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The Writing's on the Wall

By: Cst. Tom McKay

Its easy to miss some of the smaller, yet important, changes that can happen in our community as we go about our busy lives. One such change noticeable yet often overlooked change is the presence or impact of graffiti. Graffiti has been known to literally change the face of a community. It can cause people to avoid an area while attracting criminals to it. Yet very few of people see it as a problem when it is still small and manageable. This may help to explain why some estimates of graffiti damage now exceed \$13 billion annually in the United States where the tolerance for graffiti is now known to be a very poor option.

Graffiti is a premeditated, and sometimes organized, form of vandalism with a very well developed subculture behind it. It is often motivated by "fame" which accounts for the same "tag" (stylized signature or marker) or "masterpiece" being seen over and over again. The general public often attributes tagging to the work of gangs. While tagging can be gang related it is generally not the case. This makes little difference in the minds of the public who simply choose to avoid areas with excessive graffiti. This will ultimately affect profits and, if left unchecked, the viability of businesses and communities.

Graffiti must be dealt with before it has a chance to "breed". This means removing graffiti as soon as possible and thereby depriving the graffiti vandal of their most basic reward--fame. This may mean taking additional measures in highly visible and accessible locations that are particularly prized by graffiti artists. In one graffiti plagued plaza in the City of Mississauga, the problem was resolved when the removal was coordinated with a buffer planting. The planting not only kept the graffiti vandals away from the building but it removed the building's blank chalkboard look. While more costly in the short run, it did the job where an initial \$1800 cleaning followed by a lack commitment to deal with recurrences did not.

The insidious nature of graffiti and the determination of these vandals, make this a formidable and expensive form of criminal mischief that the community can't ignore.