



Rural Crime Prevention: Vandalism

Gary Holland
Community and Rural Development

Introduction

In 455 A.D., Vandals, an ancient tribe of people from Northern Europe, invaded Rome. The invasion was characterized by a senseless destruction of property, particularly the plundering of works of art. The destruction was so great that the name "vandal" came to be associated with any deliberate or reckless destruction, abuse, or misuse of property.

Studies indicate that from ten to twenty percent of all rural households are annually victimized by vandalism. Also, research shows that vandalism is increasing in contemporary rural society.

Nationally, the costs of vandalism are about one billion dollars per year. While our own personal property may not be vandalized, everyone pays the price for the vandalism that does occur through higher taxes, rents, insurance rates, and consumer goods prices.

Various research studies differ regarding the specific age group shown to be primarily responsible for vandalism. However, research results generally agree that teenagers and young adults account for most vandalism acts.

Identifying the motivation for defacing, damaging, or destroying property is also difficult. Some of the reasons acts of vandalism occur are:

- Young people see vandalism as a game or as a way of demonstrating courage to their peers. This possibility is supported by the fact that nine out of ten vandalistic acts are committed while two or more people are together.
- Some vandalism occurs as a prank. Since the damage or destruction may be slight, the actions are not viewed as a crime.
- Leisure time has increased in rural areas over the past few decades. Thus, vandalism might occur due to boredom and a lack of meaningful activities.
- Destruction or defacement of property allows an individual to vent frustration, anger or anxiety without personal confrontation.
- Vandalism, particularly in the form of graffiti, allows anonymous expression of opinion.

Consider a Variety of Solutions

Vandalism can occur in many ways and the reasons for acts of vandalism are equally varied. Therefore, a single solution to such a multifaceted problem does not exist.

Attitudes persist, however, that there is one best way of solving the vandalism problem. The following are perhaps the most prevalent thoughts on the problem:

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets
are also available on our website at:
<http://osufacts.okstate.edu>

"What we need are more security guards, police, police dogs, and electronic surveillance equipment."

Such a defensive reaction to vandalism implies an "us vs. them" relationship. Although increased security can be effective, the high cost associated with this single-answer approach is difficult to justify.

"The police and courts aren't doing their job. They've got to catch some of these people and make examples of them."

This punitive attitude implies that there is nothing those in the community can do about the problem. It's up to somebody else.

"They did it. Well, they'll just have to live with it."

This response punishes responsible citizens far more than it does the abusers. Such an attitude may turn formerly responsible users into abusers if it appears nobody cares.

Realization that vandalism can be permanently reduced through implementation of several strategies is a vital step in reaching that goal. The citizens and government officials of a community must then evaluate the types of vandalism prevalent in the area and consider possible steps to be taken.

Since vandalism can occur in so many ways, it is beyond the scope of this fact sheet to identify specific measures to reduce vandalism in any rural community. Although some examples of strategies implemented in other communities are offered, the primary emphasis of the following sections is on the general approach to use in developing a local vandalism reduction strategy.

Monitor the Condition of Property

For all practical purposes, no explanation may ever be available for why an abandoned building was damaged or the back door of a small business was spray painted or a young tree trampled. However, experience has shown that when such acts are overlooked or ignored, additional destruction will occur. Over time, a variety of people may be involved in minor acts which, individually, are not necessarily malicious. The resulting blight negatively impacts the area and will probably be expensive to repair.

Thus, a fundamental component to reduce vandalism is to frequently inspect property for maintenance needs or damage and quickly correct the situation. Maintaining private and public property in sound working order and appearance not only fosters pride and caring in the public but encourages others to maintain their property as well.

Vacant buildings are particularly vulnerable to vandalism, because the property does not appear to belong to anyone. Also, the risk of being caught is lower by vandalizing abandoned structures. If the condition of a vacant building is allowed to deteriorate, it not only becomes an eyesore to the community but actually invites vandalism.

Willingness to invest in the maintenance and appearance of structures which have no present usefulness will probably be low. However, relatively inexpensive measures can be taken to reduce vandalistic destruction.

- Keep the grass mowed and the surrounding sidewalks free of weeds and rocks.
- Maintain the integrity of doors and windows and use sturdy locks.
- Soap all of the windows. If the structure is in an isolated area, neatly cover all windows with plywood or some other protective material.
- Inspect for and remove bird nests and other material which represents a fire hazard.
- Take steps to prevent unauthorized entry through ventilation ports, etc.

By creating the appearance that vacant structures are planned for eventual use, the likelihood of vandalism will be reduced. Should the structure have no future use due to obsolescence and advanced deterioration, tear it down and sell the scrap material.

Incorporate Property Designs that Inhibit Vandalism

Perhaps no approach will totally prevent acts of vandalism. Therefore, property should be designed and constructed with materials that promote ease of maintenance and quick clean up. Facilities which are hard to clean and equipment that may require difficult to obtain replacement parts are much more prone to neglect and damage.

