

HERMAN GOLDSTEIN AWARD

GRAFFITI ABATEMENT PROGRAM FOR THE INGLESIDE DISTRICT OF SAN FRANCISCO

PROGRAM ABSTRACT

98-75

SCANNING

Graffiti had been a major problem in San Francisco's Ingleside Police District for many years when Captain Richard Bruce took command of the district in March of 1997. He singled out this problem for special attention because he felt that the proliferation of graffiti throughout the district was a main reason that many residents and merchants felt as if their *quality of life* was deteriorating rapidly.

ANALYSIS

Although graffiti had existed for many years in the Ingleside District, the problem had become particularly acute over the past five years. The victims of this graffiti ranged from the city itself, to small merchants, to simple residents and homeowners. The specific harms that resulted from this activity included the actual damage to private property (which could easily run to the thousands of dollars per instance), as well as the psychological damage wrought on entire neighborhoods who began to feel as if they lived in "a ghetto," or "gang territory" (residents' own descriptions).

RESPONSE

The ultimate response decided upon by Captain Bruce was a multi-faceted *Graffiti Eradication Program* (GAP) that followed the crime of graffiti vandalism literally from its beginning (actual criminal act) to its criminal response conclusion (court penalties). This program was implemented in October of 1997, and had five stages, or components:

- 1) Detection and Arrest of Offenders
- 2) Thorough Investigations, Interrogations, and Reports
- 3) Compilation in Database of Known Graffiti Offenders and their *Tags*
- 4) Direct Contact with Youth Courts in Every Juvenile Arrest Case
- 5) Convicted Youth Offender Weekend Paint-Over Work Teams

ASSESSMENT

The results of the GAP program surpassed even the most optimistic projections for success. The *empirical data* that is available, as of May of 1998, follows:

- Total arrests of graffiti vandals since program's inception: over 100
- Total number of convicted graffiti vandals sent to Ingleside Station for community service: 48
- Total number of community service hours to be performed at Ingleside Station: 2323
- Total number of *tags* painted out since program's inception: approximately 5,000

Captain Bruce relied mainly on the perceptions, opinions and feedback of the following three groups when assessing GAP's effectiveness: district officers, district residents, and the arrested vandals. Each of the above groups, including the vandals themselves, agree that the GAP program has been an complete success, and that graffiti in the Ingleside District is noticeably reduced as a result of this program.

GRAFFITI ABATEMENT PROGRAM FOR THE INGLESIDE DISTRICT OF SAN FRANCISCO

SCANNING

Graffiti had been a problem of seemingly epic proportions in San Francisco's Ingleside Police District for many years when Captain Richard Bruce took command of the district in March of 1997. He observed firsthand literally thousands of *tags* throughout the district, many of them concentrated on the main business thoroughfare, Mission Street. Although this problem had been identified several times over the years by both citizens and police, Captain Bruce was taken aback at the magnitude of the problem, since his twenty years of service in the department had been spent in districts where graffiti problems were much less severe than they were in the Ingleside District.

The problem of graffiti was singled out for special attention from the myriad other district problems because Captain Bruce felt first, that graffiti was closely associated with the district's well-known gang problems, and second, that the proliferation of graffiti throughout the district was a main reason that many residents and merchants felt as if their district was deteriorating rapidly. This problem was deemed to be both a specific crime type problem (criminal vandalism) and a specific neighborhood problem (Ingleside District), since many *tags* are unique to certain neighborhoods.

ANALYSIS

Three methods of problem analysis were incorporated in the original assessment of this problem. First, district police incident reports were analyzed, revealing an inordinate amount of graffiti that was reported to the police. Second, residents and merchants were surveyed for their opinions about district crime, and although many crime problems were described and articulated, the problem of graffiti was common to most every respondent's list. Lastly, simple observation of the district's neighborhoods was utilized by both Captain Bruce and his staff, and these observations proved to be the most convincing evidence that graffiti was a *major* problem.

The problem of graffiti in the Ingleside District had existed at some level for many years, however, the problem had become particularly acute in the past five years. When first analyzing this problem, Captain's Bruce staff assumed that most of the graffiti was tied directly to gang activity. This premise was later found to be erroneous, and most of the vandals were found to be *graffiti artists* whose main focus was the graffiti itself, and the notoriety its display brought among other graffiti vandals, and not any connection to criminal gangs. The victims of this graffiti ranged from the city itself, to small merchants, to simple residents and homeowners, although the city of San Francisco (in the form of bus shelters, street signs, school buildings, etc.), was clearly the most victimized entity.

