

Abstract for 1999 Herman Goldstein Award for Excellence in
Problem-Oriented Policing
RICHMOND (VA) GRAFFITI TASK FORCE

In late 1997 and early 1998, the Richmond Police Department identified a serious problem: graffiti vandalism. This problem was identified by community and law enforcement observation of graffiti that was rapidly being "tagged" on businesses, residences, and historical landmarks. Public outcry and an uncoordinated effort of at least fifteen business and neighborhood associations mandated a police response.

The Richmond Police Department began its analysis by creating a community graffiti task force and appointing a Detective Sergeant to supervise the task force in March of 1998. Task force members collected information about the problem through a meeting in April where representatives of law enforcement, business, and the community in the Richmond area gathered, regular communication between the representatives, and a self-education process on the part of task force detectives.

The Richmond Graffiti Task Force responded to the graffiti problem with a number of initiatives, each of which was designed to address one of the five goals of the task force: increase the reporting of graffiti, coordinate community efforts to address graffiti, change the public's perception of the police department's position on graffiti, educate all individuals and entities involved in addressing graffiti, and deter future incidents of graffiti. The task force's responses included a major media and public service campaign, a graffiti hotline, execution of search warrants, maintenance of investigative information, roll call training for Richmond police officers, and general coordination of city and community responses.

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The efforts of the task force have been assessed and continue to be assessed by the task force. Since the creation of the task force:

- 156 incidents of graffiti have been reported to the graffiti hotline
- 231 sites have been reported to the Department of Public Works for clean-up
- 33 felony arrests and 38 misdemeanor arrests have been made of graffiti vandals
- 7 search warrants have been executed of the residences of graffiti vandals

The police department representatives on the task force have received positive feedback from the community concerning task force initiatives. Training of Richmond Police Department patrol officers has resulted in increased identification and apprehension of graffiti vandals. Finally, the arrests of a small group of individuals responsible for a large percentage of graffiti in Richmond resulted in the non-occurrence of any new graffiti for four months giving the task force time to clean-up old graffiti and prepare to proactively address future graffiti.

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A. Scanning

In late 1997 and early 1998, after a year and a half relief from a graffiti problem, the city of Richmond experienced a plague of graffiti. Graffiti vandals and their crews were "tagging" businesses, monuments, and historical buildings at a rampant pace particularly in the downtown area of the city where business people and investors were trying to revitalize and in historic residential areas which were being restored. The members of the business community and citizens were outraged that graffiti vandals were re-tagging sites within days after clean up. They were equally outraged at what they perceived as inaction on the part of the Richmond Police Department, governmental entities responsible for cleaning up the graffiti, and prosecutors.

The Richmond Police Department and the community identified graffiti as a problem that needed to be addressed and took action to remedy this problem. Police department managers appointed Detective Sergeant Burt Walker on March 20, 1998 to be the officer in charge of the Richmond Graffiti Task Force. While other problems faced the city of Richmond and the police department at the time, the police department felt that this graffiti problem demanded immediate attention. The financial cost to the community and the city, the allocation of tremendous resources to put temporary "Band-Aids" on the graffiti vandalism, public outrage, the city's concern about permanent damage to monuments and historical buildings, and the lack of a coordinated effort within the community

were the primary reasons that this problem warranted and received this kind of attention. The task force was assigned the responsibility of analyzing this problem and generating potential solutions to target those vandals responsible for the hip-hop type of graffiti tagging that plagued the city. It was the position of the Richmond Police Department that the creation of such a task force would provide a coordinated effort of police, citizens, business people, and city agencies to stem the plague of graffiti and would provide the community with a better understanding of police concern and efforts in addressing graffiti vandalism and the police with a better understanding of community concerns and frustration about the graffiti problem.

