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County authorities nab 65 taggers

65 individuals face 800 counts of graffiti

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WATSONVILLE — The Watsonville Police Department, in conjunction with the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office, has wrapped up a four-month project to eliminate incidents of graffiti in the city.

As of Monday, 65 people either stand charged or have warrants requested against them for graffiti charges. Police arrested one Watsonville juvenile, whose name could not be released because of his age, for 59 counts alone, and four others stand accused of over 50 counts

each.

The 800 incidents that the taggers are charged with include charges of graffiti, conspiracy, violation of probation, and possession of marijuana.

"We expected the project to only last a month," said Sgt. Eddie Rodriguez of the Watsonville Police Department. Rodriguez went on to say that the program had culminated only last weekend with the service of six arrest warrants in Watsonville. After searching the homes, three suspects were arrested and three had not been located. Three more search warrants were served earlier in the project.

Most of the 65 taggers caught, in both Watsonville and the surround-

ing county area, were juveniles. An exception is Michael Timothy Brown, 19, of Watsonville. Brown was recently found guilty of the graffiti charges levied against him. He was sentenced to three months in jail, probation, community service hours, and fines.

Rodriguez is confident that the project was successful in identifying 20 different "tagging crews" which consist of five to 25 people each. These crews, said Rodriguez, "compete" with each other to tag buildings the most and in the most visible places.

The majority of taggers arrested come from single-parent and middle-class families.

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"A lot of these kids are on probation," said Rodriguez, "and violated this probation by being in possession of tools used to paint graffiti."

Nine of the 65 charged are repeat offenders, having been caught for painting graffiti for the second and third times.

Police had reportedly seen a sharp increase in tagging, primarily on Freedom Boulevard, before the program began — the city of Watsonville had paid \$45,000 in graffiti abatement this year alone. This prompted the Direct Action Response Team (DART) to join forces with the Problem Oriented Policing task force of Santa Cruz County to address the problem.

After all is said and done, the graffiti artists may not have much luck in Watsonville in the future. "We're at the point where we can identify all known taggers in the area," said Rodriguez.

One Watsonville resident even cashed in on the city ordinance which allows for a reward for information that leads to a tagger's arrest. The resident got the license plate number of the car of a suspect who was painting graffiti, and received a \$100 reward.