

2011 Annual Graffiti Survey of Gwinnett County Findings and Recommendations

Conducted and Analyzed
by

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BACKGROUND

Graffiti is a crime. According to Georgia Code the term graffiti means “any inscriptions, words, figures, paintings, or other defacements that are written, marked, etched, scratched, sprayed, drawn, thereon without prior authorization of the owner or occupant of the property.”¹

Graffiti is considered vandalism. A graffiti arrest may be considered a misdemeanor, unless it is gang related which is considered a felony.

Graffiti hurts everyone: homeowners, communities, businesses, schools and you. And, those who practice it risk personal injury, violence and arrest.

Graffiti is the most common type of property vandalism (35%) according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

The U.S. Department of Justice reports that “graffiti contributes to lost revenue associated with reduced ridership on transit systems, reduced retail sales and declines in property value. In addition, graffiti generates the perception of blight and heightens fear of gang activity.”²

Most national studies show that street level graffiti is created by suburban adolescents, predominately male, between the ages of 12 and 19. There are five motivating factors for graffiti vandals:

- Fame
- Rebellion
- Self-expression
- Power
- Marking Territory

Getting the media to publish photos and videos of graffiti is often the ultimate fame for graffiti vandals.

¹ O.C.G.A. §17-15A-2 (2009)

² Deborah Lamm Weisel, “Graffiti,” U.S. Dept of Justice Problem-Oriented Guides for Police Series No. 9, (2002).

Graffiti cleanup takes a big chunk out of municipal budgets. Phoenix, AZ spends more than \$6 million annually on graffiti clean up. The city of San Jose, CA spent about \$2 million in 2006, Las Vegas, NV spends about \$3 million annually and Chicago, IL budgeted \$6.5 million in 2006.

The costs of graffiti vandalism in the U.S. have yet to be definitively documented. However, figures from a variety of communities across the U.S. suggest that graffiti clean up alone costs taxpayers about \$1- \$3 per person per year.

The term graffiti comes from the Greek word graphein, which means, "to write." Graffiti has been around for centuries, but during the early 1990's it began being observed as more of a problem at the local and national level. In 1996, in response to growing local and national concerns, Keep America Beautiful developed Graffiti Hurts, a grassroots community education program to help communities establish anti-graffiti programs that get results thereby creating healthier, safer and more livable communities.

Keep America Beautiful (KAB) is the nation's largest volunteer-based community action and education organization. With a network of nearly 1,000 affiliate and participating organizations, KAB forms public-private partnerships and programs that engage individuals to take greater responsibility for improving their community's environment. Keep America Beautiful was formed in 1953 when a group of corporate and civic leaders met in New York City to discuss a revolutionary idea – bringing the public and private sectors together to develop and promote a national cleanliness ethic.

Gwinnett Clean & Beautiful Services, Inc. (GCB) is the local affiliate of Keep America Beautiful. GCB is guided by a 50 member citizen advisory board that represents various sectors and perspectives in the community which include citizens, civic associations, large and small businesses, Gwinnett County Public Schools, local governments, law enforcement and neighborhood associations.

GCB is dedicated to continue building and sustaining a community movement to improve environmental practices and quality of life. GCB has continued to utilize KAB's research-based behavioral change process by getting the facts, involving the people, developing a systematic plan, focusing on results and providing positive reinforcement.

In 1997, to address growing concerns about graffiti at the local level, GCB began by "getting the facts" about the best graffiti prevention practices. GCB contacted national graffiti expert Victoria Wilson to tour our community and offer her observations and recommendations based on national research she had conducted. Ms. Wilson noted that there was enough graffiti present in Gwinnett to begin to establish a monitoring and prevention program. She stated that most of the graffiti she observed was "hip hop" taggings and not gang graffiti. Ms. Wilson stressed that without a coordinated intervention and prevention program Gwinnett could see more graffiti vandalism and perhaps more serious crimes.

To begin to address Ms. Wilson's recommendations, GCB convened an Anti Graffiti Task Force. The Task Force consisted of community leaders from civic associations, local governments, law enforcement and business. The purpose of the Task Force was to continue gathering the facts about graffiti and to educate citizens about the importance of graffiti prevention and abatement.

In 2000, GCB was receiving an increasing number of contacts from citizens concerned about graffiti in their neighborhoods. At that time the only gauge to determine the extent of graffiti in Gwinnett was citizen phone calls or emails. GCB conducted additional research and found that there was no data available to determine the extent of the problem in the community, nor coordinated efforts to address this issue.

GCB recognized a greater need for additional community involvement and initiated a Graffiti Hurts Coalition in 2002. The Coalition consisted of staff from local county and city governments, local businesses, the Chamber of Commerce, city and county law enforcement, schools, neighborhood associations, civic groups, local and state elected officials, Judges, the Gwinnett County Solicitor and the District Attorney. The Coalition asked that research be done to determine how other communities were addressing graffiti and what options were available to determine the current extent of graffiti vandalism and measure our progress.

GCB researched programs in the following communities: San Jose, CA; Denver, CO; Los Angeles, CA; Chicago, IL; Cincinnati, OH and metro Atlanta communities. The research identified a need for an annual survey to determine the extent of the graffiti problem in our community and establish a baseline to measure the magnitude of the graffiti problem, compare future surveys and measure progress in on-going education, eradication and enforcement efforts. GCB with the help of a retired engineer developed and conducted a comprehensive baseline survey in February, 2003. Additional data has also been gathered periodically to help estimate the cost of graffiti in Gwinnett.

ANNUAL GRAFFITI SURVEY

The baseline graffiti survey of Gwinnett County was conducted in February 2003. The Annual Graffiti Survey is a point in time “snap shot”. It is conducted each year during a two-week period in February and covers more than 1,000 miles of roadways. Using one vehicle, the survey team (consisting of a driver and 2-5 people) covers the entire county with all parties actively looking for graffiti.

The team drives all major primary and secondary roads as well as targeted neighborhood streets in Gwinnett County. The survey team checks behind all strip and shopping centers located on these major roads. If graffiti is visible at the entrance to a business park or subdivision, the team will go further into the area to check for graffiti. There are also frequently tagged sites that are checked as well.

