

Vandalism: A Retrospect

Paul A. Adekunle¹, Matthew N. O. Sadiku², Janet O. Sadiku³

¹International Institute of Professional Security, Lagos, Nigeria

²Roy G. Perry College of Engineering, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX, USA

³Juliana King University, Houston, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

Vandalism is the action involving deliberate destruction of or damage to public or private property. Vandalism is also considered as the willful or intentional destruction, damage, defacement, or disfigurement of public or private property without the owner's consent. The term comes from the Vandals, a Germanic group known for sacking Rome in 455 AD. However, the Vandals are remembered in history by destruction which is not typical even for barbarian invasions, and the term "vandalism" was used for all types of destructive and reckless behavior, regardless of perpetrators – this represents unjustifiable destruction. Vandalism is also "a form of bullying and aggression directed at destroying different material of social values, while in the original sense it implies damage to and destruction of artistic, cultural and historical values. Through vandalism, underage persons express their attitude towards society, always conveying a message through "what" they destroy and "how" they destroy – as a rule, these are invariably values not accessible to everyone. Vandalism tends to imply the brutish and destructive behavior of the young, which is manifested in different modalities of mass violence at sports events, demonstrations, rock and pop concerts. This paper looks into the issue of vandalism, its causes, history, prevention, and the overall cost to society and humanity.

KEYWORDS: *Vandalism, public and private property, brutish/destructive behavior of the youth, mass violence, monuments, recreation, tourism, cultural heritage, social order, legal penalties, community engagement, surveillance.*

INTRODUCTION

Vandalism is a form of deviant and criminal behavior that involves the intentional destruction, defacement, or damage of property belonging to another individual, group, or the public, as shown in Figures 1 and 2. It is generally classified under property crimes and is recognized across legal systems worldwide as an offense against ownership rights and social order. This term "vandalism" originated from the Vandals, a Germanic tribe historically associated – though somewhat inaccurately – with the destruction of the city of Rome during the Sack of Rome (455 AD). But over time, the term evolved to describe acts of senseless or malicious destruction of property.

In modern contexts, vandalism can take many forms, including graffiti on walls, breaking windows, damaging vehicles, destroying public infrastructure, or defacing monuments, which may be motivated or

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caused by a range of factors such as anger, peer influence, protect, boredom, or a desire for recognition.

Vandalism has significant social, economic, and psychological impacts. Some of which can lead to financial losses as a result of repair costs, reduction in the aesthetic value of communities, and the creation of feelings of insecurity among residents. However, in urban environments, the repeated acts of vandalism can contribute to broader patterns of disorder and crime, as explained by theories such as the Broken Windows Theory – disorder encourages further crime; Strain Theory – frustration from unmet societal goals leads to deviance; Routine Activity Theory – crime occurs when opportunity, lack of guardianship, and motivated offenders converge; and

the Social Learning Theory – behavior is learned through observation and imitation.

Therefore, due to its widespread effects, there is the need by governments and communities to implement various preventive measures, which can include legal penalties, surveillance, and community engagement programs, to reduce its occurrence and maintain public order [1-6].

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of vandalism has evolved over centuries, reflecting changes in society, culture, and law. The act of destroying property is said to be as old as human civilization, and with the term and its modern meaning having specific historical origins.

Origin of Vandalism: The origin of the term or word “vandalism” was derived from the Vandals, a Germanic tribe that invaded parts of the Roman Empire. The term became associated with destruction after the Sack of Rome (455 AD), when the Vandals looted the city of Rome, as shown in Figure 3. The historians at that time noted that the Vandals were not uniquely destructive compared to other invading groups of the time. However, the negative connotation of the term was popularized much later, particularly during the French Revolution, when the word “vandalism” was first used to describe the deliberate destruction of art, cultural heritage, and property.

Vandalism in Ancient and Medieval Periods was said to resemble the acts of vandalism that existed long before the term itself, in that:

- In ancient civilizations like Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece, destruction of monuments or temples often occurred during wars or regime changes.
- In the Roman Empire, property destruction was common during political conflicts and invasions.
- During the Middle Ages, religious conflicts sometimes led to the destruction of churches, icons, and cultural artifacts.

