, 2002). The program runs fortnightly. As a form of rehabilitation, participants engage in clean-up programs involving the painting over graffiti targeted walls (Knox City Council, 2002).

Whilst Knox City Council is working closely with the Police and the Courts, its policy is not based on prosecution or criminal justice intervention – such instances will only be considered as a last resort, in line with current Sentencing principles. Youth who participate in the diversion program do not receive a conviction if they fulfill program conditions; this is a significant incentive for them to participate (Knox City Council, 2002).

For diversion initiatives to be thorough, all key stakeholders should recognise the need to discourage conviction of low level offenders. Individuals engaged in their first encounter with the Courts can benefit from having their behavior redirected at a local level (Knox City Council, 2002). Diversion activities and Community Based Sanctions are extremely suitable mechanisms, when applied at a

local government level. Strong partnerships between Police, the Courts, and Welfare agencies can ensure their perception “not (as) alternatives to prison, but prison as an alternative to other sentences.” (McShane and Williams, 1989, cited in Richards, 1990, p. 2).

Strategies that utilise pre-existing community groups and structures, traders, community organisations, local government and local police assist communities to identify and meet their special needs. Reducing opportunity for crime to take place can prevent it (Walsh 2001). This can be done in many ways, by increasing the perceived effort against crime, increasing the perceived risks of crime, reducing the anticipated rewards of crime, and removing the excuses for crime (Knox City Council, 2002).

In its visibility to the community, a diversion program suggests that there is more effort to combat the effects of crime on the community. The risks of committing crime are made explicit to the community by the presence of response teams in their locality. Crime is perceived to have little reward, and excuses are not made for it (Knox City Council, 2002).

“Historically, community based sanctions have provided limited community based alternatives, and inadequate supervision of offenders. This totally inadequate system not surprisingly was perceived by the courts and the community as providing a ‘soft option’ correctional sanction in which little confidence could be placed. The situation now is dramatically different, as the system has been transformed into one offering a range of credible and effective community - based sanctions which constitute real alternatives to prison.”

Office of Corrections to the Victorian Sentencing Committee, 1988, p. 6.

## **Redirection**

The Knox Redirection Program aims at providing young people at risk of, or currently involved in illegal graffiti with options for using their talents in positive community activity. Participants produce community murals and gain valuable artistic, marketing, and personal skills through the course of the program. The program has a strong youth worker component, aimed at building ongoing relationships with Youth Services. It also aims to cover a broad spectrum of personal and continuous development issues. Previous pilot projects have had positive outcomes, supporting the continuation of the project as outlined in the Graffiti and Vandalism Management Plan. The Knox experience (and international research) suggests that Aerosol Murals deter future graffiti attacks. In fact, most Aerosol Murals in Knox, since their inception in the 1980’s, have not suffered any subsequent ‘taggings’. This is strong evidence to suggest that a carefully crafted mural placed in an appropriate area can generate successful outcomes for program participants, affected properties being either council or private, and the community as a whole.

## **Community Art on Poles**

This initiative involved the identification of a set of street light poles that were subject to high levels of graffiti and illegal advertising (that is, Traffic Light Poles, Street Light Poles, Power Poles and Telephone Line Poles). Council approached TXU, an electricity provider, and Vicroads to gain their support for this program. The program is based on the application of community art-theme designs to deter illegal advertising and graffiti (Knox City Council, 2002).

## **Community Involvement and Support (Information Line)**

To assist in the collection and analysis of data, a reporting line was developed to better understand the criminal activity in the area. This initiative is seen to be a partnership between the Council and the community. Discount paint for residents and information for the Victoria Police are also services attached to this project (Knox City Council, 2002).



## **Conclusion**

Australian responses to graffiti have historically been reactive rather than proactive; however evidence overwhelmingly indicates that community responsibility is imperative to the success of initiatives within local neighbourhoods. There is a need to recognise the social, economic and environmental factors that impact on graffiti writers and the broader community.

Legislative initiatives to combat the problem have appeared ineffective and although these are an important part of government approaches, it is now apparent that community based prevention strategies could produce more successful outcomes.

Reducing the fear of crime within Australia is a challenge faced by many municipalities and community groups. Sustainable partnerships need to be established, to ensure crime prevention initiatives are implemented by those with a vested interest in their locality. Much can be learned from the range of existing policies and international approaches examined in regards to graffiti and vandalism. Taking into account those global experiences of graffiti and vandalism can consolidate knowledge, however acting on these issues must be done according to local contexts.

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