

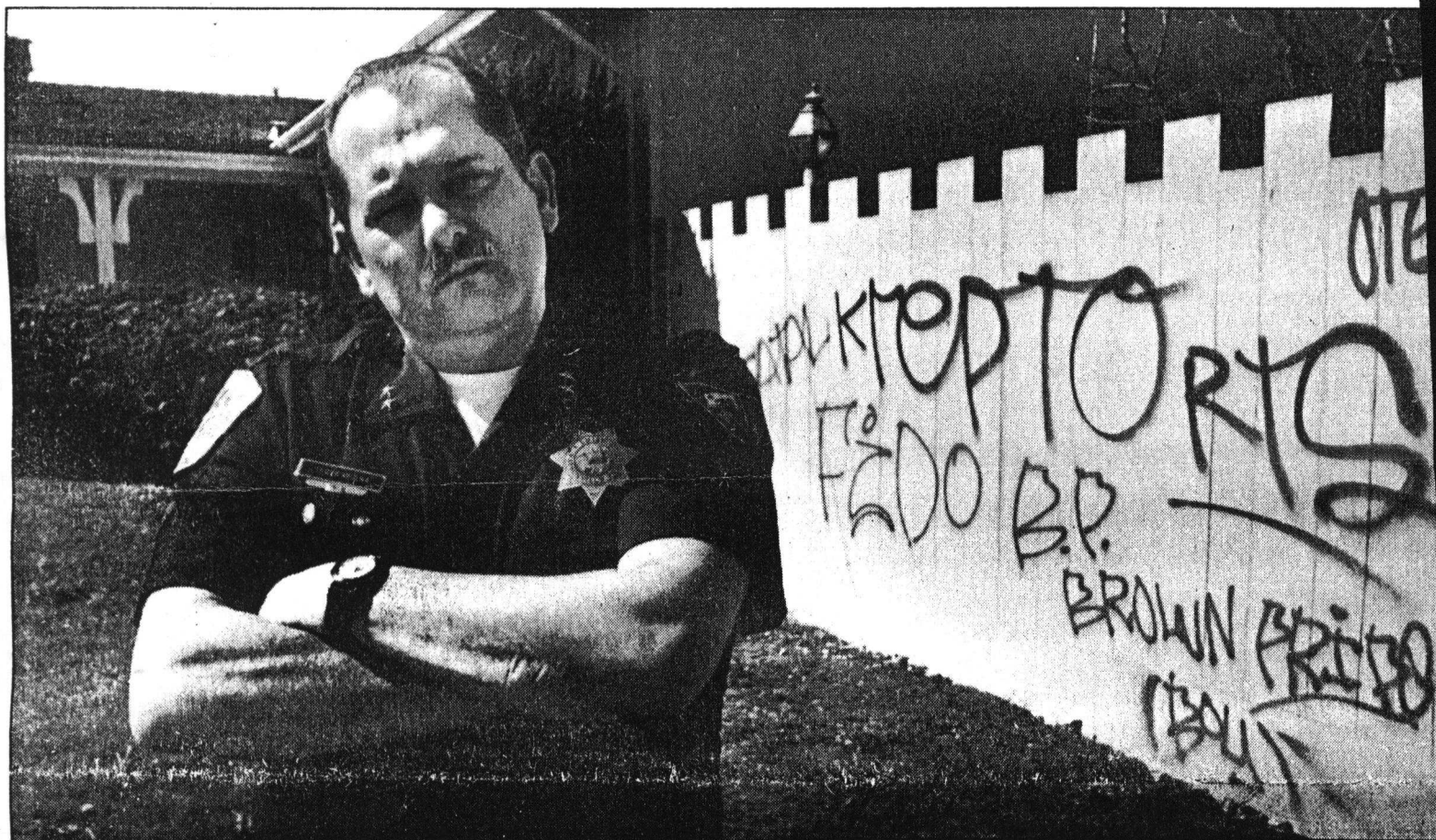
VER 1 GRAFFITI

RP p.1

# AMERICAN GRAFFITI

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Agencies gearing up to combat most graphic of urban vandalism



Mike McCollum

Police Chief Terry Medina in front of a Marilyn Street fence. Above, the monument to World War veterans at Buena Vista and Freedom Boulevard.

