

A STUDY ON VANDAL MOTIVATION

THESIS STUDY: 1981

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2.

## SUMMARY

This study was chosen in order that some of the problems and attitudes associated with delinquents in our society could be understood and resulting design work would benefit from this knowledge. Not being a sociologist I do not feel qualified to suggest social remedies to the inequalities of our society, however it would seem apparent that we all share the blame to some degree in the making of delinquents.

It would be impossible to single out vandalism against other types of anti-social behaviour undertaken particularly by youths as these often stem from the same causes and occur side by side. An attempt has been made therefore to deal with the subject of delinquency generally but particular emphasis has been placed on vandalism in this thesis.

The introduction considers general aspects of the delinquent's society, his motives for committing acts of malicious damage and a table of subsequent costs to the ratepayer. This is discussed in greater detail in the following sections which attempt to align motives for vandalism with relative age groups. The work continues with an assessment of current writings on frustration-aggression theory, from which all unlawful behaviour is expected to arise. Finally conclusions are submitted which are considered relevant to my design work.



3.

## INTRODUCTION

The increased levels of vandalism in Ireland during the past decade have inconvenienced virtually every section of the community and cost us more and more each year in repairs and replacement to public and private property as can be seen from the table below:

Table 1

Criminal Injury Costs - Dublin Corporation 1961-1978

Year Ended	Costs in £'s	Costs in £'s adjusted for inflation
31/3/61	40,209	40,209
31/3/66	47,000	38,330
31/3/71	107,590	66,612
31/12/76	2,363,629	681,093
31/12/78	1,215,000	286,487
31/12/79	3,985,561	797,112
31/12/80	4,000,000 approx.	800,000 approx.

Source: Corporation, City Hall figures rounded off to the nearest pound. 'Criminal injuries' cover malicious damage to cars, walls, telephone boxes, etc.

While general crime statistics for Ireland show a large increase over the last twenty years (14,818 in 1961 to 62,000 in 1978) statistics for juvenile crime suggest a lowered rate of criminal activity despite an increasing young population and trends in urbanisation and unemployment which are often associated with juvenile crime. The following tables would appear to bear this out while Table 4 suggests a decrease in truancy.



Table 2

Age Group of Persons Convicted or Against Whom the Charge was Held Proven and Order Made With Conviction 1961 - 1978

Year	Under 14 Years	14 & under 17	17 & under 21	Over 21	Total
1961	1,319	2,014	1,298	2,449	7,080
1966	1,211	1,957	2,259	3,793	9,220
1971	724	2,027	3,059	5,386	11,196
1976	734	1,888	2,609	5,291	10,522
1977	515	1,784	2,844	5,558	10,701
1978	459	1,479	2,608	4,519	9,065

Source: Compiled from figures given in Garda Commissioners' Annual Reports on Crime, 1961-78.

Table 3

Age Group of Persons Convicted as a Percentage of Total Convictions 1961 - 1978

Year	Under 14 Years	14 & under 17	17 & under 21	Over 21	Total Number
1961	18.6	28.4	18.3	34.6	7,080
1966	13.1	21.2	24.5	41.1	9,220
1971	6.5	18.1	27.4	46.9	11,196
1976	6.9	17.9	24.8	50.2	10,522
1977	4.8	16.7	26.6	51.9	10,701
1978	5.1	16.0	28.8	49.8	9,065

Source: Compiled from Garda Commissioners' Annual Reports on Crime 1961-78. Percentages are correct to one decimal point.

Table 4

Statistics of the School Attendance Department, Dublin 1961 - 1978

Year	Statutory Notices Served	Legal Proceedings Issued	Sent to Industrial Schools
1961	3,064	1,457	56
1966	1,796	972	40
1971	1,754	978	19
1976	969	447	31
1978	896	390	25

Source: School Attendance Department, Burton Chambers, 19/22 Dame St. Dublin 2



There has been a great lack of social research on young offenders in Ireland to date, with the exception of a book published recently by U.C.D.<sup>1</sup> which covers the history of problems associated with young offenders from independence to the present day and this book has been instrumental in providing me with relevant statistics and material for this thesis.

