

***COMBATTING VANDALISM TO PUBLIC SERVICES:  
THE CASE OF GRAFFITI ON LONDON UNDERGROUND TRAINS***

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### *Background*

In January 1986 the Prime Minister chaired a seminar on crime prevention at 10 Downing St, to which representatives of a wide range of public and private organisations were invited. The aim was to encourage others to assume their share of responsibility for preventing crime while recognising that the police retain the primary role. The immediate outcome of the Seminar was the setting up of several working groups on particular crime problems. One such group dealt with crime on the London Underground, building on work already commissioned by the management of London Underground Ltd. As well as representatives of LU, the BTP and the Metropolitan Police, the Department of Transport and the Home Office were involved. The report, published in November 1986 (Department of Transport, 1986), concluded that crime on the Underground was far from a severe problem overall, but was concentrated in particular times and places and deserved attention. It made a large number of recommendations ranging from the provision of radio facilities underground, to the design of stations, to the training of staff to take a more active role in prevention. Since then, the Department of Transport has provided extra resources and a steering group has met regularly to promote action. One of the major achievements has been the recent setting up of several pilot schemes at LU stations, aimed at reducing pickpocketing, robbery and assault.

Graffiti is not in the same league as these offences - a few people even deny that it is a crime at all. Nevertheless it currently costs LU roughly £3/4m per year to clean up trains, stations and structures like walls and bridges. Additional costs, less easy to measure, include effects on passengers and revenue. For one thing, if trains are

frequently taken out of service for cleaning, causing cancellations and delays, frustrated passengers may choose other means of transport; for another, the sight of graffiti may invoke in some passengers fear of more serious crime, on the premise that graffiti communicates the impression that London Underground is not in control of its territory or does not care. Finally, and not least, there is the danger to the young graffitiists themselves - which came tragically to public notice last year when a teenage boy was killed attempting to spray a moving train at Kilburn Underground Station.

London Underground is in the difficult position of many large organisations, namely that graffiti in the aggregate is a problem which is important enough to command attention, but not serious enough to be accorded top priority by themselves or the police. In this situation, the logical strategy becomes one of identifying convenient and cost-effective ways of preventing graffiti outside the operation of the criminal justice system.

#### *Developments in crime prevention*

Preventive thinking has come a long way from the rigid application of locks and bolts to doors and windows, as the government's current 'Crack Crime' campaign shows. The favoured way of devising preventive tactics is to identify highly specific crime problems and focus in on them - which is why I shall mainly be talking about graffiti on the outsides of trains and not so much on the insides, nor about graffiti on stations and tracksides. (This does not, of course, mean that nothing is being done about these problems.) The problem-oriented approach to crime prevention consists of five stages:

- \* collection of crime incident data from police or other records
- \* analysis of crime patterns to identify specific problems/troublespots/trends
- \* devising preventive measures aided by identification of sources of the crime problem
- \* implementation
- \* evaluation

Techniques for the collection of data and the analysis of crime patterns are described in the Home Office publication *Getting the Best out of Crime Analysis* (Ekblom, 1988). The next step begins with looking at the sources of the crime problem - and then the creativity comes in because the aim of the game is to devise any means of blocking these sources, that are feasible and acceptable.

Broadly, the immediate sources of a crime problem can be divided into offending **people** and offence **situations**. The offender's general motives and specific goals are *obviously* relevant to prevention; less so the physical and social circumstances of the offence. In the last few years, however, it has become apparent that there is a great deal of scope for tackling crime through altering these physical and social circumstances - in the approach known as **situational crime prevention** (see, for example, Heal and Laycock, 1986). Underlying this development is a realisation by many social scientists and practitioners that people's behaviour, including their criminal

behaviour, is determined far more than previously believed by the situation they find themselves in, and correspondingly less by disposition or personality (Clarke, 1980). Of course, people are not like snooker balls, bounced passively around from one situation to the next - the impact of situations is generally felt on people's **decision-making** (Cornish and Clarke, 1986) - the opportunities they see for crime, the methods they can draw on to exploit these, the rewards, the risks, the effort and the costs.

### *Sources of the graffiti problem*

I would like now to look at the sources of the graffiti problem. I will start with the situation itself, and then move into the way the offenders see the situation, finishing up with more 'dispositional' factors such as motives. Some of the insights come from site visits and general common sense; others were made with the help of research. In particular, London Underground commissioned two small projects where graffitists were interviewed. One (drawing on a sample of 12 young male convicted offenders) explored the way the graffitists perceive the Underground system and their methods of offending; the other (based on a sample of 20 graffitists identified by a screening interview administered to young males selected at random on the street) covered the question of motivation. In each case the approach was qualitative - the aim was the identification of ideas and viewpoints rather than precision sampling with the intention of generalising to specific populations.

### *The offence situation*



- \* Train sides are physically good canvasses - large slabs of smooth, plain aluminium.

- \* Trains are left unattended in sidings / depots for long periods during the day and night, due to the uneven demand for service.

- \* Depots are large and difficult to monitor and sidings are often literally 'out of the way'; in both cases perimeter security was not designed to keep out determined trespassers.

- \* Paint spray cans are ideal tools - they are clean, portable, convenient and readily obtainable.

#### Target selection

- \* The offenders largely avoided private property - by contrast, publicly-owned property 'fair game'

- \* Train sides are especially attractive as they offer a way of maximising exposure to the audience. Although Metropolitan Line 'A' stock is a long way from the Flying Scotsman, there is nevertheless the intrinsic romance of trains, especially 'American' looking ones - harking back to the imported origins of train-side graffiti.