B. Analysis

The Richmond Graffiti Task Force, upon its creation in March of 1998, immediately undertook an analysis of the problem. It was already clear, from the public outcry and city efforts being expended to address the problem, that a serious problem did exist. The task force conducted an analysis, of reported crime within the city of Richmond and came to the conclusion that the majority of graffiti vandalism incidents were not being reported to the police department. The task force determined that the police department and the community had addressed the problem as recently as 1996 by the assignment of two detectives who initiated several investigations leading to arrests and a temporary decline in graffiti vandalism. This temporary decline ended in 1997 and by the first quarter of 1998, graffiti was again widespread in the city.

During the first two weeks of its existence and since that point, the task force learned and continues to learn about the offenders who engage in graffiti vandalism and about the victims who are their targets. The offenders were graffiti vandals who organized in "crews" such as the Mad Skills Posse or "MSP." These crews were well organized groups consisting of black and white males many of whom had moved to Richmond from the Northern Virginia area in order to attend school at Virginia Commonwealth University. They ultimately dropped out of school but remained in the Richmond area. They were interested in hip-hop culture, tattoos, and skateboards. Some were determined to have criminal histories. Most were "straight-edged", meaning that they lived a lifestyle which did not involve the use of drugs, the consumption of alcohol, or the use of tobacco. Analysis revealed that these graffiti vandals were motivated by the respect that they gained from other graffiti vandals and by their desire to rebel against society. The time, place, and nature of their graffiti determined the degree of respect that they would receive from other "crews." The victims of the graffiti vandalism were Richmond citizens and business owners whose property was being ravaged by the graffiti vandals. They suffered enormous clean-up costs to the tune of \$200 - \$500 each time that they would employ a non-city agency to remove the graffiti and potentially permanent damage to their businesses and historical landmarks. The city suffered as a whole by the divisive atmosphere that this problem generated and the enormous financial burden on city government and ultimately, the taxpayers. It was estimated at one point that it would cost a quarter of a million dollars just to clean up the existing graffiti. A public works

supervisor estimated in June of 1998 that the Department of Public Works was removing graffiti from 90 to 120 properties each month.

Prior to the creation of the Richmond Graffiti Task Force in March of 1998, no less than fifteen (15) neighborhood and business associations were working independently to address the problem of graffiti vandalism. The Downtown Business Association had hired a private contractor who they routinely called to clean up graffiti. Some of the Richmond neighborhood associations used volunteers to clean up graffiti in their neighborhoods. The Richmond Department of Public Works was not being successful in their efforts to obtain releases of liability from the owners of affected property and was thus not being successful in clean up efforts.

The task force and particularly, the Detective Sergeant and four detectives (one from each police precinct) almost immediately realized that certain information was needed to better understand the problem of graffiti vandalism. They undertook this task by meeting and corresponding with other law enforcement agencies who had also experienced this problem particularly in the Northern Virginia area, by meeting with informants in the Richmond area who could provide information on the identities and culture of graffiti vandals, by studying written materials that were available from graffiti experts, and by examining graffiti web sites on the Internet.

On April 1, 1998, the task force held its first meeting at the Virginia State Library. In preparation for this meeting, the Downtown Business Association prepared flyers advertising the meeting and distributed these flyers to all

neighborhoods and business associations. Forty-one individuals representing 17 agencies/organizations and several police departments attended this meeting which lasted for one and one-half hours. The efforts of Sergeant Burt Walker prior to this meeting to contact the leaders of the main citizen and business groups previously involved in addressing the problem and the meeting itself led to the creation of the largest citizen/police/city organization in the Richmond area, the Richmond Graffiti Task Force. The organizations that agreed to participate and actually did participate in the task force were the following:

- The Downtown Neighborhood Association
- The Fan District Association
- The Fan Women's Club
- The Historic Jackson Ward Association
- The West of the Boulevard Association
- The Carytown Association
- The Downtown Business Association
- Richmond Renaissance
- Virginia Commonwealth University's Division of Student Affairs
- Virginia Commonwealth University's Physical Plant
- The Richmond Department of Public Works
- The Richmond Clean City Commission
- The Department of Community Development
- The Virginia Department of Transportation
- Offender Aid and Restoration of Richmond, Inc.
- The Richmond Commonwealth Attorney's Office
- Richmond Police Department
- Virginia State Capital Police
- Virginia Commonwealth University Police