In 1924, the General Prisons Board, who then had charge of young offenders, published the following generalisation of youths in their institutions:

"We have within the last few years to deal with an entirely new class of criminal, composed of half educated youths who would appear to have escaped early from parental control. They have grown up in lawless habits and the streets and the cinema have been the main sources of their moral education. Full of new and unsatisfied desires, these youths have been dazzled by sensational reports in newspapers of large sums of money obtained by organised robbery, and they are seduced by the prospect of getting money easily without having to work for it honestly. There is also another fact which we have noticed. Formerly a series of convictions for minor offences preceded offences of a graver nature. Now the first offender starts off with a more serious form of crime, and unlike his forerunners in crime seems after committal more concerned with the comforts or otherwise of his detention than the disgrace which it involves".<sup>2</sup>

I have often read similar arguments advanced today about the effects on children of violence and criminality as displayed on television. Experiments carried out in Germany by Herbert Selg<sup>3</sup> in the late sixties would seem to suggest that the media has some effect on the behaviour of young people but the causes of delinquency were not as simple as that, either in 1924 or today, but have much to do with urban deprivation and social conditions.

In the following passage from the Irish Times some of the difficulties of life in Dublin's inner city are portrayed:



"Gardiner St, Sean McDermott St, Sherriff St, Foley St, and Summerhill are areas that dominate any discussion of Dublin's delinquency problems. They are frequently cited as one of the reasons why the Loughlan House project must go ahead. Decent law-abiding citizens and their property must be protected from the young criminals who flourish there - the handbag snatcher, the mugger, the car thief and the teenage gangs that terrorise neighbours and local shopkeepers alike. No one disputes that these things happen or that these are areas that few would recommend for a tourist itinerary, particularly after dark. But there is another side to the story, an appalling one of poverty, squalor, overcrowding and a total lack of amenities...." 4

A local Garda spokesman made this statement from his experience in the area:

"How much better would I, or any of us have been, if we had come through the same thing? By and large, these people turn to crime through no fault of their own; they are deprived and condemned through ignorance".

The studies of the U.C.D. Group revealed that high unemployment and low income are very real facts of life for young people coming from socially-deprived areas of the city and in the following table, compiled by Murphy and Morrissey, this fact is seen:

Table 5

Take-Home Pay from Present Job of Young People in North Central Dublin

£	Total %	Male %	Female %
Under £10 week	3.7	4.4	3.4
£11-20	62.7	46.9	75.9
£21-30	27.0	36.7	19.0
£31-40	5.6	10.2	1.7
£41-50	1.0	2.0	-
	100	100	100

Source: Murphy and Morrissey, *ibid.*, p.70.



One young offender commented to Father Brian Power, when asked during his survey of fifty Dublin youths, "Would you not prefer to be honest all the time?"

"Yes, I would, but I can't be. You see, I don't have money all the time. That's really what I steal for - money. I suppose if my parents were well off I'd be very honest because I'd get money off them". 5

However, while the incomes of the young people from these areas is an important consideration, they do not all become involved in delinquent acts and crime.

Also to be carefully scrutinised are the incomes and social positions of their parents, the number of brothers and sisters, and involvement of older members of the family group in law breaking.

In the following tables it can be seen that the largest proportion of young offenders came from lower income families with above average numbers of children. This would suggest a lessening amount of parental attention and heightened deprivation.

Table 6

The Social Group of Young Offenders in an Irish Industrial School and Reformatory, 1968

Social Group	Percentage national population	Percentage delinquents
Farmers	28.0	0.0
Other agricultural occupations	9.0	6.0
Higher professional	2.5	0.0
Lower professional	3.0	0.0
Employers and managers	1.5	0.0
Salaried employees	13.5	1.0
Intermediate non-manual	9.5	11.5
Other non-manual	12.0	19.5
Skilled manual	7.0	12.5
Semi-skilled manual	7.0	32.0
Unskilled manual	5.5	16.5
Unknown	1.5	1.0
	100	100



Source: Ian Hart, 'The Social and Psychological Characteristics of Institutionalized Young Offenders in Ireland', Administration Vol. 16 (1968), p 17.

Source for national data: Vol.III, 1961 Census, p.171.

Table 7

Fathers' Occupations of Those in Reformatory Schools, February 1968

Father's Occupation	Boys Schools	Girls Schools	Totals
Clerical worker	3	-	3
Intermediate non-manual worker	4	1	5
Skilled tradesman	6	1	7
Semi-skilled worker	12	5	17
Agricultural labourer	1	1	2
Non-skilled worker	27	3	30
Unemployed	16	-	16
Disabled	5	1	6
Itinerant	4	1	5
'In England'	4	-	4
Occupation unknown	3	1	4
No reply	20	24	44
	—	—	—
	105	38	143

Source: Kennedy Report (1970), p.106 (partial reproduction).

