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TEENAGE VANDALISM IN GEORGIA

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ABSTRACT Data gathered from a selected nonmetropolitan and a metropolitan county in Georgia suggest that most junior and senior high school students had engaged in at least one act of vandalism in the previous 12 months. Vandalism most often occurred among groups of four or more people, on weekends, and outside one's own neighborhood. Reduction of teenage vandalism involves consideration of peer group influence, leisure activities, and deterrence measures.

Introduction

The emergence of vandalism as a serious problem has implications for many aspects of community decision making, but it is particularly significant for citizens involved in crime control efforts. In 1982, 34,913 acts of vandalism¹ were reported to law enforcement officials in Georgia, and 3,352 people were arrested for committing the crime of vandalism. Vandalism accounted for 15.7 percent of all less serious offenses, representing the second highest percentage of all less serious crimes committed in Georgia. Driving under the influence (DUI) was first with 21 percent.

Nationwide, 218,451 people were arrested for vandalism in 1980, a 17.8 percent increase since 1976. About half of all these persons were under 18 years of age. Georgia had a lower vandalism crime rate² than the national average in 1980. For that year the U.S. vandalism rate was 112.3 per 100,000 people. In Georgia the rate was 71.6 per 100,000. These figures, however, do not reveal whether Georgia's lower vandalism rate is attributable to enforcement priorities, reporting procedures, or community norms.

National and state arrest figures, as well as the number of incidents reported to the police, can aid in analyzing levels of vandalistic behavior. Government

¹ The Federal Bureau of Investigation (U.S. Department of Justice, 1979:320) defines vandalism as:

...the willful or malicious destruction, injury, disfigurement or defacement of any public or private property, real or personal, without the consent of the owner or person having custody or control, by cutting, tearing, breaking, marking, painting, drawing, covering with filth, or any other means as may be specified by local law.

² Vandalism crime rate = Number of vandalism arrests divided by total state population or total U.S. population.

research, however, shows that in 1980 only one-third of all personal crimes and 39 percent of all crimes involving households were reported to law enforcement personnel (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1982). An Ohio study revealed that nearly one in every five rural households was a victim of at least one act of vandalism annually (Phillips, 1976). These studies suggest that less serious offenses, such as vandalism, may occur with greater frequency than current reporting procedures and arrest figures indicate.

A national study recently estimated that the cost of vandalism to commercial establishments alone exceeded \$2.5 billion per year, a figure that equals the cost of burglary and exceeds that of shoplifting and various forms of fraud (U.S. News and World Report, 1979). In 1982, the Georgia Department of Transportation spent about \$1 million to repair and replace vandalized and stolen road signs. The average road sign costs approximately \$13 to make and \$45 to erect (Tifton Gazette, 1983). It is apparent that vandalism is not only costly, but pervasive throughout the United States and Georgia.

In order to learn more about the nature and extent of vandalism in Georgia, the University of Georgia's Cooperative Extension Service developed a research project to investigate the problem. The objective of the project was to examine the incidence and types of vandalism committed by youths in Georgia and reasons why young people commit vandalistic acts.³ Vandalism, rightly or wrongly, is still considered a youth crime. The study also sought to evaluate the effectiveness of certain types of vandalism prevention programs.

Study method

A questionnaire was administered in two counties, one metropolitan and one nonmetropolitan.⁴ The 1980 population

³For this research the definition of vandalism was not limited to a strict legal interpretation, but expanded to include participation in mischievous acts that had the potential to cause monetary damage or inconvenience victims.

⁴Based on the 1980 Census, Georgia has eight Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA's). The general concept of a Metropolitan Statistical Area is one of a large population nucleus together with adjacent counties which have a high degree of economic and social integration with that nucleus. These areas are typically surrounded by nonmetropolitan counties. Areas qualifying for recognition as Metropolitan Statistical Areas have either a city with a population of at least 50,000 or a Bureau of the Census urbanized area of at least 50,000 and a total Metropolitan Statistical Area population of at least 100,000. Georgia currently has 38 metropolitan counties and 121 nonmetropolitan counties.

was less than 35,000 in the nonmetropolitan county and more than 100,000 in the metropolitan county (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1982). The largest city in the nonmetropolitan county was slightly under 14,000 population, while the metropolitan county's largest city was approximately 74,000. These counties are considered to be representative of Georgia's metropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties.

