



IMPACT AREA:  
NEIGHBORHOOD  
REVITALIZATION

# GRAFFITI BUSTERS

A **CITIES OF SERVICE** BLUEPRINT

**Graffiti Busters** is a high-impact service strategy in which the mayor's office leverages the power of ordinary citizens to turn the tide in the fight against graffiti.

# GRAFFITI BUSTERS

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# GRAFFITI BUSTERS

Graffiti Busters is a high-impact service strategy in which the mayor's office leverages the power of ordinary citizens to turn the tide in the fight against graffiti.

This initiative rallies a corps of volunteers from across the city to participate in regular graffiti cleanups in their neighborhoods and elsewhere, and then helps keep graffiti away by engaging the volunteers in follow-up efforts. Volunteers conduct assessments to identify the type and location of graffiti to be cleaned and then remove it using materials appropriate for each blighted surface.





## BACKGROUND

Graffiti is a crime that costs communities more than \$8 billion a year to clean up.<sup>1</sup> While many “taggers” view it as self-expressive art, graffiti has a negative impact on the surrounding area. Graffiti generates the perception of blight and heightens fear of gang activity. The appearance of graffiti is often perceived by residents and passersby as a sign that a downward spiral of vandalism and danger has begun in the community, regardless of whether that is actually true. Graffiti has been correlated with increased littering, and it is a common concern that where graffiti is tolerated, serious crimes such as theft and assault are a greater risk – yet when these areas are cleaned up and graffiti is removed, these concerns subside.<sup>2</sup> Graffiti also contributes to lost revenue associated with declines in property value and reduced retail sales.<sup>3</sup> By enlisting volunteers to identify and remove graffiti on a regular basis (e.g., monthly), the mayor’s office can encourage neighborhood pride and motivate citizens to stay involved by reporting new graffiti or helping with further removal.

<sup>1</sup> <http://bit.ly/pco7ku>

<sup>2</sup> For example, a Harvard University study conducted in Massachusetts concluded that improvements to the physical environment of “crime hot spots” generated a 20% reduction in calls to the police. Braga, A. A. and Bond, B. J. (2008), Policing Crime and Disorder Hot Spots: A Randomized Controlled Trial. *Criminology*, 46: 577-607. <http://bit.ly/iu8GYJ>. See also <http://www.suffolk.edu/34417.html>.

<sup>3</sup> “How does graffiti ‘hurt’?” Graffiti Hurts: <http://bit.ly/gPWuv3>. The average cost per person per year in city revenue is between \$1 and \$3. The causal link between graffiti and crime was reported by Reuters in “Graffiti encourages more crime than you expect”: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/11/20/us-crime-graffiti-idUSTRE4AJ78Q20081120>.





# REQUIRED ELEMENTS

- 1 Mayor's office brings together city officials to identify city resources to support the initiative and encourage property owners in the target area(s) to grant permission for volunteers to come on private property and conduct graffiti cleanup.
- 2 Mayor's office, along with any relevant partners, secures supplies to assess and clean up graffiti throughout the city. The most common supplies needed for this work include gloves, paint rollers, paint, solvent, and pressure-washing equipment.
- 3 Volunteers conduct assessments to identify the location and type of graffiti to be removed. Teams of volunteers then return with the appropriate supplies to clean or cover it.
- 4 Mayor's office encourages ongoing engagement by asking the volunteers and the public to help the city spot graffiti and take part in the city's graffiti-fighting efforts.
- 5 Mayor's office tracks and reports impact metrics for the initiative.

## Required metrics include:

- Number of incidents and estimated square feet of graffiti reported in volunteer assessments
- Number of incidents and estimated square feet of graffiti removed or covered
- Number of returning volunteers





**Additional metrics that may be tracked but are not required include:**

- Length of time (days / weeks / months) locations remain graffiti-free
- Number of residents from the targeted areas who volunteer with Graffiti Busters
- Number of residents who help monitor and report graffiti (e.g., who also helped with graffiti cleanup)





