

North Park Graffiti Task Force

Project Summary

NORTH PARK GRAFFITI TASK FORCE

PROJECT SUMMARY

SCANNING: "I paint it out and the next day it's back! What are you (the police) doing about the graffiti in my neighborhood?" This was the constant message the officers were hearing when attending community meetings. The old saying goes, "If I had a nickel for every time I heard that." Well, it's true. Graffiti is everywhere. Graffiti plagues our community's highways, businesses, residences, and alleys. Police don't see it happen. Citizens weren't calling the police when they saw it happen. Graffiti became the biggest mystery crime; all involved were trying to ignore it. Graffiti affected the quality of life and had a drastic effect on the property values for everyone in the community.

ANALYSIS: Graffiti crimes have plagued the neighborhoods and businesses in San Diego for several years. Last year alone graffiti crimes cost the City of San Diego in excess of two million dollars. Often, no crime cases or investigations were conducted leaving no one accountable for the damage. The primary complaint by citizens and business owners addressed in community meetings in Western Division was and still is graffiti. As a result, the Graffiti Task Force (GTF) was started in September 1999 at Western Division to supplement POP project #5316.

RESPONSE: The GTF started a campaign to educate the community regarding graffiti crimes. Also, the GTF created a Graffiti Authorization Letter to obtain information on chronic graffiti victims. The GTF developed a strong partnership with Detectives within the Department's Gang Unit. Additionally, the officers have developed an understanding of graffiti recognition and identification. The officers developed a new digital approach with documentation of evidence for

graffiti related crimes. The GTF officers provided Division-wide training to develop field officers awareness and provide guidance to ensure proper documentation for successful prosecution of graffiti related crimes.

ASSESSMENT: Community groups and businesses within Western Division hailed the GTF as a great success. Calls for service for tagging/graffiti have stayed the same. However, the arrest rate for tagging went from one percent to fifty percent. This can be attributed to training provided patrol officers by the GTF, increasing community awareness and an aggressive approach by the officers in investigating and arresting suspects for graffiti related crimes. In addition, the GTF has been successful in getting the courts to impose strict conditions on convicted taggers. The GTF was recently expanded throughout the two remaining service areas in Western Division, with the recommendation to expand the program citywide.

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SCANNING:

Graffiti crimes have plagued the neighborhoods and businesses in North Park for years. The primary complaint by citizens and business owners at community meetings in North Park was graffiti. In the past patrol officers would drive down any street or alley and see graffiti plastered on houses, bus stops, signs and businesses. Officers would usually drive by the graffiti unless dispatched to take a report on it. Graffiti crimes were almost impossible to enforce without an actual witness who could positively identify the suspect. As a result, graffiti was designated a priority for officers working North Park. In order to address the community's concerns, officers would have to redirect their efforts. This required a whole new school of thought. Officers needed to reconsider their approach to enforcing graffiti crimes.

ANALYSIS:

In September 1999 Western Division formed the North Park Graffiti Task Force (GTF). The GTF was made up of officers from each patrol watch, the Community Relation's Officer and the Service Area Lieutenant. The original goal of the Graffiti Task Force (GTF) was to document graffiti crimes and to identify as many suspects as possible. Unfortunately, there were few measurable results and many of the officers lost interest in the program. Officers used old, unreliable Polaroid cameras that took poor quality photos with no way of tracking tagging crews or suspects. In July of 2000, the program was re-evaluated. The GTF realized if the program was going to be successful in reducing graffiti crimes, old traditional ways had to change. It was time

to become more aggressive and efficient and have the support equipment needed to do the job right. It was time to go "high-tech."

The GTF knew the individual graffiti sites were too numerous to count. Officers were not witnessing the graffiti; therefore, no enforcement action was being taken. After speaking to community members it was learned they were not calling the police when they witnessed tagging. Benefactors believed the police were not addressing their concerns regarding graffiti. If citizens did report graffiti, it was usually handled by a telephone report for insurance purposes only. Since graffiti crimes were seldom investigated, the problems spread like wildfire. It is a documented fact - communities with a substantial amount of graffiti have a higher crime rate. In addition, property values were diminished and local businesses had adversely affected retail sales.

