innovate change is a social innovation agency that identifies and implements new and creative ways to design, deliver and review health and social care programmes, services and policy.

Auckland Council commissioned innovate change to lead a social innovation process to develop a new education programme for graffiti vandalism prevention. This work supports Auckland Council’s vision of a city free of graffiti vandalism.

Graffiti vandalism refers to writing, drawing, painting, spraying or etching done without lawful consent on a wall or other surface in a public space.

innovate change undertook a four-phased process of social innovation from February to April 2014 to gain an understanding of the issue, generate and validate ideas, and design a new graffiti vandalism prevention education programme.

This document presents 11 key insights and four case studies that innovate change generated and tested during this process. The insights emerged from a targeted review of selected literature and interviews with people who have knowledge and/or experience of graffiti culture, urban design, vandalism prevention, public art, youth development or community education.

A list of references is provided at the end of this document. Some of the insights include a quote from an interview participant. Quotes are unattributed to protect the identity of participants in this project.

For more information about this project or other services and projects undertaken by innovate change, please visit www.innovatechange.co.nz.
Insights
1. Rapidly removing graffiti vandalism reduces graffiti, but requires consistent effort

As a result of Auckland Council rapidly removing graffiti vandalism and actively enforcing the law, graffiti is much less visible in greater Auckland than it was 15 years ago.

An area that has been tagged once is more likely to be tagged again, but this can be avoided by quickly removing the graffiti. Rapidly removing graffiti reduces the likelihood of the offender receiving recognition from their peers. Eradication can therefore demotivate graffiti writers. It can, however, result in graffiti writers doing quicker tags and using stickers, rather than taking the time to create more elaborate artwork.

Rapid removal of graffiti vandalism can be effective at reducing graffiti, but it is not a systemic approach. It requires sustained effort, ongoing investment and complementary prevention strategies.

“Our success revolves around getting it out straight away. Don’t allow [graffiti writers] the mana. So now it’s not worth the bother [for them].”
2. Of the different types of graffiti writing, tagging is the biggest problem in Auckland

There are four main types of graffiti writing, all found to a varying extent in Auckland: conventional, political, gang-related and tagging. Conventional or bathroom graffiti includes the etching of names into desks, doors or walls, and is found in schools, public toilets and parks. Political or ideological graffiti can be seen as inevitable or important for democratic reasons. Gang-related territorial markings are the most concerning in terms of safety, but are likely done by young prospects rather than patched gang members.

Hip hop style graffiti, or tagging, is the most common type of graffiti in Auckland. Originating in New York in the 1970s, it involves writing a simple, stylised name or signature in public, often repeatedly and often using spray paint. Markers and etchers are also common. In Auckland, tagging is often found along the railway line and on vacant, industrial buildings and other types of private and public property.

“There are different worlds here, and you’d need to have a deep understanding of them to design a response.”
3. Graffiti writing is done mostly *but not only* by young men

Most graffiti vandalism is done by young men aged 13 to 23. Some younger and older people, including employed adults, girls and women, are also known to write and paint graffiti.

Hip hop style graffiti writers are part of an international sub culture and come from a range of social, cultural and economic backgrounds.

Many young people do minor occasional graffiti and a small number do much more.

Some young people go through a phase of tagging. For others, belonging to this sub culture is an important part of their identity. Some hone their skills and become street artists; others do not.

Those who most repeat graffiti vandalism are typically young men who lack positive connections with education, work or family.

“I’m 37 and some of my peers still tag.”
4. There are many reasons to write graffiti, but it’s often a question of identity

There is no single reason why people are involved in graffiti vandalism, but most graffiti writers are not primarily motivated to cause harm or damage. For many, graffiti provides a means of self-expression and a sense of belonging.

Key motivations for tagging include:

• to be seen, noticed or recognised (for fame, respect, visibility or credibility)
• the thrill of illicit activity, or to combat boredom (for excitement, challenge)
• to express creative talent (for pride, pleasure, creativity or achievement)
• to fit in with a ‘crew’, peer pressure, or to combat experiences of being excluded
• to claim or enliven space, or to exercise some control over the environment.

“I really enjoyed doing it so I didn’t stop [even after I got caught and] I had to do 100 hours of community service.”
5. An extreme reaction to graffiti vandalism is problematic

Some people call for ‘zero tolerance’ for graffiti. They suggest we need to educate the public not to accept any kind of graffiti. According to the ‘broken windows’ theory, minor signs of disorder, like graffiti, invite more serious forms of crime and can have disastrous consequences for a city. However, researchers have not found strong evidence to support the theory that graffiti leads to serious crime.