The specific harm that resulted from this activity was twofold; the first being the actual damage to private property (which could easily run to the thousands of dollars per instance), and the second being the psychological damage wrought on entire neighborhoods who began to feel as if they lived in "a ghetto," or "gang territory" (residents' own descriptions). Prior to implementing the below described program, there was no specific plan or program that addressed this problem. Periodic arrests were made of graffiti vandals that the district's police officers came across in their travels, but there was no follow-up to these cases, and the officers were rarely if ever even called to court to testify. As a result of this rather haphazard and unfocused approach to the problem, it not only continued to exist, it began to grow each year.

In September of 1997, after spending several months assessing the problem, Captain Bruce convened a *graffiti forum* at Ingleside Station, inviting interested members of the district to Ingleside Station's community room to both discuss the problem and to brainstorm possible solutions. There already existed in the district a cadre of individual residents who took it upon themselves to paint over graffiti in their respective neighborhoods, but this forum was the first opportunity for them to meet with both each other and police officers, and to discuss strategy. The attendees at this forum were immediately christened the *Ingleside Graffiti Task Force* by Captain Bruce, and he began to periodically update them on the results of his officers' efforts in this area through a Graffiti Fax-Tree.

RESPONSE

Captain Bruce and his staff realized that any response would have to address the perceptions and attitudes of two groups of people involved in these cases, that being the suspects (graffiti vandals) and the victims (property owners). Interviews with graffiti vandals revealed that they felt that they were essentially free to do whatever they wished without any fear of law enforcement reprisal. (Unfortunately, they were largely correct in this perception.) Victims felt that they were helpless to do anything about this problem, since regardless of how many times they reported these crimes to the police, "nothing ever seems to change, and nothing ever seems to happen to the people that get caught."

The ultimate response decided upon by Captain Bruce was a multifaceted *Graffiti Eradication Program* (GAP) that followed the crime of graffiti vandalism literally from its beginning stage (actual act) to its criminal response conclusion (court penalties). This program was implemented in October of 1997, and had five stages, or components:

- 1) DETECTION AND ARREST OF OFFENDERS. As already stated, prior to the implementation of this program, periodic arrests of graffiti vandals were made by Ingleside's police officers, but they were few and far between. The first component of the GAP program was to place undercover teams of officers in the field two to three nights a week in the known *hot spots*. The hot spots were frequently identified by the district residents themselves, who would communicate frequently with the main district graffiti *liaison officer*, Ed Collins, and would tell him what areas had been *hit* on the previous night. These surveillance operations began to net impressive results, and on

many nights, numerous graffiti vandals were caught red-handed (sometimes literally red handed, depending on their paint color of choice!)