# EXECUTING THE PLAN

## LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

- 1** Engage relevant city officials to participate in the initiative. A range of city officials whose work relates to the fight against graffiti (including officials working on neighborhood beautification, public safety, parks and recreation, policing, programs that work with troubled youth, and any programs already focusing on graffiti cleanup) should be asked to help. These internal stakeholders can help the city target the volunteer effort and determine what resources the city brings to bear. For example, parks and recreation departments or departments of public works may be able to provide equipment and supplies for painting, paint removal, and pressure-washing.
- 2** Get permission from property owners in the target area to do graffiti cleanup, as required by local regulations. In New York City, for example, wherever there is graffiti on private property, the city needs written permission from the property owner to remove it. Check your city's local laws or ordinances to ensure graffiti-removing efforts are in compliance with local regulations. If the city does not already have a process for property owners to grant that permission, the mayor's office may choose to create one that is quick and user-friendly. For example, New York offers a "Forever Graffiti Free" form that can be filed online (see Resources section for more details).
- 3** Invite local partners to participate. Local non-profit, faith-based, and community-based organizations can augment the city's operational capacity and ability to recruit and manage volunteers. Help from these organizations can be invaluable not just on the days of the graffiti cleanup, but for as long as the initiative runs. In addition to formal organizations, the mayor's office may want to recruit volunteer "block captains" to amplify recruitment and add additional management capacity for cleanup days in each target neighborhood.





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Secure needed supplies. The principal materials required for graffiti removal are painting supplies (e.g., gloves, paint, paint rollers), chemical removers, and pressure-washing equipment. Some graffiti may require specialized removal methods such as: scraping with razor blades, sand or soda blasting, sanding, or mineral spirits. Other useful but optional materials that sponsors might provide include water and snacks, printed material (e.g., posters, fliers, or postcards), and t-shirts.

## COORDINATING VOLUNTEER TEAMS

Graffiti Busters includes three main tasks for volunteers: assessing and documenting the extent of the graffiti in a given area, removing each instance of graffiti, and continuing to monitor the area for graffiti. The most effective way to organize the volunteers for the first two tasks is for assessment to be done first, so that data can be collected on the type and extent of graffiti in the entire area, followed as soon as possible (ideally the next day, but at least within the next 7-10 days for public property, or within one month for private property) by removal teams who are equipped appropriately for the range of cleaning tasks. Assessment and removal should occur on a regular - monthly or quarterly - basis to deter tagging.

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Organize graffiti assessment teams to document existing graffiti in the target areas. These teams will document each incident of graffiti with details such as the following, accompanied by photos, for eventual before/after documentation:

- Closest street address or intersection and additional notes on the specific location
- Whether the graffiti is on public property, private property, or property ownership is unknown
- Surface type and substance to be removed (sharing the chart in the Resources section entitled "Removal Techniques" can provide a common terminology for volunteers to use)
- Measurement of the square footage of graffiti







## 2 Organize graffiti removal teams to follow-up on the assessment by cleaning or covering each incident of graffiti. Where graffiti is on private property, the city first needs to gain permission to enter. Removal teams will:

- Plan removal methods beforehand so that they arrive with tools appropriate for working with the underlying material to be cleaned, the substance to be removed, and the length of time the graffiti has been present (See the Resources section for information on removal techniques.)
- Record data on which instances of graffiti were successfully removed so that the mayor's office can track the overall progress

## 3 Once the graffiti has been removed, ask volunteers to continue helping the city monitor the area for graffiti, emphasizing the importance of helping the city respond in the days and weeks immediately after removal. To help with this, the mayor's office or relevant partners should develop a method or system to capture volunteer reports of repeat graffiti incidents (e.g., through a website or online form) and plan to respond quickly to such occurrences.

## FUNDRAISING FOR GRAFFITI BUSTERS

Graffiti Busters is a terrific sponsorship opportunity for businesses, foundations, and individual donors through funding or in-kind donations. For example, there are pre-packaged graffiti removal kits available from a number of companies in a range of prices, often as little as \$10. (See the Resources section for more information on graffiti removal kits.) Since graffiti removal will make the strongest impression on the residents of a given neighborhood, when approaching locally-focused businesses, you might consider offering sponsorships on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood level.

If seeking philanthropic funding, the mayor's office or non-profit partners may develop a short proposal that describes the opportunity for support and how the funds would be used. Elements of a typical proposal include:

- Description of Graffiti Busters
- How this initiative would positively impact the community (e.g., more beautiful neighborhoods, greater civic pride, less crime)
- Amount of funding requested, proposed breakdown of grant(s) and how those funds would be used
- Metrics that would be collected to assess progress





- Information on **Cities of Service** (this is especially helpful for national organizations)
- Recognition plan for the donor (e.g., logo on volunteer t-shirts, branding on your city's service website)

## RECOGNIZING VOLUNTEERS AND ENCOURAGING FURTHER INVOLVEMENT

One of the great values a city can gain from volunteer cleanups is a core group of highly-engaged citizens in each neighborhood who are willing to report graffiti on an ongoing basis and participate in regular cleanup efforts. It is these highly-engaged volunteers who can help the city respond quickly to new graffiti and then monitor cleanup areas in the days and weeks that follow—both of which are crucial to preventing further tagging. Recognizing and thanking these volunteers for all that they do to make this initiative an ongoing success can encourage further help and support.