At the other end of the tolerance spectrum, graffiti is seen as inevitable in a modern city. Graffiti has existed ever since humans first etched images on the walls of caves. Prohibition simply does not work. Allowing graffiti writers to tag or draw whatever they want all over Auckland is not an acceptable outcome for most people, though.

In between these polar extremes are more balanced and evidence-based responses that allow people to express themselves through legal graffiti without permitting vandalism.

“You’ll never stop graffiti but you can restrict it.”
6. Applying principles of environmental design can prevent graffiti in certain spaces

There is a large and growing body of research that suggests crime prevention through environmental design is a pragmatic and effective approach to prevent vandalism and other crime in particular spaces.

Applying principles of environmental design to create safe, vibrant spaces can deter people from damaging property in these places. The potential for graffiti can be further reduced by creating surfaces and modifying settings so that graffiti writers do not perceive a wall or space as an empty and inviting “blank canvas” waiting to be filled. Practical examples include planting trees or bushes in front of a fence or wall, installing good lighting and wall murals.

To be most effective, this approach needs to involve multiple stakeholder groups and incorporate social, environmental and community development strategies.

“Stop building solid fences and walkways between cul de sacs.”
7. Educating property owners about graffiti removal and prevention can work well

Auckland Council already provides information for property owners and other community members about:

- how to prevent graffiti (e.g. through lighting, painting and planting),
- how to report graffiti, and
- the importance of rapid removal

Best practice from the United States and United Kingdom suggests that this can be effective as part of a broader strategy to prevent graffiti vandalism. It can also be combined with assistance with planting, graffiti proof paint or graffiti removal, and education about crime prevention through environmental design.

In Auckland and other cities, some property owners have engaged street artists to beautify and enliven their environment. There is scope to improve property owners’ understanding of the value of art projects for graffiti vandalism prevention and how they can work with street artists.

“We need guidelines for businesses or building owners and artists to negotiate together. How would an artist talk to a building owner to get permission? How could building owners see their boring walls as potential canvases for interesting art?”
8. Educating young people requires a comprehensive approach to behaviour change

A conventional approach to graffiti prevention is to run school-based programmes to educate young people about the negative impacts of graffiti vandalism. However, people often overestimate the benefits of these programmes. Rigorous studies show educational programmes for young people which focus on information about harm or use scare tactics are often ineffective or counter-productive. Similarly, one-off educational sessions in schools are unlikely to lead to positive behaviour change.

Experience from other fields has shown that educational approaches to reduce problematic behaviour can be effective where these form part of an integrated and comprehensive approach and are centered on positive relationships. Educational components delivered by a trusted and known adult are more likely to be effective. The target group, behaviour change goal and behaviour change method also need to be well understood and clearly defined.

“Telling youth not to do something will only encourage them.”
9. Legal graffiti walls do not usually appear to prevent graffiti vandalism

Some communities have created graffiti walls where anyone can legally apply graffiti at any time. The idea is that if you provide an outlet for young people to write graffiti publicly, they might “get it out of their system”.

Despite the arguments that permitted sites would resolve or ease the problem of graffiti vandalism, most of the evidence does not support this view. If these sites are unsupervised, they may not be safe spaces for young people to gather and develop creative skills. Graffiti has sometimes spread out into surrounding areas of legal graffiti walls.

“This approach does not seem to address important motivations for graffiti writing such as the appeal of illicit graffiti and the wish to claim space or have a voice in the city.

“We had free walls in the late 90s. It went well until West Auckland came over and wanted to add their part... It went to custard then the neighbourhood complained.”
10. Urban art projects can prevent graffiti vandalism in certain areas for a limited time

As well as improving an urban environment, street art projects can address graffiti vandalism. Artwork is less likely to be damaged by graffiti vandals if they know and respect the people who have created it. Engaging street artists and young people from the local community is therefore key. This can also mean community members take ownership of the area, maintain the artwork and manage any vandalism. Murals that do not include participatory processes or exclude the values and input of those involved with graffiti may be less effective.

There are many one-off case studies and best practice examples but little formal evidence of the effectiveness of public art for preventing graffiti vandalism. Projects like council-commissioned murals can be complex, expensive and require a long-term approach. They usually only remain tag-free for a certain amount of time (e.g. six months).

“Walls with artwork don’t get tagged as often.”
11. Young graffiti writers can be offered an alternative outlet for creative expression

Graffiti vandalism might be prevented by providing writers with an alternative way to express their identity, feel connected to others, be recognised for their talents and have a voice in the community. Efforts to engage young people in education or meaningful activities are likely to have a positive effect, especially if they offer creative skill development in connection with hip hop culture. To be most effective, programmes should take a positive youth development approach – this means focusing on young people’s strengths, positive relationships, participation and empowerment.

