

The Bridgeport Police Department's Anti-Graffiti Problem-Solving

Summary

In an attempt to reduce graffiti, the Bridgeport Police Department received grant funding from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. The Problem-Solving Grant stipulated that the Police Department partner with another agency and employ the four-stage S.A.R.A. Problem-Solving Model (Scanning, Analysis, Response, Assessment) to develop nontraditional police responses to graffiti. The Police Department originally partnered with the city's Anti-Blight Task Force, but also included the Citizen's Coalition Against Blight following reception of the grant.

The scanning and analysis stages of the problem-solving model yielded a large amount of information on graffiti, offenders, and abatement. A major finding was that most graffiti in Bridgeport was not gang-related. Many of the youth involved in graffiti considered themselves to be artists. A graffiti culture existed in Bridgeport in which tagging - the scribbling of a nickname or identification mark with spray paint, markers, or stickers - was a way for the youth to gain notoriety from peers. It was believed that youth would better respond to positive opportunities to express themselves than deterrence strategies focusing on arrests.

The main responses centered on improved police data collection, improving the process of abatement referrals with the Clean and Green Initiative Office, providing community education on graffiti, and creating positive alternatives for graffiti offenders. A graffiti database was created to track offenders and incidents of graffiti. Responses were also developed that provided graffiti offenders with positive alternatives to graffiti vandalism.

The process evaluation found that the Police Department successfully followed the problem-solving model. The success of this model can be attributed to two primary sources. First, the Graffiti-Problem-Solving Committee provided oversight and direction during the early stages of the project. Second, the reassignment of a police officer to participate in this project on a full-time basis was a key element to its success. The Graffiti Officer entered this project with a personal interest in graffiti that allowed him to provide insight to the problem-solving committee on the graffiti culture in Bridgeport.

The outcome evaluation consisted of a telephone survey of randomly selected Bridgeport residents toward the end of the project and surveying a small group of residents early in the response implementation and six months later. The results of these surveys provided evidence that supported *the* effectiveness of this project.

Perhaps the most important outcome of this grant-funded project was the establishment of the non-profit United Youth Arts Partnership, Inc. that has established as its motto: "Investing in our Future, One Wonderful Kid at a Time!"

The Bridgeport, CT Police Department's Anti-Graffiti Problem-Solving Project

Description

The City of Bridgeport, Connecticut, had experienced a substantial drop in all serious and violent crime categories in the several years prior to this Anti-Graffiti effort. However, certain community disorder and fear issues continued to be problematic. The graffiti issue was selected in the first instance because of the tremendous cost associated with this form of vandalism, if left unchecked, and due to its relationship with community disorganization and fear, and fueling of community discontent. Also, there were significant costs to businesses, residents, and property owners in terms of property losses, and to the city, and others, in terms of clean-up costs. On average, the City of Bridgeport was spending well over \$100,000 per year on graffiti vandalism abatement. Finally, the selection of the graffiti issue offered the department an opportunity to continue its nine-year evolution into a community-policing agency by moving further away from an "incident-driven" approach and work more in a problem-solving police mode.

Analysis was handled on several fronts. First, a comprehensive review of programs and field research in this area was conducted. Next, input was obtained from all of the key stakeholders through a series of meetings, interviews and a community conference on graffiti and blight. A Problem-Solving Partnership Committee was formed and met regularly. Prior to these meetings, a series of meetings were held within the Police Department. These were well attended with 32 of 54 community police officers and most upper-level police managers in attendance. Data from police reports, graffiti clean up logs, and other sources was reviewed and analyzed.

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Moreover, a key element of the analysis involved interviews with offenders. Initially, information was obtained from offenders as to their motivation and preferred opportunities to write graffiti, regarding graffiti as a communicative and expressive method, and as to their potential interest in redirecting their artistic talents. The Department has continued to evolve in its in-depth analysis of these matters and has developed a feedback loop, as it were, where this information is continually developed. Additional analysis items also focused on "conflict resolution through the arts" methods as being appropriate for these graffiti artists, and issues regarding replacement offenders. In terms of the latter point, it is important to develop analytic information regarding the best ways to prevent future graffiti by working with younger youth-at-risk of graffiti offending.

Key issues regarding offenders, time/place and opportunity were developed. For example, most graffiti incidents occur between 5:00 p.m. and 4:00 a.m., and between Thursday and Sunday. The majority of this graffiti can be categorized as tags, followed by throw-ups and then pieces/burners. The graffiti vandals can range between 10 and 31 years of age, with most vandals being between 15 and 23, and male. Most of these younger graffiti writers were attending school, affording opportunities for contact. Hispanics constituted the largest group of graffiti vandals, followed by Caucasians and lastly African-Americans. For all vandals, with increasing age, and skill at producing large murals or pieces (short for masterpiece), comes greater respect among peers. A very small proportion of the graffiti is done by street gangs, such as the Latin Kings,

The Bridgeport Police Department's Anti-Graffiti Problem-Solving Project Latin Queens, The Nation, The Bush Mob and B.D.G.N. (Black Gangster Disciple Nation).