- 2) THOROUGH INVESTIGATION, INTERROGATIONS AND REPORTS. Unless there is substantial property damage wrought by the vandal, graffiti crimes are considered misdemeanors in California, and therefore, arrest cases frequently receive less than a thorough investigation and report (particularly in San Francisco, where misdemeanor cases are routinely discharged as a matter of unwritten policy by the office of the District Attorney). However, under the GAP program's written protocol, each arresting officer was required to conduct a thorough and complete investigation, including a full interrogation of any arrestee(s) and pictures of all damage. Additionally, although misdemeanor cases in San Francisco are sent straight to the District Attorney, Captain Bruce arranged with a member of the Inspector's (Detective's) Bureau to be placed on-call to advise on the proper handling of each and every graffiti arrest in the Ingleside District. As a result of these steps, graffiti arrest reports became better prepared and more thorough, and it became easier for the District Attorney to proceed with the cases, rather than simply discharging them immediately after arrest.
- 3) COMPILATION IN DATABASE OF KNOWN GRAFFITI OFFENDERS AND THEIR TAGS. One unexpected result of the interrogation of each and every arrestee was that the officers began to gather so much data on the various district tags that, within months, a computer database had to be established to document the hundreds of tags that had been discovered and recorded in police reports. This database allowed arresting officers to immediately determine just how prolific any given tagger was in the district, and also allowed the officers to confront the arrestees with information that tied them to other crimes, and that could be used as leverage in gaining cooperation during interrogations.
- 4) DIRECT CONTACT WITH YOUTH COURTS IN EVERY JUVENILE ARREST CASE. One of the problems inherent in most criminal prosecutions in San Francisco is that officers rarely know the outcome of their arrest cases (particularly misdemeanor arrest cases) since the cases themselves are rarely charged, and when charged, are often handled by plea-bargain with no courtroom testimony by the arresting officer. In an attempt to address this problem, Captain Bruce began communicating directly with the Youth Courts (since most graffiti arrestees were juveniles) in an effort to maintain better control over the case outcomes. Eventually, one juvenile court judge was identified who was particularly interested in these cases, and Captain Bruce began to send each juvenile arrest case, with a cover letter, directly to the aforementioned judge. In these letters, Captain Bruce requested not only that each case be prosecuted, but that any convicted offenders be sent back to Ingleside Police Station for supervision of any community service hours assigned as a penalty.
- 5) CONVICTED YOUTH OFFENDER WEEKEND PAINT-OVER WORK TEAMS. As a result of this arrangement with the youth court, these convicted vandals began being assigned back to Captain Bruce at Ingleside Station to perform their community service

hours (which average 50 hours per offender). Once so assigned, the juveniles are required to report to the police station every weekend where they are met by a police officer who supervises their activities as they paint over the *tags* that they helped to place on various sites throughout the district!

Using this five-step approach, the police officers assigned to Ingleside Station are able to follow these youthful vandals literally from surveillance, to arrest, to interrogation, to booking, to trial, to conviction, to penalty (paint-overs), to probation.

ASSESSMENT

The results of the GAP program surpassed even the most optimistic projections for success. Due to the nature of graffiti, and the fact that more than 90 percent of it goes unreported, it is very difficult to obtain empirical data to assess pre and post program levels of graffiti. The hard numbers that are available are as follows:

- Total arrests of graffiti vandals since program's inception: over 100
- Total number of convicted graffiti vandals sent to Ingleside Station for community service: 50
- Total number of community service hours to be performed at Ingleside Station: 2600
- Total number of *tags* painted out since program's inception: approximately 5,000

Captain Bruce relied mainly on the perceptions, opinions and feedback of the following three groups when assessing GAP's effectiveness:

- district officers themselves
- district residents
- the arrested vandals

As the officers go about their duties in the district, they have an opportunity to witness firsthand the current level of graffiti. Since the inception of the GAP program, district officers are unanimous in their assessment that, "graffiti is down...way down!" Likewise, district residents and merchants have noticed a drastic improvement in the appearance of each of their respective neighborhoods, and also, the overall district as well. Perhaps even more important for district residents than this observation of a reduced level of graffiti, is the change in their perceptions. District residents and merchants who are aware of the GAP program (and it is discussed at every district meeting or forum in which there is any police involvement), no longer feel that they are helpless in the face of this urban blight.

They know that literally scores of vandals have been arrested for graffiti vandalism, and know also that these vandals are sent out each weekend to paint out district graffiti. Many residents who are merely going about their personal business in the district have seen these crews at work

and gladly report back to Ingleside's officers and captain about how they witnessed the "graffiti offenders cleaning up the district!" An additional benefit realized by the district residents is the knowledge that, should their property become vandalized, they can simply phone directly to the police station and will be assured that their house will receive prompt attention from the district's graffiti crews within days.

These victims, who formerly felt powerless, feel a sense of both control and justice when they are present to witness convicted graffiti vandals being forced to paint out the graffiti they callously placed on the personal property of innocent residents. One more unintended benefit of the GAP program was that many juveniles who were forced to confront their actual victims (many of them homebound elderly) actually gained some understanding of the pain and distress they had caused their victims. Following these confrontations, many of the offenders would admit to the supervising officers that they had never really thought about how their actions affected so many innocent victims, and how they had a greater understanding of the true toll their *artwork* took on their own communities.