A number of participatory mural projects taking a youth development approach have been completed, although there has been little formal evaluation of their impact. Existing levels of creative talent and youth leadership in Auckland suggest this approach has great potential. It would require significant investment.

“You need to empower the people who are the problem to come up with the solution.”
Case Studies
In Wellington, from 2011 to 2013, over 60 young people designed and painted public artwork as part of a youth services programme run by BGI. The voluntary participants were predominantly young Māori and Pacific Island men disengaged from education, many of whom had been known to tag.

Taking a strengths-based, empowering and participatory approach, the programme fostered a strong group culture, creative skill development, and positive identities and relationships. It empowered young people to have a constructive voice in the community through the artworks, while maintaining a persistent intolerance for vandalism. Participants came to see tagging as immature and inferior, and the vast majority stopped writing graffiti illegally.

Key success factors in the project were: its positive youth development approach; strong co-facilitation by a street artist, whom the young people respected, and a skilled and experienced youth worker; the regular structure of weekly art workshops; strong partnerships with Council, local businesses and other community/youth organisations; and positive reporting by local media on significant mural projects.

Photo credit: Rod Baxter, BGI
Case Study 2: Community Ownership and Youth Led Approach to Graffiti Prevention

In 2004, the City of Vista threatened to close its skatepark because of problems with graffiti and other kinds of vandalism, which were costing the city around $10,000 a year. A group of local young people and their parents volunteered to keep the Vista Skate Park clean if the City would keep it open. The young people formed “skate and bike watch groups” to take charge of the park.

Seven months later, there had been only two minor acts of vandalism at the park and the City spent half as much on skatepark maintenance and supervision the following year. Within a few years, however, the council reported increased problems at the park and suggested that the presence of city supervisors seemed to be aggravating retaliatory acts of vandalism.

A key learning from this case study is that community ownership and informal surveillance of a public space where young people enjoy spending time can be more effective for graffiti vandalism prevention than an authoritative approach focusing on apprehension and punishment.
Case Study 3: Youth Participation in Creative Place-Based Projects

Auckland Council’s Arts and Culture team has proposed collaborating with The Roots Creative Entrepreneurs in a hot spot area as part of a creative approach to graffiti vandalism education prevention. The Roots are an Auckland-based collective that aims to inspire the next generation through creative opportunities in communities, with a particular focus on sustainability and South Pacific arts.

Although their past projects have not been graffiti-focused, the work of The Roots could easily contribute to graffiti vandalism prevention outcomes. The Roots started with a project that involved building sculptures from thousands of bottles with high school student ‘tribes’ at Otara Town Centre in South Auckland. Since then, the collective has worked with young people and urban professionals on a range of sustainable art projects, including eco-villages at Pasifika and the Garden of Avondale at Rosebank School.

The Roots have recently been working on a programme supported by the Waitemata Local Board, which engaged local high school students in a collaborative and experimental endeavour to create sustainably designed sculptures in Albert Park.
Graffiti vandalism has been an ongoing problem for the Bhana family, who have a store on Ponsonby Road. Their alleyway was getting tagged a lot, so the family was happy when some Cut Collective artists proposed to paint their own design there in 2006, especially as they did not ask for any payment. For several years, the artists maintained the walls, returning to paint out the odd tag and evolving the work over time. Harry Bhana told us, “On those particular walls, there was less tagging. Maybe taggers know who they are – the [artists] always sign off their work. The odd one still scrawls something, but it’s nowhere near as bad as a bare wall.”

The artists have not repainted the alleyway for around 18 months now, because they have been busy with other commitments, and graffiti vandalism has reappeared. As one of the artists told us, “Some kids have tagged it now.”

This case study demonstrates the great potential for property owners and street artists to work together on beautifying their property and protecting it from graffiti vandalism, but this requires a connection and informal agreement to be made between the two parties. Importantly, maintaining the artwork requires ongoing effort.
All of the insights were informed and validated by key informant interviews and focus groups, conducted by innovate change, Auckland, March 2014. The featured quotations in the insight section are verbatim quotes from these interviews.

Additional sources of information for each insight and case study are listed below.

Insight 1


Insight 2

Insight 3


Insight 4

Insight 5


Insight 6


Insight 7

Insight 8


Insight 9

Insight 10


Insight 11


Image credits

Insights 1-5, 8-11 – Photography by Emma Blomkamp
Insights 6-7 – Photography by Terry Fleming
Case study 1


Case study 2


Case study 3

  For a video about the Waitemata project, see: http://vimeo.com/87538721.

Project participants

Although they remain anonymous, innovate change would like to acknowledge the 43 people who contributed to these insights and case studies in March-April 2014 by participating in interviews, focus groups and a design workshop.