



ITEM G-2

Lodi Police Department

Sierra Brucia
Chief of Police

Memorandum

To: Chief Sierra Brucia
From: Lieutenant Eric VerSteeg
Date: May 4, 2021
Re: Graffiti Abatement

This memorandum is in response to a question posed by the City Manager. He seeks to determine whether the Broken Windows Theory is still valid. This was the result of a discussion with City Council, and an attempt to determine whether the City should maintain funding for the Graffiti Abatement program.

Research into this topic showed two types of graffiti. While illegal, some artists use graffiti as a medium for creative expression. The other type of graffiti is typically ugly, destructive, negative, or serves as a form of communication for gang members. The latter is the focus of this memorandum.

In brief, the Broken Windows Theory states that serious crime has roots in disorder. If that disorder was addressed, it would serve to reduce crime. Crimes of disorder would typically include graffiti, vandalism, litter, and other lower levels of crime. The theory had a major impact in the 1990s, particularly in New York City. Implementation of the program found significant success, and the concept soon spread throughout the country¹.

Nearly 30 years later, researchers at Northeastern University conducted a meta-analysis of 300 studies and concluded that graffiti and abandoned buildings do matter, but not in the way that the Broken Windows Theory believed². Another concern with the theory is how it has affected modern policing. It has led to feelings of over-policing in low-income and diversified communities³. One of the founders of the theory later expressed concern about the theory. He did not believe in the "stop and frisk" tactics that it led to, and felt that the theory must be carefully implemented to be done correctly, to ensure that "the police do not become the agents of neighborhood bigotry"⁴.

Though there may be cracks in the Broken Windows Theory, the specific crime of gang graffiti should still be considered.

On the LAPD's website⁵, they express concern about the "inherent violence" in gang graffiti. It identifies the entire neighborhood as associating with that gang and increases the likelihood of violence against an innocent citizen. Gang graffiti is a form of communication with their members and represents challenges to their enemies. It can indicate future criminal activity or crimes that have already been committed. The cumulative effect also causes graffiti to spread into previously unaffected neighborhoods⁶. The Department of Justice recommends addressing gang graffiti when addressing gang problems⁷. The National Neighborhood Watch program suggests that the government work with crime prevention to curb gang activities, in part through graffiti eradication⁸.

The City of Lodi is not immune to gang graffiti. A recent incident illustrates this, with "tagging" that occurred in several parts of the Eastside community in April of 2021:



In 2020, LPD documented 37 incidents of "tagging" or graffiti. Not all incidents were gang-related, but many appeared to be.

Other community models exist that can take the place of a graffiti abatement program. These can include "adopt a wall" or groups of volunteers that check their neighborhoods for graffiti. The benefit, however, of a formal graffiti abatement program is the quick and reliable response that helps prevent additional graffiti. Graffiti eradication that depends upon the property owner may be delayed significantly, particularly for rentals or abandoned properties.

The part of Broken Windows Theory that works? Fixing broken windows. In this case, removing vandalism.

In 2008, Dutch researchers conducted a study⁹ which showed evidence that in areas with graffiti and litter, more thefts and littering occurred than in areas without graffiti and litter. In this study, they found that thefts increased by 27% in an area in which graffiti and litter were present. They also discovered that in areas with graffiti, people were twice as likely to litter than in areas without graffiti.

In 2009, the city of Paramount struggled with thousands of instances of tagging¹⁰. Utilizing a web-based tracking system, they eventually began identifying the taggers, associating them with their vandalism, and aggressively prosecuting them. Between 2015 and 2018, the city had reduced

graffiti by 68%. There was also a 93% 10-year decrease in gang-related crimes and a 63% yearly decrease in gang-related crimes.

A 2015 study¹¹ in Vancouver showed a strong correlation between graffiti and violence.

In cities such as Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington, “city governments have placed increasing responsibility for cleaning up graffiti on private property onto property owners”¹².

According to Portland’s website, there has been a 394% increase in graffiti in the last year. As a result, they have reallocated \$150,000 in contracts for graffiti abatement.

A common-sense approach to tackling gang crime includes addressing graffiti. This was the approach taken by East Palo Alto in 2008¹³ and Fairfax Virginia in the same year¹⁴. Continued internet searches for similar programs yielded consistent results.

In sum, there are questions about the validity of the Broken Windows Theory as a whole, however, proactive graffiti reduction provides a tangible benefit to the community. Graffiti abatement is an effective tool in reducing gang crime, particularly when coupled with other tactics such as aggressive enforcement, prosecution, and youth intervention.

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 2. <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-criminol-011518-024638?journalCode=criminol>
 3. <https://news.northeastern.edu/2019/05/15/northeastern-university-researchers-find-little-evidence-for-broken-windows-theory-say-neighborhood-disorder-doesnt-cause-crime/#:~:text=Now%2C%20Northeastern%20researchers%20say%20they,a%20lower%20opinion%20of%20their>
 4. <https://www.npr.org/2016/11/01/500104506/broken-windows-policing-and-the-origins-of-stop-and-frisk-and-how-it-went-wrong>
 5. https://www.lapdonline.org/la_gangs/content_basic_view/23471
 6. https://www.in.gov/iifc/files/Community_Graffiti_Information_Bulletin.pdf
 7. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles/156059.pdf>
 8. <https://www.nnw.org/publication/detering-gangs-your-neighborhood-turf>
 9. <https://www.livescience.com/7599-graffiti-triggers-crime-littering.html>
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 11. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275210172_The_Pen_or_the_Sword_A_Situated_Spatial_Analysis_of_Graffiti_and_Violent_Injury_in_Vancouver_British_Columbia
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