

# **GRAFFITI – LOOKING BEYOND THE SYMPTOMS**

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## **Graffiti – Looking Beyond the Symptoms**

Graffiti provides a platform for fame for its participants. A desire central to Hip Hop culture from which it comes. The common misconception, that graffiti is simply a random act of defiance by mischievous adolescents cannot be supported by facts. It's part of an established culture supported by music, web sites and magazines. The majority of writers are between 12 and 25 and some participants are known to continue into their 30's and beyond. Graffiti crews are at the core of the culture and their activities influence younger participants.

For most writers, their initial involvement in graffiti was as a result of being introduced to it by friends or peers when they were in their early teens. Within graffiti they find structure and a sense of belonging. They gain a sense of achievement upon completion of a work and earn recognition amongst their peers. Illegal graffiti unquestionably also provides a "rush" for its participants.

Left unchecked, graffiti culture will continue to grow. The visual blight of tagging will remain the by-product of this growth. If not removed graffiti will attract more graffiti, however rapid removal alone is not the answer. The solution is a holistic approach which targets the culture of graffiti and not simply the symptoms, tagging.

In the past, popular graffiti abatement strategies have fallen into two categories, "Rapid Removal" and "Aerosol Art Murals".

The aim of rapid removal programs is to remove the graffiti before it has had exposure. It's a simplistic strategy that targets only the symptoms and generally fails to address graffiti culture. The belief that writers will be discouraged by having their work removed rapidly is a misconception. "Buffing" (the removal of graffiti by authorities) is an accepted aspect of graffiti culture, cleaning canvases and turning over sites. At critical sites (e.g. piecing walls), rapid removal can result in an increase of graffiti activity in the surrounding area. Rapid removal is only successful as part of a holistic approach to graffiti abatement.

Aerosol art mural projects are popular because of their low cost and their community approach. Mural projects aim to protect the wall being painted, reduce the level of illegal graffiti in the surrounding area and redirect participants through education and training. Bankstown Council participated in mural projects for three years.

Council's mural projects failed for a number of reasons. Facilitators were often sympathetic to illegal graffiti and used the mural projects as an opportunity for their own work. With only a small percentage of genuine graffiti writers participating, involvement by some writers resulted in division amongst the local graffiti community. For those who were not graffiti writers, murals potentially introduced aerosol art to young people for the first time. At some sites, the murals became "shrines", resulting in an increase in local graffiti activity.

Before addressing graffiti, Council looked closely at graffiti culture within Bankstown. The public's exposure to graffiti was generally limited to tagging. To Council, tagging was simply an indication of "graffiti traffic" which is a symptom of the problem. It was identified that rail corridors play a significant role in graffiti culture within Bankstown. Bankstown has 2 rail corridors and 9 rail stations. To reduce the level of graffiti within Bankstown, Council needed to reduce the influence of crew activity along the rail corridor and other major transport corridors.

Because of their significance, rail corridors became the initial focus of Bankstown Council's long term strategies. Graffiti crews gain exposure by "piecing" walls visible to the rail line. Rail corridors also provide incentive and access for crews from outside Bankstown. Rail corridor activity influences younger local writers and helps to perpetuate graffiti culture.

The reduction in the influence of crew activity is critical for the long term reduction of graffiti culture. Piecing walls provide exposure for crews and higher profile writers. The removal of piecing wall opportunities reduces the level of crew activity and the attractiveness of Bankstown to crews from outside the LGA. This reduction in influence also helps to limit the growth of graffiti culture within the next generation.

Grffiti writers seek recognition. Crews and writers are known to monitor the media and will respond to publicised strategies targeting them. By taking a stealth approach to graffiti management, those taking part in illegal graffiti do not receive the notoriety they crave. As a result, Bankstown Council does not promote its strategies within the LGA. Graffiti removal units use unmarked vehicles and team members do not wear Council uniforms.

Bankstown Council has created a 9-step holistic strategy aimed at the long term reduction of graffiti within Bankstown. Over the last 2 years it has been successfully implemented in an area in the north of Bankstown LGA. The strategy is now being expanded to include key areas in the south of Bankstown.

### **Step 1 – External Agencies**

A holistic approach to graffiti management cannot be achieved without the support of external agencies. Within Bankstown, the support of the Police and The Rail Infrastructure Corporation (RIC) has been important. Council is now also working with local schools and the Department of Education and Training.

### **Step 2 – The Collection of Data**

The creation of an incident and photographic data base allows for the monitoring of costs and the collecting of intelligence on graffiti activity.

### **Step 3 – Remove Piecing Wall Opportunities**

By initially targeting piecing walls only, costs are reduced and the influence of crew activity is specifically targeted. Council has combined with RIC to remove visible piecing wall opportunities adjacent or within the rail corridor. This includes the planting of vegetation to hide walls, wall relocation, wall demolition and the cleaning and repainting of walls.

### **Step 4 – Reduce Access**

To reduce the likelihood of piecing wall sites being reactivated, accessibility to both current and likely piecing wall sites is reduced. With the help of RIC, fences were erected, strengthened and repaired. This step also forces a change in the movements of crews and writers.

### **Step 5 – Monitor**

Before expanding strategies it is important that crew activity no longer be present on piecing wall sites. As a result, strategies on piecing wall sites are implemented up to six months ahead of other sites in an area where the strategy is being targeted.

### **Step 6 – Establishment a Colour Palette**

The creation of a graffiti abatement colour palette reduces long term costs, streamlines maintenance and reduces the signs of “buff marks” (patches left after chemical removal or painting). Writers target buff marks, tagging directly over patches.

### **Step 7 – Remove Remaining Graffiti**

Following the reduction in crew activity and influence, the remaining sites are less likely to be the subject of graffiti following their removal. Council uses high pressure water cleaners and the colour palette to remove, clean or paint over the remaining graffiti.

### **Step 8 – Spray Can Retailers**

Changes in the legislation in new South Wales restrict the sale of spray cans to people under the age of 18. Whether this strategy will prove to be successful in the reduction of graffiti remains to be seen. Work with identified retailers to reduce the irresponsible display and/or sale of spray cans.

### **Step 9 – Build Localised Community Support**

Following the successful reduction in the level of graffiti culture, groups such as Neighbourhood watch, Chambers of Commerce and concerned residents can be enlisted to monitor, report and help maintain areas.

To further reduce the growth of graffiti culture in the future, Councils must implement pre-emptive measures. Taking into account CPTED principles (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design), Bankstown Council has introduced graffiti abatement measures into Council's Safety & Security Development Control Plan. Measures to take into consideration include, position/visibility, landscaping, surface type, natural surveillance, accessibility, colour schemes and lighting.

A successful graffiti abatement program requires knowledge of the problem and an innovative solution. Look beyond popular strategies and target the culture of graffiti, not simply the symptoms. Be stealth in approach, focus on rail and transport corridors and target the piecing wall sites and crew activity on them. It is important to implement a multi step, holistic strategy and plan for the future.