



Research in Practice

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Key issues in graffiti

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Graffiti is an issue that generates widespread community concern. It impacts on state and territory governments, local government, police, public transport and utility providers, local communities and young people in a variety of ways. Although an issue of concern, there has been limited criminological research exploring the characteristics of graffiti offences and offenders and the impact that graffiti has on communities. This poses a challenge for policymakers and practitioners.

Although further research is needed, existing research suggests that graffiti can have a negative impact on community perceptions of safety and public amenity. Finding ways to effectively address graffiti is a long-standing issue. This is partly because graffiti is not a simple phenomenon and it continues to maintain its popularity. Further, there is debate over its place in society, with advocates claiming it is a legitimate art form and detractors seeing it as vandalism. This distinction carries through to debate regarding the motivation of graffiti writers and the characteristics of the graffiti they produce. What is clear is that responses should be based on information relating to the precise nature of the problem in the local context. This includes the types of graffiti being produced, the extent or incidence of graffiti, methods of graffiti writing, locations targeted by graffiti writers, when it occurs, who is affected by graffiti and the nature of their objection, who is involved and their motivation for participating in the production of graffiti (Sutton, Cherney & White 2008).

An understanding of these factors will enable more effective graffiti-prevention strategies that focus on reducing those elements that have a negative impact on the community as a whole.

This summary paper provides an overview of findings from research into graffiti, describing the range of different types of graffiti and graffiti-related activity, the impact that graffiti may have on the community, situational risk factors and offender characteristics. Implications for policymakers and practitioners seeking to develop and implement graffiti-prevention strategies are also highlighted.

What is graffiti?

Graffiti refers to the act of marking property with writing, symbols or graphics (Weisel 2002; White 2001). For the purpose of this paper, graffiti is defined as *the marking of other people's property without their consent*. In this context, graffiti is illegal and in Australia it is a persistent problem that attracts a variety of penalties.

Graffiti is not a simple or homogenous phenomenon. There are many different types of graffiti and each type has a different profile. Hip hop graffiti, typically characterised as comprising 'tagging' and mural paintings, originated in the United States. It is identified in the literature as the most common form of graffiti. This is largely because tagging, which involves writing a pseudonym on surfaces such as walls, fences and public transport facilities, is the most visible and prolific form of graffiti and those involved in its production are most frequently targeted by interventions (Halsey & Young 2002b). Conversely, gang-related graffiti is rare in Australia (Halsey & Young 2002b).

In developing crime prevention strategies, it is helpful to distinguish between the different types of graffiti and graffiti-related activity. Table 1 summarises the different

