

Vandalism and Graffiti in Public Spaces: Clean up and Prevention

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Graffiti and vandalism are more than just an eyesore—they can make public spaces feel unsafe and cost communities significant time and money to repair. Vandalism in the form of graffiti, broken fixtures, or damaged landscaping is a crime. It can create safety hazards, deter visitors, and erode community pride. For maintenance staff and supervisors, tackling this problem is two-fold: prevention and remediation.



Most vandalism isn't random. People, especially youth, may vandalize out of boredom, peer pressure, frustration, revenge, or while under the influence. Sometimes it's about "making a mark" or expressing identity. Understanding the various "whys" within your community can inform the "how" of prevention in your parks and public spaces.

Prevention

While there is no surefire prevention strategy, experts have noted several options that can work. Many of the following methods can be combined to provide a stronger deterrent against vandalism.

1. Keep Spaces Active and Maintained

Clean, busy, and cared-for spaces are less likely to be vandalized. Regular maintenance sends a clear signal that the community cares. Quick removal of graffiti—ideally within 24 - 48 hours reduces repeat tagging.



2. Improve Lighting and Visibility

Install lighting in high-risk areas such as blank walls, entrances, and pathways. Place lighting out of reach and use vandal-resistant fixtures. Trim trees and bushes to eliminate hiding spots. Ensure that the lighting is directed towards the most at-risk areas.

3. Apply Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED). Changes to the environment can have a dramatic effect on crime. CPTED offers these suggestions:

- Use thorny or dense shrubs to block access to vulnerable walls and areas.
- Plant fast-growing, low-maintenance bushes or trees along the sides of buildings.
- Install lattice-work trellises with vines on the side of the building to reduce open space.
- Install visible security cameras. "Dummy" cameras can be interspersed with online cameras.

- Commission murals to prevent unwanted tagging and graffiti.
- Position amenities to avoid giving vandals a “boost” to high surfaces.

4. Use Protective Materials and Coatings

Surface coatings can make graffiti harder to apply and easier to remove. Sacrificial coatings, such as wax coatings, can be washed away easily with a power washer or hot water. Other paints can repel markings or enable easy cleanup. In addition to surface coatings, there are several cleaning products specifically made for graffiti removal. There are also numerous durable materials, such as steel, cast iron, and aluminum, that are vandal-resistant and can be covered with an epoxy to resist graffiti.

5. Engage the Community

Neighborhood watch programs, volunteer “park patrons,” and youth mural projects can foster ownership. Murals in particular can reduce tagging because vandals are less likely to deface respected artwork.

6. Limit Tools of Vandalism

Work with local retailers to restrict sales of spray paint, wide-tip markers, and etching acids to minors.

7. Provide Positive Outlets for Youth

Recreation programs, volunteer opportunities, and youth employment in park upkeep can channel energy away from destructive behaviors.



8. Use Technology Wisely

Surveillance cameras, motion detectors, and smart lighting can deter vandalism, but they should complement, not replace, community involvement

9. Prosecute Violators

This is a time/place/intent decision on the agency’s part; however, knowing there may be punitive consequences can dissuade others from vandalism.

10. Work with Law Enforcement

Get help to patrol and track problem areas, provide random inspections and seek out repeat offenders.

11. Encourage Natural Surveillance

- Place outdoor amenities together
- Orient desks in offices to face the windows.
- Keep plants trimmed to augment sight lines
- Place park amenities near likely targets

Remediation Techniques

Left unaddressed, vandalism often spreads. The “Broken Windows Theory” states that visible damage invites more of the same. Operations professionals need to respond to graffiti and vandalism quickly, as fast action prevents copycats and limits repeat offences. Maintain a “zero tolerance” policy and don’t let damage linger. Rotate inspections to spot and fix problems early.

Rapid attention will also contribute to the public perception that the area is well-maintained and considered a community asset. When performing cleanups or repairs, here are some factors to consider:

1. Try to match the Cleanup to the surface

- **Painted walls:** Repaint with the matching color.
- **Masonry/rock:** Use pressure washing or approved cleaners. (Cleaners such as Elephant Snot have been successful in removing graffiti from rocks)
- **Glass/metal:** Apply solvents or replace when necessary.



2. Protect yourself

Some of the paints and chemicals can be harmful to your skin and eyes. Wear Protective equipment such as gloves, goggles, and masks when handling chemical cleaners.

3. Document Before Removal

Photograph damage for police, insurance, and vandalism tracking. Keep a record of employee hours and cleanup costs. These can be useful when trying to identify the perpetrator or assessing remediation costs or fines.

Long-Lasting Solutions

There is no sure-fire answer to prevent vandalism. However, employing any one of these strategies above can help you decrease the amount of vandalism.

Preventing and remediating vandalism isn’t just about avoiding and fixing damage; it’s about building spaces people respect and want to protect. The two most important steps you can take to reduce vandalism are to use multiple prevention strategies and encourage natural surveillance (eyes on the area), as this is one of the strongest deterrents. By combining smart design, rapid response, community engagement, and consistent upkeep, maintenance teams can help keep parks, trails, and public facilities safe, welcoming, and graffiti-free.

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