



No.6

# Research brief: Graffiti and vandalism on public transport

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*Since the founding of the Australian Institute of Criminology in 1973, Institute staff have been engaged in research on matters of public policy. The Institute believes that a summary of recent research, together with a discussion of its policy implications, should be incorporated into our Trends and Issues series. We believe that this will allow a wider dissemination of Institute research findings.*

*This, our first 'research brief' in our Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice series deals with graffiti and vandalism with particular reference to transportation systems. As with all research briefs in the series we have strongly emphasised the practical or policy implications arising from the study.*

*Future briefs will deal with other research at the Institute, including neighbourhood watch, the mass media and crime and missing persons.*

**David Biles**  
Acting Director

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## The Issue

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**V**andalism and graffiti are common on most of the developed world's urban railway and transit system. Indeed, a comprehensive international review of vandalism and graffiti on Western European, North American and British railways reports a general increase in all systems, although in Moscow and Tokyo vandalism and graffiti are virtually unknown.<sup>1</sup>

Most transportation systems exhibit similar characteristics in graffiti and vandalism including the type of damage done (i.e. seat slashing), a predominance of juvenile offenders amongst those apprehended, the greater frequency of damage in off-peak hours and unsupervised areas and the decline in staff morale and passengers' perceptions of the safety and comfort of the service.

However, even within countries, different transportation systems appear to have varying rates of vandalism and graffiti. For example, in New York graffiti has been a major problem until recently where a decrease in graffiti on subway cars has been reported. In San Francisco, on the other hand, graffiti has never been a problem of the same proportions as in New York, although vandalism rates have, at times, been high.

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Differences between graffiti and vandalism rates exist within Australian cities as well. Authorities in the major centres of Sydney and Melbourne are currently experiencing considerable problems with both forms of behaviour. By contrast, in Brisbane, Perth, Hobart and Adelaide, rates of vandalism and graffiti appear to be relatively moderate.

### The Research

The Australian Institute of Criminology was commissioned by the State Rail Authority of New South Wales to research the causes of this behaviour and to develop specific policies for the prevention or, at least, the containment of both graffiti and vandalism in its transportation system.<sup>2</sup> What follows in this research brief are the major conclusions of that research project. The strategies for prevention are, in general terms, applicable to all transportation systems.

In New South Wales, staff responsible for train seat repairs have reported a significant and sustained increase over the past several years in the number of train seats slashed or otherwise damaged. Similarly, station assistants and train car cleaners have reported a continuing increase in the amount of graffiti and a major change in its nature.<sup>3</sup> Where previously there had been a predominance of slogans and offensive messages scratched or written in relatively easily removed ink, pencil, lipstick or crayon, now stylised signatures known as 'tags', slogans and messages are written with harder to remove felt tip markers and spray cans. In addition, there has been

an increase in 'New York-style' art graffiti. These stylised drawings of figures and the 'artists' name are carried out with spray cans of paint on carriage exteriors, walls, buildings and tunnels along the rail system.

#### *The Cost*

The cost of graffiti and vandalism in both human and financial terms has been considerable.<sup>4</sup>

- Four young persons were killed on New South Wales railways during 1986 while attempting to engage in graffiti on train carriages.
- In 1985-86 there were 343 reported incidents of vandalism which led to 1306 train delays, a marked increase over the 1984-85 year when 218 incidents caused 598 delays.
- A recent Sydney survey of community attitudes to rail transport suggest that a significant proportion of the Sydney public (80 per cent) are concerned about the personal safety of rail passengers and that this concern was associated with their concerns about vandalism and graffiti.
- The cost of repairing damage due to vandalism and cleaning graffiti in trains in 1984-85 is estimated to have been \$4.76 million.

#### *Characteristics of graffiti and vandalism offenders*

Sydney graffitiists are mainly young adolescents and include both girls and boys, although boys predominate. They come from a wide range of social groupings and areas of Sydney. Many are self-organised into loose

groups of gangs, some of which are geographically based, and all appear to travel widely, and often over considerable time and distance, to gain access to trains or other suitable sites for their graffiti. While some graffitiists engage in vandalism most confine their activities to illegal drawings and figures.

Vandals are typically male aged between 13 and 17, generally originate from poorer geographical areas of the city, have relatively low levels of education and belong to large families. Vandals are not confined to the psychologically disturbed or socially inadequate. Studies of vandals indicate that they are more likely to offend in groups than other juvenile delinquents and that the majority break other laws as well as engaging in vandalism.

#### *Motivations for graffiti and vandalism*

Rennie Ellis, collector of Australian graffiti, has described graffiti as '... the result of someone's urge to say something—to comment, inform, entertain, persuade, offend or simply to confirm his or her own existence here on earth'.<sup>5</sup>

Interviews conducted by Institute researchers with young persons engaged in graffiti confirmed this observation. Much of Sydney's graffiti, whether it be tags or stylised signatures or multicoloured drawings and the graffitiist's name (e.g. Subway Art) also reflected a style of popculture which has been wildly publicised and popularised amongst Australian adolescents through films, television and music video clips and books. Relevant facts in understanding the motivations of graffitiists also include:

- Surveys reveal that, unlike adults, Sydney youngsters regard the removal of graffiti from State Rail property as of relatively low priority.
- To some, graffiti on trains is seen as a legitimate form of self expression, a form of public art

*Table 1 Cost of vandalism repair and graffiti cleaning of State Rail trains, 1984-85\**

Incident type	Number	Cost (\$000's)	Percentage of total cost
Seats - replaced	12111	2723	57
- replaced backs	5406	1400	29
Light diffusers	2184	78	2
Windows	4615	333	7
Grffiti removal	22700 (hours)	225	5
<b>Total</b>		<b>4759</b>	<b>100</b>

\* Based on information provided by Statistical Services, Development Branch, NSW State Rail, July 1986. Indicates management estimates of number of items repaired and average costs.

which improves trains and the urban environment generally.

