

## Crime Prevention

# Vandalism: An Overview of the Problem

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## Abstract

Vandalism is the willful marking upon, defacing, and damaging of property. It is a serious problem that affects all types of businesses and properties, both public and private. Although the cost to society from vandalism is difficult to measure, losses are believed to be in the billions of dollars. This report defines vandalism and provides information on which institutions or enterprises are most prone to acts of vandalism and what can be done to curtail losses associated with vandalism.

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## Introduction

Vandalism is a serious problem throughout the United States. Once considered an urban problem, vandalism has spread to suburban and rural areas. Vandalism is most evident in the graffiti found on many public structures and building facades.

Vandalism affects all types of businesses through its senseless destruction of property. While most of the damage is directed against public buildings and structures, private buildings suffer as well. Reports of damage from acts of vandalism in schools and churches are regularly seen in the local papers and on television news programs.

Although there is no magic formula that will totally eradicate vandalism, it can be controlled and kept to a minimum by applying preventive strategies. This report defines vandalism and provides information on which institutions or enterprises are most prone to acts of vandalism, and what can be done to curtail the losses associated with vandalism. Estimates of insured losses due to vandalism are also provided.

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## What Is Vandalism?

There is no offense known to the law as "vandalism." The term is used to describe what the law defines as "destruction of property" and includes willful marking upon, defacing, and damaging of property. Vandalism is usually referred to as a "senseless crime" or an "expensive" joke or prank, usually without motive. Regardless of the motive, or lack of it, vandalism is an aggressive act prohibited by law and, as such, is a criminal act.

From the victim's viewpoint, acts of vandalism are, in fact, senseless. This does not mean that the vandal acts senselessly and without motive. A child that breaks a school window with a thrown rock, although acting senselessly, may have done so out of resentment at being disciplined by school authorities.

It has been suggested by behavioral scientists that defining vandalism as a senseless or motiveless crime contributes to our frustration in coping with it. Vandalism is often written off as a joke or prank, or as a "sickness," that exists within a certain age group in society; however, the costly effects of vandalism preclude us from ignoring it.

One problem in defining vandalism is how to distinguish it from arson, since it is often difficult to determine when an act of vandalism becomes arson. The following example serves to illustrate the problem: Vandals, as a means of gaining entry into a school building, set fire to the plastic glazing material of a door with lighter fluid; other combustibles in the building ignite, causing an extensive fire loss. The incident is reported as arson, although the cause of the loss was vandalism.

## Vandalism: An Overview of the Problem

While we tend to look upon vandalism as destruction of property, the most common sign of vandalism in our society is the defacement of public and private structures, highways, and street signs with graffiti. Public transportation facilities, highway structures, churches, and schools are common victims of graffiti.

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### Types of Vandalism

One useful classification of vandalism distinguishes between "tactical vandalism," "vindictive vandalism," and "wanton vandalism."

In tactical vandalism the damage is not an end in itself but merely a way to achieve a further, nondestructive goal. For example, someone may destroy a pay phone or vending machine in order to steal the money it contains. A worker may sabotage equipment in order to gain relief from a monotonous job.

Others may use vandalism to express discontent, to avenge a real or imagined affront, or to vent frustration or resentment. In such vindictive vandalism, the vandal is interested in destruction itself.

Wanton vandalism includes the popular image of vandalism as one of irrational, gratuitous, or wanton destruction. It is the type of vandalism most frequently committed by groups of young people. Kids "hang around" and, for lack of something constructive to do, turn to acts of destruction without any regard to what they are destroying or who the victims might be. While the motives are not always obvious, the vandalism occurs as a result of a dare, a fear of peer pressure, the excitement that comes from these types of activities, or the game of "one-upmanship." Wanton vandalism is the most common type of vandalism.

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### Losses Due to Vandalism

Up-to-date statistics on the scope and total cost of vandalism to society are unavailable. The most recent study on vandalism losses was conducted in 1984 by the All-Industry Research Advisory Council (AIRAC). AIRAC was formed by the property-casualty insurance industry to provide the public and industry with timely, reliable research information relative to public policy issues affecting risk and insurance. The study, *Crime Losses in Property-Casualty Insurance*, was based on insured loss data gathered by property-casualty insurance companies and reported to the Insurance Services Office.

Among the major findings of the study that are relative to this report were the following:

- Crime-related losses were conservatively estimated to account for 12.1 percent of all insured property-casualty industry losses during the three-year period 1979-81.
- Excluding commercial auto crime losses, known crime losses increased 43.4 percent from \$3.97 billion in 1979 to \$5.70 billion in 1981. When commercial automobile losses are added for 1981, known losses totaled \$6.02 billion.
- Vandalism accounted for estimated insured losses of \$407 million, nearly 7 percent of the total 1981 insured crime losses of \$6.02 billion.
- Arson was the second leading source of insured crime losses, totaling an estimated \$1.5 billion or about one-fourth of all crime-related losses for 1981.

