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VANDALISM IN AMSTERDAM

- Ecological approach (1980-1981)
- Action-research (1981-1983)
- Prevention

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I VANDALISM IN AMSTERDAM: 1980/1981 AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

Aim of the research

Our first research in Amsterdam has been strongly influenced through our social geographical background and more specific the social ecological tradition of the Chicago school.

In this tradition it is quite common to search for the geographical pattern of a phenomenon and subsequently to find an explanation for this pattern in which the hypothesis about the causes of that particular phenomenon are tested.

One of the classical examples of such an ecological study is the study of Shaw and McKay: "Juvenile delinquency and urban areas".

In this study the highest rates of delinquency were found in the so-called slums where the poor immigrants lived.

The conditions in the slums - bad housing, rapid influx of population and isolation from the rest of the city - led to a breakdown of traditional values. Shaw and McKay called this situation "social desorganisation" and in their view this was the main cause of juvenile delinquency.

The methods of our research resembled the methods used by Shaw and McKay, but we concentrated on the more narrow scope of one type of juvenile delinquency: vandalism:

In our study we wanted to find an answer to the following questions:

- Where and how much does vandalism occur in Amsterdam?
- What are the factors causing the differences in vandalism rates of the Amsterdam neighbourhoods?

Collection of data

The first aim of our research was to obtain a picture of the geographical pattern of vandalism in Amsterdam.

There are two main sources of data on vandalism:

- 1. Police data on apprehended vandals. The main disadvantage of this data is the enormous "black number":

In Amsterdam the police caught about 80 vandals in 1979

But the more important question is "how to explain the differences in vandalism rates in the other Amsterdam neighbourhoods"?

When you want to answer this question the first problem is whether you deal with "attracting factors" or "breeding factors".

In the field of criminology "attracting factors" refer to the factors that make a neighbourhood attractive for young people to commit vandalism; as we have already noted the large number of destructions in the city centre is partly explained by attracting factors.

"Breeding factors" refer to the factors that "produce" a lot of young people in a neighbourhood that commit vandalism.

Like Shaw and McKay we were primarily interested in "breeding factors".

This interest led to the question if the data on destructed objects could be used as an indicator for the level of young vandals living in the different neighbourhoods.

Data of the Amsterdam municipal police showed us that most youngsters that are caught for vandalism live very near the place where they commit their destructions (1). Therefore it seemed reasonable to answer the foregoing question in a positive way.

Results of ecological analysis and conclusions

To get a picture of the possible "breeding factors" (or in ecological terms get an explanation for the pattern of vandalism) we looked if there was any correlation between the level of vandalism at the one hand and a set of neighbourhood variables - including a.o. socio economic status, % Foreign born people, % bad housing, distance to the centre, % removals, % of young people aged 10-19, at the other hand.

The results of this analysis were as follows:

- There was no relationship between status and the number of destructions.
- We also found no correlation between the variables that indicated the quality of the neighbourhoods and the number of destructions.

(1) This is true for all parts of Amsterdam, except the centre.

This is in accordance with the idea that the high number of destructions in the centre is caused by attracting factors.

- There was a positive relationship between distance to the centre and the number of destructions (if one leaves the centre out of consideration)
- There was a strong correlation between % of young people aged 10-19 and the number of destructions.

These major findings of the ecological analysis led to the following conclusions:

- 1. Deprived areas do not suffer in a larger extent from vandalism than well-to-do neighbourhoods.

This was not in line with the work of Shaw and MacKay. The reason of the deviance is twofold.

In the first place the deprived areas in Amsterdam are far less deprived than the Chicago slums during the great depression.

But there is an important second factor: The slums in Chicago were isolated from the city centre, so the circumstances were very favourable for developing a delinquent subculture. In Amsterdam the deprived neighbourhoods of the 19th century belt are highly integrated with other parts of the city.

In this connection we also have to point at the outskirts of the city where a lot of vandalism takes place.

These parts of Amsterdam are more isolated from the rest of Amsterdam than the neighbourhoods in the 19th century belt. Maybe there is a situation in these isolated areas that could be described by social disorganisation.

- 2. Vandalism is not a typical lower class phenomena.

Therefore it seemed to us that theories that explain youth delinquency in terms of the "deprived situation" of lower class people do not offer an explanation for vandalism.

Theories that see youth delinquency as a form of behaviour that is quite common for young people stemming from all kind of social classes seem more in place.

These two conclusions are of course rather superficial because they are derived from data on a neighbourhood level. To get a confirmation and a deepening of these conclusions it is necessary to do research at an individual level.

The next part of this paper will deal with such a research, that has been conducted last year in Amsterdam.

II THE AMSTERDAM VANDALISM ACTION-RESEARCH 1981/1982

1. GOALS AND MEANS OF THE ACTION-RESEARCH

This research is carried out in charge of the youth department and the Education department of the city of Amsterdam.