These acts were often tied to warfare, religion, or political power, rather than individual deviant behavior.

The French Revolution and Modern Meaning: The modern understanding of vandalism began during the French Revolution. During this period:

- Revolutionary groups destroyed royal monuments, churches, and artworks.
- The term “vandalism” was coined to condemn such destruction of cultural heritage.

This was seen to mark a shift from viewing destruction as part of war to seeing it as a social and moral offense.

Industrial Era and Urbanization (19th-20th Century): With rapid urbanization and industrial growth:

- Vandalism became more associated with urban environments.
- Common forms included graffiti, property damage, and destruction of public infrastructure
- Governments began to criminalize vandalism explicitly and introduce legal penalties.

The studying of vandalism by scholars began as a social problem, especially among youth.

Contemporary Vandalism (20th-21st Century): In modern society, vandalism has taken on new forms and meanings:

- Graffiti and street art – sometimes viewed as artistic expression
- Political or ideological vandalism – targeting symbols of authority
- Digital vandalism – hacking or defacing websites
- Public unrest and protests – leading to property destruction

The rise of cities and technology has expanded both the methods and motivations behind vandalism.

Changing Perspectives: Over time, the perceptions of vandalism have shifted:

- Earlier: Linked to war and conquest
- Later: Seen as moral and cultural destruction
- Today: It is now viewed as a criminal, social, and sometimes expressive act.

Modern theories, such as the Broken Windows Theory, laid emphasis on how visible vandalism can encourage further disorder and crime if left unchecked. The history of vandalism shows a clear evolution i.e., from acts of destruction tied to warfare and political conflict to a recognized social and criminal issue in modern societies. In addition, its meaning has also expanded to include a wide range of behaviors, influenced by cultural, technological, and urban development [4, 7-10].

Who commits vandalism?

Worth of note is that there is no “typical vandal”. Further studies however have shown correlations with youth, male gender, and school settings. Vandalism is considered a subset of antisocial behavior that partly overlaps with criminal behavior [11-13].

THE KEY ELEMENTS OF VANDALISM

The core elements identified by most legal systems are:

1. Intent or recklessness (Mens Rea)

In this case, the offender must:

- Intentionally cause damage, or
- act recklessly (aware of the risk but ignoring it); i.e., must be deliberate or malicious [6].

2. Property damage (Act of damage or defacement)

For this to occur, there must be actual harm to property i.e.,

- Breaking, destroying, or damaging property
- Defacing (e.g., graffiti)
- Tampering in a way that reduces value or usefulness [6].

3. Ownership (Belonging to another)

- The damaged property must not be solely owned by the offender.
- The property must belong to someone else or the public [14].

4. Lack of consent: The act must be done without the permission of the property owner.

- If consent is given, it is generally not vandalism.

5. Unlawfulness: The act must be illegal and not justified by law.

- For example, lawful demolition or authorized alternations are not vandalism.

Actus reus – This refers to the physical elements of a crime. The key elements of actus reus are:

voluntary act, omission (failure to act), result (consequence), and circumstances. Most crimes

require both (i. e., actus reus and mens rea) to prove guilt. Actus reus is **what you did (or failed to do)** that the law considers criminal.

6. Resulting damage or loss: There must be actual damage (i.e., measurable harm or loss), which may be:

- Physical destruction
- Diminished value
- Cost of repair or restoration [15-17].

TYPES & MOTIVATIONAL TYPOLOGIES

Below table shows the typology framework that is most cited [18-21]:

Type Motivation Example

Acquisitive To obtain money/property Breaking open vending machines

Tactical To achieve another goal Sabotaging machinery to force a work break

Ideological To promote a cause/message Political graffiti, propaganda

Vindictive Revenge Damaging an ex-partner’s car

Play Games, boredom, curiosity Ball breaking a window; “unintentional” acts

Malicious Boredom, frustration, resentment Random destruction in public settings

There are other additional categories by other researchers like: institutional vandalism and unexplainable vandalism.

