

## Slap On, Scrape Off



### Vandals Use Stickers, Postal Labels as Destructive New Graffiti Devices

By BILL HEARD, Editor

(Feb. 9) Slap tags. Quick and easy to apply, but hard to remove, they're the latest and one of the most destructive devices young vandals are using to deface transit buses in Los Angeles County.

Slap tags, in police parlance, are name badge stickers and self-adhesive postal labels. Vandals pre-mark the labels with their monikers. In seconds, they can slap them on bus windows, walls, seats and even the lenses of bus security cameras.

#### 40 percent use slap tags

Members of the LAPD's undercover GHOST unit, an anti-graffiti team, estimate that 40 percent of vandalism arrests now involve slap tags. The labels have joined the list of vandal tools, including spray paint, indelible markers, scribing tools and scouring pads, that are illegal under California law.

Most popular are U.S. Postal Priority Mail and Express Mail labels, according to Officer Mark Hernandez, a GHOST team member. "They're free and you can get them at any post office. The kids just walk in and grab them."

The GHOST team late last year arrested an 18-year-old with 200 postal labels in his possession – about 20 of which already were prepared as slap tags. Officers also have arrested vandals as young as 10 and as old as 30.

#### Slap tags on 'school trippers'

Slap tags are most prevalent on the MTA's "school tripper" bus routes, such as Lines 68, 204 and 81, serving central Los Angeles, and Lines 76 and 78, serving the San Gabriel Valley. But, slap tag vandals also hit Foothill Transit buses and buses operated by Santa Monica, Montebello, Torrance and Gardena, among others.

Young vandals choose labels, in part, because they can take more time with their "art work," GHOST team members say. They also may

believe that stick-ons don't permanently damage a surface.

Not so, says Tony Chavira, Transit Operations maintenance superintendent. His office is responsible for the MTA's anti-graffiti programs. Over the years, he and his staff also have developed a number of techniques to prevent and remove graffiti. One example: the clear inserts used to protect bus windows from etching.

### **Almost impossible to get off**

"The glue on the labels is so strong that once they hit a window or interior bus panel it's almost impossible to get them off," Chavira says. "Rather than removing them with a rag and chemical solution, our maintenance people have to use razor blades. We take a lot of time and care to deal with those stickers."

Chavira has taken one measure he hopes will slow the use of postal labels as slap tags.

He asked postal officials in downtown LA, in the Crenshaw District, in the City of Alhambra and elsewhere to remove supplies of the labels from lobby tables to prevent their use as vandalism tools. Now, patrons must request the labels at the counter.

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