

# Preventing Vandalism

This guide is one in a series of crime prevention publications designed to equip current and potential Safe City partners with low-cost tools to assess their crime problems and to develop strategies to address them. Other guides in this series include panhandling, car crimes, public disorder, retail burglary, and shoplifting.



**Safe City** is a model community-based initiative that aims to reduce crime, build awareness, and develop communities into safer places to live, work, and shop. Community partners in cities across the U.S. modify the model to best suit their needs and resources. The goal is to leverage existing resources by building collaborative relationships between law enforcement, businesses, residents, government leaders, property managers, and community organizations. This approach maximizes the tactical, financial, technological, and human resources available to address a community's crime problems. The Safe City model promotes partnerships and technical solutions as instrumental building blocks for success. These partnerships are further strengthened by individual retailers taking ownership over the crime and disorder problems occurring in and around their businesses.

Safe City has partnered with the Urban Institute, a non-profit policy research firm, to develop a variety of crime prevention strategies for use in retail settings, many of which are inexpensive and easy to implement. For more information about the Safe City program, please visit [www.mysafecity.com](http://www.mysafecity.com). For more information about the Urban Institute's justice policy research activities, please visit [www.urban.org/justice](http://www.urban.org/justice).

## Understanding Vandalism

Definitions of vandalism vary by jurisdiction. In general, vandalism is willful or malicious damage to property, such as equipment or buildings. Vandalism is often associated with other signs of social disorder, such as disturbing the peace and trespassing. See the Safe City guide "Preventing Public Disorder" for more information. Furthermore, vandalism incidents are burdensome to businesses by generating costs associated with repairs and cleaning, which the victims are often left to cover themselves.

### Vandalism Patterns

Vandalism is not senseless property damage. Individuals vandalize for a variety of reasons including: to convey a message, to express frustration, to stake revenge, to make money, or as part of a game. Perpetrators may work alone or as members of a loose or organized group.

**TIME.** Much vandalism is done in the late evening hours when businesses and surrounding property have little or no surveillance. After-school hours are also common, particularly for juvenile vandals.

**LOCATION.** The most frequent targets of vandalism are those located in public spaces, or those on private properties that are open to public view. Properties where no one has direct responsibility for the area, or those that seem less well guarded, are also frequent targets of vandalism or graffiti. Not surprisingly, vandalism is commonly found on trains, buses, bus shelters or stations, traffic signs, sides of freeways, park benches, billboards,

vacant buildings, schools, or other large, plain, light-colored surfaces. Businesses located near city downtowns, high traffic areas, or concentrations of low-income residents are particularly vulnerable to vandalism. Like other crimes, a building that has been vandalized once is likely to be vandalized again.

**TYPES.** Vandalism includes graffiti, trash dumping, light smashing, removing/bending signage or ornamentation, breaking windows, or other defacing of property. Graffiti is a pervasive type of vandalism experienced by retailers and commercial property owners. Graffiti vandals use a variety of instruments to tag or mark property including, spray paint, broad-tipped markers, metal objects, etching pens, or shoe polish bottles. Vandals use etching pens and shoe polish bottles to mark surfaces with acid. Acid graffiti (acid etching) permanently damages glass and metal surfaces and is extremely harmful for those that come in contact with it.

### Addressing Vandalism

It is difficult to gauge the true prevalence or cost of vandalism based on the official reports to police because they are some of the most underreported crimes. As compared to violent crime, an incident of vandalism may be considered trivial; however, in aggregate, vandalism may be a reflection of a larger or more systematic problem in the community. Vandalism is widely viewed as a "broken windows" offense which, if not addressed, could lead to other more serious crimes.

## Using this Guide

This guide is designed to help you and your partners understand and address the vandalism problem affecting your business area and to help promote dialogue among retailers, police, and community stakeholders about these issues. Keep in mind that when implementing these strategies you should tailor your solution to the unique nature of your crime problem and business environment.

Other guides in this series address car crimes, retail burglary, public disorder, panhandling, and shoplifting.

## Quick Tips

Here are a few guiding steps that can help prevent vandalism:

- 1 Measure your vandalism problem.
- 2 Identify business practices that may make you vulnerable to vandalism.
- 3 Choose a practical strategy to reduce vandalism and try it.
- 4 Measure your vandalism problem again to assess the impact of your strategy.
- 5 Modify your strategy if necessary.