The GTF found the Internet to be a wealth of information on taggers and the graffiti subculture. Hundreds of websites¹ promote taggers, tagging crews and an online retail market geared solely for taggers. The websites lend credibility to the depth of the graffiti problem and allowed the GTF insight into what drives a tagger. The common topic of the online tagger is self-promotion. Photographs on the Internet show taggers use their nickname or moniker as a "Badge of Courage". They believe the more dangerous the location tagged, the more recognition and respect they receive. Common themes of graffiti websites were drug and alcohol use, willful destruction of property, lack of remorse and evading law enforcement.

During the analysis the GTF learned there were two classifications of taggers. The first uses tagging as a crime of opportunity. For instance, a tagger may write his moniker on a bench while waiting for a bus. The second classification of taggers is the self-proclaimed "artists". These "artists" believe they have the right to put graffiti wherever they want. The "artists" have planned

their graffiti crimes in advance. They usually have pre-drawn sketches of their work, supplies and equipment such as: paint, respirators, latex gloves, cameras and two way communication devices. This breed of tagger goes to great lengths to avoid being caught. They usually go out tagging in groups, commonly referred to as a "bombing run". Juveniles tended to be the opportunistic tagger, leaving the adult taggers to be self-proclaimed "artists".

The GTF saw graffiti in higher concentrations in and around public transportation hubs. Graffiti related contacts by police increased in and around these areas. Taggers use public transportation to spread graffiti throughout the city, and beyond. Once a tagger left the North Park service area, there was no method to track their movement and activities in other parts of the city. This meant taggers were only held accountable for crimes occurring within the project area.

Taggers bragged graffiti was everywhere and could not be stopped. One officer put the problem in perspective by saying, "Graffiti was here when I started and it will be here when I'm gone. It's like holding the ocean back with a fork." Without documentation taggers were not being identified. This left the benefactors financially responsible for graffiti damages.

The GTF discovered The City of San Diego Graffiti Control Program spent 1.5 million dollars annually' on education, enforcement, prevention and removal of graffiti. In 2001, they handled approximately 24,000 cases of graffiti and received around 3,500 calls on their Hotline. This figure does not include money spent by other divisions within the City or graffiti painted out by businesses and property owners. When Graffiti Control painted out graffiti, there were no crime cases generated with police, leaving no one accountable for the crimes. The GTF discovered in some cases valuable evidence was being lost due to graffiti paint out prior to investigation.

In the past Officers' reports were missing the needed elements necessary to have the cases issued by prosecutors. They lacked the expertise to successfully identify and investigate the specialized crime of graffiti. Traditionally, officers wouldn't follow up with their investigations once submitted. The GTF realized they needed a partnership with the Department's Graffiti Detective to supplement their understanding into the graffiti crimes and the subculture of tagging. Project officers believed efforts of the GTF would positively affect the following benefactors; businesses, homeowners, residents, North Park Main Street (a business district improvement association), The City of San Diego, San Diego City Schools and the San Diego Police Department.

RESPONSE:

An initial hurdle that had to be overcome by the GTF was the lack of department funds for the necessary equipment needed to move the project forward. GTF Officers wrote grants and were successful in obtaining digital cameras, photo printers, and a desktop computer. This equipment allowed them to document evidence accurately, portraying the damage. They were able to store images on the computer. This was important because after the GTF had identified a suspect through his moniker or nickname they could go back at a later date and pull up the crime cases and submit them to the detectives for prosecution. Having the digital equipment helped them suppress graffiti related crimes through a campaign of aggressive documentation. The GTF now had ability to hold suspects accountable criminally and seek financial restitution for the damages. The officers knew they had to try harder to bring a heightened awareness regarding graffiti related crimes to the public. It was important to educate the various neighborhoods and businesses throughout North Park. The education process gave the officers an opportunity to

explain new methods used to combat graffiti. This was positive, because for the first time the community believed they were in a partnership with the police.

The GTF identified seven areas that needed addressing to ensure success in combating graffiti related crimes within North Park. By focusing on these seven areas, the GTF believed graffiti related crimes and arrests would initially increase. The GTF knew these responses would produce a reduction in the near future.

1. Community awareness: One of the prevailing themes heard at community meetings was a constant complaint about the graffiti problem. Citizens were unsure how to report these crimes. When witnesses or victims did call the police, they became frustrated by the lack of interest on the part of dispatchers and often hung up.