Examples of design features which inhibit vandalism include:

- The use of materials with rough-textured, dark-colored surfaces to discourage graffiti. An alternative is to use smooth, hard surfaces which are easily cleaned. Stone or masonry surfaces are poor choices since they are both easy to mark and difficult to clean.
- Elimination of recessed entryways and unused space under stairways to reduce unobserved activity.
- Replacing broken windows with plexiglass or some other shatter-resistant window covering.
- Elevating the height of street signs to reduce damage and theft.
- Using ceramic tile on walls in areas where people congregate. Also, wallpaper should be washable and strip-pable.
- Utilization of night lighting to reduce unobserved activity and enhance the appearance of the property.

Schedule Availability of Public Facilities Properly

Recreation centers that are open sporadically, swimming pools that are closed when they are supposed to be open, and floodlights which are off when the softball teams arrive to play all cause frustration that may be taken out on the facilities themselves. If the managers of a facility are perceived as indifferent or unresponsive to the needs of the public, they may be implicated in the damage problem.

Schedules should be tailored to the needs of the majority of users, but sometimes this may not be possible. The key factor, however, in reducing vandalism is to widely publicize the hours of availability and rigorously adhere to them.

Utilize the Capacity of School Buildings

For whatever reasons, school buildings are a particularly favorite target of vandals. Acts of defacement and destruction at schools largely occur in the evening.

Thus, consideration should be given to ways in which the school building can be utilized in the evening hours to increase the risk a vandal must take. Programs for Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, senior citizen groups, adult education classes, and others can be held at the school. While the school saves the expense of additional security measures, community groups are provided an ideal meeting place.

Develop Community Youth Programs

Studies have revealed that acts of vandalism by people of all ages increase when a sense of alienation from the community exists. Involvement in community activities can, therefore, encourage a sense of pride and belonging. The inclination to deface or damage property in a community with which one is strongly identified will be very low.

Since teenagers and young adults are primarily responsible for vandalism, efforts should be made to provide activities which promote a sense of stewardship for the community in addition to enhancing personal development. Athletic programs might be provided during the summer vacation as well as during the school year.

Many other possibilities exist as well, such as Scouting programs, 4-H, and community service groups. Some communities have encouraged teenagers to organize specifically to combat vandalism and other criminal acts by youth. The teenagers are responsible for monitoring a certain area and reporting maintenance needs or acts of vandalism to police or school administrators. The redirection of youth activities toward constructive, worthwhile purposes promotes a sense of pride and responsibility.

References

- Bennett, Georgette. "A Safe Place to Live," Insurance Information Institute and Crime Prevention Coalition, New York, New York, 1982.
- Cross, Fred. "Rural Crime Prevention:" Vandalism, Cooperative Extension Service - Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, 1982.
- Donnermeyer, Joseph and G. Howard Phillips, Rural Youth Vandalism, Extension Review, Spring, 1980.

Hoskins, Josiah, Jr. "Planning A Vandalism Prevention Program," Cooperative Extension Service - University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, brochure.

McAlister, Douglas. "Vandalism: The Million Dollar Prank" Cooperative Extension Service - Virginia Tech University, Blacksburg, Virginia, Slide/tape narration.

Scott, Alvin, Robert Fichter, and Scott King. "Managing Vandalism," Parkman Center for Urban Affairs, Boston, Massachusetts, May 1978.

Wipe Out Vandalism, Criminal Justice Services, American Association of Retired Persons, Washington, D.C., 1983.

Appreciation is expressed to the following for their review of the manuscript for this fact sheet:

Robert Bauer - President
Oklahoma Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association

Hilary Driggs - President
Oklahoma Chiefs of Police Association

J.D. Fleming - Executive Director
Oklahoma Farmers Union

Ken McFall - Executive Secretary
Oklahoma Farm Bureau

Kay Thurman - Uniform Crime Report Supervisor
Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service Bringing the University to You!

The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal educational organization in the world. It is a nationwide system funded and guided by a partnership of federal, state, and local governments that delivers information to help people help themselves through the land-grant university system.

Extension carries out programs in the broad categories of agriculture, natural resources and environment; family and consumer sciences; 4-H and other youth; and community resource development. Extension staff members live and work among the people they serve to help stimulate and educate Americans to plan ahead and cope with their problems.

Some characteristics of the Cooperative Extension system are:

- The federal, state, and local governments cooperatively share in its financial support and program direction.
- It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
- Extension programs are nonpolitical, objective, and research-based information.
- It provides practical, problem-oriented education for people of all ages. It is designated to take the knowledge of the university to those persons who do not or cannot participate in the formal classroom instruction of the university.
- It utilizes research from university, government, and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
- More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
- It dispenses no funds to the public.
- It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
- Local programs are developed and carried out in full recognition of national problems and goals.
- The Extension staff educates people through personal contacts, meetings, demonstrations, and the mass media.
- Extension has the built-in flexibility to adjust its programs and subject matter to meet new needs. Activities shift from year to year as citizen groups and Extension workers close to the problems advise changes.

Oklahoma State University, in compliance with Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 11246 as amended, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and other federal laws and regulations, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, age, religion, disability, or status as a veteran in any of its policies, practices, or procedures. This includes but is not limited to admissions, employment, financial aid, and educational services.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert E. Whitson, Director of Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President, Dean, and Director of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 20 cents per copy. 0803