**For citation purposes:** Scott, Michelle L., Nancy G. La Vigne, and Tobi Palmer. 2007. "Preventing Vandalism." Washington, DC: The Urban Institute Justice Policy Center.



URBAN INSTITUTE  
Justice Policy Center



*Opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice, the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.*

## Defining Your Problem

**Before implementing a strategy** to prevent vandalism, it is important to define the specific nature of the vandalism problem affecting your business. Community partners should consider the questions that appear below. Although there are many methods you may use to address vandalism or graffiti on your own, a community-wide response that incorporates other area businesses, agencies, and public services is beneficial to address any underlying community problems which may be related to vandalism. Answers to these questions will help you understand the problem affecting your business area so that you can select an appropriate response strategy.

Questions to Ask:	Example Responses:
How many incidents of vandalism or graffiti have occurred on your property in the past quarter?	There were ten separate incidents of vandalism in the past quarter.
What type of vandalism is most common?	Spray painting is most common, followed by trash dumping.
Are vandals targeting specific types of property?	Walls, barriers, and trash dumpsters are the most common targets.
Do you know anything about the individuals doing the vandalizing?	I think the graffiti is painted primarily by juveniles. I am not sure who is dumping trash.
What times of day and days of week does vandalism occur?	All incidents occurred at night after the store is closed. Most occur on Friday or Saturday nights.
Are other area businesses experiencing vandalism or graffiti?	Yes, I have heard of other businesses having problems as well.
Do you have anything in common with other businesses being targeted?	Yes, we are all within walking distance of a middle school.
Are the acts of vandalism the same for other area businesses?	The spray painting seems rather pervasive. I have not heard anyone else complain of trash dumping.

# Developing Response Strategies

**After you've worked** with your partners to define the vandalism problem for your area, you are ready to develop a response strategy to prevent it. The following are strategies that can be used for common vandalism scenarios. Do not forget that situations vary and that yours may require a tailored response. In addition, be prepared for potential implementation challenges, such as unanticipated costs and delays in both the implementation and impact of your crime prevention strategy.

It is important to measure your vandalism problem before and after initiating a response. Doing so will tell you whether the response you selected is effective. Proof of effectively reducing vandalism (or any other crime) can be useful in persuading other area businesses to join collaborative efforts to reduce crime throughout the community.

Your measurement may also provide evidence that the strategy is not reducing vandalism as you expected, suggesting an adjustment to the response is in order. While you may note improvements immediately, it is advisable to wait at least a few months after implementing a response to see whether it has had an impact. Below are ways that you can measure the state of your vandalism problem, outcomes that will indicate whether the vandalism problem has improved, and possible data sources.

When measuring outcomes it is important to note that a temporary increase in reporting of incidents to police may represent a positive outcome, indicating that community members are paying greater attention to vandalism. However, reported incidents should decline over time as the number of vandalism incidents decrease.