Not only did many victims engage the young offenders in conversation about their activities, the supervising officers routinely posited hypotheticals for the juveniles regarding their feelings about their own property. For example, the juveniles (over 90 percent boys) would often comment on passing cars as they went about their paint-overs in the district. When one or more of the boys were duly impressed by a passing vehicle, the officer might ask, "How would you feel if you owned that car and someone put graffiti all over it?" The juveniles would of course strike various macho poses and talk about what they would do to someone who "messed with" their "wheels." They were always caught off-guard when the officer pointed out that cars, even nice cars, are worth a few thousand dollars, whereas the houses that they were vandalizing were often worth hundreds of thousands of dollars!

Ironically, the last group that the officers relied upon to assess the effectiveness of the GAP program, was the graffiti vandals themselves. Since each arrestee is interrogated, the officers are able to gather useful information regarding their own attitudes and perceptions regarding the district's graffiti problem. What officers began to notice a few months after the program's inception was that arrest numbers were down, and the officers had to work harder to conceal themselves in order to make any arrests. When the officers asked the arrestees about this tendency, they were told that the word out on the street was that, "...undercovers were out every night, looking for taggers."

As a result of this perception on the part of the offenders themselves, they admitted to arresting officers that they were becoming increasingly paranoid of tagging anywhere in the Ingleside District. This tendency of course began to *displace* the graffiti problem to adjoining districts, and in response, the Mission District, which adjoins the Ingleside District to the north, recently began their own GAP program based upon the Ingleside model. Ingleside's district captain has engaged the other adjoining captains in discussions about how this problem can be pushed out of San Francisco entirely, and recently, discussions have even been held with other nearby city police departments regarding how this problem can be dealt with on a more regional level.

Regarding the cost-effectiveness of the GAP program, the officers who conduct the weekend paint-overs have arranged with the city's own Department of Public Works to obtain all of the paint and other materials needed each week. The cost to the department in terms of officer/hours expended averages approximately 40 hours per week of paid overtime, and an equivalent amount of compensatory time granted. Thus, for the equivalent in overtime hours of approximately two full-time officers, the GAP program has been able to not only operate, but to flourish.

Captain Bruce has decided that, for the time being, there can be no ending date for the GAP program, and that a maintenance program must remain in place if the gains of the past several months are to be protected. In terms of future effectiveness, there are plans to expand the GAP program into two additional areas. First, although a very reliable system has been established with the youth courts, a similar system needs to be implemented with the adult courts. Conversations have already taken place between Captain Bruce and members of the San Francisco District Attorney's office regarding this issue. Additionally, an educational program needs to be implemented in the city's schools that attempts to address the issue of graffiti with students *before they are arrested as perpetrators*.

Captain Bruce has also explored the possibility of assisting victims in the filing of suits in Small Claims Court as a method of recovering both actual and punitive damages against graffiti vandals. Due to prohibitions on the release of any arrest information involving juveniles to members of the public, it is unclear how this can be accomplished, but discussions continue between Captain Bruce, the members of the Graffiti Task Force and the members of the Ingleside community as to how this program can continue to improve in the years to come.

AGENCY AND OFFICER INFORMATION

The GAP program was initially implemented only at Ingleside Station in San Francisco, but has since been adopted by the adjoining district to the north, which is served by Mission Station. (There are ten district stations in San Francisco, each covering a specific geographical area of the city.) All of the officers involved in this enforcement project had received some level of community policing training from the department, and some officers had attended outside training sessions also. Some of the officers who participated in this enforcement project received some level of overtime compensation for their efforts, while others participated as part of their regular duties.

The involved officers did not refer to any manuals or other problem-solving examples when planning this enforcement project, and relied instead on their own police experiences when designing their plan of action. Surprisingly, very few problems were encountered with the problem-solving model, and the project succeeded far beyond even the most optimistic projections of success. None of the resources committed to the project went beyond the department's existing budget, and the overtime costs of approximately forty hours per week were provided for by the annual overtime fund that is part of every year's overall budget.

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ATTACHMENTS:

1. Ingleside Graffiti Abatement Enforcement Plan, dated October 3, 1997 (4 pages)
2. Database of convicted Graffiti Offenders Referred to Ingleside Station (2 pages)
3. Example of Graffiti Fax-Tree Correspondence
4. Example of Cover Letter to Juvenile Court Judge
5. Example of Offender and Tag Database
6. Example of Citizen Paint-Over Request (Fax-Sheet)