Table 8

Young Offenders' Families and Families of the National Population by Average Number of Live Children According to Social Group\*

Social Group	Average number of live children in delinquents' families	Average number of live children in families of national population
Other agricultural occupations, salaried employees, intermediate non-manual & other non manual	6.31 (n=39)	4.40
Skilled manual, unskilled manual, unknown	6.74 (n=31)	4.80
Semi-skilled manual	6.63 (n=33)	4.74

\* National averages are taken from figures for the 25 to 29 year duration of marriage group to improve comparison with the



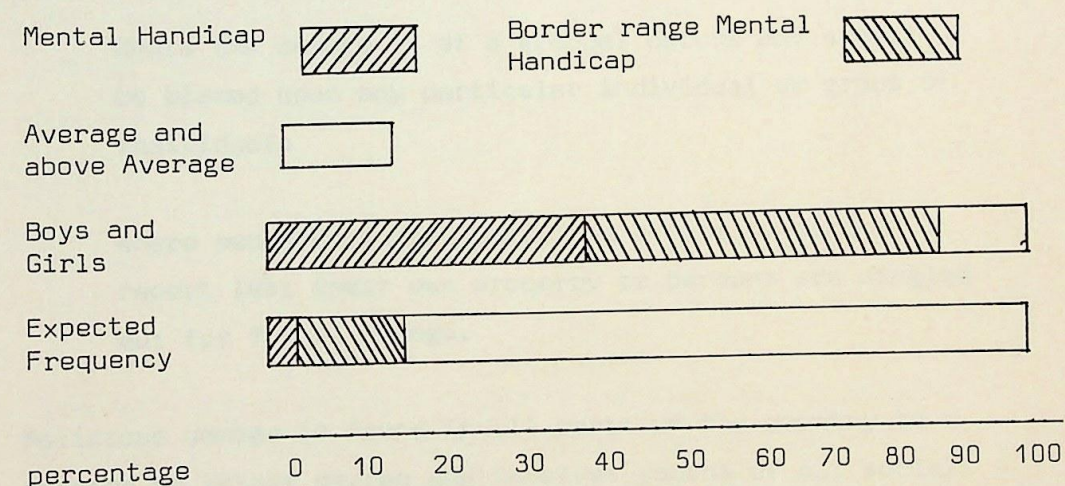
delinquents' families as the modal age of the delinquents was 15. The fact that a certain proportion of couples during that duration of marriage group are childless was allowed for by increasing the average number of children per social group in the population by a fraction based on the proportion of childless married couples in that group. The differences between the three pairs of means were statistically significant.

Source: I. Hart, 'A Survey of Some Delinquent Boys in an Irish Industrial School and Reformatory'.

Another important consideration in looking at delinquency in Ireland is the level of mental handicap amongst youths in our reform schools. The bar chart below (Table 9) from the Kennedy Report is quite startling in highlighting this fact; as it is found that many of the most harmful acts of malicious damage may be committed by persons that are to some degree mentally disturbed.

Table 9

Frequency of Mental Handicap and Average and Above Average Intelligence Among Fifteen Year Olds in Reformatory Schools



Source: Kennedy Report.

From their investigation the U.C.D. Group submitted this appraisal of the young offender:

"From our investigation a picture of the 16/17 year old delinquent boy in Ireland emerges. He would seem to come from a large family living in the poorer



sectors of a town or city. His father's occupation is either an unskilled or semi-skilled job and his mother may work part-time, or may not work at all. His intelligence is below average, and hence his educational attainments are poor. He probably finds it difficult to keep up with an ordinary class and so he is an habitual truant from school. He rarely sits for his Primary Certificate and does not go to technical school afterwards. He commits his crime as a member of a group rather than alone. He seems to be a generally handicapped individual all around".<sup>1</sup>

Official figures on malicious damage based on the number of reports bear no relation to the actual number of offences committed, because in the following instances the public may not consider it worthwhile to make reports:

Where the vandal has already left the scene of the incident

Where there is little hope of the vandal being apprehended

Where the damage is of a gradual nature and cannot be blamed upon any particular individual or group of individuals

Where members of the public are afraid to make a report lest their own property or persons are singled out for future damage.

Malicious damage is found in all parts of the country to a greater or lesser degree and involves youths of all social backgrounds although their motives may differ and the rate of incidence is obviously higher in deprived urban areas. A Garda Liaison Officer made this comment when questioned about the delinquent's motives, "You mean malicious damage in Coolock and 'souvenir' hunting in Foxrock!".

