



# Reducing Vandalism at Places of Worship

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Surveys of church leaders have revealed that **more than 70% have experienced at least one act of vandalism to their church within the last year**. More than 60% of these acts of vandalism have included graffiti.<sup>1</sup> Though often minor in the amount of actual danger posed, these acts blemish the appearance of the building, break the hearts of those who worship there, frustrate church staff, cause additional financial expenses, and contribute to rising insurance rates. People may also begin to perceive the location as unsafe, thus reducing attendance, especially among the elderly. Therefore, **leaders of places of worship should learn why vandals commit these acts, and how they can be reduced.**

## Vandals and Their Motives

Many social scientific studies have involved interviews with persons who engaged in vandalism, revealing a number of common patterns. Most vandalism to places of worship, schools, businesses, and homes consists of breaking glass doors or windows, defacing surfaces with graffiti, and breaking objects (such as smashing signs or ripping off gutters or siding). Vandals also sometimes enter the building to destroy and deface the interior, but such acts are far less common. Almost all vandalism occurs during the times of day, or days of the week, when the building is unoccupied. **The overwhelming majority of vandals are youths and young adults between the ages of 10 and 23.**<sup>2</sup> (An exception would be vandals who are seeking to steal metals for profit, such as aluminum siding, but these types of offenders are thieves, not vandals, and have different motives.<sup>3</sup>)

Some vandals, who focus almost exclusively on graffiti, fancy themselves as cutting edge ‘avant garde’ artists. Most vandals, however, are simply seeking a thrill, committing vandalism for the emotional rush of the risk, and to lash out at authority / dominant social norms. While what they write in their graffiti may suggest a particular bias, in most cases this is more of an attempt to ‘get under your skin’ than it is a representation of any truly organized or committed group. **In other words, the data indicates that the same group of vandals are just as likely to paint demonic symbols on a Christian church, swastikas on a Jewish synagogue, or racist words on an**

**African-American church. When caught, the vast majority of these vandals are revealed to be troubled teens – not an organized hate group.**<sup>4</sup> They get pleasure from effectively lashing out at symbols of authority, and what greater symbol of authority is there than God?

### **Not Totally Random**

Not all places of worship (or schools, businesses, etc.) are targeted equally, as some places receive much more vandalism than others. While some places of worship are never vandalized, others are vandalized repeatedly over the course of a year. **Interviews with vandals have revealed distinct characteristics associated with their selection of a place to vandalize. Understanding these characteristics can help places of worship reduce their likelihood of future victimization.**<sup>5</sup>

#### ***Strength of Local Social Norms***

Vandalism is far more likely to occur within neighborhoods that are suffering a breakdown of social institutions, such as the family, schools, community organizations, and churches. As a result, youths in these neighborhoods are more likely to learn deviant social norms (lack of respect for authority, ‘do to others before they do to you’, etc.) and less likely to learn prosocial norms. Vandalism is more likely to occur in such neighborhoods because it sometimes appears this behavior is normal and tolerated by society. Graffiti and damaged properties that go unaddressed tend to breed more graffiti and damaged properties.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, these are the types of communities that are probably in greatest need of ministry from religious institutions. The more religious institutions become an integral part of the neighborhoods in which they are located, the less likely they are to be vandalized.<sup>7</sup> Outreach and ministry to the people living within walking distance of the institution can reduce vandalism potential. This usually mean more than simply evangelizing – it means being a good neighbor. Host a block party, provide meals to the needy or shut-ins on the block, assist neighbors with removing their own graffiti or repairing vandalism damage. Such activities will increase social support for the religious institution and increase the strength of local social norms against damaging the neighborhood church.

#### ***Effort***

**Very few vandals are high achievers in life, focused on long term goals and imbued with grit and determination. In fact, most are generally quite lazy and seek immediate gratification.**<sup>8</sup> As a result, the more effort required to commit the crime, the fewer the vandals that are interested in committing it. Therefore, anything that makes the offense harder to commit, reduces the likelihood of vandalism. For example, buildings situated closer to the street, or other travelled footpaths, are more likely to be vandalized than buildings set father back because offenders have to go father out of their way to commit their crimes. This has actually been demonstrated in several studies.<sup>9</sup>

Besides close proximity to the potential vandal’s normal travel path, there are other features that increase the ease of committing vandalism. **Leaving paint, tools, or ladders unattended on the property creates a temptation to would-be vandals and increases the ease of committing vandalism. Easy access when no one is around, such as unlocked doors or open gates, also**

