OPERATION TAG

Police crack down on graffiti

Crimes & Criminals Graffiti

Volunteers, technology help cops catch 37 suspected taggers

By DONNA JONES

el.com 4-8-09

WATSONVILLE — Police tapped new technology and a cadre of trained volunteers to crack down on taggers allegedly responsible for more than $50,000 in property damage.

The three-month investigation, dubbed Operation TAG, or Target All Taggers, resulted in the arrest of 15 adults and 22 juveniles who are being charged with 885 counts of vandalism, officials from the Watsonville Police Department and the District Attorney's Office said Tuesday.

District Attorney Bob Lee promised offenders would pay with "jail and lots of jail, community service and lots of community service, cleanup and lots of cleanup, and fines and lots of fines." In some cases, parents would be held responsible for restitution, he said.

The operation, launched in December with the cooperation of Lee's office, was "motivated by the anger created by graffiti in the community," said Police Chief Terry Medina. As much as people worry about gangs and vio-

GRÁFFITI

lence "what really bothers them is graffiti."

It's costly, too. The city spends $150,000 a year on cleanup, money that could be spent on services such as youth programs, Watsonville Public Works Director David Koch said.

That doesn't count the cost to businesses when people are afraid to visit their shops because of the tagging, Medina said.

But he said unlike gangs who use tags to mark territory and warn rivals away, the taggers enjoy the process of putting something up without getting caught.

"It's a lifestyle," Deputy Chief Manny Solano said.

Operation TAG involved standard investigation techniques, including confidential informants and search warrants, along with an aerosol sensor developed by Broadband Discovery Systems Inc. of Scotts Valley. While police were purposely vague about how the devices work and where they have been placed, Medina said a tagger was caught within an hour of the first deployment.

Cory Stephanson, president and chief executive officer of Broadband Discovery Systems, said he despises graffiti, so when he saw technology his company sells to the military could be used against it, he jumped on it. The device, called Merlin, sells for $300 to security customers and $1,300 to law enforcement. Since it was released to the market in December, it has been put to use nationally and internationally, he said.

The Sheriff's Office has ordered six of the devices, Lee said.

Just as helpful as the technology, Medina said, are volunteers who have been trained to keep an eye on high-risk sites.

Lee said state law changes that allow stiffer penalties and holding parents accountable also help.

The message is "zero tolerance," Mayor Antonio Rivas said.

TAGGING ARRESTS

NAME	AGE	COUNTS	ESTIMATED PROPERTY DAMAGE
Rene Sanchez	22	13 counts	$715
Javier Frias	19	15 counts	$5,503
Juan Hernandez	22	12 counts	$660
Zachary Urango	19	20 counts	$2,320
Alvaro Avila	19	20 counts	$1,760
Moyses Gomez	20	1 count	$55
Vincent Bonilla	20	1 count	$55
Scott Wilson	18	1 count	$55
Ernesto Rebollar	18	59 counts	$4,005
Ivan Guillen	18	12 counts	$660
Jeovanni Jimenez	23	1 count	$200
Oscar Lemus	19	52 counts	$2,282
Joseph Wolters	20	51 counts	$2,805
Brian Leos	18	33 counts	$417
Christopher Welty	20	7 counts	$770

SOURCE: Watsonville Police Department