To recognize volunteers for Graffiti Busters, consider sending thank you letters and/or providing information on the impact of the overall effort (e.g., before/after photos, impact metrics) to those who volunteered, as well as suggestions on how to stay involved in fighting graffiti. Volunteer recognition events offer mayors' offices the opportunity to publicize the initiative's impact, amplify the message that graffiti will not be tolerated, and create a call to action for citizens to help by reporting graffiti as soon as they see it.





# MEASURING IMPACT

**The mayor's office or lead partner establishes a process to collect data from all volunteer teams and compiles a report on the initiative's impact. Impact is tracked and reported by measuring the following required metrics:**

- Number of incidents and the estimated square feet of graffiti reported in volunteer assessments
- Number of incidents and the estimated total square feet of graffiti removed or covered
- Number of returning volunteers

**The mayor's office may also consider it useful to document the following optional metrics:**

- Length of time (days / weeks / months) locations remain graffiti-free
- Number of residents from the targeted areas who volunteer with Graffiti Busters
- Number of residents who help monitor and report graffiti (e.g., who also helped with graffiti cleanup)





# OPTIONAL ELEMENTS

## MAKE GRAFFITI REPORTING QUICK AND EASY

In some cities, there are barriers to reporting graffiti. For example, it may be difficult to locate the appropriate city website or correct reporting form. Additionally, in some cities, residents may find that the form is not user-friendly as they may be required to return the form in the postal mail.

One approach to overcome these barriers is to include graffiti reporting as a service provided by the city's 311 line (if the city has one). Alternatively, the city can arrange to receive text and images from residents' cell phones; citizens can be encouraged to send in photos of graffiti – along with the address(es) of that graffiti – from their phones. This would provide the city with real-time reporting information, as well as a visual documentation of the graffiti. Cities could also consider using social media and/or online mapping technology to help identify and track locations where graffiti is present and in need of cleanup.

## ORGANIZE COMMUNITY MURALS

Many cities have found that when graffiti-prone areas are covered with murals painted by the community, the murals are rarely defaced. Such murals are typically done with paintbrush rather than spray paint, to differentiate them from graffiti and make it easier for the community to participate. These murals are often done by local artists or schoolchildren and portray images that speak to the shared history, hopes, fears, and cultural identity of neighborhood residents. This not only helps to prevent graffiti, but also gives the neighborhood more aesthetic character and tends to increase residents' sense of pride in the place they live.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.graffitihurts.org/pdf/mural.pdf>






## SET UP A “PAINT BANK”

To access graffiti removal supplies, many cities or local partners have set up public paint banks where community-based organizations can access free paint and other graffiti removal supplies for volunteers doing graffiti cleanup. The supplies can be provided by the city or donated by individuals and businesses that have extra paint they would otherwise throw away. Beneficiaries of the bank can be limited to community-based organizations or expanded to include individuals as well. To track impact and ensure proper usage of the supplies, the paint bank should document the following each time supplies are checked out: the location of the graffiti, a picture of the graffiti prior to cleanup, the square feet of graffiti removed, and a picture of the graffiti-free surface afterwards.





# GRAFFITI BUSTERS IN ACTION

 In **Phoenix**, Graffiti Busters is an umbrella program that includes a variety of initiatives designed to mobilize community members in graffiti eradication and other neighborhood beautification activities. A major component of this is the “Blight Busters” program, in which volunteers attend a special training and are taught how to use paint sprayers, utilize GPS-enabled cameras to track graffiti, and recognize and report gang-related graffiti to their local police precinct.

To equip volunteers and community groups with the right tools for graffiti removal, the city offers a tool-lending program in which volunteers may borrow tools and supplies to help implement their cleanup efforts. As of July 2011, over 1,700 graffiti-removal projects had been completed by 128 volunteers. In addition, the City of Phoenix has donated almost 9,000 gallons of paint to support community-led graffiti-removal efforts.





# RESOURCES

## INFORMATION

**Graffiti Hurts** is a prominent national anti-graffiti educational organization: <http://www.graffitihurts.org/>. Its website contains:

- Facts about the problems graffiti causes
- Tips on preventing graffiti
- Anti-graffiti lessons for various school grade levels
- Suggestions on how to establish anti-graffiti laws and collaborate with police departments
- Effective methods of removal
- Best practice approaches to community organizing on the issue
- An annual grant program to help fund cities' anti-graffiti efforts

**NoGraf Network and Residents Against Graffiti Everywhere** each provide a variety of additional information about combating graffiti. Visit: <http://www.nograffiti.com/> and <http://bit.ly/nPu1uz> respectively.