Anything that is tagged (fences, homes, businesses, street signs, sidewalks, streets, utility boxes, utility poles, dumpsters, etc.) at a property is logged in and shared with the appropriate entity if possible. The following pertinent information related to each site is collected:

- Address (or nearest address if not marked)
- Nearest intersection
- Name of business/business park
- Name of Subdivision
- Type of graffiti
- Approximate square footage
- Name, color and numbers on utility boxes
- Type of street sign
- Description of tag (letters, symbols, colors, other markings)
- Type of surface
- Residential, business or public property
- Occupied or vacant property
- Graffiti visibility (1 = visible from a major road, 2 = visible from a secondary/neighborhood road, 3 = visible from behind a building)

Pictures are taken of various types of surfaces tagged – not necessarily every site, but sites that are heavily tagged, sites that may be needed to assist with identification of ownership of utility boxes or dumpsters or unusual taggings. The annual survey does not attempt to capture sites where graffiti had previously occurred and been painted over.

The results of the 2003 Survey indicated that graffiti was observed on 252 sites, 50% of the sites were highly visible from major roadways and 90% was gang related.

Since 2003, surveys have been conducted annually at the same time of the year. Each year’s data is compiled and the results are compared to the 2003 baseline. Data is also compared to prior year’s results to determine trends and identify potential problems.

The findings are documented and proposed recommendations are developed and shared with all stakeholders including, local governments, key businesses, the law enforcement community and the general public.

SURVEY FINDINGS

The 2011 Annual Graffiti Survey was conducted in February by a team of trained observers, including law enforcement volunteers. The survey identified the following current conditions:

- 317 sites where graffiti was observed
- 11,261 square feet of surface area tagged
- 84% of sites contained gang-related graffiti
- 60% of sites were occupied buildings and related structures
- 51% of sites were visible by citizens as they traveled from their homes around the community
- 74% of sites were on business property
- 12% of sites were on residential property
- 14% of sites were public property (structures on rights-of-way, street signs, pavement, etc.)
- 78% of sites were in Duluth, Norcross and Lawrenceville zip codes; but graffiti is spread throughout the County.

The following data was compared by year, with 2003 being the baseline year. The number of tagged sites observed during 2011 was 27% less than 2010, but 26% more than 2003.

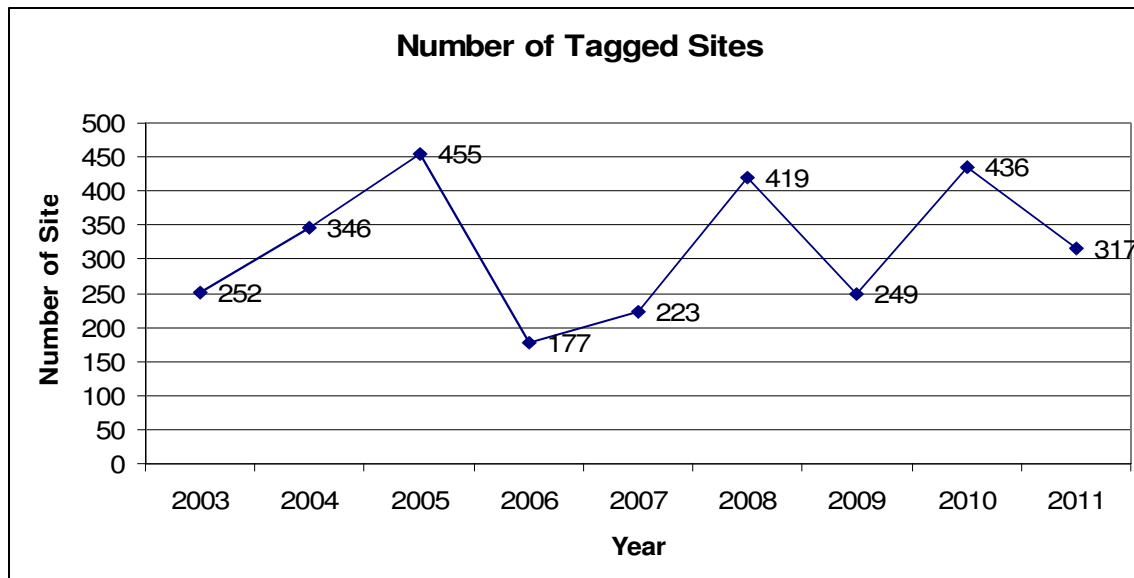


Fig. 1

The total area tagged in 2003 is more than 3 times the total area tagged in 2011. In 2003, the average graffiti site was 149 square feet. Today, it is 35 square feet. We are seeing smaller tags which are quicker to make. Despite these improving trends, the graffiti observed in this year's survey would still cover a two-foot high wall that stretched from the intersection of Mall of Georgia Boulevard & Buford Drive to the Gwinnett Braves Stadium at Coolray Field.

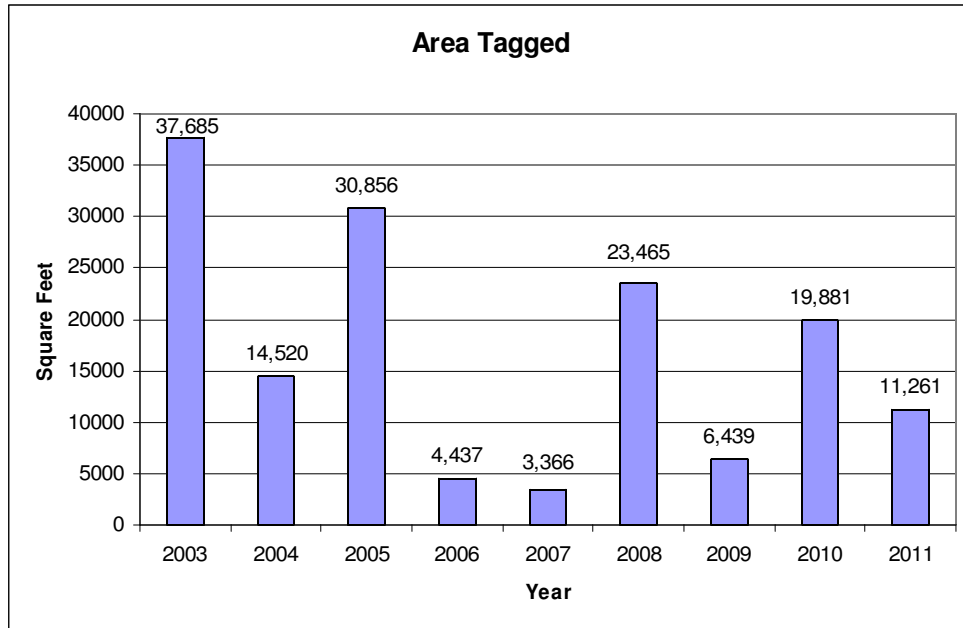


Fig. 2

Gang graffiti continues to be the predominant form of graffiti vandalism in Gwinnett.

