

# WHAT'S NEW WITH KIDS?

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May 2015

## *Graffiti Vandalism*

Memories from my trip to Madrid, Spain, about 10 years ago, include late-night dinners, El Prado Museum, and graffiti. The sky-high graffiti on public structures, I concluded, must have been done by graffitiists who used a crane or by Cirque du Soleil-type acrobats. A Madrilenian said that the higher the graffiti the more prestige is bestowed upon the graffitiist. Graffiti in the Las Vegas Valley is not on the scale that it was in Madrid, but it is here, more so in some areas of the valley than in others.

Graffiti is “any unauthorized inscription, word, figure or design that is marked, etched, scratched, drawn or painted on the public or private property, real or personal, of another, which defaces such property” (NRS 268.4075). Modern graffiti originated in the 1960s in the city walls and subways in Philadelphia and New York City (PBS News Hour, 2011). It is found on buildings, water towers, billboards, retaining walls, freeway sound walls, utility poles, vehicles, bridges, etc., on public and private properties, in urban and rural areas throughout the United States.

The U.S. Department of Justice categorizes graffiti into six types: (1) gang, (2) common tagger, (3) artistic tagger, (4) conventional graffiti: spontaneous, (5) conventional graffiti: malicious or vindictive, and (6) ideological (Weisel, 2013). Graffiti is often referred to as either graffiti done by taggers or that done by street gangs. Taggers use graffiti to express their artistic creativity, to play a game, or to achieve fame and notoriety (Salt Lake Metro Gang Unit, Washoe County Sheriff's Office). Gangs use graffiti to mark their territory or to threaten their enemies (Salt Lake Metro Gang Unit, Washoe County Sheriff's Office).

Graffiti is a property crime, costing the United States an estimated \$12 billion to remove it (Weisel, 2013). The cost of graffiti abatement and removal to communities is high as is shown below:

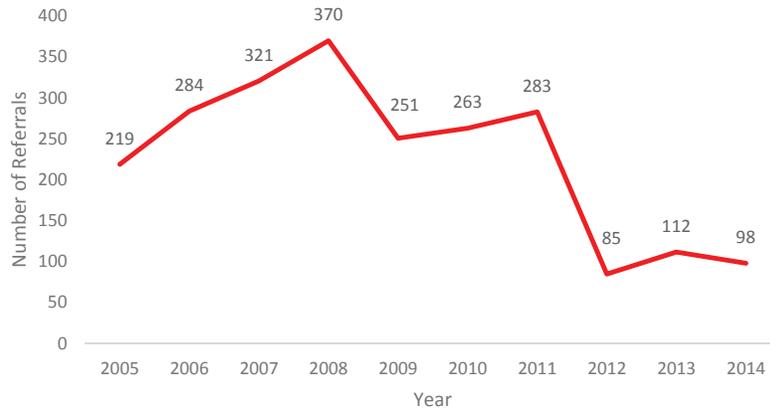
- Austin spends over \$500,000 annually on graffiti removal (Valles, 2014).
- Milwaukee spends about \$1.5 million annually on graffiti removal (City of Milwaukee).
- Minneapolis budgets slightly more than a million dollars annually to document and remove graffiti (Golden, 2014).
- Omaha budgets about \$650,000 annually on their graffiti abatement program (Omaha Public Works).
- Reno spends about \$339,000 annually for graffiti abatement and removal (Senate Committee on Judiciary, 2015).
- Riverside spends more than \$1.3 million annually on graffiti abatement (City of Riverside).
- Salt Lake City spends about \$400,000 annually on graffiti removal (Salt Lake City Police Department).
- San Francisco spends more than \$20 million annually on graffiti removal (San Francisco Public Works).
- Southern Nevada spends more than \$30 million annually (includes private and public funds) to fight graffiti (Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department).
- Stockton spends more than \$900,000 annually on graffiti removal (City of Stockton).
- Tucson spends \$874,630 on graffiti abatement and removal (Grijalva, 2015). Tucson's FY2016 city budget includes double that amount (Wasu, 2015).

Graffiti is rarely reported to the police (Weisel, 2013), as a result, statistics may not reveal the extent of the problem. The statistics reported on the next page provide some insight into graffiti by juveniles in Nevada's two largest counties, Washoe and Clark.

Washoe County (projected total 2014 population of 437,580) (Hardcastle, 2014)

- In Washoe County there were 98 total graffiti referrals (arrests, citations) of youth and juveniles ages 8 to 17 in 2014, seven of which were female (Frank Cervantes, personal communication, 7/11/15).
- From 2005 to 2014, the number of juvenile graffiti referrals peaked in 2008 and bottomed out in 2012 (figure).

**Juvenile Graffiti Referrals, Washoe County, Nevada: 2005-2014**



Note: This is a referral count only. The same juvenile may have multiple referrals.

Source: Frank Cervantes, Washoe County Juvenile Services, personal communication, 7/9/15.

Clark County (projected total population of 2,051,946) (Hardcastle, 2014)

- About one-half of graffiti-related offenses in Southern Nevada were committed by juveniles age 17 and under in 2012 (SNGC, 2012).
- One hundred fifty juvenile graffiti referrals were made by the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police in 2014 (Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, Office of Public Information,, personal communication, June 2015).

Detective Scott Black, of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, in an interview for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, said that in the Las Vegas Valley, graffiti is mostly done for fame and notoriety, it is rarely gang affiliated, and most taggers who are arrested end up performing 100 hours of community service. The latter usually is removing graffiti (Ragan, 2014).

Frank Cervantes, director of Washoe County Juvenile Services, captures the social and economic effects of graffiti on communities—“Graffiti by definition is not art. Graffiti is destruction of property. In addition to the many negative financial and social implications that graffiti creates, it can also form a perception of an unsafe community” (Frank Cervantes, personal communication, 7/9/15).

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