**Precita Eyes Mural Arts and Visitors Center** stewards a long-running and well-known community mural program in San Francisco's Mission District, a gang-ridden section of the city that has long struggled with graffiti but where the community murals are frequently left untouched. Visit: <http://www.precitaeyes.org/>.

Many suppliers of graffiti removal materials can be found online on **ThomasNet**: <http://bit.ly/g6CidY>. Further, a wide variety of graffiti-cleaning supplies can be found on the web by searching for "graffiti removal supplies" or "graffiti removal kit."





## POTENTIAL PARTNERS

**Keep America Beautiful** ([www.kab.org/](http://www.kab.org/)) has local affiliates in most cities that run similar events for cleaning up litter, tapping a volunteer population that is already engaged in beautification. Some affiliates already run graffiti cleanup efforts and many will be aware of Graffiti Hurts as another Keep America Beautiful initiative. Keep America Beautiful also runs two grants programs, one for affiliates and one for non-affiliates, which might be able to provide funding – for more information, visit: <http://bit.ly/fjt19K>.

**The local Boys and Girls Clubs of America** are another set of potential partners, as the national organization has made anti-graffiti education one of its priorities. Visit: <http://www.bgca.org/>.

## MODELS

For an example of the legal language used for obtaining permission to remove graffiti from private property, see New York City's "**Forever Graffiti Free**" form, which the city provides both as a mail-in PDF and also for submission online: [http://www.nyc.gov/html/cau/downloads/pdf/graffiti\\_waiver.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/cau/downloads/pdf/graffiti_waiver.pdf).

For more information about the **Graffiti Busters** program in Phoenix, Arizona, visit: <http://1.usa.gov/nPdQ65>.







## REMOVAL TECHNIQUES: SURFACE TYPE AND RECOMMENDED APPROACH<sup>5</sup>

### Surface Type

Removal of Spray Paint and Similar Materials (marker, shoe polish, lipstick, stencils, etc.)

### Aluminum Siding, Fiberglass

Paint remover (sparingly); rinse with water

### Glass

Razor blade to scrape off; can also use paint thinner

### Masonry (includes brick, marble, stone, tile, granite, and concrete)

Power washing with low pressure; sand and or soda blasting (may create a shadow); paint remover or chemical graffiti remover / solvent applied with brush and rinse with water; paint over

### Historic Masonry or Other Valuable Structures

Seek out a professional; get the National Park Service Brief on removing graffiti from historic masonry

### Metal

Paint thinner or chemical graffiti remover / solvent and rub with steel wool or sandpaper and rinse; power washing; paint over

### Pavement

Chemical remover and power washing; soda blasting

### Street Signs

Chemical remover (make sure it does not remove reflective coating)

### Stucco

Paint remover / chemical remover and rinse with pressure wash; paint over

### Utility Boxes

Chemical remover with cloth or scrubber

### Vinyl Siding

Chemical solvents sparingly as they may remove the vinyl coating; repaint with primer first

### Wood

On painted, unweathered wood can try mineral spirits; power washing with low pressure; sanding; repainting

### Etching

Etching may be repairable on some glass (seek out a professional); replace glass

### Adhesives

Scrape away as much of the adhesive as possible; use nail polish remover or acetone-based cleaner to remove remaining residue. Be aware that acetone-based solvents can soften plastics.

<sup>5</sup> As shown at [http://www.graffitihurts.org/rapidremoval/removal.jsp#removal\\_chart](http://www.graffitihurts.org/rapidremoval/removal.jsp#removal_chart)





# SPECIAL THANKS

We'd like to thank the following cities:

- City of New York, New York for their insight and expertise
- City of Phoenix, Arizona for their valuable lessons learned



**Cities of Service** is a national nonprofit that designs and supports the implementation of high-impact service strategies that can be widely replicated in cities worldwide. We provide technical assistance, programmatic support, planning resources, and funding opportunities. Cities of Service supports a coalition of nearly 200 cities whose mayors are committed to using citizen volunteers to solve local pressing challenges, from engaging mentors to help decrease high school dropout rates to increasing energy efficiency in buildings. We help coalition cities share solutions, best practices, and lessons learned, as well as spread awareness about their great work.

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