Table 1 Different types of graffiti and graffiti-related activity

| Type | Purpose and profiles | Characteristics |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Tagger graffiti | <p>Notoriety, peer recognition and status</p> <p>Emphasis on being seen in as many places as possible</p> <p>Entry point to graffiti, often done by novices</p> <p>Often involves working in pairs or groups but with individual tags</p> | <p>Quick, usually in spray paint or paint marker pen or simple throw-ups (outlines of bubble letters) and simple motifs</p> <p>Condensed calligraphic lettering, creating a special pseudonym signature (words or numbers)</p> <p>Also includes throw-ups (fat bubble style lettering), pieces (murals) and slogans</p> <p>Highly prolific, high numbers, can escalate rapidly</p> <p>Frequently seen in public places with high visibility</p> <p>Comprises much of the graffiti occurring in interior spaces (buses, train carriages)</p> <p>Includes 'scratchitti' (scratching or etching in to surfaces which is then extremely costly to remove or repair)</p> |
| Toilet/desk graffiti | <p>Provides opportunity for people to participate in a public conversation or debate</p> <p>Done by a wide range of people</p> | <p>Largely involving jokes, public debate, insults and banter between anonymous contributors</p> <p>Content differs according to location (eg school or university desks, public toilets, bus shelters)</p> <p>Typically involves use of pens or scratchitti</p> |
| Gang-related graffiti | <p>Strategic and territorial</p> <p>Strong group activity</p> <p>Not necessarily associated with other criminal gang activity</p> <p>Facilitates strong group identity and bonding</p> <p>Part of larger lifestyle or involvement in a subculture</p> | <p>Multicoloured and complex, usually collaborative 'pieces'</p> <p>Highly stylised letterforms, indecipherable to the public, depicting gang/crew name</p> <p>Use of images and 'characters'</p> <p>Statements of territory; claims that this crew owns a particular neighbourhood (but may be largely symbolic)</p> <p>More prevalent in locations (and countries) with high levels of gang activity</p> |
| Political and protest graffiti | <p>Communicates a dissenting viewpoint, challenging the legitimacy of the current political order</p> <p>Can involve individual or group activity</p> <p>Associated with street art</p> | <p>Political message or comment</p> <p>Expressing a dissident viewpoint</p> <p>Typically uses legible text that is easily read or strong images</p> <p>Becoming commonly characterised by use of stickers</p> <p>Highly emotive content (pictures of tanks, bombs, surveillance cameras, riot police, UN soldiers, refugees etc)</p> |
| Urban art | <p>Older participants with ages ranging from 15–35 years</p> <p>Organised, skilled activity with strong aesthetic dimension</p> <p>Seen as part of an international contemporary art movement</p> <p>The end point of a graffiti subculture 'career'; a mature and more experienced participant in graffiti culture</p> <p>Peer recognition, pride, aesthetic development</p> <p>Individually done pieces but strong social network</p> | <p>Found in some street galleries, fine art books, dedicated websites, magazines, videos (sold in specialist stores and online)</p> <p>Associated with hip hop culture</p> <p>Associated with professional development such as graphic design, screen-printing, web-design magazine illustration, entry into the high art arena in Australia and overseas</p> <p>Accompanied by gallery exhibitions and skate and street wear design shows</p> <p>Characterised by highly stylised drawing, development of signature styles and sets of characters and symbols, highly refined technique and compositions</p> |

Source: Halsey & Young 2002a; Weisel 2002; White 2001

types of graffiti found in Australia. Not all places will experience the same types of graffiti, however there are distinctions which are important to understand in order to develop appropriate responses; primarily distinguishing between graffiti and graffiti art (frequently called urban art). Urban art refers to the legal version of graffiti, insofar as it is done with the consent of the owner of the property. It is an art form which requires skill, involves a strong aesthetic dimension and is a legitimate form of contemporary art (White 2001). To address the problem of distinction between forms, the Western Australian Government has been clear in highlighting the difference between urban art and graffiti vandalism, and to avoid confusion has been reluctant to use the term 'graffiti' on its own.

As suggested by the different types listed in Table 1, graffiti is a complex social issue and there is a wide range of perspectives and conflicting interests between different sections of the community on its value (White 2001). Part of the problem comes from graffiti's status as both an aesthetic practice and criminal activity, with the line between art and vandalism constantly shifting (Halsey & Young 2006). The distinction between graffiti and urban art can also sometimes become blurred. While it may be completed without the property owner's consent, large scale pieces and murals are often creative and, in the view of those responsible (and some observers), enhance public space (White 2001). Other types of graffiti appear to serve little purpose other than

to mark or destroy public property. Some graffiti writers argue that their work has visual merit and cultural value, while opponents and critics advocate its removal from public spaces and punishment of graffiti writers (Halsey & Young 2006; White 2001).

Much of the research into graffiti has originated in the United States. However, while there are certainly clear influences of US hip hop culture in Australia and in graffiti writing, it is important that graffiti is not treated as globally homogenous (Lombard 2007). Global communication and information exchange, particularly through new technologies such as social networking media, mean that imitation and adaptation of global trends will continue to influence graffiti culture in Australia (Lombard 2007).

The impact of graffiti and community safety

Estimating the cost of graffiti is difficult, however the cost to state government, service providers, local government, business and private property owners is considerable. Rollings (2008) estimated the cost of criminal damage across Australia, which includes but is not limited to graffiti, as being over \$1.5b annually. This is likely to be a conservative estimate given that the figure is based upon a figure multiplied from recorded crime data and graffiti and other forms of criminal damage are not always reported to police. It also does not take into consideration the social cost of graffiti; in particular the impact on perceptions of safety and public amenity. The total cost of graffiti is therefore likely to be substantially higher.