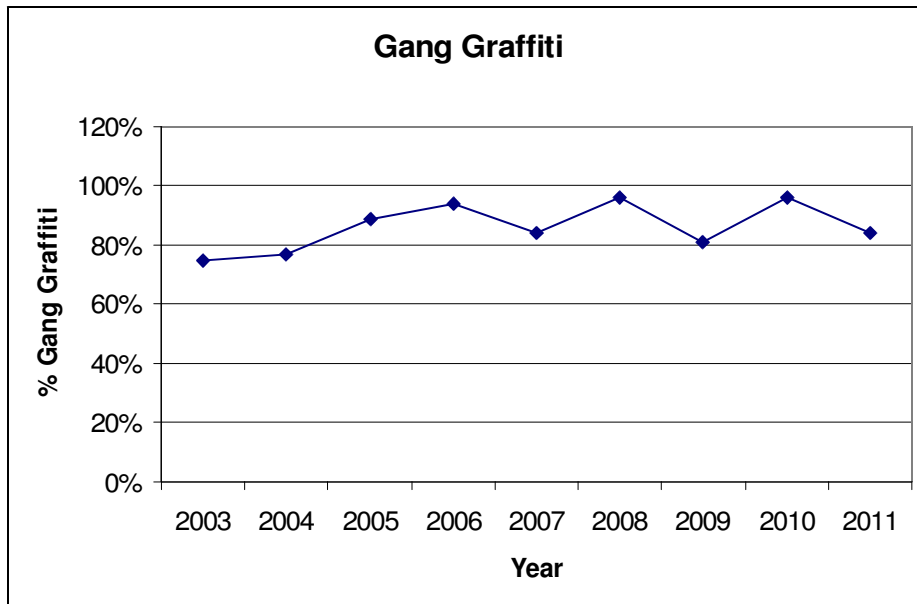


Fig. 3

Nationally, only 10% of graffiti is considered gang graffiti vs. 84% in 2011 in Gwinnett County.

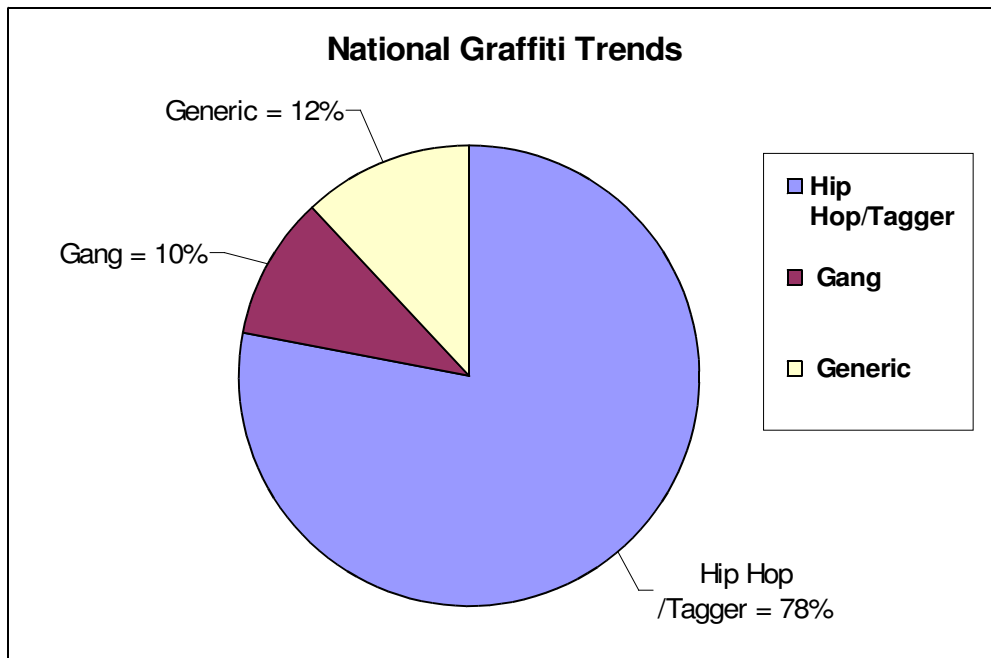


Fig. 4

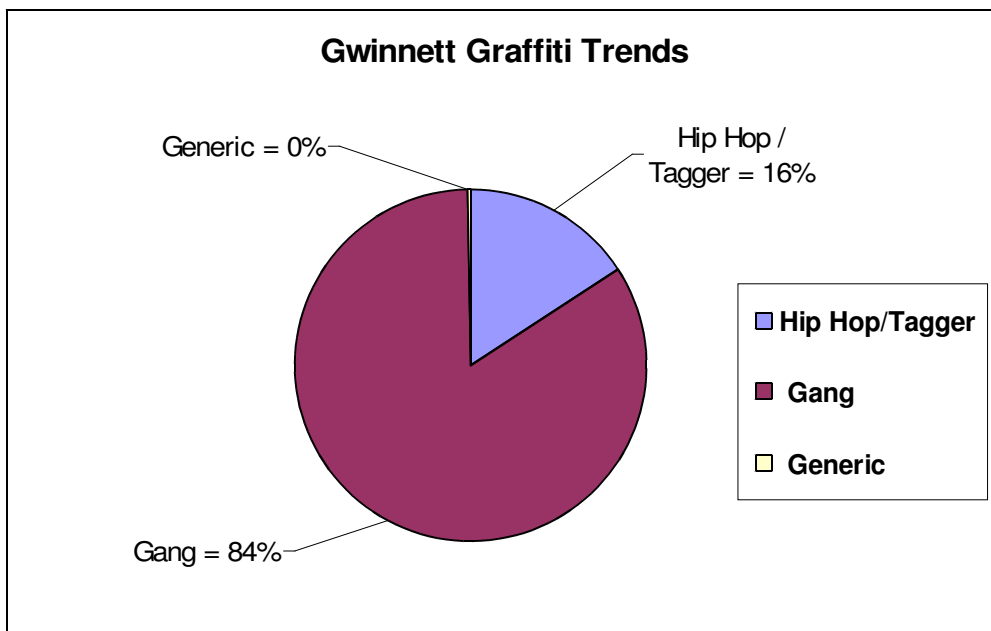


Fig. 5

More than 90% of graffiti sites observed in 2003 were located on occupied property. Since 2008, the trend shows an increasing number of vacant properties and a decreasing number of occupied properties are being tagged. There are major challenges identifying and locating owners of vacant properties to get graffiti removed in a timely manner. Studies show that removing graffiti within 24 to 48 hours results in nearly a zero rate of reoccurrence.

