

NEWS

Targeting Taggers

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New Police Unit Focuses on Downtown Graffiti

by Ryan Vaillancourt

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DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - Graffiti is one of the oldest, most ubiquitous forms of urban blight, but until William Bratton came to town seven years ago with an emphasis on stopping small quality-of-life crimes, it was not high on the Los Angeles Police Department's priority list.

Still, tagging has proliferated in parts of Downtown. Now, that could change. In June, Central Area Capt. Blake Chow green-lit a task force that has two full-time officers working solely on identifying and building cases against prolific Downtown graffiti vandals.



Adrian Lopez (left) and Raul Riojas comprise the Central Division's graffiti task force. The officers, who usually work in street clothes, concentrate on going after graffiti vandals in Downtown. *Photo by Gary Leonard.*

"With the way we've traditionally tackled this problem, it's very hard to catch someone and when there have been arrests, it's been almost a slap on the wrist because most were juveniles," Chow said.

In the past, officers have focused on monitoring tagging hot spots in hopes of catching vandals in the act. Central's graffiti task force will take that tack sometimes. But the thrust of the efforts will be investigating prolific taggers and then using department resources and coordinating with other agencies to link a suspect with his or her "tag," or moniker. Then, they will execute a search warrant in hopes of finding incriminating evidence.

Linking a suspect to multiple tags across Downtown and beyond, as opposed to catching someone in the act, said Chow, could result in stiffer penalties for vandals.

"I think a lot of these kids are under the impression they can just go and spray on somebody's building and get away with it and we're here to say no," Chow said. "We're going to gather intelligence and serve search warrants and show up at your house at 7 a.m. and hand walk the case to the D.A."

Spilt Spilk

The task force served its first search warrant on Aug. 6 at 7 a.m. They traveled to West Covina to the home of a 20-year-old man suspected of spraying the tag "Spilk" across Downtown and causing thousands of dollars in damages.

The man, whose name was not disclosed, was not home, but officers later that day searched another location and found spray cans, photos of the suspect and his tag in his so-called "pride book," along with other graffiti paraphernalia, said Lt. John McMann, who oversees the task force.

Officers last week were still compiling their case against the man — who has not been caught — likely for multiple charges of felony vandalism, said Adrian Lopez, one of the two officers on the task force.

His partner is Raul Riojas.

Lopez said he connected the suspect with his tag by combing prior police and court records. The man has been arrested nine times for vandalism, and related records include references to the "Spilk" tag.

"Hopefully if you can arrest and prosecute them, they'll change their lifestyle," Lopez said.

Arresting and prosecuting the "Spilk" suspect could help bring down more than just one tagger, McMann said.

"The way it works is, we get one and it opens up a network of one of the larger tagging crews," McMann said. "You hit one, you start focusing on it and we're going to open up a network and we're going to start hitting these folks hard that cause the blight in the area."

Surveying the Damage

To some, graffiti is an urban art form and the calling card of a decades-old American subculture worthy of museum and art gallery exhibitions. To others, it's a declaration of gang turf, though in Downtown, police say that only a small percentage of graffiti is gang-related. To many area workers and residents, it's just ugly blight.

To the Downtown Center Business Improvement District, it's one big, expensive headache.

"It creates a fear factor for people when they start to see lots of graffiti that hasn't been attended to," said Carol Schatz, president and CEO of the DCBID. "It gives the feeling of lawlessness when these crimes aren't attended to, especially in an urban environment."

The BID's boundaries stretch roughly from First Street to Olympic Boulevard and from the 110 Freeway to parts of Main and Hill streets. In that area, crews have removed 1,316 instances of graffiti this year, said Ken Nakano, the DCBID's director of operations. He noted that the figure applies not just to spray paint but also markers and stickers. Another 95 instances of high-rise graffiti had to be referred to the city, since the DCBID removes tags only on the ground level.

"The cost in manpower alone to remove this graffiti is estimated at approximately \$33,315," Nakano said in an email.

Paint, chemicals and materials needed to remove the graffiti have tacked on about another \$5,000, Nakano said.

In 2007, at the Downtown Breakfast Club's Roses and Lemon Awards breakfast, the group took aim at the California Department of Transportation for lackluster cleanup of freeway graffiti.

"We have more than \$17 billion in combined investment in Downtown and look at how we greet visitors," said Hal Bastian of the Breakfast Club (he also works full-time for the DCBID) at the 2007 event while showing slides of freeway and landmark signs peppered with spray paint.

While the event made Caltrans an easy target, Schatz admits that at the time she and others underestimated the complexity of cleaning up freeway graffiti.

"It's far more complicated than people realize," Schatz said. "You have to close the freeway down, get guys up there, and it's dangerous. So Caltrans was supportive of the community trying to address the issue but they were already having resource issues at the time."

Chow hopes that the task force will lead to fewer instances of graffiti, which will also reduce the burden on agencies charged with cleaning it up. In addition to connecting the dots between the tags on the street and the suspects, the officers are taking aim at stores in Downtown that may be selling graffiti paraphernalia to minors (state law prohibits the sale of spray paint to people under 18).

Chow said he is looking into computer software tailored to tracking graffiti. Certain programs can identify tags in pictures and match them with others in a database, he said. That part of the plan is still at least months away, and would require funds to be approved by the City Council, he said.

"The bigger vision is the more agencies that use graffiti tracking systems, the more intelligence will be gathered and shared," Chow said. "So if you have a tagger working in two counties, you could go to wherever he's active."

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page 1, 08/24/2009

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