The British Design Council, 1979, have done much work on



designing against vandalism and offer the following definition of malicious damage:

"It is damage to things that are owned by someone (whether or not they are perceived to belong to someone)".<sup>6</sup>

Vandalism is about the most anonymous of crimes, and, unless the offender is caught red-handed, prosecution can be difficult. The vandal does not have to carry away or dispose of property, nor does he have to carry obvious tools around with him. These may be found at the scene (e.g. rocks, nails, broken glass, wire etc.) or they may be easily concealed on his person (e.g. spray paint, markers, matches, keys, coins, chewing gum etc.) or he may even rely on the strength of his body alone (e.g. head, hands, feet, knees, elbows etc.).

It has been found that private property is seldom troubled by vandals, except in cases where there is a grudge between the parties involved. This is most probably because, private property is seen to be cared for and damage to it may swiftly provoke an angry response from the owner. However, in the case of public property and private property that is not obviously looked after (e.g. dumped vehicles, derelict buildings) the vandal runs little risk of apprehension and this makes them very attractive targets.

Generally speaking, acts of aggression are said to follow frustration but the vandals' motives are not always so and may vary with age, social background and personal development. In order to discuss the matter it is necessary to categorise type of activity with age group. The following sections describe the different behavioural patterns to be expected from - boys up to the age of 12; youths up to the age of 16; and older youths or adults aged 16 and upwards.



4.

## MOTIVATION FOR MALICIOUS DAMAGE BY BOYS UNDER THE AGE OF 12

The overwhelming majority of acts of vandalism are committed by the young and many of these by the very young. An investigation of vandalism in Blackburn by Tony Marshall (1976)<sup>7</sup> found that the peak age of offenders was under ten years of age. However, this is not as surprising as it may at first seem as most damage occurred during play or is due to the child's natural wish to experiment and take things apart.

Seldom do young children damage property with malicious intent, but with a lack of thought as to what may result from their actions having serious consequences. In Limerick City two years ago, two small boys aged nine and ten, totally destroyed their school. A small fire they had started and were playing with got out of hand.

At this stage young boys develop interests outside the home and have less dependence on their parents than formerly. Before attending school and especially during the first years at school, they will make friends and groups begin to form. These boys will meet and play with each other during their free time and depending on the area in which they live, the availability of interesting playspace or organised sports activities, some of these groups will become involved in acts of vandalism from time to time.

Derelict buildings, building sites and dumps are full of interest to the youngster and are popular play areas. The following extract comes from one of the boys interviewed and speaks for itself on some of the vandal-type activities of this age group:

"When you're a little kid, you smash up the things people chuck on the bomb sites, like old baths, old prams, old boxes and that. And motor-cars - there's always old motor vans on the bomb sites that the kids smash up. At first they think the bits they pull off are going to be useful for something, but when they



get them off there's always something wrong with them, say some bracket won't come off, so then they do some more smashing up. It goes in crazes. After that we used to smash up builders' boards and "House to Let" notices. We didn't do it very much, but I know for a time we was pulling up those "House to Let" boards, and we used to dump them in the canal or in the Victoria Park Lake. I don't know why we did it; it was for a giggle".<sup>8</sup>

In many cases damage is undertaken spontaneously without thought, reason or speech amongst members of the group. Only one has to throw a stone at a derelict building's window and the rest of the group will follow suit to see who can break the most.

To sum up the activities of this age group The Design Council suggest that "acts of wilful destruction may be subordinate to the general spirit of competition between young boys as to who can achieve most".



5.

MOTIVATION FOR MALICIOUS DAMAGE BY BOYS AGED  
13 TO 16 YEARS

Much of what has been written remains relevant with this age group too. However, there are more factors at work which have much to do with the growing up process. Play recedes in importance and is replaced by the youth's position within his group and the opinions of his peers. A posture of daring and toughness are necessary for the boy's prestige, in order that he may prove his value to the group and establish his right to belong to it. Status gained from committing violent acts and offences is important and it is thought that though many boys may not wish to be violent, nor commit acts of aggression, they will do so in front of their friends to prove themselves. It is not without significance that vandalism can be the cheapest and safest way for them to do this. Other ways of expressing their loyalty to the group are in conformity to certain modes of dress, tastes in music and in attitudes to adults and authority. A passage from "The Paint House", edited by Peter McGuire and Susie Daniel (1972)<sup>9</sup> discusses this point. Incidentally the authors of this book were part of a group of London 'Skinheads'.

