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VANDALISM: A General View

By Edward A. Huth, Ph. D.

One of the most shocking developments in the United States since World War II has been the volcanic eruption of juvenile delinquency and adult crime. Between 1948 and 1960, juvenile arrests more than doubled, while the population of juveniles increased by less than fifty percent.¹ In the period, 1958-1963, crime in the United States increased 40 percent while population increased eight percent, indicating that crime increased five times faster than our population growth.² Juveniles made up 17 percent of all police arrests in 1963. Young people in the 15 through 19 year age group had the highest frequency of all population groups for crimes against property, including burglary, larceny and auto theft.³ Statistics, however, do not tell the entire story of wanton brutality, beastly and savage depredations which describe the insolent conduct of some teen-age punks and hoodlums today. In many areas where arrogant teen-agers operate, no one may feel safe, not even judges and the police.

Among the many varieties of juvenile delinquency, vandalism may be considered the symbol, the hallmark, of young lawbreakers in this era. Because of its importance, vandalism merits analysis.

Every day, principally in urban and semi-urban areas, there are reports of the willful, and apparently senseless, damage to or destruction of property by juvenile vandals. Such delinquencies and crimes include: cutting tires; slashing theater seats; smashing bottles and windshields; breaking street lights; defacing walls and billboards; tearing pages out of books; shooting out windows; throwing stones at anything; flooding school buildings with fire hose; spraying cars with paint; blowing up mailboxes; burning buildings; wrecking motor vehicles; and ripping out seats in school buses.

The etymology of the word, "vandalism," reaches back in history to the Vandals, an ancient tribe of people, who lived south of the Baltic between the Vistula and the Oder. In the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., they invaded Gaul, Spain, and northern Africa, and, in 455 A.D., they sacked Rome. The Vandals developed an evil reputation for wanton destruction of life and property. Hence, the term, "vandalism," is reminiscent of the *modus operandi* of Vandals.

Webster defines vandalism as: "The spirit or conduct of, or like that of, the Vandals; hostility to, or willful destruction or defacement of things of beauty."⁴ The term, "vandalism," was coined during the French Revolution by Henri Gregoire to describe the widespread destruction of works of art.⁵ He described such profanation

and desecration as “vandalism, the willful and ignorant destruction” of artistic treasures.⁶ Although the word, “vandalism,” is still used to describe “the willful and ignorant destruction” of artistic or literary treasures, it is commonly used today to describe the damage to, or destruction of, property in general.

More completely explained, vandalism may be defined as the malicious, deliberate, and wanton damage to, defacement or destruction of, property, public or private, with no apparent gain for the perpetrator. Vandalism might be considered as: savage and unrestrained youthful exuberance; malicious damage and/or destruction; contagious maleficence; or, a product of boredom. It may also be regarded as an expression of hostility, aggression and frustration.

Vandalism is frequently connoted in such descriptions of delinquent activity as: “acts of carelessness,” “malicious mischief,” “disorderly conduct,” and, “general destructiveness.” According to complaints filed by the victims of vandalism and by the police, there is scarcely any property that is safe from attack. Schools are one of the most common objects of attack by vandals, and the most common form of school vandalism is breaking windows.

Anyone, regardless of age or sex, may commit an act of vandalism. In general, however, the majority of vandals are male teen-agers. Vandalism occurs in all parts of the world. It is an accepted norm of conduct among the representatives of the teenage delinquent subculture. Some vandals have the attitude that they can get away with anything, because they are juveniles and because they rely on the sentimentality which prevails among some officials. Certain acts of vandalism require an ingenuity of planning and performance that comes only with older adolescence and more experience.

Whereas, the adult world thinks of the teen-age vandal as a delinquent, the vandal might have an entirely different self-conception. His self-image is often that of a prankster, not a delinquent. The fact that frequently nothing is stolen during acts of vandalism tends to confirm the vandal’s image of himself as merely a prankster, not a thief. For the vandal, property damage and/or destruction appear to function as a protest against his ill-defined adolescent role and rather ambiguous status in the social structure.⁷ Most vandals are as normal and as intelligent as other juveniles, who find socially acceptable means for solving their problems.