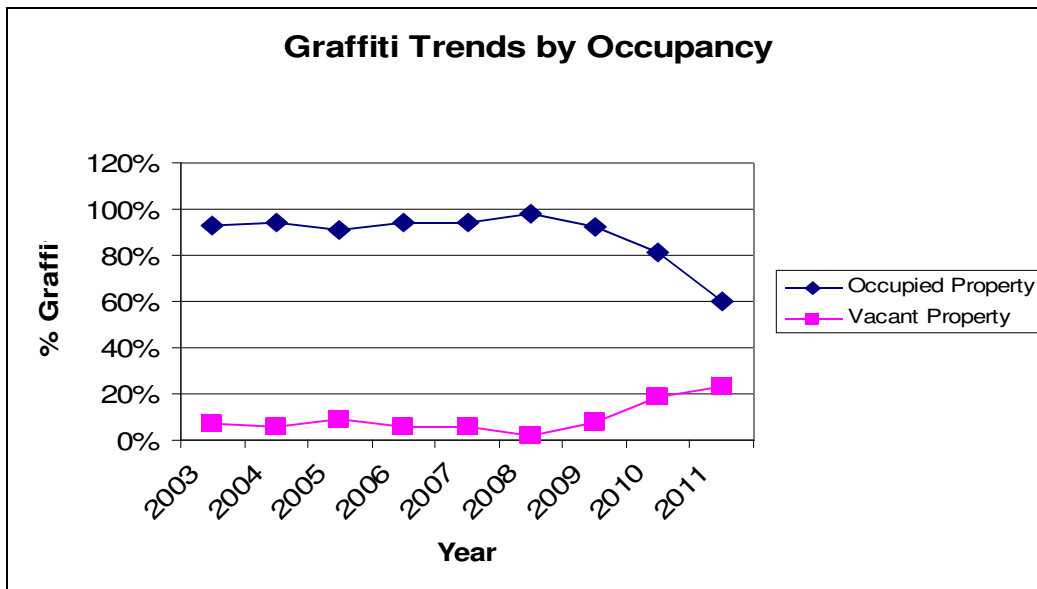


Fig. 6

Graffiti remains visible in our community. In 2011, 51% of the tagged sites are visible from the road by citizens.

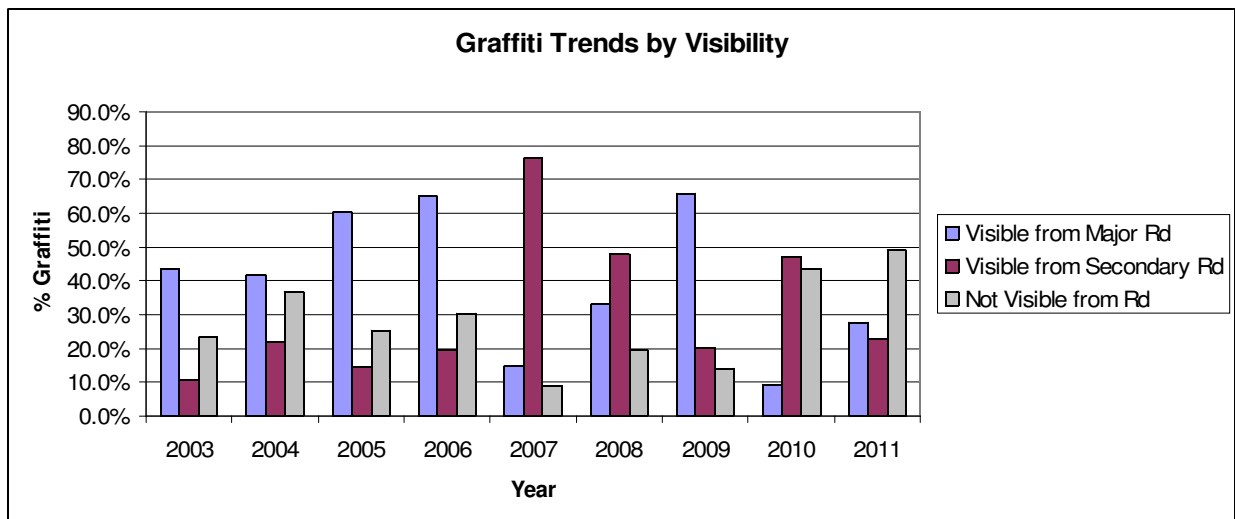


Fig. 7

In 2003, 90% of the graffiti observed was located on business properties. Comparisons show a 16% decrease in graffiti sites on businesses when compared to 2003. However, we are seeing an increasing trend in graffiti on business properties since 2008. The trend since 2009 shows a decrease in graffiti in residential and public areas.