With the cooperation and assistance of the local school boards, junior and senior high school principals, and county Extension staffs, a random sample of students was drawn and a survey questionnaire administered in the two counties' public school systems. None of the respondents refused to participate in the research. A total of 730 usable questionnaires was obtained.

Survey results

Information in Table 1 shows the number of respondents engaging in vandalistic acts. About 14 percent of the total sample said they had not engaged in a vandalistic act in the previous 12 months. About 15 percent of the metropolitan respondents and 11 percent of the nonmetropolitan respondents reported in a similar manner. Additional statistical analyses (not shown) indicate that very little substantive difference exists between the two groups with regard to participation in vandalistic acts.

Information in Table 2 reveals the number of vandalistic acts reported by the respondents. Approximately 25 percent said they had participated in two to four vandalistic acts in the preceding 12 months; more than 20 percent indicated they had committed 11 or more. These findings reveal that vandalism occurs with a relatively high degree of regularity among many school-age youth in the study area.

To determine what types of vandalistic acts young people are committing and how serious or destructive their behavior is, the respondents were asked whether they had engaged in any of 31 different types of vandalistic acts. The findings presented in Figure 1 are in order of frequency of participation.

The four most frequently self-reported types of vandalistic behavior--breaking bottles, telephone harassment, ringing doorbells, and drawing restroom graffiti--are vandalistic activities commonly perceived by many people as "traditional" or "kids will be kids" types of behavior that have become part of everyday life (Phillips, 1976).

Shopping centers, malls, recreational areas, and business establishments with large parking lots that are meeting and gathering places for young people are particularly vulnerable to problems of personal injury and tire damage associated with broken bottles. Cleaning up broken glass and anti-vandalism patrols inflate operational costs and inconvenience law-abiding citizens. Restroom graffiti poses no physical threat, but the expense of periodically repainting restroom facilities is considerable.

Table 1. Self-reported participation in vandalistic acts in previous 12 months (percentages in parentheses)

	Total Sample (N = 730)	Metropolitan County (N = 391)	Nonmetropolitan County (N = 339)
Yes	631 (86.4)	330 (86.4)	301 (88.8)
No	99 (13.6)	61 (15.6)	38 (11.2)

Table 2. Total number of self-reported vandalistic acts previous 12 months

(N = 730)

	Number	Frequency	Percent
	0	99	13.6
	1	64	8.8
	2- 4	180	24.7
	5- 7	133	18.2
	8-10	86	11.8
	11+	168	23.0
Total	31	730	100.0

Figures 1, 2, and 3

FIGURE 1: TYPES OF VANDALISTIC ACTS (N = 730)