As to motivation, vandalism may be considered under three heads: (1) Predatory vandalism; (2) Malicious vandalism; and (3) Sportive vandalism. These three classes are not sharply demarcated.

Predatory vandalism includes acts which, although destructive, result in some financial reward for the vandals. For example, fixtures may be ripped out of a building and later sold; desirable articles may be thus acquired and “junked,” or, store windows may be smashed in order to steal merchandise on display. This type of vandalism represents a conflict between the values of the vandals and those of the law-abiding public.

Malicious vandalism is illustrated by antagonism and hatred for certain individuals and groups, such as racial and religious minority groups. A Negro's home may be stoned, or a Jewish synagogue desecrated with Nazi swastikas. School property may be damaged or destroyed by an individual or a group who hate the teacher and/or the school.

Sportive vandalism is exemplified by mischief-making of the type that occurs as part of children's play, as the stoning of school windows by a group of boys simply to ascertain, "Who is the best shot?" In Sportive vandalism, damage to and destruction of property is simply part of the play activity of children, particularly of relatively young children. The spontaneous and wild destruction by marauding bands of adolescents is also of the Sporting type.

The following illustrative cases represent, in different ways, the various factors in the three types of vandalism.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The State has withdrawn charges brought against a 19-year-old Marine who, police said, gave a three-day house party that resulted in about \$5,000.00 damage to his parents' home. The Marine was arrested after neighbors complained about noise coming from the home in Pittsburgh's Oakland section. Police estimated that between 200 and 300 persons attended the party at various times. The Marine's parents were vacationing in Europe at the time.⁸

Newport, Rhode Island. Hundreds of young people attending the annual Jazz Festival made shambles of a beach party. Beach pavilion doors, umbrellas, and a lifeguard stand were tossed into a bonfire. Rocks were hurled at the police. About 100 were arrested.⁹

West Yellowstone, Montana. About 30 residents used ax handles against a mob of 1,000 teen-agers and college students, who tore down fences and signs, and demolished a trailer for bon-fire fuel. Four were jailed.¹⁰

Sacramento, California. Two teen-agers, 16 and 17 years old, were arrested after one of them admitted starting a two million dollar fire that destroyed the Stanford junior high school.¹¹

Birmingham, Alabama. Bomb explosions heralded the arrival of President Kennedy's two-man mission on racial peace. There have been more than 40 bombings in Birmingham since World War II. This bombing was in a middle-class Negro neighborhood on Birmingham's south side, across town from the 16th Street Baptist church where four Negro

girls were killed in a blast on September 15, 1963. The shrapnel-like bombs were packed with nails, which imbedded themselves in neighborhood houses or went sailing through windows.¹²

Hamilton, Ohio. Three teen-age boys, aged 14, 16, and 17 years, confessed to an orgy of destruction in Greenwood and St. Stephen's cemeteries. A total of 142 monuments, markers and statuary were damaged. None of the boys could give any reason for the vandalism, which caused damage and destruction estimated in the tens of thousands of dollars.

"How did you do it?" a detective asked the trio. "With our lily-white hands," one replied. The boys lost their long "ducktail" coiffures at the detention home by order of the Juvenile Court judge.¹³

Dayton, Ohio. In September, 1963, the Plantation Country Club, 5400 Salem Avenue, was wrecked by vandals. Damage was estimated, by the president of the Club, at from \$100,000 to \$150,000. Every window was broken. A hole was chopped in almost every wall. Every fixture in the kitchen was destroyed. Every mirror was demolished. Every light bulb was smashed. An ax was used on every door.