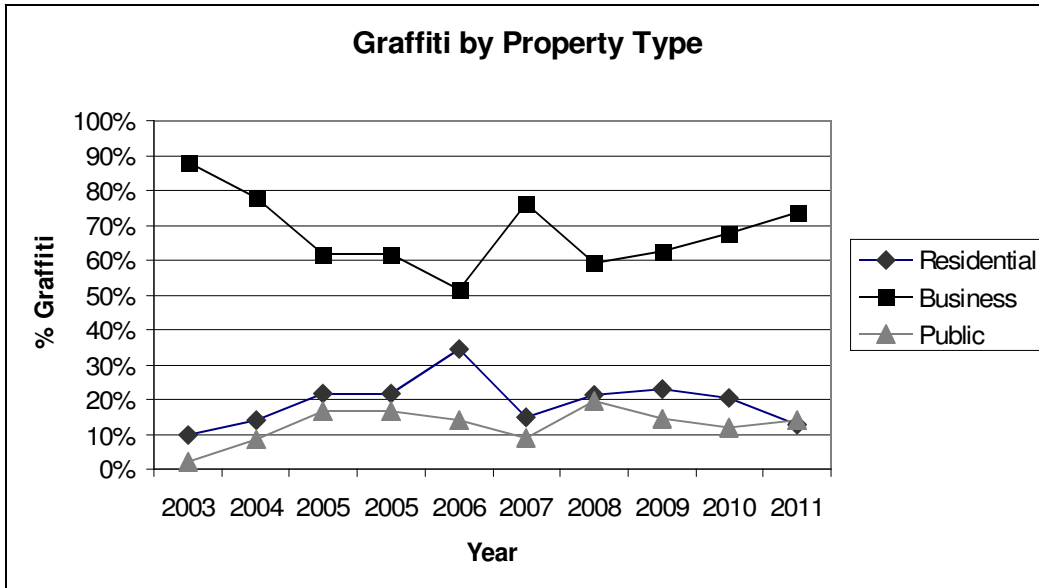


Fig. 8

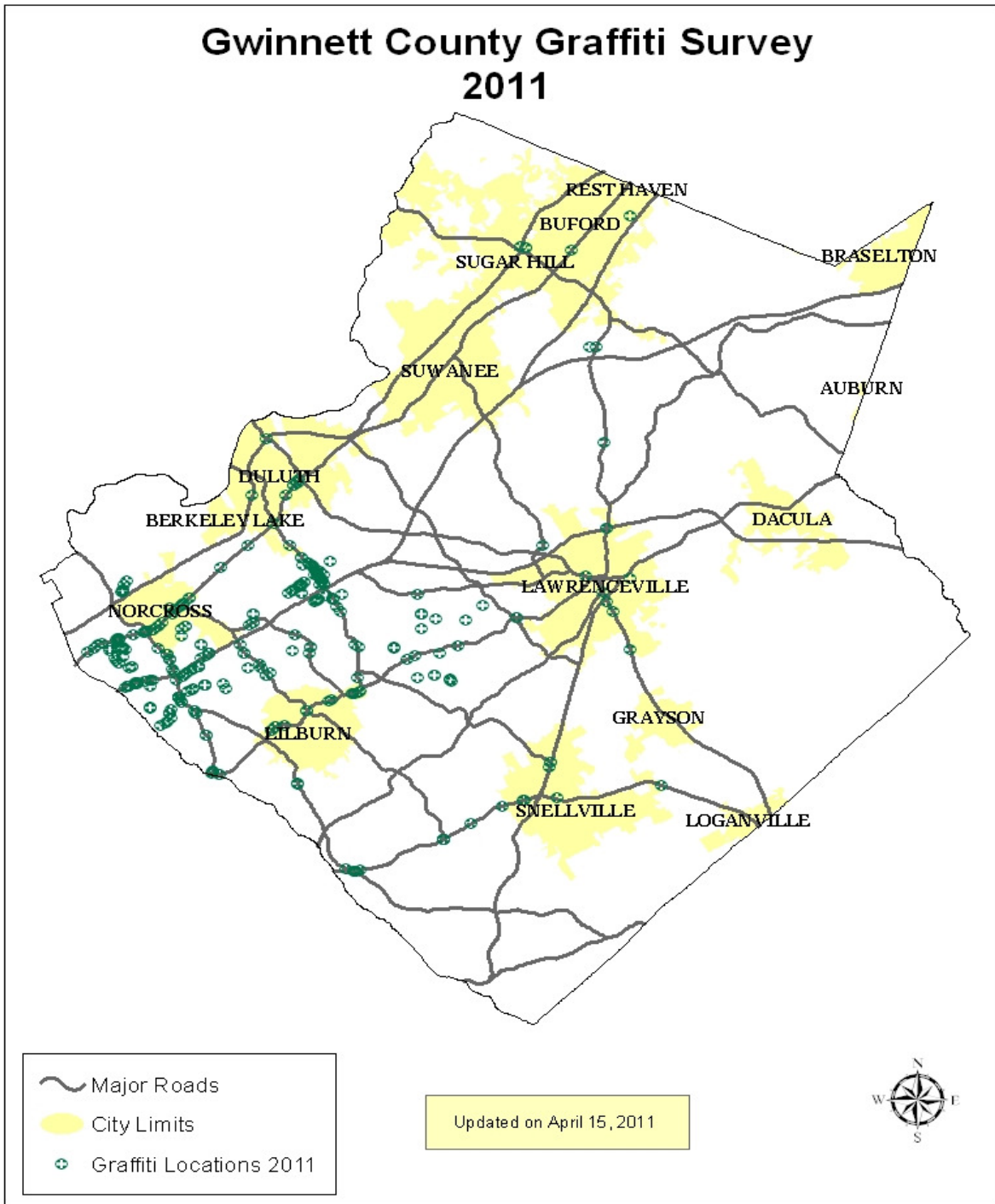


Fig. 9

Trends show that graffiti continues to occur in the Duluth, Norcross, and Lawrenceville zip codes, but is spread throughout the County.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, numerous programs have been developed and implemented to address graffiti. The most significant actions in Gwinnett County are noted below and show their impact on survey results.

