

# Vandals deface school, buses

Work of graffiti 'taggers' in Santa Cruz will cost taxpayers \$80,000

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A historic Santa Cruz elementary school and 30 buses in the county's Metro bus yard are the latest victims of increasingly bold graffiti vandals.

Attacks at Gault Elementary School early Monday and at the Metro maintenance headquarters on River Street over the weekend will cost taxpayers an estimated \$80,000.

"It's becoming an eyesore," said Santa Cruz police Officer Warren Barry. "People feel their community is being violated."

Spray paint was used to deface the white walls at Gault school, built on Seabright Avenue in 1928, with hundreds of dripping logos and obscenities. At the bus yard, an apparently different group of graffiti "taggers" sneaked onto buses before dawn Saturday and Monday and used glass cutters to carve their insignias into dozens of bus windows.

Police said neither incident appeared to be the work of Hispanic gangs, whose members often get blamed for graffiti. Rather, the logos, or "tags," were written in English and represent abbreviations used by middle-class white students, according to investigators.

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"It's mostly skateboarders," said Barry. "The kids tell us it's the guys with the baggy clothes and shaved heads. They're looking for recognition."

During the past several years, the amount of graffiti in Santa Cruz County has grown considerably. Police have a difficult time arresting perpetrators because they must catch someone in the act of defacing property to make charges stick.

In several rare instances when taggers have been caught, judges have handed

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CAP CARPENTER — MERCURY NEWS

Grffiti 'taggers' left their mark on the walls of Miguel Perez's home.

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down relatively light sentences, critics complain. Many of the vandals are under 18, which also limits the extent of punishment allowed under the law.

Several parents and classrooms full of students volunteered to paint over the blue and black paint covering Gault school, said Nancy Street, a sixth-grade teacher.

"We love our school. We're proud of the way it looks," she said. "This was just a huge, horrible mess."

By 2 p.m., all the graffiti had been covered up. Other spray paint still remained on fences and buildings along Seabright Avenue.

At the bus yard, where 80 Metro buses are cleaned and serviced every night, an apparently unrelated series of tags were scratched on the interior windows of 10 buses, said Ken Hick-

lin, operation manager.

The attack was similar to an incident early Saturday morning, when trespassers sneaked through open gates and carved letters into the interior windows of 20 buses parked in dark corners.

"Unfortunately, when you scratch the glass that deeply, you can't buff it out," said Metro director Scott Galloway. "You have to replace it. I just hate this kind of meaningless vandalism."

Bus company officials estimated combined damage for both attacks at from \$75,000 to \$80,000. A similar attack six months ago also cost \$80,000, said Galloway.

Police suggested that the bus directors hire security guards, lock gates and improve lighting at the yard.

"They've told me that it's too expensive," said Santa Cruz police Sgt. Joe Haebe. "But I don't know of any security guard who costs \$80,000."