- Virginia Union University Police

C. Response

The Richmond Graffiti Task Force started its mission on April 2, 1998, the day after the April 1st organizational meeting, with numerous suggested and recommended responses that had been presented by various individuals at the

April 1st meeting. From those initial suggestions or recommendations and through continuous networking and brainstorming amongst members of the task force, a multitude of responses has been taken to address the graffiti problem in Richmond. They include:

- The establishment of a court-monitoring group to appear in court when any graffiti case is prosecuted.
- A major media campaign primarily undertaken by the West of the Boulevard Association and Downtown Business Association to educate the public about graffiti and the reporting of graffiti.
- A public service campaign that was developed with a \$10,000 grant from the Richmond Clean City Commission. This campaign consisted of 5 30-second television spots featuring the trials and tribulations of a Claymation character graffiti writer named PUNKO.
- The city's dissemination of fliers about how to report graffiti, the city's effort in general to clean up graffiti, and the graffiti hotline. These fliers were included in the envelopes with all Richmond city utility bills for the months of August, September, and October of 1998.
- Regular press releases on the arrest of graffiti vandals and their ultimate court dispositions.
- The establishment and manning of a graffiti hotline to report graffiti activity.
- The execution by Richmond police of search warrants on the residences of graffiti vandals.
- The creation of a graffiti database to preserve any and all information gathered by the task force.
- Communication with Northern Virginia law enforcement agencies on a regular basis to identify potential graffiti vandals who may be relocating from the Northern Virginia area to Richmond.
- Roll call training for officers conducted by the detectives assigned to the task force.
- Coordinating with the Department of Public Works in reporting locations of graffiti and assisting them in obtaining liability waivers from the owners of the affected buildings.
- Prosecution in Richmond General District Court where the typical sentence has been 12 months in jail with 11 months suspended, a fine, restitution, and court costs.

The task force chose these different responses based on the primary findings from the extensive analysis. Each response was aimed at addressing one of the

following primary findings: there was no single coordinated effort within the city to address the graffiti problem, the majority of graffiti vandalism incidents were not being reported to the police, graffiti vandals took pride in their "work", the community felt that the police were not addressing what was a serious community problem, city officials were unable to obtain liability waivers so that they could clean up the graffiti, prosecutions of graffiti cases were not resulting in what the community believed to be stiff enough punishment, and the lack of understanding on the part of both the community and law enforcement as to the type of individuals and culture behind graffiti vandalism.

When the task force undertook its efforts to address the graffiti problem, it was guided by its five (5) goals (to increase reporting of graffiti, to coordinate community efforts to address graffiti, to change the public's perception of the police department's position on graffiti, to educate all individuals and entities involved in addressing graffiti, and to deter future incidents of graffiti). The task force's objectives to meet these five (5) goals would also serve as the evaluation criteria upon which any response could be measured. Those objectives were as follows:

- To organize a task force of citizen groups, business groups, city agencies and the police department as a community or problem-oriented policing effort to deal with graffiti in the city.
- To organize and coordinate the efforts of the various city agencies responsible for graffiti clean-up efforts and to develop a procedure to make liability waivers available to property owners.
- To develop a reporting system so that citizens could make one telephone call to report graffiti, obtain information about graffiti vandalism, or provide general information about graffiti that might be useful to the task force.

- To record and document incidents of graffiti so that historical investigations could be developed to identify, arrest, and prosecute graffiti vandals.
- To provide training for investigators and commonwealth attorneys to successfully investigate and prosecute graffiti vandals.
- To develop a roll call training program for patrol personnel on methods of identifying graffiti vandals.
- To develop a media campaign designed to educate the community on graffiti and to educate graffiti vandals on the consequences of their actions.
- To successfully deter graffiti vandalism both in the present and the future.