Seven juveniles implicated in the vandalism were sentenced to repair some of the damage. One 17-year-old youth, who hoped to enter a medical school, replied, when questioned as to why they did it, "Just for kicks. Nothing better to do, you know."¹⁴

On the night of June 21-22, 1964, the Club was extensively damaged by fire. Cause of the fire was undetermined, but vandalism was strongly suspected.¹⁵

Southampton, Long Island, New York. Vandalism hit a new extreme at the Fernanda Wanamaker Wetherill's debut. After the 800 guests had danced and imbibed large measures of champagne, they retired to a 30-room Southampton mansion, which had been rented by the host to serve as a dormitory for the male guests. It was here that the post-party high jinks took place on the night of August 31, and September 1, 1963. There the young blue-bloods cut loose in a frenzy by breaking glass, and hurling furniture out of the windows. Damage to the mansion was estimated at \$6,000.00. The pictures in *Life* document this incredible story.¹⁶

Fourteen youths were originally indicted as a result of the vandalism. On April 15, 1964, four of the high society blue bloods were acquitted of criminal charges, consisting of: breaking a French door; wrecking an expensive chandelier by swinging on it; smashing a lamp; and using dinnerware as targets for a BB gun.¹⁷

New York, New York. An automobile filled with 12 adults and children went past warning lights, which had been blacked out by vandals, and plunged into the Harlem River. Only one person survived. Vandals had ripped bulbs and wiring from blinking red lights at the end of Lincoln Avenue, The Bronx, where the car went into the river.¹⁸

Cincinnati, Ohio. Arson investigators say a nine-year-old boy has admitted setting \$12,000.00 worth of fires because he was angry at being punished by his parents. The youngster is being held for a psychiatric examination. The boy admitted setting nine fires in the Beechwood area between April 25 and August 7, 1964. No one was hurt in the fires.¹⁹

Indianapolis, Indiana. Giggling teen-age girls, who smeared lipstick on doorknobs and ripped expensive gold vinyl paper from walls, have forced cancellation of reservations for the Beatles in a fashionable downtown motel.

The vice president of the Essex House requested Indiana State fair officials to find other accommodations for the quartet, which will appear in two shows at the fair on September 3, 1964. He said ever since the announcement seven weeks ago that the singers would be guests, teen-agers have thronged to the motel. Squealing girls have kissed doorknobs in hopes a Beatle would eventually touch it.

"I'm really relieved, they aren't coming," said the motel housekeeper. "Those teen-agers have just overrun the place." She stated that the young fans begged for contents of the Beatles wastebaskets, their used soap and even their cigarette butts.²⁰

Dayton, Ohio. In mid-August, 1963, a gang numbering 16 juveniles smashed 300 windows at the Jefferson Elementary School, 1231 North Euclid Avenue. Damage was estimated at \$2,000.00 by the school principal.²¹ All of the boys, except one, attended Jefferson School.

When questioned by police for an explanation of the vandalism, the boys muttered the same. "I don't know. The other boys were doing it." A ten-year-old explained: "I was just doin' what the other boys were doin'."

In 1964, vandalism to Dayton Public schools amounted to approximately \$40,000.00.²¹

In order to better understand vandals and vandalism, the following five factors will be taken into consideration: (1) Personal characteristics of vandals; (2) The home life of vandals; (3) Peer group relationships; (4) Vandalism risks and danger-

ous situations; (5) The community and vandalism.

Personal Characteristics of Vandals. Vandals may be divided into three classes: (1) Fundamentally law-abiding vandals; (2) Mentally-disturbed vandals; and (3) Sub-cultural vandals.

Fundamentally law-abiding vandals come from so-called "normal homes" in which there is comparatively little parent-child conflict or tension. Most of such vandals are fairly well adjusted in school. They are distinguished by their freedom from serious disturbances and by the fact that their slipping into vandalism is quite incidental to their otherwise non-delinquent careers. Frequently "nice" boys from so-called "better families" engage in daubings, desecrations, and molestations. The destruction and damage wrought by young children is often excused with the rationalization that they have not yet reached the use of reason. For them, vandalism is not necessarily malicious, rather it is more often destructive play motivated by curiosity.

Mentally-disturbed vandals frequently manifest neurotic and psychotic disturbances. Vandalism is only one facet of their disordered minds. The major characteristic of these vandals is their serious personality aberrations and their tendency toward recidivism. Mental defectives and epileptics, who engage in vandalism, also come under this classification. Psychopathic and orthopsychiatric cases involving vandalism are examples of syndromes indicating personal disorganization.