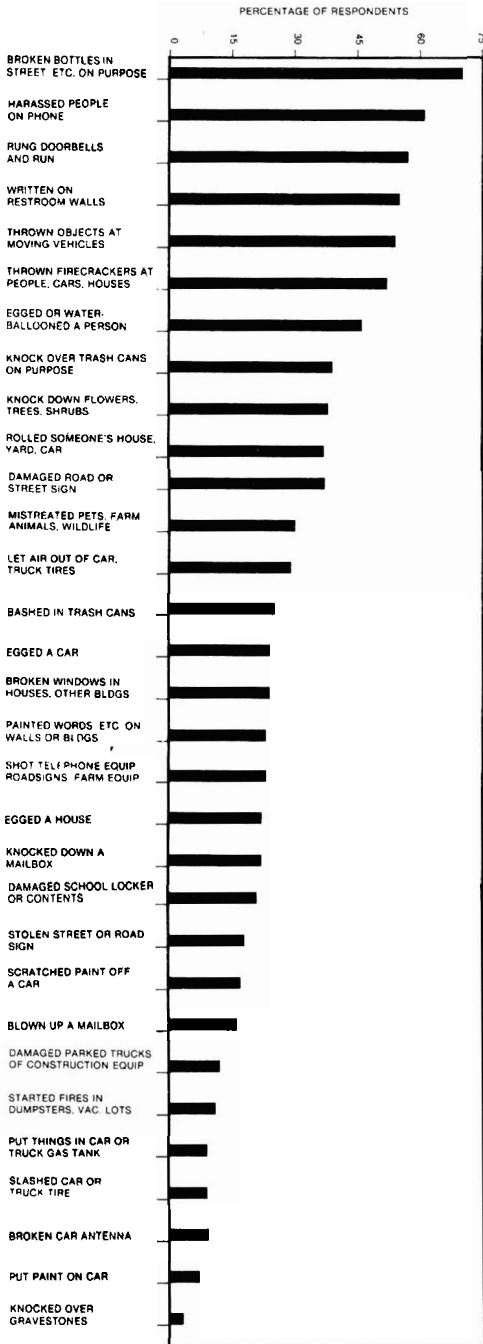


FIGURE 2: FREQUENCY OF VANDALISM (N = 730)

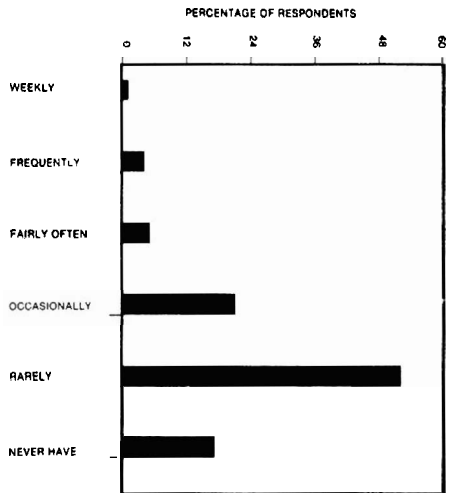
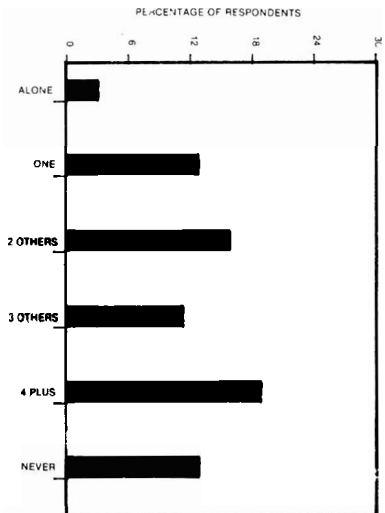


FIGURE 3. PEOPLE INVOLVED (N = 730)



The recreation department in the nonmetropolitan county spends more than \$200 annually to eliminate graffiti in public restrooms. The cost may seem insignificant if one views the problem of vandalism as an isolated act, but if total costs are analyzed on a county or statewide basis, they become enormous.

In addition to the expense of replacing or repairing damage, vandalism results in personal injuries, inconveniences, irritations, and fear. Telephone and doorbell harassment are good examples of social and psychological costs associated with vandalism, especially when older people are the targets.

Figure 1 also shows the percentage of all respondents engaged in a wide variety of vandalistic acts, from draping toilet paper over trees and shrubs to blowing up mailboxes. More than one-fourth said they had damaged road signs. About 15 percent indicated they had painted words or letters on walls or buildings, thrown eggs at a house, damaged school lockers, broken windows, and damaged garbage cans. Thirteen percent admitted to damaging a mailbox, and 11 percent reported blowing up a mailbox. An Ohio study estimated it costs approximately \$55 to replace both the mailbox and post if the victim must pay to have the job done (Donnermeyer and Phillips, 1982). Knocking over gravestones was the least reported type of vandalistic act.

Figure 2 shows that vandalism is a recurring form of behavior, although only a small percentage of respondents indicated they had committed vandalistic acts on a weekly basis. One-fifth said they occasionally participated in vandalistic behavior. About 52 percent, however, reported rarely engaging in vandalistic acts.

A series of follow-up questions about the circumstances and situations associated with vandalistic behavior was included in the questionnaire. Figure 3 reveals that more vandalistic acts are committed by a group of four or more people than by any other size category. Only four percent said they acted alone while committing a vandalistic act. These results indicate that peer groups are a powerful social force influencing the vandalistic behavior of school-age youth.