## City barraged by complaints

By JUDY BRILL  
STAFF WRITER

**C**ONFRONTED with the worst onslaught of graffiti ever to hit Watsonville, city officials and the police department have joined forces in an effort to deal with perhaps the most visible of all urban problems.

Graffiti comes in waves, and

the most recent surge has the community up in arms. It has become more than an eyesore. The scrawl discourages potential home buyers and new businesses to the area. It has gotten so bad in some neighborhoods that residents are talking about pulling up stakes and moving elsewhere.

There are theories on what's behind the recent three-month

increase — everything from the emergence of a fresh group of youth offenders seeking to establish their identity to the new year-round school scheduling, which leaves a "track" of students out of the classroom and on the street for part of the year.

In a barrage of letters and phone calls to the City Council, the city manager and the chief

of police, citizens are calling for a permanent, ongoing plan to deter — and if that fails, clean up — the chronic writing on the walls, fences and storefronts throughout the city.

Working with Pat Donohue, director of the city's Recreation and Parks Department, Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina has drafted a two-pronged pro-

See GRAFFITI page 2 ►



# American graffiti becomes an urban scourge

GRAFFITI, from page 1

posals intended to enlist the city, the police and the public and private sectors in tackling the growing graffiti problem. Medina is scheduled to present the outline to the City Council tomorrow.

AS WITH any criminal activity, the two most basic approaches to dealing with graffiti are prevention and prosecution. The latter is difficult because, quite simply, graffiti writers are hard to catch. They usually work at night when witnesses are few. And they typically travel on bikes, skateboards or motor scooters, making quick getaways after making their marks.

In spite of all the graffiti and law-enforcement's efforts to catch the artists, few are ever prosecuted.

"When I get a (graffiti case), I'm almost gleeful," said Judge Heather Morse, who hears cases in Municipal Court on Freedom Boulevard. Of the few she has seen, Morse said the typical sentence for a graffiti conviction is 30 days in jail, two years probation ("so I can keep my eye on them"), a day of work for the city of Watsonville and payment of restitution.

This, Morse said, is the most difficult part to establish due to all the variables, such as proof that the graffiti artist actually was responsible for all instances of a particular moniker being written, the amount of damage the graffiti caused, and the cost of painting it out.

THE PENAL Code lists graffiti offenses under vandalism, and unless a single incident causes more than \$5,000 in damage — which is extremely rare — the crime is considered a misdemeanor. Prison time for a graffiti conviction with damages under \$1,000 is six months or less; maximum prison time for a misdemeanor is one year.

Morse called graffiti a "non-emotional" crime, involving neither anger nor drug- or alcohol-impaired judgment. She said people just do it, and doubts that counseling or education could be effective as a deterrent. Morse said she leans toward punishment over deterrence.

However, Medina cited a study conducted several years ago by the University of Minnesota suggesting that graffiti removal is a viable deterrent.

In the study, a car was parked on a street in a city beginning to show signs of urban decay.

AFTER SOME time, when it was apparent the car wasn't going anywhere, a window on the car turned up broken one morning," Medina said. No repairs were made, and within a few days, more windows were broken. Then a window in a nearby building was broken. A trail of vandalism eventually spread in the area, all leading back to that car.

The researchers had another vehicle parked. After a certain period, a window was broken. But the glass was quickly replaced and the car cleaned. After a while, another window on the car was broken. It too was fixed. And that was the extent of the vandalism experienced.

Medina explained that until now, the chore of "painting out" (painting over) graffiti has fallen to private citizens and businesses who volunteer time and materials. The situation has gotten to the point, however, where once-a-month paint-outs are simply inadequate.

