

Ontario School Resource Officer (OSRO) Training Manual – Youth in Neighbourhoods: A Positive Approach to Graffiti Management

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-with input from Const. Scott Mills – Toronto Police Service, Crime Stoppers School Officer

1 Transformations

1.1 Why me

Why should I be writing this? Well, I've been taking pictures of graffiti for nine years, to preserve and promote as an art form. I'm an older retired corporate person, but my initial focus on graffiti has expanded over the last few years into an interest in other hip hop related activities, and an appreciation of this culture. I have helped with various youth groups and hip-hop events, and have developed a better appreciation of the issues faced by the youth and other community members. I now work on ways to resolve these issues, both with Scott Mills and as a board member of the groups CAVE (Communities Advancing Valued Environments) and Sketch Orleans.

I've helped with some transformations, doing positive community building, using young graffiti artists for activities in Toronto and Ottawa, so I have experience in both planning these events and priming walls.

Based on this, I've been asked by Const. Scott Mills – TPS Crime Stoppers school officer to put together a "how-to guide" using graffiti as a community building theme, based on my observations and recommendations. He in turn has forwarded this on to be included in the OSRO manual.

1.2 Traditional approaches

Traditional graffiti management approaches focus on arrest and eradication. However, fines may not be a deterrent, and a new blank wall will usually just get re-tagged. In addition, many cities' by-laws fine the victim's (property owners), and require the approval and purchase of a sign permit before the owner can replace a tagged wall with a mural.

1.3 What a "transformation" is

- Aims to change (transform) not only the look of an area, but also the local attitudes and how the different community groups interact with each other
- Focuses on a specific area within a neighbourhood – such as a neglected back alley
- Groups work together to clean up an area, prime over tags, replace them with murals (pieces), add some plants and gardens. Murals tend to not be tagged over, as the artists respect each other's work. Vines can also discourage tagging.

- Brings together the stakeholders that are key to the graffiti problem and builds stronger community links. Some of these key stakeholders are:
 - Young graffiti artists (preferably from same area)
 - Business owners
 - Residents/tenants within the specific area
- Involves other stakeholders – those with varying degrees of interest
 - School Resource Police Officers
 - Local Patrol Police Officers
 - Crime Stoppers programs (builds trust with youth)
 - School guidance
 - Probation Officers/Parole Officers
 - By-Law Officers
 - Local Business Improvement Associations
 - Local Business Owners
 - City Councillors
 - Community Groups
 - Local Media
- Objectives are to not only reduce graffiti tagging in an area but also “improve” the community.
 - Participants are encouraged to communicate and work together, so that they gain an understanding and appreciation of each other’s point of view and culture.
 - Youth are mentored in their art skills by more talented artists, learn other options relating to their art work that can lead to paid jobs, and gain self-confidence and business skills.
 - All surfaces are primed over together by youth and other residents
 - The mural surfaces stay relatively tag free, as there is usually a high degree of respect amongst graffiti artists.
 - Illegal tagging over a mural is quickly repaired, by the property owner contacting the initial graffiti artist.
 - Increased community involvement in their neighbourhood and pride of the area – measured through festivals, newspapers, and feedback.
- Artists that are involved, whether from a “youth at risk” program, or just interested youth, gain not just an appreciation of the impacts of their tagging, but an understanding of the larger community they are part of, and that they are valued as artists.
- Residents and property owners in turn gain an appreciation of the artistic skills of the youth and of their culture, and an understanding that the vast majority of vandalism graffiti is not related to the perceived violence associated with gang activity.
- Some artists may decide to do only legal graffiti art after the projects.
- Some may not be ready to go totally legal, and may attend events wearing the bandanas used by graffiti artists use to help filter paint fumes while they are working (a ventilation mask is recommended). All youth should be welcome, as this is also about communicating and building trust. Just make sure they don’t inadvertently pick a local gang colour for their bandana.

- Local businesses can sponsor the event by providing paints, food, coffee, plants, or cash donations
- Artists should be given an honorarium and/or paint to encourage the idea that art can lead to a career.
- Some key items needed for success
 - Buy in of concept from almost all of property owners for cleanup and priming or a mural. If many tags are left in the area because of non-consenting property owners, the success of the transformation is much less.
 - It is recommended that most property owners have a mural done over primed area, as murals deter much better than repeated priming.
 - Non-confrontational atmosphere should be set up to encourage communication and cooperation between groups.
 - Community volunteers are actively involved, with one of them willing to actively lead this activity and also remain as a contact for follow-ups. This change can't be done by just having an external group show up, clean the area, and disappear. This is a community effort.