The main goals of the action-research are to gain insight in the backgrounds of youth-vandalism, and to develop policy-measures to prevent vandalism.

Three means are used to achieve these goals:

- an inventarisation of vandalism-research and anti-vandalism measures, from elsewhere in Holland.

This was the starting point of the study. Some of the results of this inventarisation are presented in the third part of this paper.

- research among youngsters and "experts". We expected to obtain useful information by interviewing youngsters and people who work with them.

Therefore we have spoken with 250 youngsters between 8 and 21 years, 30 headmasters en 10 youthworkers. The conclusion in the next paragraph are based on these interviews.

- evaluation of experiments, which might reduce vandalism

The inventarisation and the interviews served as a basis for the defining of the experiments. These experiments are carried out through youthworkers headmasters and representatives of Municipal Services and take place in one neighbourhood of Amsterdam. The researchers are now coordinating and stimulating the experiments and will evaluate these experiments. One of the evaluation- criterions for the experiments as a whole, is a comparison between the number of destructions in the experiment-area and a control-area before, during and after tje experiments.

2. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS OF THE INTERVIEWS

This part of the study had an explorative character: the aim was to get a picture of the various forms of vandalism and of factors which might be related.

Therefore interviews were held with 250 young people (in primary schools, secondary schools, youth-clubs) in two Amsterdam neighbourhoods.

Questions were, among others, asked about: spending of leisure time, participation in sport and youth-clubs, membership of groups, committing of vandal acts, parental control, attitude toward school, work and neighbourhood.

We have also spoken with 30 headmasters and 10 youthworkers. All interviews were recorded on tape and worked out afterwards.

AGE AND SEX

Age and sex are clearly related to vandalism. It turns out that between 8 and 16 years, about 2/3 of the boys and 1/3 of the girls are destroying objects. Within these categories there are no great differences between the ages: so the percentage of boys of eight years old that commit vandalism is about the same as of boys of 16 years old.

From 17-years old the percentage of youngsters that "demolish" things, rapidly diminishes. In the age-category 17-21 years, about 1/3 of the boys and 1/6 of the girls vandalise.

MOTIVES

Several motives can be distinguished, which are related to age and sex.

BETWEEN 8-11 YEARS

Between 8 and 11 years, vandalism often turns out to be:

- a direct expression of anger, of which the origin of that anger is clearly visible (f.e. smashing a window by that little footballplayer, because he missed that penalty-kick).
- an expression of revenge. Vandalism as a way of punishing someone that you hate (f.e. by cutting the tires of the car of the milkman, because he didn't allow the children to play in front of his shop).

+) We define vandalism, as the destruction of objects, without any aim for material gain. Breaking up a parking meter to obtain money is in our definition no vandalism, but theft. In the interviews vandalism is operationalised as at least one destruction in the past half year.

These two motives (anger and revenge) of vandalism occur in the same percentage by boys and girls. The damage is usely-relatively-small.

The two other reasons to destruct things for children between 8 and 11 can be described as:

- a way of learning to know the fysical surrounding, often as a part of games (f.e. the lightning of a fire, where-suprisingly-some bricks might break or perhaps a whole school changes into ashes)
- a way of learning to know the social surrounding. Vandalism is interesting, because it is prohibited. Therefore it is exciting and a very suitable way pass away boredom. This "motive" seems to become even more important in the agecategory from 12-16.

The last two reasons (way of knowing physical and social surrounding) are important especially amongst boys in a group.

12-16 YEARS

From 12 years (up to 16) the nature of vandalism starts to differ. The more heavy destructions take place in this age-category.

Twe two following motives seem the most important:

- vandalism as a way of testing the effectivness of the control and authority adults. By daring to destroy objects one can examine one's own possibilitie and find out if and how the norms of adults are maintained (such as: "You shall not destroy").
- vandalism as a confrontation with the authority of adults has another aspect one can express an independent position toward adults. In this sense one can gain status in the peer group.
Sturdiness is especially for boys in this age an important value. Girls are expected to choose other ways to gain prestige (f.e. beauty). Because vandalism is a way of "showing guts", boys can discriminate themselves in a positive way, among other adolescents.

We should notice that this type of vandalism turns out to be exchanged with "ragging teachers", "theft of small things in shops" and "badging neighbours". All these activities are forbidden by adults and are ways of gaining status in the peer group of adolescents.

Motives, as a direct expression of anger or an expression of revenge, which we frequently met among younger children, appear far less in the age-category 11-16.

ATTITUDE TOWARD SCHOOL

There is another factor which seems to have implications on the motives for vandalistic acts: the attitude toward school.

A negative attitude toward school (both pupils of primary and secondary school) is very strongly correlated with vandalism.