"But let's look at the gang itself. Its most striking aspect was the conformity, only equalled by the council flats that they live in. The conformity of the language, areas of discussion, interests, attitudes and actions. There is security in this sameness - individuality was a threat and could not be tolerated. Membership was based on the embracing of the conformity, termination of membership was achieved by non-conformity. This could be a difficult task, if the member needed the approval of the other members, as the group pressures may be too strong to overcome. All the members of the gang were dependent on the gang, they were forced together due to their common experiences and common attitudes to the society at large. They gave each other the support that they did not receive from the community. The gang itself was often referred to as a community and even by some on odd occasions as their family. In this way the gang supplied a very real service to the members when they were in need of a sense of



belonging. An identity and the knowledge that they were wanted by other people". 9

The following passage from Peter Wilmot's "Adolescent Boys of East London" further typifies the attitudes of the group and the excitement and security in being a member:

"When they're together there's a sort of devil-may-care attitude. They're all in one bunch and they feel the others don't seem to care - well, they're pretending not to care, anyway - so why should I care. I won't care either. They sort of get carried away with each other. One tries to outdo the other. They say to themselves, if he's not afraid to shout out at that old lady over the road, I'm not afraid to put a stone through that window over there". (18 year old)<sup>8</sup>

However, groups of youths in this age range are less easily tolerated by adults than their younger counterparts, especially when they are seen loitering in public places. The public feels threatened and the group can attract the attention of the authorities. Naturally enough the group finding itself under attack, closes ranks and divides further from the public. This extract from Peter Wilmot's book expresses the harassment and resentment some youths feel. This resentment is heightened when they see other groups or individuals getting away with the same type of behaviour:

"We don't learn to speak properly. We've been brought up pretty rough. The things these students do are not all that different from what we do. But people don't look at it the same way. They say, 'They are studying, and they need to let off steam' - you know, exuberance and all that. But when any of us do it, I mean even the general public - it's not only the law - people turn round and say, 'Look, they're mad gits, sit on them'. 8

In the latter part of this age group vandalism has a less widespread incidence and is generally undertaken more frivolously than formerly. Most youths are into a widening pattern of criminal behaviour, therefore it is stressed that it would be rare to find a youth of this age whose only criminal activity was that of vandalism. It is true



that many would have already indulged in petty theft, such as shoplifting, before reaching this age. By this time they have usually progressed to more organised crimes such as burglary and the theft of motor vehicles. Also important is the range for these activities as at this age many will have some sort of part time employment and money will enable them to travel outside their own neighbourhood to commit the offences.



6.

# MOTIVATION FOR MALICIOUS DAMAGE BY YOUTHS AGED 16 AND UPWARDS

As youths approach their late teens the crime rate begins to fall off and vandalism is no exception. The demands of jobs, new responsibilities and a heightened interest in girls are some of the reasons for this. Generally speaking, new interests break up the old group - there is more to gain by behaving conventionally than formerly and they gradually resume contact with the public.

This passage from "The Paint House" explains how the gang became a spent force and why it had been so strong at its peak:

"The gang disappeared as a gang when the members no longer needed it. The friendships and relationships which were developed either continued or faded as interests took people apart. To all of the members the gang itself had obviously been an invaluable experience and it had supplied a security which otherwise was not forthcoming. Our society usually sees gang structures as a threat and reacts against them. They try to break them up and this only alienates the members of the gang still further. The gang is a social structure which is formed by its members because they need it, because it may be their only form of defence or survival, and therefore it is valuable. But the institutions of our society refuse to adapt". 9

However, some youths may remain in the slowly dissolving group into their late teens. These are young people ill-equipped or hesitant to compete in the areas of activity into which their former companions have moved. These disturbed, often aggressive youths feel obliged to engage in more extreme forms of delinquency in order to justify continued membership of the group, and, acts of vandalism by such persons may be very costly to their victims.

In the latter two groups vandalism may be closely associated with damage due to breaking and entering, or to frustration at failure to gain entry or to find valuables. In these cases vandalism is merely a step towards achieving entry to a building or meter and accounts for most damage to property done by adults.



7.

## FRUSTRATION AND AGGRESSION

A prominent sociological theory in the United States put forward by Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin is that youths who are constantly rejected, respond with aggression, which may derive from frustration, and that they try to kick against society through delinquency and violence.<sup>10</sup>

Their argument continues that these youths live in a society which values success, and in which advertising and the media generally are constantly at work to sharpen aspirations. Those who do not succeed, especially at school, are quickly branded as failures and rejected by the system.