There are many reasons why graffiti has become an issue of considerable public concern:

- It is regarded by many sectors of the community to be unsightly and represents a threat to quality of life and community safety.
- Graffiti is one of the most visible forms of crime and disorder that occurs in a community and as such can become a visible sign of unruliness, social decline and antisocial behaviour among young people.
- Graffiti has a significant impact on whole communities, not just on the owner of the property targeted.
- It has a potential impact on the long term viability of businesses and continuing investment of the private sector in heavily affected areas.
- Graffiti is often linked (correctly or incorrectly) to other crime types and escalating levels of criminal behaviour as well as youth gangs.
- The cost associated with cleaning graffiti from property is considerable, be it the direct removal costs or indirect costs from insurance premiums and taxes (Matruglio 2008; Sutton, Cherney & White 2008).

Where prevalent, graffiti can contribute to a sense of fear in communities by undermining a sense of community safety through giving the impression that public spaces and private property are not cared for or respected (Sutton, Cherney & White 2008). Perceptions of graffiti as vandalism and the impact it has on feelings of safety are based on its association with more severe types of offending (Bandaranaike 2001). Anxiety about crime being out of control has been attributed to the existence of graffiti in a community (Bandaranaike 2001). The presence of graffiti is perceived to be indicative of a general decline in the quality of public space which will result in other more serious crimes.

According to the *National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing*, 85 percent of respondents in 2007–08 were of the opinion that graffiti or other vandalism was a 'major' problem or 'somewhat' of a problem (SCRCSP 2009). There are likely to be different perceptions of graffiti in different locations, both within and across metropolitan, regional and remote areas. Bandaranaike (2001) suggests that perceptions of the severity of graffiti are inversely related to the size of a population; communities in smaller regional centres are more likely to experience higher levels of anxiety and concern about the levels of crime in their community.

Graffiti is one of the most visible of all crime and disorder problems that may occur in a community. Other problems that are often associated with graffiti include:

- public disorder, such as antisocial behaviour and loitering
- shoplifting materials used for graffiti, including paint and markers
- gang-related activity
- property destruction, such as broken windows or slashed bus or train seats (Weisel 2002).

The association with other crime problems means that the amount of graffiti in a community can influence adults' opinions of young people and their behaviour, including their involvement in other forms of criminal activity (White 1999).

However, reliable estimates of the prevalence of graffiti are difficult to obtain. Most types of property damage are not routinely reported to the police. Recent research in NSW observed an increase in the number of reported graffiti incidents, but was unable to determine whether this increase represented a real increase in offending or whether it was the result of an increase in the reporting of graffiti incidents (Matruglio 2008). There are many reasons for not reporting crime, but there has been little attempt to understand why people do not report graffiti. Research indicates that this lack of reporting is one of the reasons policing

agencies and other agencies do not have an understanding of the level or nature of graffiti (Weisel 2002). Further complicating this matter is the fact that many graffiti writers are not identified and ever fewer are prosecuted (Matruglio 2008). Prolific offenders often change their methods and choice of location to avoid apprehension (Weisel 2002).

Graffiti targets

Graffiti is usually found in public places and on public property, however it is increasingly being found on private property close to public spaces (Halsey & Young 2002a; Weisel 2002). Prime locations for graffiti include trains, buses, shelters, vehicles, walls facing streets, traffic signs, statues, vending machines, park benches, electricity poles, billboards, parking garages, schools, fences, sheds and business walls.

Some areas may be particularly vulnerable to graffiti, in particular:

- easy to reach targets
- hard to reach locations which offer high visibility and symbolise risk on the part of those placing the graffiti
- highly visible locations
- locations with a wall or fence as the primary security and limited natural surveillance
- locations where surveillance is varied across different times or days
- mobile targets that may generate a high level of exposure for graffiti (Weisel 2002).

The placement of graffiti may therefore be understood as being a function of a number of specific factors or considerations, including:

- the ability of offenders to graffiti property with limited surveillance and risk of detection, as well as the risk associated with the graffiti production in dangerous locations (eg moving trains)
- the likelihood that the target audience, be it peers or the broader community, will be able to see the completed piece
- the extent to which offenders are motivated to express themselves through various forms of graffiti (White 2001).

