

Graffiti: What you should know about it

The following comments are based on notes taken at an all-day graffiti conference held in Portland on May 18th, 2010.

There is “The war on terror” and “The war on drugs”. Add “The war on graffiti”. None of them is going to end. Graffiti damage in Portland runs about \$3 million/year.

Almost all graffiti is put on by committed taggers -80%. About 15% is gang related, 3% is political, 1% is trying to be unauthorized “art” and 1% is political. The artistic tags require a lot of time, so are generally in places where they will not attract police. There is a profile of taggers, and reasons why they tag. Many taggers suffer from ADHD or ADD, and they are self-centered. In the sub-culture, there is more male bonding than in hockey or rugby. Taggers form clubs, (called “crews”) and you may see one large tag with lots of the club members putting on their own street name tags. A tag like “YPN” means “Your Property Next”. Taggers do not change their tags anymore than successful companies change their names. You will not be able to read much of it.

Gang related graffiti stakes out territories, lists members, or has warnings... Where you have cross-outs and new graffiti, you have evidence of turf wars. Fortunately inner SE does not see this type. In Portland, most gang graffiti is Hispanic, i.e., Spanish-speaking population – not “from Spain”.

Portland Tagger Profile: 16-35 year old males, big on hip-hop music, do their damage mostly between 2AM and 5AM, have under-age girlfriends (older females are too smart), work on their tags alone but may work in groups for multiple tags, get a real rush out of tagging, addicted. They are educated, computer literate, and capable of planning their work... They have “piece” (sketch) books to work on their tags, and they practice a lot (that is why they can go so fast). They do not care one bit about the damage they cause!

This is a definite sub-culture, with its own vocabulary, WEB sites, Facebook or Myspace accounts, etc. Some taggers carry weapons, and fearlessness is part of the culture. Graffiti vandals produce and sell home-made videos of their work.

Reasons Why: Think of this like a sports pyramid - starting young and green all the way up to the NBA/NFL all stars. Fame/respect is the goal. It is almost as if they have a point system. Here is how you seem to get or lose points:

- Number of tags total or up at any given time
- Size and complexity of their tag
- Amount of difficulty getting tag up- structure, location, risk
- You stole the paint (minus points if purchased)
- The degree of exposure
 - Length of time “up”
 - Traffic exposures
- Problems with law enforcement (may be minus if you are stupid)
- Geographic exposure (multiple neighborhoods or cities is +)

The best defense is to catch them, prosecute them on felonies (over \$1000 in damage or certain properties such as hospitals, railroad structures, transit assets), and get a judge who will send them to jail/prison. Businesses are left trying to minimize long-term costs by removing tags quickly. This may not result in stopping re-tagging, but it is way worse if you leave it up.

Business/residential neighborhoods that allow graffiti scare customers/buyers away and lower property values and business activity.

In Portland, the City contracts with Youth Employment Institute (YEI) and Goodbye Graffiti to remove some graffiti. They are dispatched by the City to remove/repair at small businesses (test is # of locations and square footage), non-profits and owner-occupied houses. They try to limit to those without their own resources. YEI managers say that 60 taggers in 8 crews do 80% of the tags in Portland.

Goodbye Graffiti, a private company, removes 2000-3000 tags a day in their 15 offices (Western Canada and the Pacific NW). In Portland, besides doing a small amount of work through the Graffiti Abatement Program contract, Goodbye Graffiti also contracts with Traffic Signal Maintenance to clean traffic control boxes and other city-owned signal properties, AND they serve private clients through their EverClean program and by the job work.