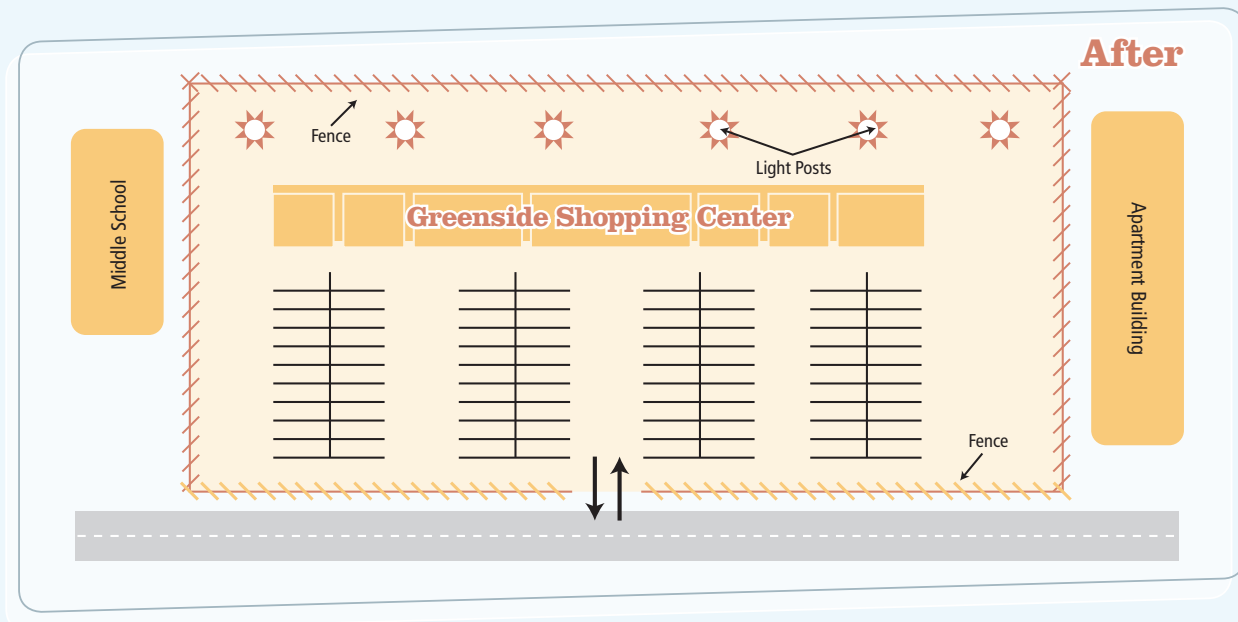
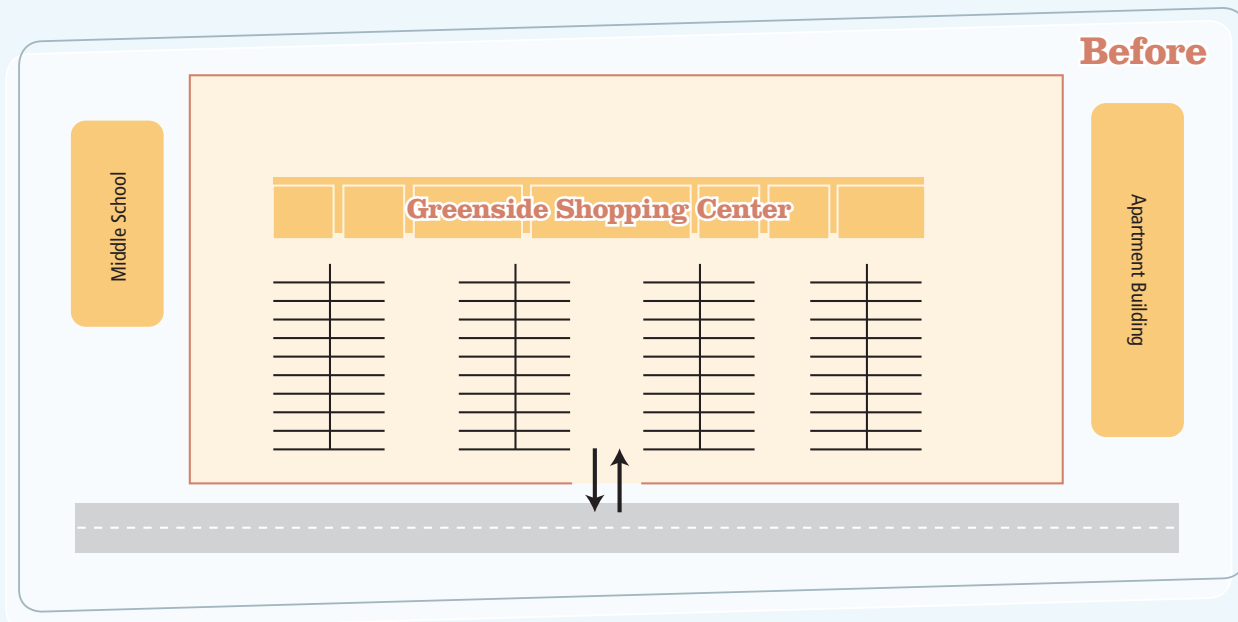
Measurement	Data Source	Strategic Response	Outcome
<b>General vandalism</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of incidents</li> <li>Location of incidents</li> <li>Number of chronic offenders</li> <li>Cost (\$) of repair or clean up</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local police</li> <li>Business records</li> <li>Site survey</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduce pedestrian throughways</li> <li>Install secure perimeter fencing that allows for surveillance</li> <li>Maintain trees and shrubs to improve line of sight</li> <li>Improve lighting</li> <li>Monitor vandalism-prone areas regularly</li> <li>Work to enact mandatory clean-up regulations for businesses or community</li> <li>Develop business or neighborhood watch program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fewer incidents</li> <li>Incidents less concentrated</li> <li>Fewer repeat offenders</li> <li>Decreased cost (\$) of repair</li> </ul>
<b>Graffiti</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of incidents</li> <li>Number of calls for service</li> <li>Cost (\$) of clean up</li> <li>Demographics of suspects</li> <li>Location of damage</li> <li>Number of chronic offenders</li> <li>Day/time of incidents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local police</li> <li>Business records</li> <li>Site survey</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use graffiti resistant paint or heavily textured materials</li> <li>Apply protective film to glass surfaces to minimize acid damage</li> <li>Detect and clean up graffiti quickly</li> <li>Plant low shrubs, vines, or thorny plants around signs or buildings to make access difficult</li> <li>Restrict spray paint, wide tipped markers, and etching acid sales</li> <li>Improve lighting</li> <li>Install video surveillance in problematic locations</li> <li>Increase incident reporting to police</li> <li>Develop business or neighborhood watch program</li> <li>Establish list of chronic graffiti artists or create an intelligence database noting characteristics of chronic vandals' work</li> <li>Implement a graffiti hotline</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fewer incidents</li> <li>Fewer calls for service</li> <li>Decreased cost (\$) of clean up</li> <li>Fewer offenders</li> <li>Fewer repeat offenders</li> <li>Fewer after-school or weekend incidents</li> </ul>
<b>Juveniles damaging property</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of incidents</li> <li>Number of calls for service</li> <li>Cost (\$) of repair or clean up</li> <li>Demographics of suspects</li> <li>Location of damage</li> <li>Number of chronic offenders</li> <li>Day/time of incidents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local police</li> <li>Business records</li> <li>Site survey</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase targeted police or security presence for hours immediately following school dismissal</li> <li>Put lights out-of-reach or behind protective coverings</li> <li>Use strengthened, scratch-resistant glass or grilles in windows</li> <li>Detect and repair damage quickly</li> <li>Improve lighting</li> <li>Increase incident reporting to police</li> <li>Develop business or neighborhood watch program</li> <li>Establish list of chronic vandals</li> <li>Install video surveillance in problematic locations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fewer incidents</li> <li>Fewer calls for service</li> <li>Decreased cost (\$) of repair</li> <li>Fewer juvenile offenders</li> <li>Less concentrated damage</li> <li>Fewer repeat offenders</li> <li>Fewer after-school or weekend incidents</li> </ul>

