



City of Seattle Anti-Graffiti Efforts: Best Practices and Recommendations



City of Seattle
Office of City Auditor
<http://www.seattle.gov/audit/>

Report Highlights, July 2010

What We Found

Why We Did This Audit

We conducted this performance audit of the City of Seattle's (City's) anti-graffiti efforts at the request of Seattle City Councilmembers Tim Burgess and Tom Rasmussen. Specifically, they asked us to examine how the City handles graffiti removal, prosecutes offenders, and educates the public about graffiti. They requested this audit based on feedback from citizens who expressed concern about not feeling safe in their neighborhoods, and their concerns about "street disorder" in Seattle.

According to recent academic studies, there is a connection between visible environmental disorder and higher rates of crime.

What We Did

To complete our audit, we reviewed City ordinances and laws; interviewed City and community stakeholders; reviewed relevant City policies, procedures, and studies; observed Seattle Public Utilities' (SPU's) Graffiti Rangers; attended a regional anti-graffiti conference; performed a physical inventory of graffiti in four sample areas in two Seattle neighborhoods; implemented and analyzed the results of an electronic survey of a broad range of community participants; researched best practices from other jurisdictions, non-profit organizations and academic research; and traced a sample of SPU Graffiti Hotline calls to verify abatement response times.

Graffiti in Seattle

Writing, painting, or drawing on public or private property without the owner's permission is not permitted under the law in the City of Seattle (Seattle Municipal Code 12A.08.020). In addition, the City of Seattle also has a Graffiti Nuisance Code (Seattle Municipal Code 10.07) that requires property owners to promptly remove graffiti found on their property after notice from the City of Seattle. During our audit we collected a wide variety of

views about the impact of graffiti. A web survey of over 900 Seattle residents, businesses and organizations revealed a range of public opinion, with 39% indicating that graffiti was not a problem and 40% indicating that graffiti was a medium to very big problem. These results appear to reflect how often respondents had been the victim of graffiti: 37% percent had never been victims, while 33% had been victimized at least several times a year.

Our systematic, single-day, physical count of graffiti in four



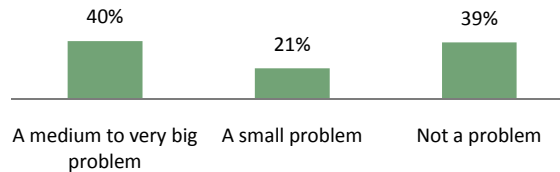
A Seattle Public Utilities Graffiti Ranger removes a tag reported by a resident.

sample areas in two Seattle neighborhoods (each .7 miles) captured 556 instances of graffiti including 551 common tags* and five that appeared to be gang graffiti. We found that public property was nearly twice as commonly tagged as private property, with traffic/street signs, utility poles, and pay stations as common targets.

Costs of Graffiti in Seattle

The City of Seattle spent approximately \$1.8 million dollars in 2009 abating graffiti from public property. Also, the nearly 300 survey respondents who reported graffiti damage spent a total of \$232,000 to remove graffiti in 2009.

Views on graffiti were mixed among over 900 survey respondents



Profile of Graffiti Vandalism (Adult Misdemeanors)

Based on our analysis of 2007 and 2009 data on persons charged with graffiti vandalism in the City of Seattle, we found the following:

Of the 18 offenders whose cases were closed in 2009:

- 17 (94%) were male
- Their median age was 24 (ranging from 20 – 34 years old)

Of the 40 offenders charged in 2007:

- 22 had criminal charges in addition to a graffiti vandalism charge
- These charges included: assault, theft, obstructing an officer, carrying a concealed weapon, criminal trespass, reckless endangerment, harassment, and violation of a domestic violence protection order

Vancouver B.C. has studied its persistent offenders (those with 5 or more graffiti-related police contacts) and found that among this group:

- 63 % have police contacts related to violent offences
- 29% have five or more criminal charges
- 23% have a drug or alcohol related offence as their first offence

*"Tags" are simple names or symbols, often written in a stylized manner found in high volumes and in high-visibility locations. Tags range from small single-color marks to large elaborate "pieces" in multiple colors and bubble-lettering. Seattle officials indicate that "tagging" is the City's most common graffiti. Nationally, about 78-80% of graffiti is common tags; 10% is gang graffiti; 5% are "pieces," or large elaborate tags; and the remaining 5-7% include hate, message (e.g., Class of '09), political, and artistic graffiti. Source: GraffitiHurts.org

What We Recommend



A community mural in West Seattle covered with tags.

Graffiti walls, murals, and restrictions on the sale of spray paint were not included in our recommendations due to lack of evidence about their efficacy in preventing graffiti. Murals may be effective for areas that are frequently tagged, and graffiti walls might provide a creative outlet for youth. However both require monitoring and maintenance.

Contact Us:

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<http://www.seattle.gov/audit/>

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Based on our research and analysis, we developed 14 recommendations. **The first five are directed at the City Council and Mayor:**

1. Develop a clear policy statement on graffiti in accordance with current City laws. If the Mayor and City Council decide that addressing graffiti is a policy priority, they should:
2. Establish clear directives about who in the City is authorized, responsible, and accountable for anti-graffiti efforts;
3. Develop specific outcome goals for the key components of Seattle's anti-graffiti program (e.g., a 50% reduction in graffiti in three years);
4. Require departments to gather baseline data before new policies and procedures are implemented; and
5. Require an annual physical inventory of the graffiti in Seattle to evaluate the effectiveness of the City's efforts and to measure outcomes.

These five recommendations, if implemented by City leaders, will provide direction and momentum for City departments and community stakeholders to work together to implement nine additional specific recommendations.

Summary of Specific Recommendations

The next nine recommendations address each of the questions posed by the City Council in their audit request. The recommendations utilize existing City resources, leverage volunteers and partnerships, or have minimal cost.

We identified three jurisdictions that have experienced a significant decrease in graffiti over time that is supported with quantifiable, data-supported outcome measures. Each of these jurisdictions use a multi-faceted approach to graffiti that includes:

- 1. Eradication,**
- 2. Enforcement, and**
- 3. Engagement/Education.**

Our recommendations are designed to strengthen these three elements for the City of Seattle.

They include:

1. Amend Seattle Municipal Code (SMC) 12.A.08.020 (Property destruction) to include stickers in the list of prohibited materials.
2. Amend SMC 12.A.08.020 (Property destruction) to add a clause stipulating the elements that should be included in calculating restitution for violations of the code.
3. Strengthen recording of graffiti by having Parking Enforcement Officers (PEOs) and other City employees photograph and report graffiti they discover in the course of their work.
4. Strengthen the Seattle Police Department's ability to analyze graffiti crimes by creating and maintaining a photographic database.
5. Strengthen the City's ability to apprehend, and prosecute graffiti vandals by creating a pilot program with a dedicated graffiti detective (redeploy existing resource).
6. Work with the City Attorney's Office prosecutors familiar with the Community Court's Diversion program and chronic graffiti offenders to develop diversion programs that are effective for this population, based on their knowledge of the population and the results of evidence-based research on effective programs.
7. Redeploy resources to help ensure that graffiti on parking pay stations is abated within the 6 day target goal set by the City.
8. Implement a three-part model to enhance community involvement and public education, consisting of:
 - A broadly-based coalition of City and other public employees, community organizations, businesses, and residents,
 - A comprehensive community outreach plan, and
 - A strategic plan for public education about the costs and impacts of graffiti.
9. Conduct further study of the business improvement area (BIA) programs for graffiti removal based on comparing physical inventories in BIA and non-BIA locations, while continuing to support SPU grants to BIAs.