Sub-cultural vandals are the career delinquents, the hoodlums, the punks with histories of frequent participation in various types of group delinquency and crime. They are not affected by any serious mental problems, and their vandalism is usually considered deliberate and malicious. From this class come many of the future criminals and saboteurs. As the child is father of the man, so is the juvenile vandal often father of the adult saboteur.

The Home Life of Vandals. Neglect at home, and lack of discipline in the home are two of the principal reasons for juvenile vandalism. The basic cause of the present situation is that so many young people have no real sense of moral responsibility which comes from an intimate knowledge of God's teaching and law.

Vandalism may be very substantially reduced when parents make it their business to know where their children are when they are not in school. If parents neither know nor care, then let them not blame society, the schools, the churches, or evil companions for their vandalic children.

Lack of security, often from infancy, and neurotic needs for leadership sometimes results in vandalism. Some juveniles may feel that they are not understood or are unjustly treated by their parents. They may take out their resentment against people by acts of vandalism against property.

The family is the cradle of civilization. As the family goes, so goes the nation. In the family the virtues of honesty, chastity, respect for property, respect for authority, respect for the rights of others, and self-discipline should be taught and exemplified. Such virtues, however, are without meaning unless they are founded upon an

understanding and respect for the authority of God. Here is where many families are failing. Here is where much of the answer to vandalism and other forms of juvenile delinquency may be found.

Emphasis upon uninhibited personality development, the modern psychology of self-expression, has brought about an inevitable lack of self-control, which is one of the greatest causes for juvenile delinquency. The only prescription is a return to emphasis upon personal responsibility and duty, and less humbug about the rights and privileges of children. Much vandalism grows out of delinquent family attitudes toward property, and from boredom.

Frequently, the term, "juvenile delinquency," is a misnomer for adult delinquency. There will be less vandalism when we have better and wiser mothers and fathers. In some cases, the juvenile vandal is the product of an over-permissive, over-indulgent, and over-protective environment. In many homes the child grows up without firm standards of behavior, and with little or no enforcement. Governor George Romney of Michigan expressed the situation facing the United States when he declared that "Family life is being destroyed by immorality and neglect of children."²² Most difficulties with youthful vandals, as with juvenile delinquents in general, originate in a home where a true sense of sound values is diminishing or is entirely absent.

Peer Group Relationships. Participation in vandalism is one way of meeting the needs for autonomy and peer-group acceptance. Some boys seem to feel that it is necessary to be self-directive in order to be considered masculine and acceptable to their peers. The contagion of gang action may encourage individual members of the gang to go to much greater proportions in damage and destruction than any one member had contemplated. This is a manifestation of mob psychology. The absence of clearly defined norms and values by juvenile vandals, coupled with their peer-group loyalty, results in conflict with authority figures such as parents, teachers and police. The product of gang peer-group interaction is frequently vandalism, which is called delinquent by the adult world, but is considered "normal" in terms of conformity to peer-group expectations. In nearly all cases of vandalism, the acts are performed with companions.²³ Some rival gangs compete in acts of vandalism.

Damage to, and destruction of, property may be considered as pathological juvenile exhilaration and exuberance, which is contagious and often malicious in nature. Vandalism is symptomatic of a more or less seriously disturbed teen-age peer-group. Hon. J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Department of Justice, has stated: "Juvenile criminality is more than a childhood disease. It is a chronic and infectious plague."²⁴

Vandalism Risks and Dangerous Situations. In vandalism, there is generally found some evidence of profound emotional conflict with a feeling of inferiority and frustration. Some vandals feel a need to punish others for real or fancied offenses against themselves. A United States Senate committee reported that the amount of hostility and maliciousness expressed in vandalism is an index to the degree for

which vandals feel that they have been imposed upon and offended.²⁵

No one commits vandalism without some reason. We are living in a delinquent era when emphasis is on destruction, as evidenced by two very destructive World Wars in the first half of the twentieth century and many lesser conflicts. Children read about destruction in newspapers, hear about it by radio, see it in movies and television. In labor disputes and in race relations, vandalism and sabotage are more or less common occurrences. Thus, juveniles do not need to be extremely original in practicing vandalism.

