Fact sheet: Access control, CPTED and education to prevent malicious damage

Malicious damage is defined as the intentional ‘destruction or defacement of public, commercial and private property’ (Howard 2006: 1). It is a very broad offence category covering a range of different acts, including vandalism (e.g. smashing windows, knocking over letterboxes) and graffiti. Graffiti refers to the act of marking property with writing, symbols or graphics and is illegal when committed without the property owner’s consent (White 2001).

The best available evidence suggests that strategies involving a combination of access control measures, crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) and/or education can be used to prevent malicious damage offences.1 Given the broad nature of this offence, you will need to have a detailed understanding of the nature of malicious damage in your area to tailor these types of strategies to best address your problem. This means that you will need to investigate the main characteristics of malicious damage offences in your area (e.g. whether it involves vandalism and/or graffiti), where the hotspot locations are (e.g. residential areas, housing estates, public spaces, areas around licensed premises or public transport facilities), and what the main targets are (e.g. letterboxes, fences, vehicles, public facilities or public transport).

What does this strategy involve?

Access control refers to interventions that improve the perimeter security of locations that have been identified as experiencing high rates of malicious damage, such as public transport facilities, high density housing estates and the areas around licensed premises. Specific strategies can include installing or upgrading physical security (such as installing perimeter fencing or self-closing secure doors) or restricting access to an area during certain times. Determining the most appropriate type of access control measure for your area will depend upon what local information identifies as being the major security weaknesses, targets and entry points for offenders.

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1 The development of these strategies has been informed by a combination of the best available evidence, a strong theoretical crime prevention framework and practitioner experience. There is strong evidence underpinning many of the strategies that are described in the fact sheets. However, in some of the fact sheets, the evidence in support of the strategies and the case studies used to illustrate them are not particularly recent, which reflects the lack of recent evaluation activity. The evidence in support of some of the strategies is also not as strong as for others and in these cases, the strategies draw more heavily from theory and practice. There is significant scope to improve the evidence base by increasing the amount of crime prevention activity that is rigorously evaluated.
CPTED involves the design and management of the built and landscaped environment to limit opportunities for crime to occur. CPTED can involve strategies that are designed to increase natural surveillance by encouraging more people to make use of pedestrian thoroughfares and strategies that limit or prevent access to certain areas. Interventions that have been implemented to target malicious damage have typically focused on urban renewal measures, which aim to general amenity of an area by keeping it clean, well maintained and attractive to potential users. This can help to encourage feelings of personal safety among users and increase pedestrian movement and use of an area. Strategies include removing graffiti from fences and windows and repairing damaged facilities in public housing estates or on public transport. Other potential measures could include tree trimming to improve visibility, landscaping or introducing features such as picnic tables or cafes to improve the amenity of an area. Again, the type of CPTED measures most suitable for your area will depend on the precise nature of your local problem.

Education projects that have been implemented to support other interventions have included providing information and training to potential offenders (e.g. school age children) to increase their understanding of the consequences associated with committing a malicious damage offence.

Similar interventions could be targeted at the owners or managers of commercial premises and housing estates, who may inadvertently create opportunities for malicious damage offences by failing to adequately secure or maintain premises or property. Education projects could also focus on providing information to other victims (or potential victims) of malicious damage about reducing the risks.

**What does the evidence say?**

Few strategies aimed at preventing malicious damage have been subject to rigorous evaluation. However, a small number of studies have shown that strategies involving some combination of access control, CPTED and/or education interventions can be effective in reducing the incidence of malicious damage offences. Three studies involving at least two of the interventions demonstrated evidence of effectiveness. There was little evidence to suggest that these interventions are effective in reducing malicious damage when implemented in isolation.

The evidence is unclear as to whether strategies involving some combination of CPTED, access control and education can have a long-term impact on malicious damage offending. However, an evaluation of one strategy that involved access control measures, education and CPTED (as part of a larger strategy with multiple interventions) found that the effectiveness of the scheme actually increased over time.