The suggestion is that this sense of failure and resulting frustration is the mainspring of unlawful behaviour but interpretations differ. Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin see the lawbreaking as an attempt to get by illegitimate means the material trappings that successful people obtain by legitimate work. Matza argues that the essential motive is status frustration. That is, the youths behave as they do in order to hit back at society which has rejected them and to show their contempt for its values.<sup>11</sup>

However, these studies were carried out in the United States and David Downes in "Delinquent Solution" (1966) refutes this as not relevant to the English scene since many of the youths interviewed in his research expressed neither negativism nor malice. Downes maintains that though many delinquents are found amongst the young male working class urban population,<sup>9</sup> young lawbreakers from this social level should not all be labelled as delinquent as many are purely engaged in a search for excitement and thrills, where organised recreational activities are lacking, and breaking the law is for these youths a deliberate attempt to manufacture excitement. Downes does not describe these youths as delinquents but as 'corner boys'.<sup>12</sup>



It is noted that the number of delinquents and 'corner boys' drops as one rises through the social classes and reasons for this include

- 1) a later school-leaving age
- 2) less recreational spare time due to organised sports etc. and,
- 3) more interesting careers and job prospects

Downes also found that the standard group ranged in numbers from four to five with a few on the periphery. These groups had no stated leadership, role allocation, hierarchal structure, uniform or name, which are features commonly attributed to the group insofar as they are more acquainted with individual members, but rarely took part in any delinquent activity. Many youths complained of police victimisation and held a deep hatred of them. Although this harassment is undoubtedly true Downes maintains Police justification is valid as the groups they break up are often ripe for 'troublemaking': removal of the causes which led the groups to form and hang about together in this way, is not the concern of the police.

Wilmot agrees with Downes in that neither of the American theories is really relevant to Britain and that they will only explain the transgressions of the minority because their investigation of the youths' motives proved it was not a case of rejection or frustration.

He explains the relatively trivial anti-social behaviour of the majority as part of the process of working out adolescent resentments against adults. The process which makes boys withdraw into a group of their own could also be said to be fear of the opposite sex and the influence of social disapproval. They care less than formerly what their parents think but have not yet acquired a girl friend whose opinions may influence them. When they develop more mature attitudes and become interested in getting married, with family commitments, they become once again



subject to the social controls of the local community  
and its expectations.



8.

## CONCLUSION

As stated earlier it is not the intention to supply a solution to the problem of vandalism, rather to find a means of understanding its causes. However, in order to discuss design solutions, it is impossible not to mention that if better educational and recreational facilities were available to the socially-deprived members of the community, along with improved job opportunities, then vandalism might not have become such a problem in our cities. In addition, it is considered imperative for anyone working in this area that they attempt to understand the motivation of the vandal before specifying equipment.

From my research I would conclude that the answer to the Problem may not lie in providing sturdier or heavily-armoured equipment (e.g. wired glass) as this may act as a challenge to disorderly youths. Rather the answer may lie in the subtle selection of a system that would make the prospect of attack upon it seem less challenging, less satisfying and less attractive to the vandal.

In the area of public telephones, light easily-produced, polythene shelters may have a better life expectancy than the present macrylon or wired glass. On the other hand, if these were allowed to deteriorate, these too might serve as a stimulus to vandals.

Some important points worth considering in the design of a vandal resistant system would include having as few moving parts as possible available to the public and these parts sited in such a way as to make them easy for a caller to manipulate but difficult for anyone to exert pressure or leverage upon. For example, if sufficient of the dial were visible to touch with the fingertips but not enough room available to obtain a grip.



Other solutions in this area would include the substitution for cash of a magnetic card which would be rechargeable in the local post office. If cash were absolutely necessary then siting the money compartment in such a way as to make the petty thief at work obvious to the passers-by as well as reducing his ability to survey the surrounding area and contorting his body position to such a degree as to heighten his tension.

The equipment should be brightly lit up 24 hours a day in order to make the occupant visible at all times and sited so as to simplify surveillance by the public and authorities. However, choice of sites for the equipment should avoid those areas which have high leisured youth traffic and very few residents as these are classed as high risk areas. Possibly the installation of public phones in shops would be feasible, since by day they would be under constant surveillance and their use at night would not be required.

However, no matter how successful any particular design may be in lowering the levels of attack by vandals, there would remain the threat of attack from the seriously disturbed individual who would go far out of his way to destroy it.



9.

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