In its efforts to meet both its goals and objectives, the task force had certain resources that were already available and some that it sought out. Because of the nature of the problem and the efforts of other individuals and entities, many of the task force's resources were already at work addressing the problem. The task force was able to coordinate those resources and utilize them in its efforts. These resources included the various business and citizens organizations and other city agencies such as the Department of Public Works. Through this channeling of both government and civilian resources, the task force was able to take advantage of certain financing that otherwise would not have been available as well as equipment and manpower. In addition to these already available resources, the task force detectives sought out the advice and resources available from Northern Virginia law enforcement agencies who had previously experienced problems with graffiti. A local advertising company, Work Inc., was contacted and utilized in the extensive media campaign.

The task force did experience certain difficulties during the response implementation. The Richmond Department of Public Works had purchased a

truck and trailer to utilize during cleanup efforts but only had two people assigned with the task of graffiti cleanup. The task force was able to overcome these staffing shortages and nonuse of available equipment by developing a process of contacting the appropriate public works authorities upon receipt of any information concerning the existence of graffiti within the city. A second problem was difficulty in educating the public about the criminal justice system. At the outset of the task force's assignment, the public was outraged at a perceived failure on the part of law enforcement and the prosecutors in handling graffiti cases. Through contact with individuals and businesses involved in the task force, Richmond police detectives and Commonwealth's Attorneys were able to calm the public by explaining the steps necessary to successfully dispose of these types of cases. The police department recognized two additional problems that were directly related to its own inexperience with graffiti cases: the department's computer system needed to be changed to allow analysis of graffiti as a separate crime category from vandalism and detectives had to develop a method of conducting historical graffiti investigations for future identification of suspects. Finally, the task force lost its light duty police officer who had been assigned the responsibility of answering the graffiti hotline. His transfer resulted in more extensive use of the hotline's voice mail capability and a decision to utilize property crime detectives to answer the hotline when available.

D. Assessment

Evaluation of the task force's responses has been conducted continuously since its creation by not only Sergeant Burt Walker and the detectives assigned by

the Richmond Police Department to the task force but by other members of the task force as well. The evaluation has consisted of maintaining records of the number of calls received on the graffiti hotline and the number of sites that have been reported to the Department of Public Works for cleanup, receiving feedback from other individuals involved in the task force and members of the community on the task force's efforts and public perception towards the police response to the graffiti problem, monitoring detective and patrol officer identification of graffiti vandals to measure the success of all training efforts, and maintaining statistics on the number of search warrants that have been executed and arrests that have been made in graffiti investigations since the birth of the task force.

The various responses that have been implemented by the Richmond Graffiti Task Force have had a tremendously positive impact on the previously rampant graffiti problem that plagued the city in late 1997 and early 1998. Through these responses, aimed at addressing one or more of its five goals, the task force has been enormously successful in addressing each of the goals (to increase reporting of graffiti, to coordinate community efforts to address graffiti, to change the public's perception of the police department's position on graffiti, to educate all individuals and entities involved in addressing graffiti, and to deter future incidents of graffiti). Since the graffiti hotline has been available to the public for reporting, 156 incidents of graffiti within the city have been reported to the hotline. Of these 156, 99 reports involved vandalism to businesses and 57 involved vandalism to residences. Since April 1, 1998, 231 sites have been reported to the Richmond Department of Public Works for cleanup of graffiti.