Solo vandals and small graffiti crews are responsible for the majority of the graffiti that is produced. Most graffiti crews consist of three to five ~~vandals~~ who like to call themselves "writers." Often two writers will stand as look outs, some of them are armed, and at least one will serve as a runner — the person designated to carry a hiking pack full of spray paint and spray caps. A graffiti writer typically writes his street name in large letters followed by his group's (crew's) name in smaller letters.

Membership with a graffiti gang is variable in that street names can be found with different graffiti gang names. The most frequent graffiti gang symbols are DFL, AOK, CIA, BWS, WA, ANC, AFSB, REC, MIA, IA and PROS. These symbols may have one or more meanings: "De Fame League", "Artists Only Krew", "Criminals In Action", "Beyond Whatchya See", "Wicked Artists", and "Art Not Crime". Bridgeport's ~~graffiti vandals~~ emulate graffiti styles that they find on the Internet, on illegally produced graffiti videos and magazines and from neighboring cities such as New York, New York. Some of Bridgeport's graffiti can be found on pro-graffiti Internet web sites.

The initial analysis revealed that graffiti writing was related to a fairly cohesive graffiti culture. The affiliation afforded by participation in this culture offered graffiti writers several desirable benefits. These included opportunities for expression, recognition of artistic abilities, sense of belonging, and other group dynamics. Problems arose, though, in terms of certain dangers inherent in graffiti writing. Specifically, the

The Bridgeport Police Department's Anti-Graffiti Problem-Solving Project fact that some vandals participate in other illegal activities and the significant costs and problems associated with graffiti vandalism as noted above.

The information available from this analysis was used to developed the response employed by this Anti-Graffiti Project. As the analysis phase moved into the response phase, very important aspects of the graffiti culture became apparent and resulted in a very significant shift in thinking about how best to solve this problem.

The first goal was the reduction of graffiti vandalism. Those involved with the project felt that this would lead to an improved sense of well being in the communities that were the most negatively impacted by the graffiti. In the initial grant proposal, and early on in the project, there was an emphasis on the arrests of graffiti vandals. As the analysis was underway, information was leading the project participants to re-visit this issue and look for alternative approaches. This view toward alternatives was confirmed when several arrests occurred early in the project and rather than deterring graffiti vandalism, it appeared to exacerbate the problem. Those who were arrested gained fame and recognition by their involvement in the criminal justice process, and, due to the lack of significant sanctions in this area, there were few, if any disincentives. The combination of anger toward the system and the lack of deterrence engendered the more graffiti vandalism from these individuals. Moreover, it was also learned that the graffiti defendant was now elevated within the graffiti culture to a position known as "KOI" - "King of Ink" - and now needed to do even more damage to maintain his status in the culture. Once a focus on understanding the graffiti culture became part of this project, a more sensible response was developed.

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Another primary goal was the identification of graffiti writers for the purposes of developing relationships with them. It was our hope that these relationships would help maintain graffiti reductions over time, while providing opportunities to redirect graffiti writers' artistic skills into more appropriate pursuits. Primarily, this was accomplished through the development of alternative artistic outlets for these youth, as well as assisting them with other issues, such as school problems or with referrals to social service agencies. In addition, the public and private school systems were contacted and became partners with the Bridgeport Police Department and the Anti-Graffiti Project staff and Committee in addressing the problems related to schools and students, and also by referring additional supports to students.

The initial response phase involved a very intensive effort to catalog graffiti throughout the city. To date, approximately 8,000 digital pictures of graffiti have been taken and are being catalogued. Each graffiti incident is logged into a specially designed Access database with standardized information obtained by a graffiti incident form developed for this project. This information is used to gain both an overall picture of the graffiti problem over time and to identify and confront graffiti vandals with their work. This is done while also offering them positive alternative activities and supports. Several "free zones" or "safe zones" were created, however, this response went beyond the so-called "legal areas" approach by involving graffiti writers in a variety of art classes and activities to re-direct their talents, and by attempting to link youth with other supports and resources. The response was conducted primarily at the street level and in the schools; however, several other avenues were also adopted, including, working with after school

The Bridgeport Police Department's Anti-Graffiti Problem-Solving Project programs, working with the younger at-risk youth in special programs, and integrating youth with other community-based efforts and projects (e.g., Weed & Seed programs).