Another AIRAC study, *Arson Incidence Claim Study*, which was published in 1980, found that vandalism was the most common reason for arson fires, accounting for 40 percent of the residential arson dollar loss and 61 percent of the commercial arson dollar loss. The National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) report, *Fire Loss in the United States During 2004*, estimates that fire loss to residential structures in 2004 were \$6.0 billion and to commercial structures, \$2.3 billion. Using the above AIRAC study figures, it can be estimated the total dollar loss in 2004 due to vandalism was \$3.8 billion (i.e., \$2.4 billion for residential structures and \$1.4 billion for commercial structures).

## Vandalism: An Overview of the Problem

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### Victims of Vandalism

Vandalism has, and continues to be, a serious problem in many areas of our society, including schools, churches, retail and construction industries, and transportation.

#### Schools

While school vandalism comprises many often-trivial incidents, in the aggregate, they pose a serious problem for schools and communities, and the police and fire departments charged with protecting them. The impact of vandalism is felt in many areas within a school - from graffiti on walls to malicious destruction of sections of a building. Deliberately wrecked school property includes plumbing and lighting fixtures, audiovisual equipment, walls, athletic and playground equipment, and school buses.

Many school fires originate as arson or during an act of vandalism. According to NFPA, in 2004, there were an estimated 7,000 fires in educational properties with property losses estimated at \$68 million; most of these fires were suspicious in origin.

Over the past two decades, concerns about school violence, weapons, drugs, and gangs have eclipsed concern about school vandalism, its causes, and possible responses. However, even as concerns about student and staff safety from violence have become school administrators' top priority, vandalism continues to occur regularly and to affect a significant proportion of U.S. schools. From 1996 to 1997, the incidence of murder, suicide, rape, assault with a weapon, and robbery at schools was very low. In contrast, over one-third of the nation's 84,000 public schools reported at least one incident of vandalism, totaling 99,000 separate incidents.

The lack of consistency in reporting school vandalism means that cost estimates are similarly imprecise. Vandalism costs are usually the result of numerous small incidents, rather than more-serious incidents. Various estimates reveal that the costs of school vandalism are both high and increasing. In 1970, the costs of school vandalism in the United States were estimated at \$200 million, climbing to an estimated \$600 million in 1990. Not only does school vandalism have fiscal consequences associated with repairing or replacing damaged or stolen property and paying higher insurance premiums if schools are not self-insured, but it also takes its toll in terms of aspects, such as difficulties in finding temporary accommodations and negative effects on student, staff, and community morale. Not all incidents of vandalism have the same effect on the school environment. Again, two useful dimensions for understanding the problem's impact are the monetary cost (where the repair charges are high), and the social cost (where the event has a significant negative impact on student, staff, and community morale).

#### Churches

Since 1995, over 1,500 houses of worship have been damaged by fire or bombing, according to the National Church Arson Task Force (NCATF). Arson remains the leading cause of fire at worship facilities. Motives vary widely: vandalism, pyromania, to cover up evidence of other crimes (such as burglary), financial profit, retaliation, and racial/religious discrimination (hate crimes).

Glass breakage is an expensive problem in churches because of the high cost of repairing valuable stained glass windows. Works of art and historically valuable statues, scrolls, and other religious objects also are subject to vandalism. The vulnerability of churches to vandalism is based partly on the fact that, in many churches, the front door is always left open to afford ready access to its membership. Defacing and vandalizing headstones and mausoleums are problems in cemeteries.

#### Construction

The construction industry is particularly affected by vandalism, since construction sites are generally poorly lighted and virtually deserted during the long hours of darkness in the winter months and in bad weather. Although there is no overall data on the number of vandal attacks on construction sites, in a study in New York City, losses due to vandalism were reported by 30 percent of the housing and construction projects.

## Vandalism: An Overview of the Problem

### Retail

Vandalism is a major crime-related problem in the vending machine sector of the retailing industry. While the rewards to the vandal consist of only the small amount of money and merchandise in the machine, the cost to the business is increased greatly by damage to the coin meter or to the machine itself.

### Transportation

Public transportation facilities are favorite targets for vandals who frequently deface surfaces with graffiti, damage seats, break windows, or strew trash on vehicles. Most losses occur in train and bus yards where trains are parked during non-rush hours and stored for maintenance and repairs.

Railroads also class vandalism as a serious financial problem. A report released by the Association of American Railroads estimated vandalism costs at \$2.13 million in 1986. Of prime importance to railroads are the acts of vandalism that cause accidents resulting in injuries and deaths. Such incidents include shootings, rock throwing, placing rocks and debris on rails, and tampering with track switches, which can result in derailments or collisions.

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## Summary

Virtually every section of our society is affected by vandalism - from graffiti in the neighborhoods in which we live, to damage of the public facilities that we share and defacement of the buildings where we work. Although the total cost cannot be estimated with accuracy, losses due to vandalism are substantial, necessitating actions to deter or prevent it.

For information on vandalism prevention, in general, see Crime Prevention Report CP-25-11, *Vandalism Prevention*.

For information on preventing school vandalism, see Crime Prevention Report CP-93-66, *School Vandalism Prevention*.

For information on arson prevention, see Fire Protection Report FP-42-01, *Incendiarism and Arson*.

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