Chronic unemployment is concentrated in the youngest age bracket of the labor force, and this is the age of highest frequency for vandalism. Thousands of teenagers do not have any work to do, and this situation constitutes social dynamite in urban areas. Unemployment is far worse for young Negroes than for white teenagers.

The above cited Senate committee found, after months of research, that the television industry was taking "a calculated risk" with crime and violence on programs during children's viewing hours.²⁶ Positive proof is lacking, however, that television crime and violence programs are harmful to children. Nevertheless, crime and delinquency programs have provoked controversy among specialists in problems affecting juvenile delinquents. There exists sufficient professional opinion that such programs do contribute to juvenile lawlessness.

The late Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee emphasized that many children spend more hours before television than they do in school. During those hours, programs might have brought to the juvenile mind such concepts as, life and property are expendable; suffering, sadism, beastliness, and brutality are matters of indifference; and that lawyers, judges and police are often dishonest, incompetent and stupid.²⁷ The manner and frequency with which crime and delinquency programs are brought before the eyes and ears of children indicates a flagrant disregard for the social and psychological consequences upon juveniles.²⁸

There are certain evil conditions in our culture which are conducive to acts of vandalism. They have many shapes, forms and disguises such as naturalism, mechanism, pantheism, positivism, pragmatism, humanism, totalitarianism, secularism, communism, materialism and existentialism. When such doctrines are presented out of proper context and exemplified by adults, there is always potential danger for juveniles.

From early childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood, there is a continual struggle to master the care and use of property. Juveniles live in the presence, and often in possession, of property which has definite values and uses for adults, but has no real significance in the objectives and purposes of the teenager. It is imperative that there be developed a sense of responsibility toward property from the earliest years. For example, this includes the proper care of childhood toys and play-things, consideration for preservation and safety in the use of an automobile, and respect for public property, including school buildings.

Many children are frustrated, more or less, in the normal course of development; many children show some hostility toward parents, adults and society in general; and, many children, at one time or another, give expression to their hostilities. Hostile children are difficult to accept, difficult to like, and difficult to teach. Such children find little satisfaction in attending school, and they come to regard the school as a punitive and hostile institution. Inasmuch as attendance is compulsory and punishment is a constant threat, some children might well perceive desks, chairs, teachers, windows and books as proper objects for hate, damage and destruction. When it is possible to break through this hate barrier, a counselor or a teacher might do much to mitigate the situation. The problem of changing the hostile and destructive drives in juveniles is made very difficult, because many of them regard all attempts at mutuality and acceptance with suspicion and scorn.

The Community and Vandalism. Community influences which affect vandalism rates include: (1) the age, sex, and racial composition of the population; (2) density and size of the community population; (3) the economic and social characteristics of the population; (4) mobility of the population; (5) climatic influences, including seasonal weather changes; (6) the educational, recreational, and religious facilities; (7) standards governing appointments to the police force; (8) the size and quality of the police force; (9) policies of the prosecuting officials and of the courts; (10) the attitude of the public toward law observance and law enforcement.

Other things being equal, a community that is mixed racially with a good representation of male adolescents will have more vandalism than in a homogeneous population. Vandalism is very common in the larger communities, because there are so many unemployed adolescents who have no regular work to do. The more people concentrate on a given area, the more opportunities they have for violation of each other's rights in the form of vandalism. The lower socio-economic areas have higher rates of vandalism than the higher class communities. Mobility and transiency of population are positively correlated with violations of property rights. Crimes against property have a slightly higher rate in colder climates than in the warmer climates. Obviously, vandalism rates vary from community to community, and climatic influences are not definitive. Normally, the communities with better educational, recreational, and religious facilities have less vandalism than under-privileged areas. A police force that is adequate in size and training is a powerful influence in the prevention and control of vandalism. Vandalism can be reduced to a minimum in communities where prosecuting officers and judges administer certain and swift justice. Perhaps, the most powerful factor in the prevention and control of vandalism is the positive attitude of the general public toward law observance and law enforcement. When and where adults set the proper example for their children, there juvenile vandalism will be effectively controlled.