In an effort to determine the role of peer influence in vandalism, the respondents were asked if they would think a person was a "nerd"⁵ if he or she tried to stop another person from committing a vandalistic act. While a large majority responded no, about 20 percent said that such a person would be a "nerd." Thus, programs designed to reduce vandalism among young people must combat peer influence and disrupt identification with vandalistic oriented groups.

Figure 4 shows the times young people usually committed vandalistic acts. Respondents indicated they were most likely to participate in vandalism during the weekend when it was dark. Only a small minority of respondents said they were involved in vandalism before or during school hours.

5 Nerd (nurd) N 1. A stupid person or someone who's a jerk. 2. A person really not smart enough to be a jerk.

Figures 4, 5, and 6

FIGURE 4. TIME OF VANDALISM (N = 730)

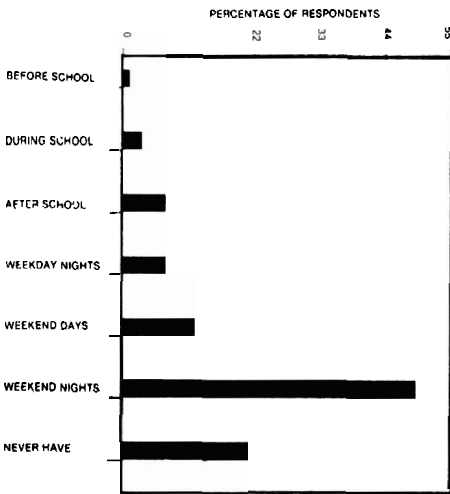


FIGURE 5: PLACES WHERE VANDALISM OCCURRED (N = 730)

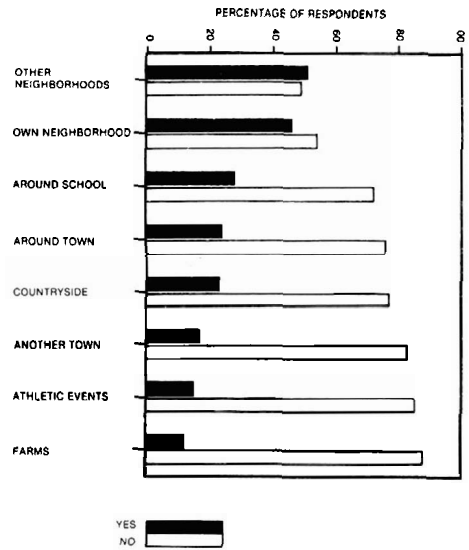


FIGURE 6: REASONS FOR VANDALISM (N = 730)

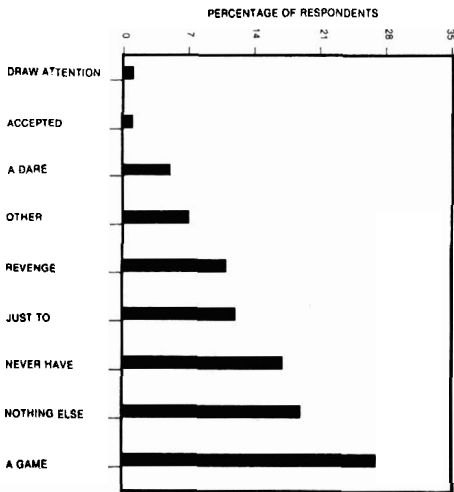


Figure 5 presents the places where respondents reported engaging in acts of vandalism. "Other people's neighborhoods" was the favorite choice and "own neighborhood" a close second. Respondents also committed vandalistic acts in a variety of different settings including their school, other towns, athletic events, around farms, and in the countryside.

Respondents were asked if a person caught committing minor vandalism by the police should be treated as a criminal. A majority (60 percent) replied "no." Research has shown that most vandals do not perceive their behavior as criminal (Glaser, 1960). A follow-up question asked, "If a person got caught participating in vandalism by the police a lot of times or really did a lot of damage, should that person be treated as a criminal?" Ninety-four percent answered "yes" to that question.