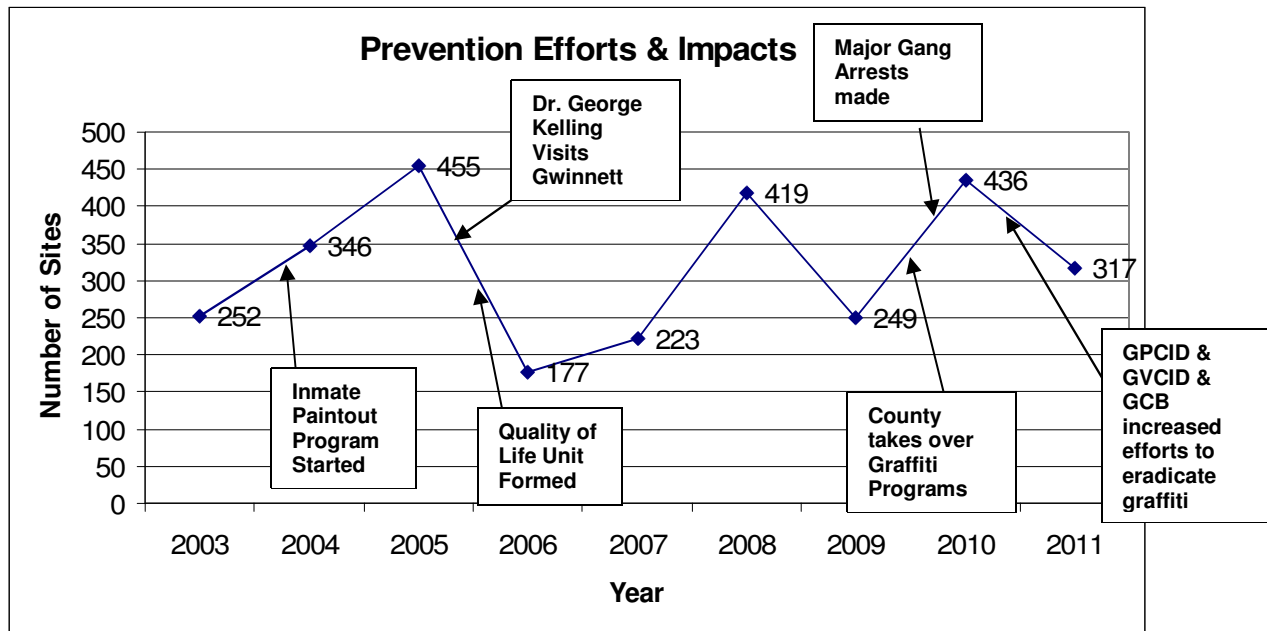


Fig. 10

Overall, trends show the number of graffiti sites is increasing.