**How does the strategy work?**

Access control measures, such as improved perimeter fencing in public transport holding yards and security doors in public housing estates, aim to make it more difficult to enter high-risk areas and reach potential targets of crime (e.g. decommissioned trains). These measures discourage potential offenders by increasing the perceived effort associated with committing a malicious damage offence. By manipulating the physical environment and minimising access points, access control measures can also help to encourage a sense of ownership of defined spaces among residents (in the case of high-density housing) or users of a public space. This can, in turn, lead to improved surveillance and an increased risk of offenders being detected.
CPTED measures focused on urban renewal (e.g. cleaning, maintaining and beautifying landscaped areas) create environments that are more attractive and inviting to actual and potential users. This encourages legitimate use of the space and feelings of safety and residential pride, which, in turn, increases natural surveillance opportunities, and deters potential offenders. Public housing estates, licensed establishments and public transport vehicles that are busy and well maintained are not appealing to offenders, as there is a higher likelihood that their criminal behaviour will be detected.

Education projects provide information to potential offenders and people who facilitate malicious damage offending by raising their awareness of specific issues, crimes, services and/or preventative measures. Education projects aim to encourage individuals (potential offenders or individuals who facilitate crime) to consider the implications of their actions (e.g. ‘tagging’ a bus window) or inactions (e.g. not refusing service to intoxicated patrons) and discourage behaviour that may create opportunities for crime to occur.

Where will the strategy work best?

Effective strategies targeted areas that were identified as hotspots for malicious damage offences. This was determined on the basis of local crime statistics and/or on the basis of concerns raised by the community, local residents and people working in the area. This included public transport facilities and areas in and around licensed premises – areas that frequently experience high rates of property damage, vandalism and graffiti.

Strategies targeting residential areas with high-density housing appear to benefit when residents are enthusiastic about the interventions being delivered. Proactive and engaged residents are important as they will ultimately be responsible for the success of the strategy in the long term, through regularly reporting incidents of vandalism to the appropriate authorities. In strategies targeting public housing estates, effective projects appeared to be supported by a good working relationship with tenants, which helped to ensure regular maintenance and quick repairs.

Table 1 lists a range of strategies that may be suitable for different types of malicious damage problems. This list is provided as a guide, rather than as prescriptive, as strategies need to be tailored to the local situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of malicious damage problem</th>
<th>Possible responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graffiti</td>
<td>CPTED (green screening) – Planting greenery alongside walls to prevent access to and/or decrease visibility of graffiti. Access control – Installing fixtures such as bollards or fencing to limit access to a site with high incidence of graffiti. Education project – Educational DVD for youths at risk of offending about the consequences and risks of graffiti. Rapid removal of graffiti to keep area well maintained and attractive to potential users.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vandalism to public facilities</td>
<td>Access control – Installing fixtures such as bollards or fencing to limit access to a particular site with a high incidence of vandalism. Community patrols of area to increase likelihood of offenders being detected. CPTED – Including trimming of vegetation and creating pedestrian thoroughfares to encourage legitimate use of spaces and deter offenders.</td>
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<td>Vehicles being damaged in residential areas at night</td>
<td>Education project – Encourage residents to park their cars in a garage, off the street or in a well-lit area Lighting – To increase visibility and enhance surveillance of a high-risk area and increase the likelihood of offenders being detected.</td>
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Table 1 Local strategies to reduce malicious damage offences

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<td>Residential homes being damaged (e.g. letterboxes, doors, windows)</td>
<td>Education project – Encourage residents to adopt measures to reduce their risks of victimisation e.g. installation of sensor lighting, security screens. CPTED – Improve general amenity of area to encourage feelings of personal safety, pride and ownership. Access control – Closure of laneways to prevent offenders accessing homes in high-risk areas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malicious damage offences in areas surrounding licensed premises</td>
<td>Enhanced accords and enforcement of responsible service of alcohol. Introduce transport options, such as providing a late-night bus to move patrons out of area.</td>
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What will you need to implement this strategy?

The accompanying handbook provides more detailed information on how to implement these strategies, but briefly:

**A good understanding of your local problem**

The studies reviewed for this project showed that effective strategies were targeted at public transport holding yards and vehicles, licensed premises and public housing estates with high rates of recorded offences. Effectively targeting problematic spaces requires access to information to identify malicious damage hotspots as well as information about the characteristics of these offences to inform a more targeted approach. The response may be different according to whether you are dealing with graffiti or vandalism, whether you are dealing with public spaces or residential areas, and whether the areas are owned or controlled by government agencies. Your intervention will need to be tailored accordingly. Some examples are provided in Table 1, however you will need to adjust these to suit your own local conditions and stakeholders.