**reduces the effort for vandals. Using rocks and gravel in landscaping, or for parking lot material, can provide vandals with ‘on-site tools’ for breaking windows, smashing locks, or scratching graffiti on walls or windows.**

To increase the effort involved in committing vandalism, places of worship can ensure that no materials (especially paint and tools) are left out that vandals could use to damage the building. In landscaping, rocks could be replaced with mulch, topsoil, sand, or boulders too big for vandals to lift. Loose bricks or cobblestones should be securely cemented. Landscaping, especially shrubs with thorns, could be planted along the edge of the building, making it inconvenient to get close to walls or windows. Large, flat exterior wall surfaces, especially those of all one color, can seem like a perfect painter’s canvas, beckoning the would-be vandal to come and write. Large flat surfaces could be made harder to deface by planting trees or climbing vines. Anything that can make the structure a less convenient target can help.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Risk***

While a primary motivation for vandalism is the thrill of doing something dangerous, thrill seeking has its limits. The higher the likelihood of getting caught or detected before the act is completed, the fewer vandals there are willing to commit the act. Therefore, **anything that increases the likelihood of being detected in the act or caught, decreases the likelihood of vandalism.**<sup>11</sup>

**Risk of detection is heightened most by increasing observability. This can be accomplished by ensuring all exterior areas are well lit, and increasing the number of eyes focused on the building.** Use of security cameras, strong relationships with those who reside beside the church, and extra patrols requested from the police or a security guard company, can all increase eyes focused on the church. Another way to increase observability is to have the building in use as much as possible as most vandalism occurs when the building is unoccupied. In addition to church-specific activities, places of worship might consider hosting such activities as a daycare or charter school, arts and crafts classes, English as a second language or GED certificate classes, athletic activities, or youth groups such as the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts. **The more often people are in and around the building for prosocial reasons, the less likely the building is to be vandalized.**<sup>12</sup>

### ***Rewards***

The greatest rewards for most vandals are the ability to admire and get attention for their handiwork, and the feeling of power derived from successfully hurting a more powerful entity, such as society, the church, or God.<sup>13</sup> Anything that can reduce or deny the vandals these gratifications can help decrease vandalism likelihood.

**In order to reduce the ability of the vandal to admire his or her handiwork, all vandalism should be repaired immediately. Several studies have found that if graffiti is not removed, or broken windows go unrepaired, the likelihood that further vandalism will occur increases dramatically.**<sup>14</sup> Places of worship that have experienced vandalism in the past might even want to consider creating a budget line item for vandalism repair until the problem abates. After taking photos of the damage for insurance purposes, and filing a police report, paint over or scrub off graffiti as soon as possible. Replace broken glass as soon as possible. (Plywood plugs of broken windows may secure the building in the immediate aftermath, but plywood surfaces make great

canvases for additional graffiti in the future.) **Deny the vandal the gratification of seeing his or her damage when passing the building again.**

Steps should also be taken to reduce the ability of the vandal to feel like he or she successfully inflicted damage on the church. After reporting the incident to the police for legal and insurance purposes, ***do not*** draw public attention to the incident. No matter how offensive the damage or graffiti language, ***do not*** give the vandals power and reward by reporting the incident to the media or talking about it publicly. If contacted by the media, do no more than issue a simple written statement that tones down the seriousness of the incident. **Calling greater attention to the incident only rewards the vandal, emboldens the vandal to strike again, and motivates others to copy the vandal's actions so that they too can have their work shown on local television (or national) news. If the vandalism is quickly removed, and the situation is handled quickly and discretely by the congregation, the vandal is denied his or her reward.**

### Conclusion

Vandalism of places of worship is a widespread crime problem, but there are things churches, synagogues, and mosques can do to reduce their likelihood of further victimization. There are simple, practical steps religious organizations can take to strengthen neighborhood social norms, increase offender effort and risk, and decrease the rewards of vandalism. If your place of worship has been vandalized recently, it is likely that it will be vandalized again in the near future unless additional measures are taken to change the current situation.

### References

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- <sup>4</sup> Allen & Greenberger (1980); Canter (1984); Coffield (1991); Ferrell (1993); Fleisher (1995); Lasley (1996); Wooden & Blazak (2000).
- <sup>5</sup> Canter (1984); Sloan-Howitt & Kelling (1997); Smith (2003); Zsako (2013).

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