No discussion about vandalism would be complete without analyzing why young people engage in vandalistic behavior. Figure 6 summarizes the reasons reported. Less than 2 percent said they engaged in vandalism to draw attention to an issue or to be accepted by their friends. About 5 percent said they committed a vandalistic act as a dare and about 10 percent indicated revenge was a major reason. Eleven percent said they committed vandalistic acts "just to do it and get away with it." Twenty percent said they didn't have anything else to do. Twenty-seven percent reported vandalism was a game, and they did it because it was fun and exciting. These findings suggest that a majority of vandalistic acts committed in the study area are unplanned or spontaneous.

In order to find out what types of prevention strategies would be successful in combating vandalism, the respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of eight different types of vandalism prevention programs. The programs are ranked in order of effectiveness in Table 3. Respondents considered alarm systems to be effective prevention devices. Stiffer court penalties, neighborhood watch programs, and increased recreational opportunities for young people were also considered effective. Educational programs aimed at teaching young people to have more respect for other people's property rated the lowest of all the prevention programs measured.

Summary and conclusion

- A large majority of the students participating in the study had engaged in at least one vandalistic act in the past 12 months.
- No substantial difference existed between metropolitan and non-metropolitan students with regard to the number of vandalistic acts committed.
- Approximately one-fifth of the respondents reported participating in vandalistic acts on an occasional basis.

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Table 3. Types of prevention programs that would keep young people from vandalizing (percent in parentheses)

(N = 730)

	Very Effective	Effective	Somewhat Effective	Ineffective	Very Ineffective
More alarms	260 (35.9)	230 (31.8)	127 (17.5)	61 (8.4)	46 (6.4)
Stiffer court penalties	242 (33.4)	245 (33.8)	147 (20.3)	60 (8.3)	30 (4.1)
Neighborhood Watch programs	206 (28.4)	238 (32.8)	178 (24.6)	56 (7.7)	47 (6.5)
Increased recreational activities	280 (38.5)	150 (20.6)	167 (22.9)	84 (11.0)	47 (6.5)
Increased police patrols	196 (27.2)	227 (31.5)	180 (25.0)	81 (11.0)	37 (5.1)
Clean up or repair damage if caught	209 (28.8)	198 (27.3)	169 (23.3)	88 (12.1)	62 (8.5)
Publish name in newspaper if caught	220 (30.4)	139 (19.2)	107 (14.8)	143 (19.8)	114 (15.8)
Better lighting	146 (20.2)	204 (28.2)	217 (30.0)	105 (14.5)	52 (7.2)
Educational programs	123 (16.9)	112 (15.4)	305 (42.0)	137 (18.8)	50 (6.9)

- Breaking bottles, telephone harassment, ringing doorbells, and restroom graffiti were the most prevalent types of vandalistic behavior.
- Ten percent of the students reported they had blown up a mailbox.
- More than one-fourth of the students indicated they had damaged a road sign.
- Other people's neighborhoods are the most popular place to commit vandalistic acts.
- Most commonly, vandalistic acts are committed by groups of four or more people.
- Weekend nights are the most popular time period for vandalistic acts to occur.
- Approximately one-fourth of the respondents said they committed vandalism because it was a game. One fifth said they had nothing else to do.

In conclusion: The study was developed to investigate the frequency and types of vandalistic activities committed by young people in Georgia. The most significant finding was that there appeared to be no substantive difference between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan Georgia in the overall reported frequency of vandalistic acts of junior and senior high school students.

The study findings also show that a majority of young people are engaged in at least some form of vandalistic behavior. Although one or two isolated individual vandalistic acts may not result in much damage or high monetary cost, their cumulative impact on a county or statewide basis is considerable.

The study of deterrents to vandalism becomes increasingly important as state and local governments face increasing costs and budgetary cutbacks. Because young people believe that alarms, more stringent court penalties, and neighborhood watch programs are effective strategies to combat vandalism, this paper strongly recommends that further research be conducted in settings where prevention measures are in practice. In addition, future research should attempt to determine if accessibility is a major predictor of a home, car, or business being targeted for vandalistic acts.

Finally, most of the students surveyed indicated they approved of a friend or another person speaking out against participation in vandalistic acts. This gives educators the opportunity to teach young people the necessary social skills for counselling their friends against participating in vandalistic acts.

The task of educators is to isolate factors contributing to vandalistic behavior and to aid action agencies in developing innovative programs to reduce vandalism among youth.

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