2 How to Organize a Transformation Event

2.1 Pre Event

An event can be triggered by a specific incident, or from bylaw officers/police deciding to target a high priority area in city. In the latter case, it's suggested bylaw officers first issue warnings to the property owners, and suggest that a cooperative transformation can be one solution.

The following is a list of items to cover before the event:

- Identify the primes, possible stakeholders and sponsors
- Contact the main groups ahead of time, to determine their concerns and goals - political, economic, and social, and flush out any hidden agendas
- Schedule a kick-off with as many of the above groups as possible
 - Clarify that the objective is to address their issues and also to together develop both a short term and long term plan to benefit the whole community. Don't suggest any solutions yet.
 - Spread the word via bylaw officers, local press, beat police, schools, hip-hop events, flyers, etc.
- At the kickoff
 - Keep things simple, but do respect the valuable time of the attendees by running this in an efficient business like manner.
 - Assign a facilitator to encourage open discussion on the issues and document them to help develop some common threads.
 - Use a separate "parking lot" pad to quickly capture people's solutions for now, or off-topic concerns, so that focus is maintained and the main issues get identified first.

- Describe the transformation process as a possible solution that has the advantage of involving all and has proven short term and long term results with little cost or effort needed from the property owners.
- Use specifics from previous events, or other solutions that were tried and worked. Invite the contact from a previous successful event to help answer concerns.
- Set out 2-3 goals, some specific measurable objectives, and a plan, so that all will see what they are working towards, and you will know if there is success or not.
- Do a timeline in the meeting and get as many as possible to commit to some specifics and next steps. Try to schedule priming and the murals within a few days, so that you don't leave a lot of inviting blank walls for tagging. Pick a rain date also.
- Get a summary of the meeting's accomplishments out to all right after the meeting.
- Contact all business owners that are directly impacted (they may have not shown up initially). Ensure that if they don't want to help out, they at least are aware of what's happening, that this is something that will improve the community – and likely will increase property values and decrease petty crimes.
- Do a map of who wants a mural, who just wants to be primed, who wants some planting, and who wants nothing done at all, and ensure that it is clear to all participating.
- Encourage dialogue between property owners and youth, as some may want a particular style of mural.
- Think Green - ensure there will be enough different garbage cans available.
- Get any necessary city permits – if possible get one for the whole area, rather than each mural. This means less paperwork and is cheaper for the businesses if they sign up for the event.
- Ensure someone keeps the team's momentum going until the event date.
- Get sponsors – food, coffee, paint, plants, or other donations. List them on any communications, major ones may have small signs they want to put up at the event.
- Set aside an honorarium for the artists.
- Arrange for music, either a local band or a sound system. Many of the artists will have mixes from DJ friends to set the mood.
- Collect supplies
 - Exterior primer – latex, in 5 gallon pails. Good quality flat black exterior latex paint will add a lot of impact to any colour murals, but an off white/cream is a good compromise.
 - Rollers, trays, cheap plastic gloves – the more the better, so that all can pitch in and quickly clean the area. Plastic sheets to cover cars, etc.
 - Spray paint – There are any choices, and it can be expensive for specialty brands such as Montana and Belton. You get what you pay for, as the high end paints have the best colours for a better looking mural, and the best paint quality for durability of the mural – many artists will bring their own. There are some acceptable substitutes, such as Painter's Touch from Walmart – check with the artists on brands and colours.
 - Gardening equipment (rakes, shovels) and garbage bags

- Arrange for a city truck for garbage pickup
- Ensure media are on board for event.
- Distribute leaflets locally a few days before event to remind local residents
- Assign a few people for publicity, to work the crowd as people pass by and manage media contacts. Some artists are eager to explain their work, some may prefer anonymity.
- Day before the event
 - check weather in case need a delay
 - leaflet any cars to ensure they won't park there the next day
 - photograph both the targeted area and adjacent walls to track any new tagging
 - confirm with all on their roles and time of event, especially the graff artists, as they can sometimes be late.