- \* The Underground provides a number of social commodities valuable to the offenders, in the form of risk (physical danger and risk of being caught) and difficulty (both physical and the need to organise logistics). Conventional police action or pursuit by Underground staff may actually heighten the payoff.

## Motivation

- \* Offenders' motivation is extremely diverse and includes excitement, esteem and peer status through challenge, artistic and logistical creativity, identity and sociability through crew membership, apprenticeship and enforcement of standards, mutual regard among all accomplished train graffitiists - what might be called the 'Bloomsbury' effect. These are all features of a 'cultural' phenomenon

- \* The offenders have a strong line in self-justification - 'it's not harmful, it's art' - so appealing to their conscience or sense of responsibility will not work.

## Methods of offending

- \* Often pre-planning - offenders make reconnaissance visits to sites to spy out access points, security levels, hiding places if chased; seek information on running timetables, track layouts, etc; some even obtain orange flash-jackets to look like authorised workmen.

- \* Detailed knowledge of spraying equipment and paint types - well-educated in the trade-off between good colour and good staining properties.

- \* Detailed knowledge of sources of paint - shops, garages etc; paint largely obtained by theft - a point of 'honour', especially as theft is apparently very easy with the type of self-service display racks shops often use.

### *Adaptability*

Crime problems do not remain fixed, they grow, alter or sometimes even diminish. Contributing to this change is the adaptability of offenders, and graffitists show this adaptability in a number of particular ways.

- \* Choice of target. The graffitists aim to travel to sites which are the easiest to enter and they are prepared to go long distances, so efforts to tighten individual sites may lead to displacement (though this may be limited if rival crews defend their territories from encroachment).

- \* Methods. There are efforts being made to find paints and inks which will resist latest cleaning techniques - there is, as it were, a continuous 'arms race' - which is found with most types of property crime.

- \* Goals. Even the graffitists' goals are adaptive. Paint permeates aged aluminium beyond the reach of cleaning solvents. The culture has learned to incorporate the resultant ghosts of former 'pieces' as something actually desirable - they call it the 'history' of a train.

All this adaptability means that agencies such as London Underground have to keep up with and anticipate developments and provide for flexible, adaptive responding in their turn.

### *Solutions*

It is a simple matter to think up a range of possible solutions to the



graffiti problem. The sky is the limit, really - water sprays on the sidings to prevent the paint sticking, and soak the offenders into the bargain; blackthorn thickets to provide an impenetrable and painful barrier; even one of BTP's special anti-vandal trains full of professional art critics (enough to deter anybody!). But as I am sure everybody <sup>who has tried knows</sup> ~~here has learnt by now,~~ there are no easy practical answers. As with all organisations coping with the graffiti problem, for London Underground, preventive ideas have to be threaded through a complex maze of conflicting and competing constraints. Generally speaking these include safety, reliability, cost, and effects on train running and stabling. The more specific ones include avoidance of providing greater incentive to the graffitists through heightening the challenge, or heightening the provocation - such as through posters that deliberately insult them. This would be counterproductive. There is also the problem of communicating effective messages to the graffitists without raising passengers' fears at the same time.

The solutions LU currently have in place, or are pursuing, all acknowledge these constraints. They cover the board in terms of scope, ranging from the physical to the social. They include:

- \* Rapid cleaning of trains, both to reduce the impact of the problem, and to reduce the incentive for graffitists; to aid this, they are developing more powerful solvents.
- \* Developing repellent coatings for existing rolling stock.
- \* Designing new stock with fewer 'mural-sized' blank spaces on the sides, and with painted finish rather than bare aluminium.

\* Starting to protect depots and sidings by strong fencing + security guards, or infra-red intruder detectors linked to CCTV. Experiments with each approach appear to have drastically reduced problems at 2 hard-hit sites over the last few months, without obvious displacement to the interiors of trains, or (in one case at least) to other stabling locations on the line.

\* Campaigning for graffiti offences to be taken more seriously by magistrates.

\* Campaigning for spray cans to be made harder to obtain by the offenders - not a straightforward task, for in seeking to curb what is sometimes recklessly easy access to the display racks, you have to achieve a balance between the rights of victims such as London Underground, versus the rights of retailers to sell at a profit and the rights of legitimate customers to buy conveniently and without hindrance.

\* Running a carefully-researched poster campaign in selected hard-hit areas aimed at reducing the incentive to graffitiists, whilst reassuring passengers that LU can cope. The one they came up with was 'Every day is wash day on the Underground' - which shows how the 'pieces' are quickly removed, and flushed down the plughole, with all the symbolism that implies.

\* Finally, they are now exploring the scope for schools liaison visits to the hard-hit areas with a view to subtly explaining the costs and dangers to pupils, and arranging visits to depots. This could take up the theme of community 'ownership' of public services.

*Conclusion*

I have tried to present a picture of how an organisation copes when faced with an important and fairly new problem, yet when the scale and type of response possible is severely constrained by factors such as safety and cost and the need to avoid over-reacting. I think London Underground is beginning to cope very well. The key to this is twofold. First, routine quantitative monitoring of the problem through the TOMAS computerised rolling stock maintenance system to identify trends and troublespots, evaluate the impact of initiatives and monitor changes in offence methods and location. Second, devising a wide set of preventive measures which relate to the pattern identified from analysis of the records; which are broadly based on research into the sources of the problem; and which are threaded intelligently and creatively between the many practical constraints experienced by any public service organisation. This is a strategy I commend to all.

## References

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