



Vandalism

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Vandalism

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Abstract This entry presents the complexity of the term vandalism as an action and a criminal offence. It begins by defining vandalism from ancient Roman times to Internet era. Then, the motivation behind this damaging behaviour is presented followed by a discussion of the typical sites and the temporal patterns of vandalism. Particular attention is given to the impact of vandalism on the quality of neighbourhoods and on the housing market. This entry reviews also current interventions for tackling vandalism as well as some emerging future avenues for research.

Short author bio

Vania Ceccato is an associate professor at School of Architecture and the Built Environment, Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) in Stockholm, Sweden. Her research interests are the geography of crime, safety and gender, quantitative methods and spatial data analysis. She has conducted research on spatial patterns of crime in Scandinavia, Brazil, UK, and the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, particularly on the relation between crime and socioeconomic neighbourhood dynamics and land use characteristics. Her current research projects deal with transit crime, safety and the housing market, safety in rural areas, space-time variations of crime and people's routine activity, women's mobility and the nature of rape places. She has published in international journals, mostly in criminology, geography and urban planning. She is the author of the book *Moving Safely: Crime and Perceived Safety in Stockholm's Subway Stations* (2013) and editor of the book *The Urban Fabric of Crime and Fear* (2012).

Keywords

physical damage, depreciative behaviour, malicious destruction, injury, disfigurement, defacement, private and public property.

Definition of Vandalism

Ampliatius Pedania est fur - Ampliatius Pedania is a thief

This was a graffiti in a wall from ancient Rome, where the act of graffitiing was considered vandalism. Vandalism was the behaviour attributed by Romans originally to an ancient Germanic group called vandals. In modern times, the term vandalism has often been linked to a varied number of intentional malicious behaviours implying damage to or destruction of private or public property. The lack of a common definition of vandalism in its specificity is associated with the fact that the concept covers behaviour for which motivations are different, or because it is not easy to disentangle vandalism from other similar behaviours, such as depreciative behaviour. For instance, despite the overlaps, vandalism is not the same as depreciative behaviour. The critical distinction between these terms according to Namba and Dustin (1992) is that in vandalism the perpetrator of the act 'knows better' but still do it whilst in a depreciative behaviour the act may not be intentional.

The concept of vandalism overlaps also the concept of disorder. For Sampson and Raudenbush (1999), vandalism is considered a physical disorder because it refers to a particular kind of wilful degrading of the urban landscape. Vandalism often includes graffiti, as well as other types of damage to objects, such as disfigurement of sites (e.g., by urination, defecation, vomit and other types of substances), breaking or destruction of surfaces. It also includes serious crimes such as arson or any other criminal damage that endangers life, or for threat or possession with intent to commit criminal damage involving, for instance, explosives. Skogan (1990) distinguishes two forms of disorder. Physical disorder involves visual signs of negligence and unchecked decay, such as abandoned or ill-kept buildings, broken streetlights and rubbish; whilst social disorder is composed of certain forms of behaviour resulting in graffiti and physical destruction. "Physical disorder refers to on-going conditions, while social disorder appears as a series of more or less episodic events" (Skogan 1990:2).

The definition of vandalism differs also based on the perspective that is given to the particular act. For instance, Moser (1992) suggests that vandalism can be seen as a damage (whether the behaviour is vandalism or not is based on the outcome of the behaviour); or it depends on the intention of the actor (intentional or purposeful destruction); its motivation (e.g., instrumental, expressive, or hostile act) or context (different degrees of tolerance towards damaging act). Regardless these differences, vandalism is often considered as a criminal act.

Vandalism is a criminal offence involving damage to or defacing of property belonging to another person or the public. Overall, the sentence for vandalism varies greatly depending on the type and seriousness of the damage (from a small fine, to community services to jail for more serious crime) as well as offender's age and circumstances.