2.2 During Event

- Ensure that first person there has the map of what areas get primed, painted, or nothing
- Post “do-not-paint” on any areas to be left alone, and keep an eye on these
- Get all the volunteers priming early in the morning. It takes a while to cover it all and needs an hour to dry before painting over it.
- Assign a wall area to graffiti artists as they come, unless they've already made arrangements with a property owner. If there are still some blanks late in the day – get them started on and arrange for follow up the next day if needed.
- Have a media contact there with info on the event and sponsors. They can also coordinate any photo-ops to promote the concept, while allowing the youth to get on with their art. Remember that some of the youth won't want their photos taken or names used, this needs to be respected.
- Ensure that while the local beat police need to be there to show their buy in and support, this is not the time not to look for or target specific youth.
- Pick an end time for the painting, to leave enough daylight to cleanup
- Make sure some stay for a cleanup crew. Don't leave paint and rollers in the garbage overnight, as it makes it too easy for the minority of youth who don't buy into the concept to use it as vandalism tools
- Ensure area is patrolled well that night, as well as the next few nights. The message needs to be clear that this was a permitted event, and tagging is still illegal.
- If a few youth need to return the next day to finish their pieces, have a publicity contact person there with them to reassure passers by.

2.3 Post Event

- Patrol the area to discourage tagging and repaint as necessary.
- Focus on this area for the next few weeks to ensure quick removal of any of new tags.
- Follow up with the team, and do a “lessons learned” in order to improve the process and determine if your objectives were met.

- See if any of the sponsors (or their corporate owners) are interested in an ongoing relationship.
- Publicize your success to other schools and areas of the city, and help them do a transformation too.
- Investigate a liaison with local school art departments to add some graffiti art to their program. Local graffiti artists are often quite willing to come in and show their skills and mentor other youth. It's not a "how to tag" course, it's a "how to work as an artist" course.
- Construct some simple frames – a 4x8 plywood sheet on 2x3 supports. These can be used to do graffiti mural demos at youth events, and the resultant works can be then auctioned off.
- Consider erecting a permanent sign at the entrance ways to the area, to celebrate the concept of graffiti as a community building strategy. This will ensure that passersby can be educated on the concept, and interested parties can contact the organizers to do maintenance in that area if vandalism occurs, or to conduct their own event .

Note: - For a transformation that was done recently (spring 2007) in Toronto's Broadcast Lane, nine months later the area saw minimal new tagging. There were also old tags left over from before the event, because some properties that did not want to give consent, and some property owners could not be located. You can see photos on via [this](#) link, or via www.ravensview.ca

3 Issues/Concerns

- Get buy in from all affected property owners, or at least ensure all are contacted. Some may worry that encouraging graffiti murals will decreasing property values. Emphasise that it is part of an overall program to clean up the area, improve linkages between various local stakeholders, and make the area a more welcome part of the community, as opposed to a hidden spot for garbage and crime. The reality will be an INCREASE their property values. A very accomplished real estate broker in downtown Toronto is willing to speak to any property owner about this concern if it comes up – Neil Wright Real Estate, at 108 Harbord St, Toronto, ON.
- Dress down –beat police may need to be in full gear since they are on patrol, but for others jeans and sneakers will be less intimidating.
- Don't use this as a fishing expedition, don't try to interrogate the artists to see what tags they might use elsewhere
- Some may refer to a "broken window syndrome" study, done in the US in 1982, that assumes cleaning an area will reduce all crime. While it's easy to believe this, subsequent studies have shown that while there can sometimes be a link to less minor crime, anything link to major crime needs to look at many more factors.
- Some may think graffiti means gangs – not realizing that typically less than 5% of all graffiti is gang-related.
- Absentee landlords may not care whether their property is cleaned or not – they may prefer to just pay the fines and write off the expense. Any communications need to emphasize that this is a recurring expense for them, and that a graffiti transformation will

likely reduce repeat tagging, increase their property values and reduce local crime (and insurance premiums).

4 Links

Community CAVE - www.communitycave.com

Sketch - www.sketchorleans.com

Crimestoppers – www.222tips.com

Legal graffiti work with Scott Mills - www.youtube.com/LegalGraffitiArt

5 Sample docs

This section of the guide can include some templates to build on, such as:

- Letter to residents before transformation
- Sponsorship request
- Press release
- Timetable and details to residents at event
- Handout for passers-by