



JEFFERSON COUNTY, COLORADO

SHERIFF

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Graffiti: What it Means, What to Do

by Sheriff Ted Mink

Graffiti has existed since the beginning of time in one form or another, from hieroglyphics to petroglyphs to rock outcroppings along the Oregon Trail. However, today's brand of spray-painted self-expression is viewed less as art and more as an eyesore to motorists and property owners who must view it, or worse — remove it.

Tagging

In the second half of the 20th century, urban gangs began using graffiti as a territorial marker. This practice, known as "tagging," continues today, but is now practiced by people unaffiliated with gang activity as well.

A "tagger" will usually use spray-paint to put his design in a public place; the design will be proprietary to the tagger and may be initials, an illustration, or a combination of numbers and letters, like a vanity license plate. Most tags represent the tagger's nickname, and tend to be short so as to make them easier to accomplish without being caught. Most taggers want to see their mark in as many places as possible, as prominently as possible.

Individual taggers or "tagging crews" of friends account for most of the bold and colorful graffiti you may see. They put their names and designs up to show other taggers their artwork. Young males between 13 and 25 create most of the graffiti that's out there. This activity can indicate the beginning stages of gang involvement, but is often not connected. In one recent incident, the Sheriff's Office caught a tagging crew spray-painting an underpass; they were carrying digital cameras to take pictures of their work.

Gang-related Tagging

A tag created by a gang member features the name of his gang. Tag wars occur when members of another gang see it, and use another color to cross it out and leave their own tag. Gangs undergo this process to claim their turf. The more artistic the image, the more likely it's the work of a tagger crew and not a gang. Gangs don't bother as much with art; they are concerned only about making their presence known.

The Sheriff's Office and Graffiti in Jefferson County

About 70 percent of graffiti in Jeffco is straightforward tagging that is not gang related. The Sheriff's Office views graffiti as a crime, as well as a quality-of-life issue for residents. In addition to making arrests for criminal mischief when possible, the Sheriff's Office documents graffiti in an attempt to identify taggers.

In a new effort to clean up problem graffiti on county property, the Sheriff's Office will be deploying a crew of inmate workers to paint over, power wash or scrub graffiti in some areas. While we cannot employ this tactic on private property, we do hope to make an impact on the prominent markings on county roads and signage.

What You Can Do

Report new graffiti to the Sheriff's Office as soon as you see it by calling our non-emergency number: 303-277-0211. The Sheriff's Office will send a crime scene technician to photograph the graffiti so that we can try to identify the tagger, as well as analyzing it to determine if it's an indication of gang activity. If the markings are on county roadways or signage, we will determine whether our inmate worker crew can remove them.

A property owner is responsible for graffiti on his or her own property. If your property or business is affected by tagging, your best course is to paint over the markings as soon as possible (after contacting the Sheriff's Office to document the incident), to discourage tag wars on your property and the surrounding area.