In the US, for instance, vandalism is legally defined as "*a wilful or malicious destruction, injury, disfigurement, or defacement of any public or private property, real or personal,*

without the consent of the owner or persons having custody or control (the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program, 1997; quoted by Stahl, 2000). In most European countries, the definition of vandalism or criminal damage does not differ much from the North American one. For example, the Swedish Legal Penal Code has a similar definition, regarding as a vandal any "person who destroys or damages property, real or moveable, to the detriment of another's right thereto" (Swedish Ministry of Justice, 1999:36). British Crime Survey uses the term vandalism as close as possible to that of criminal damage, which refers to crimes where "*a person without lawful excuse intentionally or recklessly destroys or damages any property belonging to another*" (excluding accidental damage, and only covers crimes against households and household property, including cars) (UK Government, Criminal Law Act, 1995, 1995 c. 46). Also in the UK, vandalism is part of a group of offences under the Antisocial Behaviour Order (ASBO).

Vandalism has also been associated to damaging acts in the virtual world. In the web context, especially in social networks or in interactive environments such as Wikipedia or Youtube, vandalism refers to edits that damage content quality (any addition, removal, or change of content in a deliberate attempt to compromise the integrity of the information). According to Javanmardi et al. (2013), the complex nature of vandalism, and the large number of potential features, makes vandalism detection difficult and time consuming for human editors.

Motives of vandalism

Cohen (1973) distinguishes the following behaviours as the motivations for vandalism: acquisitive vandalism (e.g., looting and petty theft), tactical vandalism (e.g., sabotage in the work place), ideological vandalism (with ideological cause or deliver a message, a statement), vindictive vandalism (for revenge), play vandalism (e.g., unintentional act such as a ball breaking a window pane), a malicious vandalism (out of boredom, exasperation, resentment, frustration often occurs in public settings). Other motivations of vandalism refer to the symbolic act or a demarcation of a group's territory, the pleasure that may be provided by the destruction of the object (Alien 1984) but also to damaging behaviour that intend to improve an individual status among its peers (Sutton, 1987).

Sites of Vandalism

Land use composition and a city's physical structure play important roles in the distribution of vandalism. Vandalism is often found in the central areas of cities where there is public entertainment (Wikström, 1991) but also in empty, low guarded settings, such as a peripheral subway station (Ceccato, 2013). Some argue that these damaging actions are often directed at unclaimed or impersonal common spaces (e.g., transport nodes, parks) rather than at private homes. Recent studies show evidence of the effect of sporting events on vandalism (Rees and Schnepel 2008). Newton (2013) reviewed a study on buses showing graffiti and vandalism were more prominent in certain parts of the bus, supporting the idea that a lack of guardianship or place management on the transport network acts a contributory factor to criminal damage.

Vandalism also takes place in unstable deprived areas but it is expected that offenders will not only act where they live but also in neighbouring areas homes (Ley and Cybriwsky, 1974; Mawby, 1984). More recently, Ceccato and Haining (2005) showed that the spatial variation in vandalism in a Swedish middle town city was significantly related to social disorganisation risk factors, and unexpectedly, with the presence of local leisure associations.

The behaviour of vandals may be motivated by situational factors (Zimbardo, 1970) but show elements of a spatially contagious process, spilling over into nearby areas which then suffer vandalism not so much because of their situational characteristics but rather because of their geographical proximity to these problem areas.

Temporal dimension of vandalism

Acts of vandalism tend to happen more often in the late hours of the day, weekends and holidays, when people are on the move and when most of unstructured human activities take place. There are also seasonal variations of vandalism. In environments such as subway stations, the highest rates of vandalism are found in the autumn and winter (Ceccato and Uittenbogaard, 2013). A study of graffiti and vandalism by Wilson and Healy in the 1980s in Australia found that most damage occurs in unsupervised areas during off peak hours.

Impact of vandalism

The more evident impact of vandalism is obviously physical depreciation of an object or property. If the object is a private property, the costs are direct to the individual whilst if the act is against a public property, society in general is charged to repair or replace the property. However, there are less tangible effects of vandalism that are equally relevant for environmental criminology.