FORMS OF VANDALISM

The common acts of vandalism include graffiti, breaking windows, arson, defacement with filth/urine, slashing seats, etching, and damage to monuments, as shown in Figure 4. By way of extension, in the digital age this has extended to “virtual vandalism” like damaging Wikipedia/YouTube content [18] and “digital vandalism,” as shown in Figures 5 and 6.

CAUSES AND CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

These are due to the following factors [22-29]:

1. Social and environmental factors
 - Lack of community attachment: When individuals feel disconnected from their neighborhood or school, they are less likely to respect public property.
 - Poor urban conditions: Neglected environments (such as broken buildings, poor lighting) can encourage vandalism, as explained by the Broken Windows Theory.
 - Weak social control: This is due to limited supervision by parents, schools, or law enforcement leading to increases in opportunities for vandalism.
2. Economic factors
 - Poverty and inequality: When individuals live in economically deprived area they may express frustration through property damage
 - Unemployment: Lack of productive engagement can lead to deviant behaviors, including vandalism
3. Psychological factors
 - Anger and frustration: Vandalism can serve as an emotional outlet.
 - Boredom and thrill-seeking: Particularly among youth, vandalism may provide excitement.
 - Identity and expression: Graffiti is sometimes used to communicate identity or beliefs.
4. Peer influence
 - Group pressure: Individuals, most especially adolescents, may vandalize to gain acceptance.
 - Gang activity: Vandalism can signal territorial control or group affiliation.
5. Cultural and media influence
 - The exposure to violent or anti-social behavior in media can normalize vandalism.
 - Subcultures (e.g., graffiti culture) may frame vandalism as art or resistance.

6. Institutional factors
 - Poor school environment: The lack of discipline or student engagement increases vandalism in schools.
 - Inadequate law enforcement: Low risk of punishment can encourage repeat behavior.
 7. Political and ideological factors
 - Vandalism may be used as a form of protest or dissent (e.g., defacing monuments or government property).
 8. Substance abuse
 - Alcohol and drug use impair judgment and increase impulsive acts, including vandalism.
- Encourages further crime (the “broken windows” effect) [30]
 - Reduces community pride and social cohesion [35]
 - Can lead to declining neighborhood quality of life [35, 36]
- In schools or institutions for example:
- It can cause disruption to learning environments
 - It can lead to frustration, fear, and tension among students and staff
 - Damage to educational facilities [37]
3. Psychological and emotional effects
 - In this case, victims may feel:
 - Anger and frustration
 - Stress and insecurity
 - Violation/loss of attachment to property or environment [37]
 - Communities may develop a perception that crime is prevalent or widespread, even if it is not [36, 37]

COSTS AND THE IMPACTS OF VANDALISM

Without any gainsaying, vandalism – the deliberate destruction or defacement of property – has significant economic, social, environmental, and psychological costs and impacts as discussed below.

1. The monetary/economic costs of vandalism: Vandalism is known to pose both direct and indirect financial burdens on individuals, businesses, and governments as depicted below.

A. Direct costs

- The repair or replacement of damaged property (buildings, vehicles, infrastructure)
- Cleaning graffiti and restoring public spaces
- Increased spending on security and prevention (CCTV, guards, alarms, and fencing)
- About 75% of vandalism costs come from physical damage, while additional costs go to prevention and enforcement [30]
- Graffiti removal alone can cost billions annually (e.g., over \$12 billion per year in the US [31]).

B. Indirect economic costs: These are long-term or hidden costs such as [32-34]:

- Reduced property values (can drop by up to 15%)
- Reduced tourism and economic activities
- Loss of business revenue and tourism
- Increased insurance premiums
- Government spending diverted from services
- Local governments may raise taxes or cut services to cover repair costs
- Businesses in high-vandalism areas spend approximately 20% more on security

C. Public sector costs

- Governments spend huge amounts repairing vandalized infrastructure
- Funds are diverted from essential services like education and healthcare [31].

2. Social impacts

- This increases fear of crime and reduces perceived safety in communities [30]

4. Environmental impacts: This shows up as a result of:
 - Use of chemicals to remove graffiti which can harm the environment
 - Damage to public spaces, parks, and urban aesthetics
 - Pollution from destroyed infrastructure
 - Increased maintenance burden on cities [35]

Worthy of note is the fact that graffiti removal methods can negatively affect both the environment and human health [38].