The coordinator of the task force, Sergeant Burt Walker, continues to receive positive feedback from other members of the task force concerning the aggressive efforts taken by the Richmond Police Department and the successful coordination of a previously uncoordinated effort to address a serious community problem. The goal of educating those involved in addressing the graffiti problem has been achieved by the task force members' own self-education on graffiti and the graffiti culture and by the development of a lesson plan for roll call training entitled *Graffiti Enforcement* by Task Force Detective Matt Edgar. The lesson plan has been successfully used to train all police officers on the identification of graffiti, the modus operandi of suspects who engage in graffiti vandalism, and graffiti terminology or slang. After this training, one Richmond police officer on the city's southside reported information to the task force after observing activity by an individual which the officer identified as connected to graffiti vandalism based on his training. Finally, the goal of deterrence of future graffiti vandalism incidents has been achieved and is measurable. After the arrests in July and August of 1998 of 5 individuals believed to be responsible for 90% of the city's graffiti problem at that time, it was four months before the Richmond Graffiti Task Force saw any incidents of new graffiti. The media campaign encouraging reporting and discouraging vandals from taking pride in their vandalism along with aggressive problem-oriented policing and investigation were directly responsible for the deterrence. The Richmond Police Department has made 33 felony arrests and 38 misdemeanor arrests of individuals engaged in graffiti vandalism since the program began. The department has also obtained and

executed seven (7) search warrants which have been tremendously successful in instilling fear in the hearts and minds of graffiti vandals. They now know that their "art" is not really art but is vandalism which is a crime punishable by stiff penalties including jail time and restitution for damage.

The Richmond Graffiti Task Force will continue its successful efforts in coordinating and mobilizing available community resources and entities to alleviate this problem and rid the city of graffiti permanently. Its efforts as a community organization not solely consisting of law enforcement increase the likelihood that just as it has been successful to date in achieving its goals so will it continue to be at least as successful and probably more so in the future. The task force is constantly looking for additional mechanisms that it can put into place to assist it in its efforts. One of its priorities for the immediate future is to transfer investigative information currently being stored in a word processing file to a database that would then allow both simple and complex crime analysis functions to be performed such as searches by a particular suspect name or tag. The task force is not and has not been concerned with displacement of this particular problem as contact with other law enforcement has not revealed such displacement. Surrounding jurisdictions do experience certain graffiti vandalism problems but analysis of the tags and other modus operandi lead to the conclusion that the vandals responsible for that activity have not also engaged in vandalism within Richmond city limits.

E. Agency and Officer Information

This problem-solving initiative, the Richmond Graffiti Task Force, was adopted initially by the management of the Richmond Police Department at the Deputy Chief level and was assigned to Detective Sergeant Burt Walker for further development and implementation. Through Sergeant Walker's efforts to coordinate community efforts and train law enforcement personnel, the philosophy and approach of the Graffiti Task Force is rapidly becoming not only a department wide but a community wide philosophy and approach toward addressing a serious community and law enforcement problem - graffiti vandalism. Officers and police department managers who were and are still involved in the operation of the task force did not receive any special training on problem-oriented policing either prior to or during the execution of this initiative. The incentives that were available to those detectives and police officers involved in the initiative included the accumulation of compensatory time, managerial encouragement on a job well done, and personal satisfaction that their efforts were successfully alleviating a community problem. The task force did not consult problem-oriented policing manuals or examples of other problem solving efforts but instead focused its efforts on self-education through the Internet and contact with other law enforcement and then coordinating the task force. Fundamental concepts and principles of problem-oriented policing were and remain at the heart of this initiative and are demonstrated by the continual and extensive reliance upon the community and other city agencies to address the graffiti problem. The task force did not identify any particular problems or issues

inherent to the problem-oriented policing or problem-solving models. The resources, personnel and financial, that the Richmond Police Department allocated to the graffiti task force included the manpower of one (1) Police Detective Sergeant and four (4) detectives. Fortunately, citizen and business associations provided the funding for a percentage of the task force's efforts and the Department of Public Works allocated \$100,000 more for graffiti cleanup efforts in 1998 than it had in 1997. The only police department financial resource that exceeded the existing department budget was the compensatory time that was given to task force detectives who worked on the initiative. The task force coordinator/project contact person is Detective Sergeant Burt Walker of the Richmond Police Department. He is currently assigned as the property detective supervisor at Richmond's First Precinct which is located at 2501 Q Street, Richmond, Virginia 23219. His phone number is (804) 780-4016, fax number is (804) 780-4152, and his e-mail address is walkerbt@ci.richmond.va.us.

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