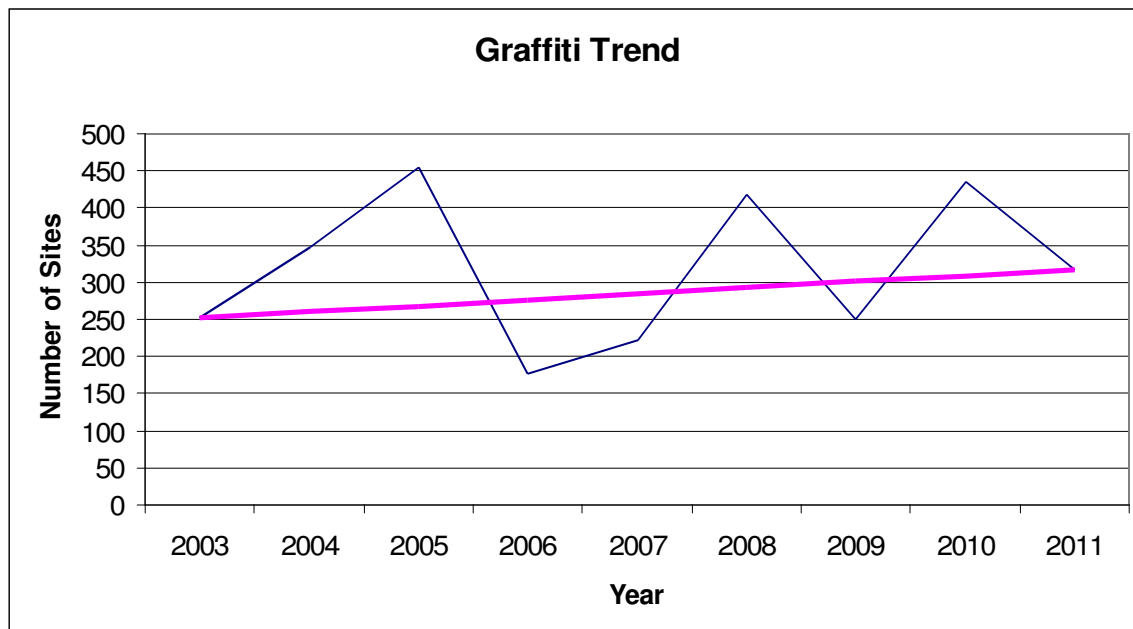


Fig. 11

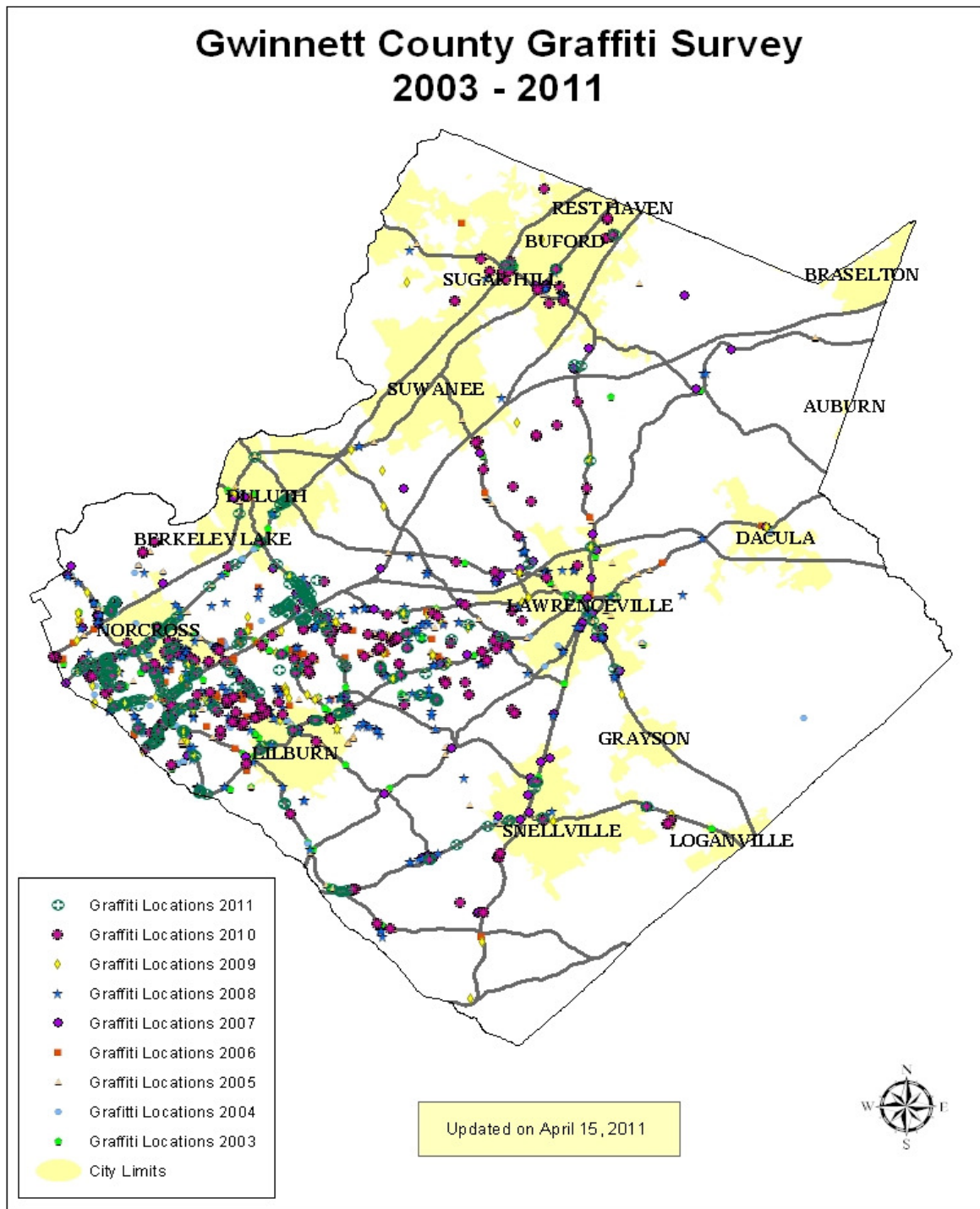


Fig. 12

Trends show that graffiti continues to occur in the Duluth, Norcross, and Lawrenceville zip codes, but is spread throughout the County.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since 2003, Gwinnett's population has grown by more than 20% from approximately 654,000 to over 800,000 today. More homes and commercial businesses have been constructed. The overall trends show that graffiti:

- is increasing
- gang graffiti remains a serious problem
- more businesses are impacted
- more than one of every two sites is visible by citizens

Trying to project future trends is challenging because data and analysis of metrics, such as citizen reporting and enforcement activities, is no longer available on a county-wide level. Furthermore, there has been a shift in program management and philosophy.

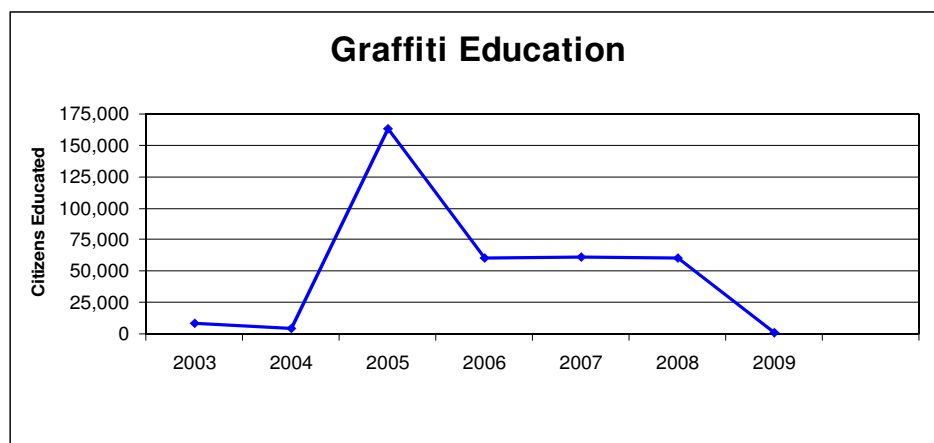
Currently, there is:

- No coordinated graffiti eradication efforts with utility companies, etc.
- Citizen confusion on how to report graffiti, and
- A shift in eradication efforts from a victim assistance program to a code compliance/penalty system.

Based on the 2011 Annual Graffiti Survey conducted by GCB, the following strategies and actions are recommended for implementation during the next 12 months:

Strategy 1: Increase Education to educate citizens and targeted community sectors about graffiti vandalism and empower them to take action.

Efforts to educate citizens and targeted community sectors have declined.



2010 & 2011 data not available

The following actions have been designed to address this issue:

Action: Establish one-stop graffiti hotline for all jurisdictions within Gwinnett County

Action: Create “Got Graffiti” teams within groups that travel roadways daily

Action: Enhance the Graffiti Hurts Coalition to re-engage local and state government officials and law enforcement

Action: Develop and implement targeted prevention strategies for businesses, home owners and other residents

Action: Continue outreach programs in partnership with schools, both public and private

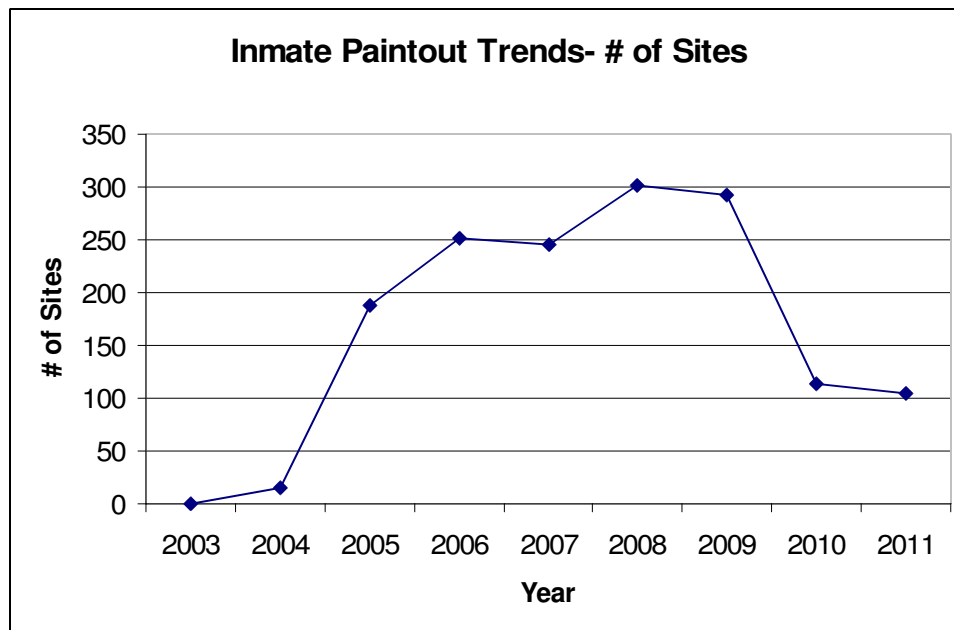
Action: Enhance opportunities to educate citizens when they report graffiti vandalism

Action: Re-instate the tracking, analyzing and reporting procedures regarding all graffiti data reported county-wide