## Measuring Your Problem: An Example

**The Greenside Shopping Center** businesses were concerned with incidents of vandalism near their stores. A representative group of business owners met to review records from the police and businesses regarding vandalism incidents. This review revealed that the primary vandalism problems were located in the rear of the shopping center. The most prevalent offenses were graffiti and damage to lights fixed to the back of the building.

Given this information, the group conducted a walk-through of the shopping center to find vulnerable characteristics of the property that could be modified to prevent future vandalism. The diagrams below display the layout of the property before and after chosen response strategies were implemented.

The group decided to erect a chain link fence around three-quarters of the property to limit pedestrian access between the Middle School and apartment building located on each side of the Shopping Center. To further limit pedestrian access to only one sidewalk entrance, they intend to install a friendly, but sturdy fence along the roadside. They also plan to repaint the rear of the building a darker color and to install tall light posts that will be resistant to tampering and breakage.



## How Other Communities Prevent Vandalism

Here are examples of how other retail establishments addressed vandalism in their communities.

### City of Fontana, California

Concerned business owners, residents, and police established a coalition after an increased number of complaints about graffiti. The coalition developed a multidisciplinary approach to address the problem. The city passed an ordinance to require property owners to remove graffiti within 48 hours, or the city could charge the owner for clean-up expenses. Downtown businesses also gave permission for the city to remove graffiti free of charge. Before August 1999, the city graffiti hotline received more than 40 complaints of new graffiti per day. By March 2001, the volume of complaints reduced by 90 percent, to 4.4 complaints per day (*Fontana Police Department Anti-Graffiti Program 2001*).