Additional response components included expanded interaction with community groups, formalizing the graffiti reporting mechanism, improving coordination between the police and city clean-up efforts, among other efforts. Meetings were also held with judges and prosecutors to discuss particular cases when the last report of arrest was indicated so as to maximize the positive outcomes associated with this intervention.

The results included a substantial drop in graffiti incidents. These incidents were coming in regularly at several hundred a night before the response; however, once the project was underway, even during the height of the summer months, the incidents were numbering only a couple of dozen a week at most, and sometimes much fewer. This is easily handled by the clean-up efforts, which is another important aspect of a comprehensive graffiti reduction effort (i.e., getting graffiti off of the walls as soon as possible). Although a complete time-series analysis of the inventory of the graffiti in the city is beyond the scope and resources of this project, the reduction in reports has been confirmed by independent observations of the outside evaluators who are associated with this project.

Approximately 300 youth, former graffiti vandals, now participate at some level in the positive alternative programming and, at the very least, are no longer vandalizing. Many of these youth are also proactive participants in all aspects of the graffiti reduction effort, and also contribute to the conflict resolution through the arts activities.

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There was significant community recognition of the drop in graffiti. A random survey of city residents was conducted by the outside evaluator, as well as a more detailed questionnaire distributed to residents in attendance at a community conference on graffiti and blight issues. This latter questionnaire was followed up six months after the conference to investigate any changes over time. The response of the citizen telephone survey suggested that responses to graffiti positively changed resident perceptions of the graffiti problem. The analysis of the conference attendees questionnaires resulted in even more striking evidence that there was a positive community response with most of these residents, who were knowledgeable about graffiti, believing that graffiti had decreased in their neighborhoods (60%) and city-wide (64%). Almost none of these individuals reported that graffiti had increased in their neighborhoods or elsewhere in the city. Additionally, both a qualitative information and a process evaluation component supported the positive outcomes of this project.

Perhaps most telling is that despite the end of federal funding for this effort, the department has retained the project; however, because of budget constraints, the Department was only able to continue to devote one full-time police officer to this effort. At this *time*, it did not look as if the Department would be able to continue to fund the programming for the graffiti artists, gang members and troubled children. This setback did not dampen the enthusiasm and dedication of our "graffiti officer." Police Officer Michael Gosha took it upon himself to find other ways to help "his kids." With the assistance of Dr. Mario Gaboury, Officer Gosha developed both the Bridgeport Police Graffiti Arts Program, as well as founded the non-profit United Youth Arts Partnership,

The Bridgeport Police Department's Anti-Graffiti Problem-Solving Project Inc., (U-YAP). The United Youth Arts Partnership, Inc. has been awarded 501(c)(3) non-profit recognition and tax exempt status. Together the Bridgeport Police Department and U-YAP have forged a positive working relationship to provide disadvantaged youth advanced art, computer workshops, Tai Chi Chuan and dance classes, after school tutoring, creative writing sessions, and a host of other programs provided by friends of U-YAP. Since its inception over 350 children and adolescents have attended U-YAP functions. Another 23 young people have found employment because of efforts of U-YAP. Perhaps, most important, four young people are in college and six have returned to school because of the *efforts* of U-YAP's dedicated staff.

Officer Gosha has a philosophy that is the motto of the United Youth Arts Partnership and that is this: "Investing in Our Future, One Wonderful Kid at a Time." Through his sheer determination to ensure that these kids continue to have a safe, bright place to go to when they felt a need to create, to talk to an adult, or to vent their anger, Officer Gosha established this partnership with creative professionals in the community who work with our young people. Some of the programs offered by the United Youth Art Partnership include "Bridgeport and Beyond". This program is made possible because of local corporate support and has allowed program participants to see the limitless potentials that artistic endeavors can contain. The "Streets `nBeyond" program provides encouragement for youth by helping them to identify the inner workings of their communities and instill pride in where they live. The 4-A's Initiative (Arts As An Alternative) is a series of workshops open to program participants that includes computer graphics, martial arts classes, poetry and creative writing, and chess clubs. Held every

The Bridgeport Police Department's Anti-Graffiti Problem-Solving Project weekend at the Bridgeport Training Academy, there are usually 30 to 40 young people in attendance.

The mission of the United Youth Arts Partnership is to be dedicated to providing youth, not only with artistic opportunities but with positive life lessons that will enhance their potential for future success. Fortunately, for the Bridgeport Police Department the United Youth Art Partnership has become a positive asset for our community. It is an asset that recognizes, respects and appreciates our artistic youth and their right to express their ideas in a safe environment.

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