Action: Provide graffiti survey results to all stakeholders

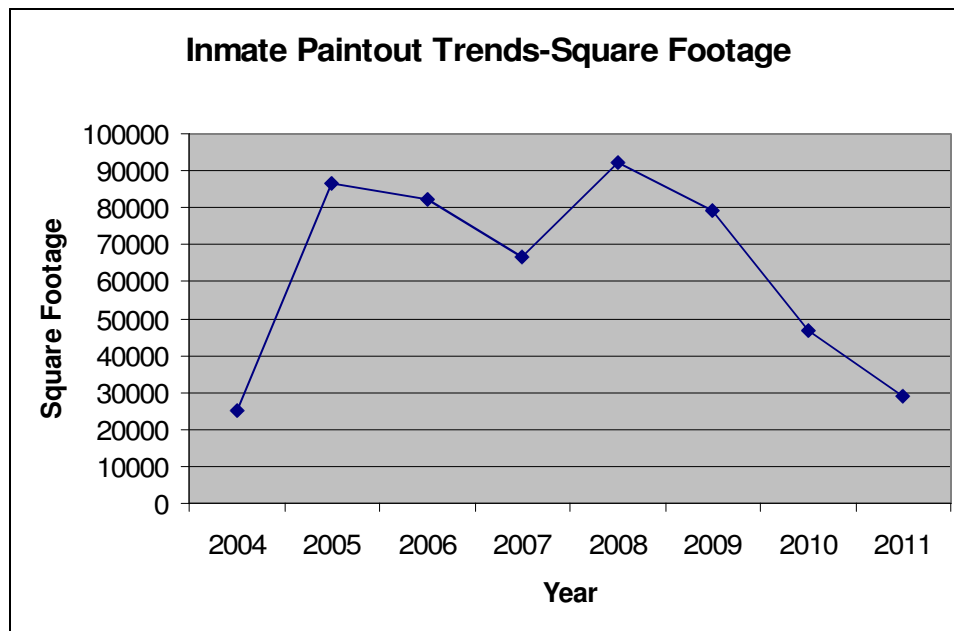
Strategy 2: Increase Eradication to remove graffiti promptly

Complete eradication data is not available. However, the data below provided by the Gwinnett County Department of Corrections shows that there were significantly fewer requests for the victim assistance graffiti eradication program in the past year.



Source: Data provided by Gwinnett County Department of Corrections

Of the 105 sites painted out in 2011, 79% of these were completed within 2 business days. Delays were a result of staff reduction and inclement weather.



Source: Data provided by Gwinnett County Department of Corrections

The following actions are recommended to remove graffiti promptly.

Action: Engage CIDs, utility companies and solid waste haulers and request their assistance with eradication

Action: Coordinate and enhance citizen reporting and graffiti eradication programs, with particular focus on common properties such as utility company equipment

Action: Develop and implement a removal program for brick surfaces

Action: Develop and implement procedures to address graffiti on vacant properties

Action: Develop and implement a community involvement project to address fences on Oakland and Cruse Roads and other high incidence areas

Action: Continue the Department of Corrections victim assistance graffiti eradication program

Action: Evaluate what is being done to prevent graffiti from re-occurring in targeted areas using data from the County Call Center

Action: Establish a local peer-to-peer best management practices program to improve prevention and eradication efforts

Strategy 3: Increase Enforcement efforts in partnership with local law enforcement to ensure anti-graffiti laws are enforced and that there is follow through in the court system

To our knowledge no metrics are available for enforcement activities regarding graffiti.

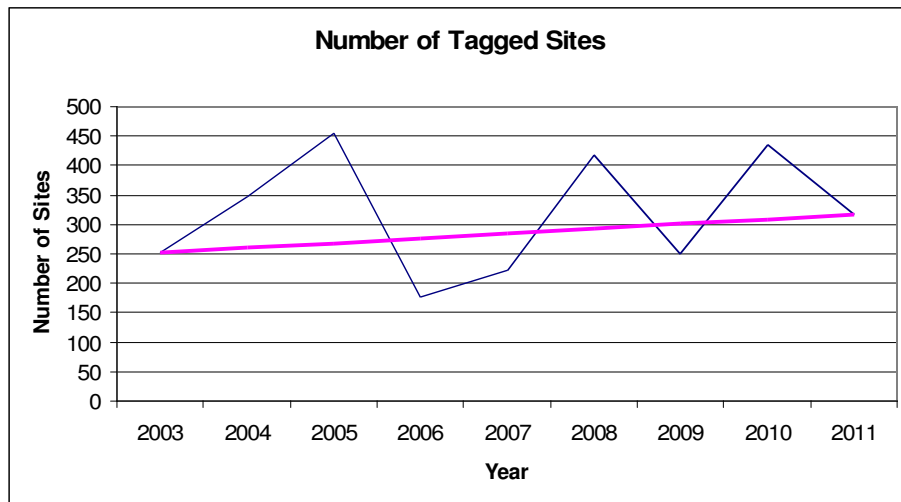
Action: Increase intervention, surveillance and enforcement in hot spots

Action: Develop metrics and a tracking procedure to record graffiti-related enforcement activities county-wide

CONCLUSION

Since 2003, Gwinnett’s population has grown by 21% and graffiti has increased by 26%. In conclusion, it is widely accepted that increasing amounts of litter and graffiti are early indicators of a community in decline. Graffiti sends the signal that nobody cares and attracts other forms of crime. Communities that are clean and cared for help deter crime and keep our streets and neighborhoods safe.

The 2011 Annual Graffiti Survey results show that the overall graffiti trend is increasing, but the number of sites is down from 2010.



All sectors of the community must work together to reduce the rising trend of graffiti vandalism in Gwinnett. A comprehensive and coordinated graffiti prevention and victim assistance program that includes more aggressive education, eradication and enforcement efforts needs to be put in place. This would ensure that Gwinnett can become safer, and the greenest, cleanest, most livable community in America.



Gwinnett Clean & Beautiful Services, Inc. is a non-profit charitable organization whose community-based network focuses on finding long term solutions to environmental and quality of life issues through individual action. The organization is guided by a 50 member Citizens Advisory Board that represents all sectors of the community. We believe that science and fact-based education is the foundation for responsible individual action toward the environment, and that citizens' acceptance of their individual responsibility is essential for improving the environment.

Through partnerships and strategic alliances with citizens, businesses, and government, GC&B involves over 150,000 volunteers annually in programs to prevent litter & graffiti, reduce waste, and improve our environment and quality of life. These programs are recognized as national and state models in creating safer, healthier and more livable communities. GC&B is dedicated to building and sustaining a community movement that will improve environmental practices and our quality of life.

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