Medina, emphasizing that the talks with the city are still at the brainstorming stage, said they are looking at establishing a graffiti abatement program that would be jointly funded by the public and private sectors and overseen by the city. He said they still have to discuss the ideas with the Chamber of Commerce.

CURRENTLY, if a person's home or a business is hit with graffiti, painting it out by the victim is voluntary. Medina said he envisions a program for homeowners and businesses in which a Graffiti Abatement Program would take care of cleaning graffiti for those who have joined by contributing to the program's fund.

Enforcement of this part of the package would be through enactment of a graffiti abatement ordinance, funded in part by \$10,000 in seed money from the city.

"If they don't sign up, and they're hit with graffiti, we'll clean it up for them — but we'll also send them the bill," Medina said.

The proposed public/private partnership would fund and hire paint contractors who would be dispatched within 48 hours to sites where fresh graffiti has been seen. The private contrac-



Mike McCollum

A building at a car dealership at Arthur Road and Marin Street serves as tablet for graffiti artists.

tors would be authorized to go on private as well as public property, and would be supervised by the Public Works Department.

The city would set up a fund account with \$5,000 in seed money. Businesses that want to participate in the program would register and contribute \$480 annually, homeowners would kick in \$120 per year, both payable six months to a year in advance.

MEDINA said they are also looking into the possibility of an assessment district that would include all parcels within the city.

There are three types of graffiti: tagger, which is by far the most common; piecer; and gang-related.

Tagger graffiti is "message-oriented" and includes monikers (nicknames), acronyms, and often tries to convey an ideal. It's evident all over the city, but a good example can be seen on Arthur Road near Sonoma Avenue.

The goal of the tagger is to write his moniker as many times as possible. Officer Henry Robles, Watsonville Police Department's gang liaison, said a certain status and power accompanies having the coolest tag, and having it appear frequently. Robles said he most often hears from taggers that they do it "to be recognized." Usually written with felt-tipped pens or spray paint, tagging is a "catch me if you can" challenge to law enforcement. It's most common among 10- to 18-year-olds.

PIECER GRAFFITI is bigger and more intricate than tagging. Taggers "graduate" to piecers, who often will do mural-type graffiti. Sgt. Len Lofano, of the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office, called piecers "outlaw artists." The works tend to be more aesthetic, are larger, and take longer to do. Not surprisingly, there are also fewer examples of piecer graffiti. Because more time is involved, piecers run a greater chance of

getting caught in the act. To cut down on the time it takes to do their work, piecers will do hundreds of practice outlines before actually going out to paint a site.

Gang graffiti is totally different than tagger or piecer work. It serves as a gang "newspaper," marking territory, letting members know "who's hot, who's not," said Sgt. Lofano. Gang graffiti is omnipresent in gang neighborhoods. Examples can be found in the Marchant Street area toward Highway 129 and on West Front Street near Rodriguez Street.

The frequency of gang-related graffiti has been declining, Chief Medina said, in part because of the Street Terrorism Act of the Penal Code. The ordinance allows for enhanced penalties for certain crimes if it can be proven that the suspect is a gang member.

"I guess (some gang members) realized that if they're going to be involved in criminal activity, it's not too smart to have their name all over town."

A "subspecies" of graffiti writers new in 1992-93 has been developing: Tagger groups are beginning to exhibit gang activity. Robles said he knows of at least one former tagger group in Watsonville that has been claiming responsibility for crimes.

MEDINA SAID said that while the proposal is being reviewed, suggestions from the public are being sought. He said the city and police department are grateful for the volunteer work and contributions of citizens and businesses, but that now "We're trying to put some long-term solutions in place."

He said anyone with suggestions should contact his office, local City Council members, and members of a newly formed city graffiti committee, including Dave Williams, assistant fire chief; John Cooper, Public Works director; Pat Donohue, at Recreation and Parks; and Charlie Eadie, in the Planning Department.