The GTF's response was to put together a training program for dispatchers. Training was provided for dispatchers instructing them to treat tagging as a "crime in progress" and dispatch it accordingly. To address the community awareness problem, GTF wrote an article for the local newspaper in North Park. The article outlined citizen's responsibilities in regards to reporting crimes and being a quality witness. The GTF was aware taggers had to get supplies from somewhere. Officers met with managers of stores supplying paints, markers and acids. The GTF learned graffiti supplies were often stolen and not purchased. Officers educated the supply stores on the extent of the graffiti problem and how securing their supplies would reduce inventory loss and the overall graffiti problem.

The GTF also sent officers to local businesses. They spoke to them about graffiti related crimes and how they could help us. Officers learned business owners often painted out the graffiti and

did not make a police report. With chronic victims a Graffiti Authorization Letter was developed. The letter gave officers legal authorization to enter the property of a business and enforce applicable laws. Also, the letter gave officers the information needed to write a crime case without contacting the victim. This was especially helpful for after hours because in the past if no victim was found, no report was taken.

2. Officer awareness and training: Officers told the GTF they were unsure how to make an arrest for graffiti or take a crime cases. Additionally, the officers were not up to date on current laws. Officers believed all graffiti crimes were misdemeanors and under the misconception that graffiti usually involved juvenile suspects. Officers were disenchanted with the lack of prosecution of taggers, thinking no charges would ever be filed against vandals.

First, GTF officers provided all Western Division officers with updated training and awareness regarding graffiti crimes. The GTF discovered, through their scanning and analysis, a large number of taggers were adults. Fortunately, in 2001 major changes were made to the vandalism laws. Vandalism laws now reflect the monetary amounts of other property related crimes like theft. For Instance, vandalism over \$400 is now a felony. Also, acid-etching paste was added into the category of "graffiti tools". Most officers were unaware of the law changes. To create awareness of new graffiti laws, the GTF produced a lineup training video outlining the new laws and giving realistic examples of their use.

Furthermore, the GTF developed a Graffiti Resource Guide to assist patrol officers. Included in the guide are the following tips.

- All laws related to graffiti crimes

- Tips on estimating damages in the field (included are paint damage and acid etching damage)
- Criteria needed to call out graffiti detective
- Key points to include in graffiti investigations and field interviews
- List of chronic San Diego victims and their information for crime cases
- The GTF made themselves available for callouts by patrol officers

The GTF put together a comprehensive training plan to address the officers' concerns with regard to graffiti related crimes. The training conducted by GTF for Western Division officers allowed them to respond competently to the graffiti problem. The training showed proper investigation and evidence gathering would result in prosecutions. Through their analysis, the GTF showed officers the majority of graffiti suspects were over the age of 18 and members of a tagging crew.

The GTF identified 26 active tagging crews affecting Western Division. Some of these crews had a membership of over fifty people. A few of these crews took on characteristics of a gang by defending their graffiti and territory with violence. This activity is referred to as "Tag banging". Two of these crews have officially been documented as a gang due to their violence and criminal activity.

3. Evidence: A constant problem we faced was poor evidence gathering equipment.

Historically, Polaroid film was used to document damages. The film was expensive and unreliable with a cost of \$ 1.25 per photo. They found about one half of Polaroid photographs did not fully develop, and the ones that developed did not produce a quality image. Prosecutors told GTF officer's taggers were seldom prosecuted due to poor photo quality or lack of evidence.

Since graffiti crimes have always been difficult to investigate and prosecute, the GTF decided to lay new groundwork for investigating and prosecuting taggers. The GTF took steps to do things smarter and cheaper by taking advantage of the technology available. Six digital cameras, a computer, and three printers were obtained through grants. Instead of using Polaroid film to document graffiti, the GTF now uses digital cameras, which makes taking several photos simple and inexpensive. Three digital images can be produced on one sheet of photo quality paper for approximately twenty cents.

Digital cameras produce a clean detailed image that can be stored and reproduced easily. Graffiti case images are stored on a desktop computer under the case numbers. All graffiti cases for a particular year are archived on a compact disk (CD-R) and a separate file on the computer in order to comply with the District Attorney's guidelines for storing and maintaining digital evidence. This allows evidence from previous years to be reproduced in the exact form in which it was obtained. By maintaining a file system where all digital graffiti evidence is archived, the GTF can easily identify suspect patterns and compile evidence from past and present cases.

