

# Crime and Criminals - Graffiti How graffiti 'taggers' pay the price

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SANTA CRUZ — Spray now, pay later.

Youthful graffiti vandals who are arrested eventually pay a price, those dealing with the problem firsthand say.

Earlier this week, in two separate incidents, groups of teenagers, 14 to 17 years old, were arrested by Santa Cruz police after early morning reports of "tagging."

Police are still tallying the damage from current

cases as reports trickle in from local business owners.

The damage will total thousands of dollars in scratched windows, defaced buildings and spray-painted cars from the Westside of Santa Cruz to Live Oak, Santa Cruz police Sgt. Tom Watson said Thursday.

If past cases are any indication, the teens will pay, one way or another, if they're held responsible for the crime.

"We actually are seeing a pretty high level of compliance with some informal or court orders to pay restitution to the victims," said Judy Cox, head of the

county Probation Department's juvenile division.

If the case involves less than \$1,000 damage, the matter can be resolved, "informally" in a meeting between the teenager, their parents, and a juvenile probation officer.

No court action is taken, and the youth agrees to make monthly payments, according to Cox.

About a third of the 50 to 80 juvenile cases her officers handle this way "are probably tagging cases," she said.

"I think it's shocking the kids, after being out there doing this (tagging) to when the final bill is tallied,"

Cox said. "It's a real sobering experience for them."

And, for the parents as well. "We have a number of parents helping to pay these bills," Cox said. "A number of kids say they've sworn off this activity after this. They realize it's not so much of a lark after all."

The money is eventually forwarded to business owners who file requests for restitution.

"We've noticed a real upswing in arrests in the last six months," Cox said. "We've seen more (graffiti taggers) in our caseload that have actually made it up to

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probation and the courts are taking it more seriously."

But in cases where damage is substantial, paying the money back can take years. And if a large number of businesses are involved, each ends up with only few dollars a month, according to Cox.

One of the county's most notorious graffiti taggers, the 22-year-old originator of the "8edge" tag, was sentenced two years ago. He's still making monthly payments of \$50 toward the \$7,800 total, Cox said.

For Randy Lynch, owner of an auto repair shop on 17th Avenue, Wednesday was a case of déjà vu.

A 50- by 60-foot wall of his business had been laced with the words "blunt, lose one, info," and "cast" in blue, yellow, green, and black paint.

Lynch figures he's repainted the wall at least 20 times over the past three years.

Santa Cruz police believe they have the suspects in that case.

Two years ago, a sheriff's deputy caught three teen-agers, ages 15 to 17, spray painting a car parked in front of his business.

They agreed to pay \$580 total, and after months of payments of "\$25 to \$15 a month," made their final payments just recently, he said.

"I also got a letter of apology from each of them," Lynch said.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Six youths were arrested this week on suspicion of spraying the 'HTK' tag on this building.