It seems as if the authority-structure of the school is experienced by many pupils as oppressive.

For those pupils the conflicts with adults (teachers) are more severe than for pupils that attend their school with pleasure. Because there are more conflicts those pupils will commit in general more vandalism.

17-21 YEARS

Youngsters older than 17 commit less destructions. Vandalism is seldom a regular activity. Insofar vandalism occurs, it happens usually after "a night out" and a "booze".

67 The feelings of impotence, which we met by pupils towards school, also seem to exist by the "vandals" in the age-category 17-21. The ones who are not satisfied with their work, and the ones who have no influence on the activities in their youth-center, vandalise significantly more than the ones who are satisfied and say to have influence.

Most youngsters from 17-21, however, consider vandalism as "childish" or an activity for adolescents to which they don't want to demean themselves.

It seems that most of them feel, or at least want to be accepted by adults, Vandalism does not belong to this attitude.

But also the youngsters who does not feel accepted by adults, or who does not seem to be able to reach by traditional ways high-rating goals of the society (a job, money) seldom vandalise. Although the confrontation with authority still exists, it expresses itself in another form. By burglary, for instance. Compared with the risk to be caught for this, it can be considered as pretty stupid to take that risk for vandalism.

BARRIERS TO VANDALISM

Besides studying the motives to commit vandalism, it is interesting to look for the barriers not to do it. We can distinguish two types of barriers: an external and an internal one.

The external barrier can be described as "the risk for a sanction by offending the norm "You shall not destroy".

Possible sanctions are: paying back the rest of the repair", criminal persecution, or (because of that persecution) "less perspective for a job".

Six youngsters in our sample had an experience with the police as a result of vandalism. For all of them that was a reason to stop (at least for a while). So the police seems to play an important role in this "external barrier".

Another factor which has a clear effect on the external barrier is the group⁺. In a group one is anonymous and by vandalising in a group the risk of sanction is small.

The internal barrier can be described as: "a positive attitude toward an object (or toward what this object symbolizes), combined with the internalised norm "You shall not destroy".

This internal barrier is very high for one's own goods (a motorbike, for instance). It also exists if one feels connected with an object (e.g. because one feels responsibility for that object).

It is interesting to note that an internal barrier for oneself can become an external barrier for someone else. E.g. the "difficult" boy, who becomes a goalkeeper in his youth-club. In that way he obtains responsibility for the club. He probably feels connected to "his" club and will not only take part to destructions there, but will also prevent others from doing so.

+) We notice that the existence of the group had also effect on one motive of vandalism: prestige. Status could be gained toward members of the peer-group by daring to vandalise.

The two-fold function of the group (motive/barrier) explains why vandalism usually occurs in groups.

III Prevention of vandalism

Introduction

In Holland the point of departure for anti-vandalism activities is that there is not a set of anti-vandalism measures that can be applied everywhere. The reason for this is quite simple:

Vandalism problems can differ from place to place.

In one neighbourhood for example the destructions are caused by little children having no playing facilities, in another neighbourhood there are groups of adolescents that are roaming the streets at night.

This implies that anti-vandalism activities must always be based on the nature of the local vandalism-problems.

So the first thing one has to do, is to make an analysis of the local situation. Such an analysis must give an answer to the following questions:

- In which places in the city vandalism is concentrated?
- When are the most destructions committed?
- Which groups of young people are involved?
- Why are they committing vandalism?

Only after an answer on these questions is obtained one can start to design a strategy for the tackling of vandalism.

For the designing and implementation of the strategy it is necessary that there is a cooperation between social and municipal agencies, schools, and the police. In Holland the local police often plays an initiating role in the prevention of vandalism. That is not surprising in view of the fact that since 1979 every local police force has an official that is fully engaged with crime prevention.

Those prevention officers are supported and coordinated by the National Bureau of Crime Prevention (1)

This National Bureau has an overall view of the various strategies that can be distinguished in the field of prevention of vandalism.

- (1) At the moment Regional Bureaus of Crime Prevention are created. So in reality the support from the National Bureau is "transmitted" through the Regional Bureaus.

Strategies for the prevention of vandalism

We distinguish four broad categories of vandalism prevention:

- 1) target hardening
- 2) repression as a form of prevention
- 3) creating better facilities for young people
- 4) making young people more involved with their environment.

Of course this classification does not mean that the use of one kind of strategy excludes the others. In practice there is almost always a combination of measures.

We will now briefly discuss the various strategies.

- 1) Target hardening

With target hardening we mean the strategy by which (public) objects are made out of more solid materials or are better guarded.

The criticism that is often heard against this strategy is that it is only a form of attacking the symptoms of the problem.