Sporadic vandalism is common in American communities, but never has it flared on a comparable scale as in this era. The insistence of some juveniles to dam-

age and destroy property is common in both rural and urban communities, and vandalism appears to be shared by children from all economic levels. Vandalism is, however, principally the activity of urban children who have nothing else to do. Young hoodlums usually do not know why they engage in vandalism.²⁹

Vandalism reflects the moral tone of a community, and its roots are found in the adult world in which juveniles live. There is some evidence that vandalism is related to racial, ethnic, or religious prejudice. The amount of vandalism that formerly was committed on Halloween has been greatly reduced in those communities which have provided healthy outlets of fun and aggression for the young people of the community.

A determined mayor in a Midwest city instituted a two-part program for dealing with increased vandalism. The first part of his plan called for having any vandalism committed by a juvenile personally repaired by him whenever possible. The second part of the program permits newspapers, radio and television stations to use the names of juvenile hoodlums, even though they may be less than 18 years of age. Placing responsibility upon the juvenile who commits acts of vandalism and promptly imposing the right penalty might do much to prevent and control vandalic activities. Both the vandal and his vandalism should be carefully considered in the application of a just penalty.

Vandalism is important enough to receive the benefit of a fully mobilized community approach and concerted attack. All civic, social, labor, fraternal, service, and business organizations should make elimination or reduction of vandalism the focal point of their programs.

In dealing with vandalism, it is important for welfare workers to have a thorough understanding of the value system in the community where they operate. Very often a minority group filled with aggression, hostility, and frustration will use vandalism as a means of retaliation against the school or any property that represents the majority culture. This is well exemplified by the recent Negro riots in New York City, Rochester, New York, Chicago and Cleveland.

Safeguards against vandalism include flood lights and continuous patrolling of schools by police. One preventive device is the portable radar system. Under this system, a radar beam is sent down school corridors, and if someone walks in the corridor when the school is closed, the police are automatically alerted.

Although it can be said that vandalism starts in the home, through lack of parental guidance, the question can be raised as to what the community is doing to prepare married people for parental responsibilities. We train engineers, architects, social workers, lawyers and doctors, but we expect people to know instinctively what it means to be responsible parents.

The increase of vandalism by juveniles in every section of the United States indicates a new pattern of violence with no apparent decrease in the traditional forms of delinquency. This situation presents a repulsive, ugly and shameful picture. It

points toward an odious decay in the social order, and reflects a growing disregard for the rights and privileges of individuals and groups. Vandalism is both socially and economically very expensive.

In conclusion, there is no single cause, or group of causes, for vandalism. The causes are complex and multitudinous. Consequently, there is no universal remedy or treatment. Vandalism has its roots in the individual, the home, the school and the community. As with other social problems, vandalism will not be eliminated or mitigated until the causes that produce it and the conditions that facilitate it are properly understood and treated. The vast majority of vandals are normal, or pass for normal, and, therefore, they should be held responsible for their acts.

Most vandals come from the lower socio-economic class. The most outstanding characteristic of vandals is their background of unsettled social and economic conditions. Families of vandals generally show a pattern of failure to show respect for property and the rights of others. Children should be taught to show respect for the property rights of others from their earliest childhood. Parents should be held morally, legally, and financially responsible for the vandalism of their children. Indulgence and materialistic selfishness are eroding the tried and true American traditions of honesty, integrity and fair play. Vandalism indicates the failure of personal and social controls.

Among the many things that may be done to prevent or reduce vandalism are the following: (1) educate boys and girls for responsible parenthood; (2) improve the quality of juvenile courts and juvenile aid facilities; (3) stop coddling juvenile punks and hoodlums; (4) crack down hard on the corrupters of juveniles; (5) mobilize all community resources for a united attack against vandalism; and (6) begin now to establish a more firm moral structure in America. The America we live in today must awaken to the danger of vandalism.

FOOTNOTES

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