- To others, especially adults, graffiti is ugly, whatever its form and threatens their sense of order, decorum, and occasionally, safety. The hostility shown by some adults towards graffitiists reinforces some youngsters' determination to engage in graffiti.

Vandalism, on the other hand is seen even by many of the graffitiists themselves as destructive behaviour having clear implications for personal safety and security. Though the media promote an association between vandalism and violence the evidence suggest that the majority of vandals confine their activity towards property rather than people. Vandalism is neither meaningless nor does it come in one simple form. The following categorisation of vandalism, adapted from Cohen, illustrates the complexity of this behaviour.<sup>6</sup>

***Categorisation of vandalism***

1. *Acquisitive vandalism.* Damage done in order to acquire money or property, e.g. damaging telephone boxes.
2. *Tactical vandalism.* Damage done as conscious tactic to achieve another end.
3. *Ideological vandalism.* Damage done to further a cause or communicate a message, e.g. slogans on buildings.
4. *Vindictive vandalism.* Damage done to gain revenge, e.g. breaking school windows because of perceived unfairness by teachers.
5. *Play vandalism.* Damage inflicted incidentally or deliberately as part of a game or competition, e.g. who can break the most windows.
6. *Malicious vandalism.* Damage as an expression of rage or frustration, e.g. scratching the paintwork on expensive cars.
7. *Innocuous vandalism.* Damage done to property defined by youth as unimportant or of no value, e.g. slashing railway seats.

The motivation for acquisitive, tactical, ideological and vindictive vandalism is relatively obvious. However, the motivation involved in play, malicious and innocuous vandalism—the common types of much railway damage—are less obvious. Studies suggest that diverse motivations in these behaviours, ranging from hostility to peer pressure, are inherent in many young people. This heterogeneity and widespread prevalence of vandalism has important implications for prevention.

**Policy Implications**

There are three possible strategies that governments could adopt to alleviate problems of graffiti and vandalism on transportation systems. Though not mutually exclusive these strategies are : (1) no formal response; (2) further research in specific areas of a city; and (3) anti-graffiti/vandalism policies implemented on the basis of our present knowledge.

We reject the first strategy on the grounds that the cost involved in the behaviours under consideration, both in financial and human terms, are considerable. The second strategy—more research based around local conditions—may well be needed in particular transportation systems. However, we believe that the third strategy is most appropriate.

Though our knowledge of graffiti and vandalism may be, in some areas, rudimentary, world wide experience and our study of the State Rail Authority would suggest that policy formulation in this area should include:

***Fast repair of vandalism and graffiti removal***

- Establishing realistic and practical time limits for quick removal and repair.
- The formation of mobile graffiti removal squads.

- Incorporation, as quickly as possible, of vandalism and graffiti resistant materials.

***Community measures***

- Publicly differentiating vandalism and graffiti from violent crime.
- The use of community murals and other forms of art on stations and in trains.
- Improving liaison between transportation departments and schools, local communities and the media.
- Diverting motivation by providing challenges/ esteem providers through schools parent/teacher associations.
- Improving, in as many ways as economically possible, the physical and social environment of stations, carriages and public walkways.

***Information systems***

- The introduction of a comprehensive system for the collection, analysis and dissemination of information on graffiti and vandalism.

***Deterrent measures***

- Establishing professional and specialised security services for these behaviours.
- Increasing visibility of staff on trains and improved patrol procedures.
- Establishing a Rail Watch (based on Neighbourhood Watch) for the staff and public.
- Investigating thoroughly the appropriateness of Community Service Orders for offenders.

**Conclusion**

To those in authority the issue of controlling graffiti and vandalism is not only one of protecting public property but also of making public transportation systems appear less dangerous and unpleasant areas for possible users. Despite the views of

some graffitists that they are simply decorating barren railway areas it is clear that the community will not tolerate widespread graffiti and vandalism.

Reduction rather than eradication of graffiti and containment rather than elimination of graffiti are realistic policies in these areas. Though there is a tendency to apply 'the big stick' to offenders in this area more than increased surveillance and higher penalties are needed.

World wide experience suggest that prevention in terms of reducing graffiti and vandalism is best accomplished by not only substantially increasing the risk of capture of offenders but also by diverting motivation by involving young people, and the local community generally, in creative schemes to improve the environment and human face of transportation system.

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### Notes

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1. Transmark, *Vandalism on the world's railways*, report prepared by Transportation and Market Research Ltd (Transmark) UK for NSW State Rail Authority, September 1985.
2. See P.R. Wilson and P. Healy, *Graffiti and Vandalism*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, 1986.
3. *ibid*, p. 3.
4. Detailed accounts of the consequences of graffiti and vandalism can be found in P.R. Wilson and P.Healy, *op. cit*, pp. 4-17.
5. R. Ellis, *The All New Australian Graffiti*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1985.
6. S. Cohen, *Vandalism: Its Politics and Nature*, in J.B. Mays (ed), *Juvenile Delinquency, The Family and the Social Group*, Longman, London, 1972.



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