5. Safety and physical risks

- Damage to infrastructure such as road signs, and transport systems can lead to accidents and injuries
- Vandalism in transport systems leads to delays and risks to passengers
- Reduced passenger use [38, 39].

6. Cost typology from research

Goldstein and others use a 2x2 matrix to classify vandalism by impact [41]:

	Low Social Cost	High Social Cost
High Monetary Cost	Breaking vending machines	Destroying school media centre
Low monetary Cost	Carving names on bleachers	Racist/political graffiti

This shows that some acts are cheap to fix but socially toxic, while others are expensive but less symbolically damaging.

PREVENTION APPROACHES

The approach to preventing vandalism requires a mix of social, environmental, legal, and technological strategies, as shown in Figures 7 and 8. Some of these key approaches are:

1. Environmental design (Situational prevention)

One of the most effective approaches is modifying the physical environment to reduce opportunities for vandalism.

Concept: Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design.

Strategies:

- Improved lighting in public spaces
- Installation of surveillance cameras (CCTV), improved lighting, increased guardianship. Presence of staff/guards reduces anonymity.
- Use of durable, graffiti-resistant materials
- Clear visibility (removing hidden corners or areas where vandals feel safe)
- Access control: Fencing, locks, limiting entry to vulnerable sites. About 72% of surveyed Nigerian schools have no perimeter fence, hence exposing them to theft/vandalism.

Rationale: The rationale is to make vandalism most risky and less attractive [42, 43].

2. Social and Community-Based approaches

This calls for engaging the communities so as to reduce vandalism by increasing social control and ownership.

Concept: Social Control Theory.

Strategies:

- Community watch programs/local vigilance groups linked to security formations – community policing and early-warning.
- Youth engagement (sports, arts, mentoring, and murals that gives potential vandals stake/ownership in spaces)
- Neighborhood clean-up initiatives
- Rationale: To foster strong community ties to discourage deviate behavior [44].

3. Rapid repair and maintenance

Addressing vandalism quickly prevents further incidents.

Concept: Broken Windows Theory.

Strategies:

- Immediate removal of graffiti
- Prompt repair of damaged property

Rationale: Visible neglect encourages more vandalism [23].

4. Legal and enforcement measures

Strong policies and enforcement deter vandalism.

Strategies: The strategies to adopt would include:

- Fines and stiffer penalties
- Community service sentencing
- Increased police patrols – targeted deployment around high-risk assets such as schools, substations, bridges.
- Intelligence gathering via the use of informants to track cable/rail theft rings

Rationale: Raises the cost of offending and reinforces norms [45].

5. Educational programs

Educating or enlightening young people about the consequences and alternatives reduces vandalism.

Strategies:

- School-based awareness programs
- Anti-vandalism campaigns
- Art programs (e.g., legal graffiti spaces)

Rationale: Helps to build values and provides positive outlets [46].

6. Technological solutions

Modern technology enhances monitoring and prevention.

Strategies:

- Smart surveillance systems
- Alarm systems
- Motion detectors

Rationale: Increases detection and reduces anonymity [47].

7. Target Hardening

This is making property more resistant to damage.

Strategies:

- Anti-graffiti coatings
- Stronger materials (metal, treated glass)
- Protective barriers

Rationale: Decreases effort required to vandalize [48].

The above stated multi-layered approach is set to address both the opportunity and the motivation behind vandalism.

Does vandalism have any benefits?

In general, vandalism is often considered harmful and illegal. However, in some academic discussions, especially in fields like Sociology, Criminology, and Urban Studies, scholars have explored whether it can have limited or indirect or unintended effects that some interpret as having “functions” or “benefits” for the perpetrator, even while the society bears the cost.

These are not endorsements, but analytical perspectives or observations of possible social effects.

Possible (Indirect) Benefits of Vandalism:

1. Social or Political Expression

This is where some of the acts of vandalism are used to protest injustice or express dissent, as shown in Figure 9. An example was graffiti or property damage during movements like the Civil Rights Movements or the Arab Spring have been interpreted as tools for marginalized voices to gain attention.