This has two consequences:

- In view of the "prestige" element that plays a role in a lot of cases of vandalism, it might be expected that young people see an extra challenge in more solid objects and this can lead to a counter effect.
- If objects are really undestructable there will be a shifting to weaker objects.

We think that this criticism on the target hardening strategy is to a large extent correct. But there are some cases that target hardening can have a beneficial effect, as has been showed by for example Gladstone in Manchester. From an analysis of vandalism at schools it turned out that a lot of destructions were caused by children that used the schoolyard as a playing-yard. After implementation of some target hardening measures (a.o. the use of glass substitutes) the children still played on the schoolyard, but the number of destructions declined sharply.

2. Repression of vandalism

The weakening of control mechanisms in our society is probably one of the reasons for the increase in vandalism.

Young people are less afraid of being caught when they do something that is forbidden.

This statement is the background for the strategy of more intensive police surveillance and "better" punishment of vandals that are caught.

Intensive police surveillance will result in a higher chance to be caught. But the effectiveness of this bigger chance depends for a good deal on what happens after being caught. If nothing happens (as is often the case) increased police activities will have little effect. But when being caught it consequently followed by a punishment the more intensive police surveillance will result in a bigger fear of being caught.

But increasing this fear is not the only goal of the "preventive-repression approach". It is also the aim that a caught youngster does not commit vandalism again.

Mainly for the sake of this second goal there are some experiments with so called "alternative punishments".

In Holland the repressive strategy has been used a few times. The results of an experiment in the city of Nijmegen indicate that intensive police surveillance has a preventive effect. But when the intensive police surveillance period is over, the level of vandalism creeps up again.

Another experiment carried out through the Amsterdam police seems to indicate that intensive surveillance renders a more lasting effect if this is combined with (police) activities that try to bring back to the citizens a certain responsibility for their environment.

There are also some experiments in which alternative punishment is used. The punishment consists of cleaning up or restoring the damage that has been caused.

This type of sanction has more relation to the committed misbehaviour and the expectation is that because of this relation the punished vandal will not so fast commit vandalism again.

Unfortunately these experiments are still too new to determine whether the expected goal is reached.

Creating better facilities for young people

One of the causes of vandalism are the frustrations that many young people have in their daily life with regard to their school, situation at home and leisure time facilities.

A very important strategy of preventing vandalism is to try to decrease those frustrations.

In Holland at the moment we have only some experience with the improvement of leisure time facilities. So we confine ourselves to this point. Of course this does not mean that other points - for example courses in school that are not only interesting for the pupil who is interested in intellectual achievements are less important.

In our society there does not seem to be a lack of leisure time facilities. But we must remember - as was laid down in the French rapport "Responses à la violence" - that a lot of leisure time organisations (for example sport clubs) have important barriers to engage in their activities.

Those barriers are created by strict rules (for example the obligation to come every week) laid down by the staff of the organisation. Young people that have problems with the discipline in schools will probably also have problems with the rules from the leisure time organisation.

Therefore in our view there must be more leisure time facilities that satisfy the following two conditions:

- The activities must be connected to the wishes of young people
- Young people must share responsibility in the "management" of the facilities

At the moment there are running some experiments like workrooms for youngsters that want to work on their mopeds and less professional sportclubs that are run by parents of "difficult" young people. The results of such activities are promising.

Making young people more involved with their environment

One of the features of our modern society is the alienation of people from their environment where they live - especially in the grey cubistic suburbs of the cities.

A low level of social ties in a neighbourhood and a lack of interest in the neighbourhood are two of the factors that contribute to vandalism.

In Holland there are many projects that are directed towards the increasing of the involvement of young people with their environments. There are numerous possibilities to do so.

- In the first place you can involve young people with physical arrangement of their environment.

- In the second place you can youngsters let "adopt" objects or buildings. Adopting in this case means that they look for if any vandalism to the particular object or building is occurring.

In those two approaches the responsibility that is given to youngsters play an important role. By means of this responsibility the gap between youngsters and grown-ups will become smaller, so the influence of another factor that contributes to vandalism will be weakened.

- In the third place you can teach young people that vandalism is something that deteriorates their environment and can mean such sadness to the victims.

It will be clear that it is possible to combine these three approaches. In fact this happens in most of the projects in Holland. The experiences from the projects seems to indicate that this fourth strategy is quite successful. Figures damage to public goods dropped often more than 25%.

There is still one important remark to make on this fourth strategy: The cooperation from schools is of course essential; in fact in Holland the teachers do most of the job.

They give lessons about vandalism and together with the crime prevention officer they arrange special activities for the children in the neighbourhood.

To make the work a bit more easy for the teachers the National Bureau of Crime Prevention has made a brochure about vandalism for schools.

Schools that want to do a project can ask for this brochure to the local prevention officer.

If you are in Paris we will hand it to you as a kind of bonus for reading our paper.

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