There is a common agreement that vandalism may not cause other more serious crimes but they do share the same explanatory processes. The difference is that vandalism, contrary to other crimes, can be observed by everybody in the area: residents, visitors and potential offenders. Visible damage or sometimes noisy events may promote the notion that no one is in control or no one cares about what happens in the area. Thus, eliminate these signs may be worthwhile. It has also been suggested that acts of vandalism and disorder function as symbols of the extent to which a neighbourhood is in decline; they are able to capture a much broader range of problems and are therefore more informative than official crime statistics. Wilson and Kelling (1982) suggested that unrepaired damage to property encourages further vandalism and other types of crime; the so-called *Broken Window Syndrome*. LaVigne (1997) found that promptly reporting all vandalism and graffiti to maintenance personnel helped to keep crime rates low in the Washington D.C. subway system.

Vandalism is thought to be more important determinant of fear of crime than the actual incidence of crime in neighbourhoods. Fear of crime may translate into an increasing desire to move, weaker attachments of residents to the area and lower house values. Ceccato and Wilhemsson (2012) showed, for instance, that vandalism decreases apartment prices but

prices are even more discounted where vandalism and fear of crime appear together in a residential area.

Vandalism and crime prevention

Actions that deal with reducing opportunities for criminal acts of vandalism at a certain place are the focus in this section. One strategy for reducing the opportunity for vandalism is by increasing the risk of being caught and decreasing the rewards for committing it. Practical guides to help practitioners address vandalism and criminal damage have often been based on ideas of situational crime prevention, which comprises opportunity-reducing measures that are directed at highly specific forms of crime. This approach involves “the management, design or manipulation of the immediate environment in as systematic and permanent a way as possible, and makes more difficult and less rewarding for the offenders” (Clarke 1997:4). In practice, actions against vandalism opportunities can be exemplified by two types, one directed to certain individuals/activities and other related to the environment and opportunities for surveillance. Some of the measures include, for instance, reducing the availability of alcohol, especially to minors, dispersal of groups of potential offenders and community safety partnerships with actions directed to public places (e.g., safety walks). Environmental approaches to tackling vandalism can be composed of ways of making places overlooked, making sure that human activity is appropriate to the location and creating a reduced opportunity for vandalism, promoting a sense of ownership and territorial responsibility, including in public places.

Vandalism: Emerging issues and future debate on vandalism

One of the issues that was raised here but perhaps not answered within this entry is the quality of data on vandalism from police registered statistics. Data reliability is an important issue when dealing with vandalism data (Mawby, 1977). Underreporting is a particular problem. It is likely that vandalism is underreported in deprived areas or areas, less cohesive areas. There are other problems of data quality that arise during the process of recording vandalism. These can be caused by a lack of information about the event from the victim (not knowing exactly where the offence took place). The police officer may fail or be unable to record the event properly (missing record on the exact location/time of the event) or may not have followed agreed reporting conventions—a particular problem with vandalism. Until recently another source of inaccuracy arose in the geocoding process, when matching the offence address database and the reference street map. Currently, the use of ICT, 3-G mobiles and applications open up a wide number of opportunities to more accurately recording cases of vandalism, and in real time. Another important area of investigation is the need to assess the relevance of youth meeting-places and their impact on vandalism levels. Evidence at ecological level shows correlation between high rates of vandalism in zones containing youth leisure associations but little evidence is found at individual level. A final issue that has become increasingly important is the use of the term vandalism in virtual space (e.g., Wikipedia, YouTube) to express malicious editing that damage content and quality of the information. A future challenge is to assess to what extent these acts can be considered as a criminal offences and, in extreme cases, whether they can be taken to court.

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Recommended Reading

Mawby, R. I. (1977) Kiosk vandalism: a Sheffield study, *British Journal of Criminology*, 17, pp. 30–46.

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