The key to addressing malicious damages offences is a problem-solving approach. This involves a thorough and systematic analysis of current data on the prevalence and characteristics of malicious damage offences, their causes and risk factors.

**Stakeholder involvement**

A number of effective strategies were overseen by a steering committee comprised of representatives from different stakeholder groups (including the community) who were affected by the problem. Similarly, it is important to establish appropriate consultation mechanisms at the commencement of the project to seek input from individuals who will be affected by the strategy. This can include the owners and managers of commercial premises, public housing authorities, residents of housing estates and public transport workers and commuters.
CASE STUDY 1: Golf Links Estate in London
This strategy was targeted at a public housing estate that was experiencing high rates of crime, including malicious damage. The estate was rundown, dirty and prone to vandalism and the surrounding grounds were overgrown and not landscaped. To improve the general appearance of the estate, substantial repairs were made to the buildings (e.g. broken windows were replaced and the exterior of the buildings repainted) and the grounds were cleared and landscaped. Other interventions delivered as part of the strategy included the installation of improved security doors on the residential buildings, increasing the frequency of police patrols on the estate and the development of an after-school activities program for children living on the estate. An evaluation of the strategy found that despite a number of implementation issues, the number of criminal damage offences occurring on the estate decreased by 71 per cent between 1983 and 1990.

CASE STUDY 2: Subway graffiti in New York City
Despite the introduction of a number of initiatives, by the early 1980s, graffiti on the New York City subway train system had become a serious problem. A multifaceted strategy was implemented in 1984 to try to reduce graffiti. The strategy involved:

• frequent security patrols of train yards
• cleaning the graffiti off subway cars
• upgrades to the train yard perimeter fencing and lighting
• the development of an education program targeted at high school students that informed them about the consequences of graffiti for the community and the offenders themselves, and
• the implementation of undercover police patrols on trains during periods when potential offenders (students) were more likely to use the subway.

The evaluation concluded that this strategy had been effective and that by 1989, there was a substantial reduction in subway graffiti. The program exceeded its annual targets every year during that period.

CASE STUDY 3: Possil Park Housing Estate – Glasgow
This strategy was implemented in a public housing estate in north-central Glasgow that had a high unemployment rate among residents. The estate had a problem with empty dwellings being regularly vandalised and stripped of their copper and lead.

The strategy was developed by local residents in partnership with the Possil Park Community Business; a committee comprised of residents that aimed to provide employment opportunities for people living on the estate. The intervention involved the creation of an unemployed workers group. Unemployed residents were employed by the local council to patrol areas that contained empty dwellings, perform general repairs to the buildings and maintain the general appearance of the estate grounds.

An evaluation found that between 1985 and 1987, malicious damage offences decreased from 252 to 188 recorded offences. Although offence rates had begun to rise again by 1990, they appeared to decrease again shortly thereafter.
CASE STUDY 4: Geelong Local Industry Accord

The Geelong Industry Accord was developed in response to escalating rates of alcohol-related crime (including malicious damage) occurring in and around licensed premises in Geelong’s central business district. Geelong had previously developed a local industry code of conduct, but it had proven to be ineffective in reducing alcohol-related crime rates.

The strategy involved the development of a steering committee comprised of local community organisations, licensees, the local council and police. The committee met on a regular basis and developed a series of voluntary ‘best practice’ guidelines for signatory licensees to abide by. In particular, licensees were required to provide their employees with responsible service of alcohol training (which, at that time, wasn’t mandatory). Other guidelines included the cessation of ‘happy hours’ after 7 pm and ‘free drink’ promotions. Sixty-five per cent of licensees involved in the scheme reported that there had been a decline in property damage offences since the introduction of the scheme, which appeared to be reflected in police-recorded crime data.

Endnotes


Further reading

For further reading in this area, refer to the accompanying handbook and literature review.

Acknowledgements

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