

# Tackling Subway Graffiti in New York City: The Clean Car Program

## Program Summary

**Aim:** To reduce the level of graffiti on New York City trains.

**Problem:** High levels of graffiti on New York City trains developed into a serious public policy issue. The condition of the trains was eroding and contributing to increased fear of crime.

**Strategy/Intervention:** The Clean Car Program was implemented to prevent the graffiti of subway trains. The project involved cleaning vandalised trains within two hours of being “tagged” and was employed to reduce the motivation of offenders: seeing their tags on trains.

**Location:** New York, United States.

**Administering Institutions:** New York City Transit Authority (NYCTA), police.

**Key Stakeholders:** NYCTA and commuters.

## Program Overview

**Background:** Graffiti is often considered the “colourful expression of creative adolescents” on one hand, and the “criminal defacing of public property” on the other. Whichever view one may hold, graffiti usually involves defacing public property with political humour, sexual innuendo or street art. In the case of public transport, graffiti, especially when coupled with broken windows, vandalised doors and marked cars, has a considerable impact on the quality of transportation and fear of crime.

In New York City the graffiti problem reached undesirable levels and was characterised by hundreds of young people defacing windows, maps and carriages. Previous attempts to curb the problem proved futile. Police became frustrated by a criminal justice system that released offenders on the basis of the nature of graffiti compared to other serious juvenile crimes. Offender cleaning campaigns generated expensive supervision costs and usually provided offenders with greater knowledge of the technology needed to create more durable tags. Securing train yards was also ineffective because of the large areas that required securing and the fact that offenders could jump, cut or negotiate their way through the security barriers.

In 1984, under new management, the NYCTA implemented the Clean Car Program as an initiative to tackle subway graffiti. The aim of the project was to remove graffiti from trains within two hours of the cars being vandalised in order to prevent offenders seeing their “tags”. This involved teams of cleaners working at the end of train lines to immediately remove graffiti or to pull particular cars from the service. The core of the program stressed that tagged vehicles would not leave storage, maintenance or lay up areas until the graffiti had been removed. The philosophy behind the Clean Car Program was that

by removing graffiti “tags”, one is also removing the offender’s motivation to deface property; that is, seeing their “tags” on trains.

The Clean Car Program commenced with two trains. Yearly project goals were set by the NYCTA, which aimed to have the entire fleet of subway trains graffiti free within five years. Other initiatives included in the Clean Car Program were the assignment of police to ride clean trains, the protection of train storage yards by NYCTA staff, improvements to lighting in storage yards, daily checking and maintenance of yard fences, and under-cover police officers acting as cleaners.

**Method:** Trains involved in the Clean Car Program were checked at the end of subway lines for graffiti.

(Scientific methods rigour: 2)

**Results:** In the first year of the program, 400 cars were rid of graffiti vandalism. By 1989, five years later, the entire fleet of cars (6,245) was graffiti-free. The program not only succeeded in removing graffiti from trains, but it did so ahead of its scheduled annual goals.

## Further Reading

Kelling, G.L. and Coles, C.M. 1996, *Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in our Communities*, The Free Press, New York.

Sloan-Howitt, M. and Kelling, G.L. 1990, “Subway Graffiti in New York City: ‘Getting Up’ v. ‘Meaning It’ and ‘Cleaning It’”, *Security Journal*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 131–36.

Wilson, J.Q. and Kelling, G.L. 1982, “Broken Windows”, *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 249, no. 3, pp. 29–38.

## Policy Issues

The Clean Car Program was based on the theory of “broken windows” (Wilson and Kelling 1982). If a window in a building is broken and left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken...one unrepaired window is a signal that no-one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing (Kelling and Coles 1996). In the case of subway graffiti, trains that have been visibly tagged are more likely to be tagged again. The key to prevention is therefore timely removal of graffiti and vandalism.

Three factors contributed to the success of the Clean Car Program—a commitment to rid the subway of graffiti, a problem solving approach to crime reduction, and the coordination of administering institutions. It has been suggested that the success of the project was due to the efficiency of cleaning rather than a reduction in offending behaviour. However, as pointed out by Clarke (1997), one would have expected graffiti to increase once the cleaners had stopped attending to trains at the end of the third year. This did not occur. The Clean Car Program required an intense commitment to cleaning; the graffiti problem had dramatically reduced by the time all the cars were cleaned.