These are acts that can highlight issues that may otherwise be ignored [49].

2. Catalyst for Urban Renewal

In some other cases, vandalism in neglected areas can draw attention to urban decay, hence prompting authorities to invest in improvements. This is sometimes discussed alongside the Broken Windows Theory, though that theory itself is debated [23].

3. Artistic and cultural Value

Cities like Berlin, Melbourne, and parts of Lagos have “graffiti tourism.”

Graffiti, often categorized as vandalism, has evolved into a recognized art form. Artists such as Banksy have gained global recognition and his works sell for millions despite being illegal. Therefore, street art can enrich cultural identity and make public spaces more engaging [50].

4. Community Awareness and Engagement

Acts of vandalism can sometimes prompt communities to organize, improve security, or engage more actively in maintaining shared spaces. This can help strengthen social cohesion in response to perceived threats [51].

Important Counterpoint

Regardless of these possible interpretations, research consistently shows that vandalism is associated with:

- Economic costs in the area of repairs, security, etc. (as costs outweigh benefits) [41]
- Psychological distress and fear
- Increased crime rates in affected areas

As a result of these harms, vandalism is overwhelmingly treated as a negative behavior in law and public policy. The dominant view is that vandalism is **net harmful**. At the societal level, vandalism is treated as a **net negative** with no legitimate benefits.

CONCLUSION

In general, vandalism is a destructive behavior that harms both public and private property, weakens community trust, and creates financial burdens for individuals and governments. While it is often

dismissed as a minor mischief, its long-term effects – such as urban decay and increased/high maintenance costs – make it a serious social issue that requires attention. Vandalism most often reflects deeper societal problems such as youth frustration, lack of engagement, poverty, or weak community ties. Addressing vandalism therefore requires more than punishment: it calls for education, community involvement or engagement, and opportunities for positive expression. Furthermore, the cost implication of repairing vandalized property places a strain on public resources and taxpayers. Preventing vandalism is more effective than reacting to it. Strategies such as community programs, improved lighting and surveillance, youth engagement initiatives coupled with stricter enforcement of laws can significantly reduce incidents. Reducing vandalism will also depend on fostering a sense of responsibility and pride within communities. This is due to the fact that when people feel connected to their environment, they are less likely to destroy it and more likely to protect it. More information on Vandalism can be obtained in books in [52-60] and the following related journals:

Tourism Management

Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism

American Journal of Sociology

Annual Review of Psychology

African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies

International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology

International Journal of Cyber Criminology

Crime Prevention and Community Safety

Journal of Environmental Psychology

Youth & Society

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Figure 1. Vandalism of art
Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vandalism_of_art

In 1997, use of sponges as a tool was described in [Bottlen](#) presumably then used to protect it when searching for food this bay, and is almost exclusively shown by females. This study in 2005 showed that mothers most likely teach the be [get a life losers](#)

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Figure 2. Vandalism on Wikipedia
Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vandalism_on_Wikipedia

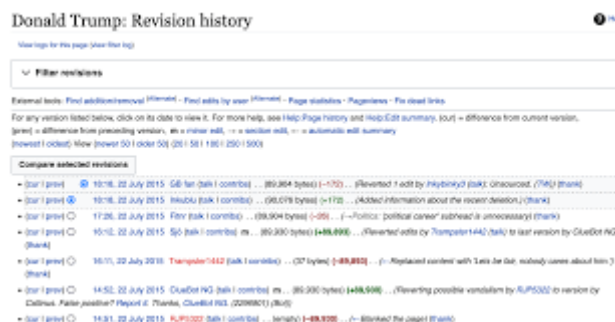


Figure 3. Wikipedia vandalism – history
Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Wikipedia_vandalism_-_history_around_revision_672598769.png



Figure 4. Graffiti

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graffiti>



Figure 7. Anti-vandalism

Source: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Anti-Vandalism_Barnstar.png



Figure 5. Virtual graffiti

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtual_graffiti



Figure 8. 2025 Malagasy protests

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025_Malagasy_protests



Figure 6. Prevention

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Go_ahead,_vandalize



Figure 9. Digital graffiti

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_graffiti