4. Partnership with Detectives: The GTF discovered the department had only one Graffiti Detective responsible for all graffiti related crimes citywide. Officers were not aware of this. They believed these crimes cases were handled within individual stations. However, graffiti related crimes were handled in the Department's Gang Division, where the Detective was assigned. Additionally, the Detective worked daytime hours and was not available to officers after hours.

From the beginning the GTF knew they had to develop a working relationship with the detective, utilize his expertise and successfully relay information back to officers at the Division. The

GTF's relationship with the detective helped us develop skills and expertise allowing them to do follow-up investigations and make arrests at a later date. The relationship also gave the GTF the confidence to put together comprehensive investigations, write search warrants and interview suspects. Additionally, GTF officers had to make themselves available as a resource to officers in the field. Also, the GTF set up a graffiti hotline at the North Park Community Storefront where citizens and officers could call in with questions or complaints regarding graffiti.

5. Prosecution: Through their analysis GTF learned few graffiti cases were being issued by the City Attorney's or District Attorney's Office. The GTF learned this was due to incomplete investigations by officers and poor quality or often lost evidence. GTF also discovered a lack of expertise on the part of prosecutors relating to graffiti crimes. GTF found there were no consistent guidelines for prosecuting graffiti crimes. Often, prosecutors with the knowledge of graffiti crimes were transferred to other units, leaving the GTF to start over. On one occasion GTF officer were asked by the prosecuting attorney prior to a Preliminary Exam, "So, what's the best way to handle these cases?"

With the relationship the GTF developed with the Detective and increased knowledge, the cases were being prosecuted. Due to the training provided by the GTF officer and their newfound expertise, there was a dramatic increase in the quality of graffiti investigations. GTF officers now had credibility with prosecuting agencies. GTF recently met with representatives from the City Attorney's Office and the District Attorney's Office. Both agencies agreed to maintain personnel trained in the prosecution of graffiti crimes.

6. Recidivism: Most taggers are repeat offenders. The GTF learned their in custody taggers had an average of two prior arrests for graffiti. The GTF realized they needed tools to combat career taggers. Therefore, they enlisted the help of the courts.

Courts are tired of seeing the same offenders over and over. Prosecutors, judges and probation officers have imposed a list of strict conditions on convicted taggers. All of this has been done in an effort to reduce repeat offenses. Additionally, the GTF worked with the courts to recognize the victim's financial need for restitution.

7. City Partnership: During the course of this project the GTF learned the City of San Diego has a division called Graffiti Control. Initially, they discovered there was no exchange of information between Graffiti Control and GTF. Graffiti Control responds to complaints from citizens calling in to report graffiti in their neighborhoods. Often the Graffiti Control team would respond to neighborhood complaints and the crews would paint out the damaged areas.

This created another problem, as most times the paint out would take place prior to the police responding to document the crime, thus leaving no one accountable for the damage. Additionally, the GTF learned the City was spending in excess of *two million dollars*² in the education and clean up of graffiti, and not one crime case was documented. GTF met with the manager of the Graffiti Control Program. Out of that meeting came an alliance between Graffiti Control and the GTF. Both agreed to share information regarding problem areas and series related graffiti crimes. The GTF agreed to provide training for the paint out crews so they could recognize the monikers of persons being investigated by the GTF.

² Estimate based on Graffiti Control Program spending and documented cases with other City divisions.

ASSESSMENT:

To date there has been a significant decrease in graffiti crimes in North Park. As GTF officers drive through North Park, they notice alleys and businesses are now clear of graffiti for a longer period of time. One of our benefactors who needed pictures of graffiti for a presentation told us, "I had to leave North Park to get pictures of graffiti." As the GTF attends community meetings the citizens are continually commenting about the reduction of graffiti and are pleased with the partnership. Graffiti is no longer the chief complaint at these meetings. The community has sought out the expertise of the GTF to provide awareness and training for the prevention of graffiti.

The GTF has provided training to approximately 200 officers regarding the documentation, evidence collection techniques, and new laws involving graffiti related crimes. For instance, the GTF advised officers to look at potential taggers' property such as, backpacks, skateboards, and notebooks for clues of graffiti and possible monikers. For officers working directly with GTF, they are provided specialized training on how to utilize the digital cameras and photo printing equipment when conducting graffiti investigations. Consistently, officer trained by the GTF conduct thorough investigations and produce detailed digital evidence. Both prosecutors and defense attorneys along with the judges have praised the quality investigations and digital evidence.

