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Hang Tough, Morgy

Thirty years ago, graffiti in Central Park was as much a New York institution as fires in the South Bronx and muggers in Times Square.

Today, the four hapless vandals who allegedly trashed one of the park's most treasured landmarks are looking at possible jail time, courtesy of Manhattan DA Robert Morgenthau.

It's called progress.

The DA's office is pursuing felony criminal-mischief charges against the teen "artists," who allegedly caused more than \$50,000 in damage to Bethesda Terrace last month.

According to Central Park Conservancy President Doug Blonsky, the sandstone murals at the Terrace — which reopened in 2007 after a \$2-million restoration — will take four to six weeks to repair and may never fully be made right.

Not that that's stopping some equally irresponsible adults from making excuses for the teens' behavior.

"It was just stupid kids doing stupid things," said a lawyer for one of the alleged perps — accusing the DA of try-

ing to "ruin their lives."

Hardly: The *really* stupid thing would be to let them off with just a slap on the wrist.

Indeed, Central Park — now the pride of New York — was once the symbol of its decay.

Years of tolerance for graffiti and other quality-of-life crime had turned it into a barren dustbowl — and a staging ground for more serious criminals.

Spare the rod, spoil the city.

These days, thanks to the efforts of the conservancy and the Giuliani-era policing revolution, it's a major driver of the city's economy: A recent report put its contribution to the city's tax base at more than \$650 million a year.

But that could change all too quickly as city leaders forget the lessons of the past — and budget cuts strip cops from the streets.

And, again: Nuisance crimes like graffiti are always the canary in the coal mine.

Kudos to Morgenthau for making a stand.