### Douglas Promenade Isle of Man, British Isles

In 2003, businesses, residents, and police established Project Centurion, a multi-agency collaboration created in response to increased alcohol-related criminal activity, including damage to property, occurring on Douglas Promenade primarily between the hours of 10pm and 2am on Friday and Saturdays. Analysis confirmed a very high correlation between the number of people leaving nightclubs and incidents of criminal damage. Project Centurion developed more than 50 potential responses to address the promenade's range of problems. Police patrols were strategically deployed to criminal hotspots and neighborhood watch programs were established throughout the area. The taxicab company improved their services to transport clubbers away from the area and extra buses created a late night bus route. Crime along the promenade decreased by one-third within two years of the initiative; criminal damage experienced a nearly 50 percent decline during the same time (*Project Centurion: Reducing Crime and Disorder on Douglas Promenade 2005*).

### San Diego Police Department Mid-City Division, California

In March 1999, community members enlisted the assistance of police to address the negative effects of graffiti on their quality of life. Analysis of the problem revealed that the best approach to address graffiti would be to target active and potential graffiti writers (or "taggers"). The community created a partnership to provide youth-oriented services, including counseling for the most problematic taggers, a joint youth-police bike patrol in popular tagging sites, local student groups to paint positive murals on heavily tagged walls, and requiring juveniles on probation for tagging to clean up reported graffiti. In addition, community stakeholders joined an adopt-a-block program for which the city's graffiti control program provided cleaning supplies. The police noted a 90 percent reduction in graffiti reports and 30 percent of taggers in counseling stopped tagging (*Graffiti Prevention and Suppression 2000*).



## Additional Resources

- Your Local Police Department
- Your Local Safe City Partnership
- Center for Problem-Oriented Policing: [www.popcenter.org](http://www.popcenter.org)
- Rutgers University Crime Prevention Service for Business: <http://crimeprevention.rutgers.edu>
- Niagara Regional Police Service: [www.nrps.com/community/vandalism.asp](http://www.nrps.com/community/vandalism.asp)
- Crime and Violence Prevention Center CA Attorney General's Office: [www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/police/Publications/publications.html](http://www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/police/Publications/publications.html)
- NYC Business Solutions: [www.nyc.gov/html/sbs/nycbiz/html/managing/graffiti.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/sbs/nycbiz/html/managing/graffiti.shtml)
- Graffiti Hurts, Graffiti Prevention: Tips for Businesses: [http://www.graffitihurts.org/learn\\_more/bustips.pdf](http://www.graffitihurts.org/learn_more/bustips.pdf)
- National Crime Prevention Council: <http://www.ncpc.org>
- Small Business Administration: [www.sba.gov](http://www.sba.gov)
- National Retail Federation: <http://www.nrf.com>
- National Restaurant Association: [www.restaurant.org](http://www.restaurant.org)
- National Association of Convenience Stores: <http://www.nacsonline.com/NACS/default.htm>

---

### Sources consulted for this guide include:

Barker, Mary and Cressinda Bridgeman. 1994. *Preventing Vandalism: What Works?* Crime Detection & Prevention Series, No. 56. Available: [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds).

City of Vancouver Graffiti Management Program at <http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/engsvcs/streets/graffiti/index.htm>

Fontana Police Department Anti-Graffiti Program. 2001. City of Fontana, California: [www.popcenter.org/library/goldstein/2001/01-20.pdf](http://www.popcenter.org/library/goldstein/2001/01-20.pdf)

Graffiti Prevention and Suppression. 2000. San Diego Police Department (CA): [www.popcenter.org/library/goldstein/2000/2000.pdf](http://www.popcenter.org/library/goldstein/2000/2000.pdf)

Johnson, Kelly Dedel. 2005. *School Vandalism and Break-Ins*. Problem-Oriented Guides for Police Problem Specific Guides Series, No. 35. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Available: [www.popcenter.org/Problems/problem-vandalism.htm](http://www.popcenter.org/Problems/problem-vandalism.htm).

Project Centurion: Reducing Crime and Disorder on Douglas Promenade. 2005. Isle of Man, British Isles: [www.popcenter.org/Library/Goldstein/2005/05-05\(W\).pdf](http://www.popcenter.org/Library/Goldstein/2005/05-05(W).pdf)

Weisel, Deborah Lamm. *Graffiti*. 2002. Problem-Oriented Guides for Police Series, No. 9. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Available: [www.popcenter.org/Problems/problem-graffiti.htm](http://www.popcenter.org/Problems/problem-graffiti.htm).



[www.MySafeCity.com](http://www.MySafeCity.com)



[www.MySafeCity.com](http://www.MySafeCity.com)