Since then the GTF has received several special requests by other divisions to provide graffiti training for their officers. More and more, officers have requested assistance from the GTF when encountered with a tagger in the field. After the GTF gives the officer the guidance they need, the appropriate enforcement action is taken. In some cases, the GTF responds to the other division to assist with investigation and interviews of suspects taken into custody. Currently, other divisions

starting graffiti pop projects in their service areas have listed the GTF as resources. After the GTF trains other officers, there is an increase in enforcement and interest in graffiti crimes. In addition, the trained officers keep in communication with the GTF regarding graffiti crimes and trends in their area. In most cases, the graffiti found in one part of the city is going to be found in other parts, crossing service areas and agency boundaries.

Since the GTF's aggressive campaign against taggers, there has been a drastic decrease of graffiti crimes in North Park. Unfortunately, the taggers have taken their crimes to other parts of the city, leaving other officers to deal with the problem. During the last year the GTF has conducted over 78 investigations resulting in 22 graffiti related arrest. This was a 49 percent ³ increase in arrests over the last year while the crime case totals⁴ were essentially the same. This is attributed to actively investigating the cases and following them through to prosecution. To date the GTF has a 100 percent conviction rate. As a result of following through with graffiti investigations, the GTF has seen stiffer convictions and probation conditions of convicted taggers. For example, conditions such as geographical stay away orders, financial responsibility for damage, fourth amendment waivers, non-association orders, community service, mandatory parenting classes for parents of taggers, along with special conditions for juveniles to maintain good grades and school attendance. In addition, the GTF will enter all convicted taggers' probation conditions into the Officer Notification System (O.N.S.).

One of North Park's prolific taggers has been arrested three times in the last year. Each arrest has been in other parts of the city. While interviewing subjects, the comment has been made on numerous occasions " are you guys those graffiti cops?" Just as officers have their own

Source- GTF investigation and arrest log 2001.

⁴ Source- S.D.P.D. Crime Analysis

communications network, so do taggers. One tagger told GTF officers that North Park and the surrounding areas were "burned" ~ meaning off limits.

The GTF currently is operating with two-patrol officers and one sergeant, spear heading the project. The officers are still maintaining their patrol responsibilities and have taken on the task of graffiti crimes as a collateral duty. The GTF has outlined the following few areas that need to be addressed to make the project a long term continued success. During the duration of this project the GTF has noticed that many of the taggers they are dealing with are very mobile. They travel across divisional boundaries by public transportation. (bus or trolley) There is no mechanism in place to track the suspects once they leave the project area of North Park. A proposal the GTF has made is to create a Department or city- wide law enforcement database. Once created it would give patrol officers across the city the ability to capitalize on intelligence gathered throughout the city. For example, if an officer conducting a graffiti investigation could input the suspect's moniker such as "Pokey" into the database. The database would contain all of the suspect's information. Officers citywide would have access to this information when contacting the suspect anywhere in the city. Additionally, this database would also work by cross-referencing by the suspect's name.

However, the GTF has encountered a lack of support from the department's Data Systems. This proposal has been recommended however; it has been met with little support or enthusiasm. The GTF continues to look at ways to make this a reality.

Since the GTF has collateral duties there never seems to be enough time to address all the issues that arise. The GTF constantly has to turn down requests to provide assistance or training to those in need. Additionally, there is too much information coming into the GTF officers. They cannot

follow up sufficiently on it. The Department's one graffiti Detective is constantly asking GTF to assist in follow up investigations. However, that is limited due to the hours the GTF works. It is the belief of the GTF that the city could easily have a full time team that could address graffiti issues throughout the city working in conjunction with the graffiti Detective and liaison with outside agencies.

The GTF continues to monitor the project daily and provides weekly status reports to the division's command staff. Currently, the supervisor and two officers have dual duties with patrol and GTF obligations. To date, the GTF strives to remain committed to addressing graffiti crimes and working with county and city officials.

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¹ Graffiti websites: WWW.PUREGRAFFITI.COM
WWW.OACREW.COM
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