The placement of graffiti provides useful insights into who is responsible for it, their likely motivation and the dynamics underpinning the graffiti production, and implies different types of audiences and different types of messages (White 2001). For example, attempts to gain notoriety and recognition may result in the increased volume, scale and complexity of graffiti or the targeting of hard to reach places to prolong visibility (Weisel 2002). The incidence of graffiti can vary according to whether or not it is an organised

activity, whether it is tied to a particular graffiti culture and whether it is linked to particular locations which determine whether the number of possible targets is limited (White 2001).

Understanding graffiti writers and their motivations

Understanding why individuals engage in graffiti is useful to developing effective preventive strategies. It is important to recognise that individuals involved in the production of graffiti are not part of a homogenous group as the characteristics of graffiti writers are different and there are a variety of different motivations.

Characteristics of graffiti writers

Victorian longitudinal research found that among a representative sample of adolescents, the proportion of individuals who engaged in graffiti drawing in public places appeared to peak in mid-adolescence (at the ages of 15 to 16 years) before declining (Smart et al 2004). The same research also found that females between the ages of 13 and 16 years engaged in graffiti drawing significantly more often than males in the same age group, despite males engaging more often in almost all other types of antisocial behaviour, including property damage. However, other research has suggested graffiti writers are more commonly male (Halsey & Young 2002a; Weisel 2002). Unlike most other forms of antisocial behaviour investigated, graffiti drawing was more common among adolescents who do not continue to engage in offending behaviour beyond their mid teens than among persistent offenders (Smart et al 2004).

Qualitative research that involved interviewing a number of graffiti writers revealed the following in relation to the characteristics of graffiti writers:

- most were males from a broad range of social backgrounds and aged between 12 and 25 years. However, tagging is more common among teenagers and piecing (ie murals) more common among those 15 years and over
- many have experienced some type of alienation from school
- the vast majority of persons are introduced to graffiti through friends and acquaintances
- once exposed to graffiti production, many make the conscious decision to continue engaging in the activity because they derive pleasure from it
- graffiti is an activity that evokes strong feelings of self esteem, satisfaction and pleasure
- the majority of those involved have strict self-imposed rules regarding where they will graffiti and whether they will engage in other criminal activity

- there are different motivations among taggers and those who piece. Taggers account for around half of all graffiti writers
- graffiti 'crews' or 'gangs' are uncommon
- most who engage in graffiti production will do so for a limited period of time
- those strongly committed to graffiti writing are unlikely to be deterred by zero tolerance and rapid removal approaches to graffiti prevention (Halsey & Young 2002a).

Halsey and Young (2006) found that the majority of graffiti writers had committed, or been involved, in other types of crime. However, they distinguished between offences committed in order to write illegally and other unrelated crimes (Halsey & Young 2006). While some graffiti writers are involved in general criminal activity, a significant proportion only engage in offending in order to write illegally (including stealing graffiti implements and trespassing onto private property). Individuals engaging in graffiti, while it may include damage to private or public property, do not necessarily participate in other non-graffiti related forms of vandalism (Halsey & Young 2002b).

Motivations of graffiti writers

The motivations for graffiti practice are complex. Common assumptions suggest that involvement is related to issues such as boredom, a desire to cause damage and a lack of respect for other people's property (Halsey & Young 2006). These assumptions frequently underpin graffiti-management strategies. A review of media reports, policy documents, academic writing and public opinion suggests there is a widespread view that graffiti is attributable to young male teens, the result of unemployment and boredom, is inherently antisocial, associated with low socioeconomic areas and associated with other criminal activity (Halsey & Young 2002a). Given the lack of a body of research on which to base these assumptions, the persistence of graffiti as a crime problem is in part a reflection of limited attempts to understand the various thoughts, motivations and feelings experienced by graffiti writers (Halsey & Young 2006).

Graffiti may be part of a collective creative endeavour, or it may be less artistic and instead reflect a desire to mark territory or communicate specific messages (White 2001). Suggested motivations for graffiti writing include:

- the need for risk and excitement and the adrenalin rush and pleasure associated with this risk-taking
- a sense of engaging in the free and democratic expression of ideas, ability and creativity
- expression or assertion of an alternative identity and membership to a subculture

- place making, specifically inscribing local spaces to make a statement of presence, reflecting a desire to reclaim public space
- disengagement and exclusion from conventional pathways and participation, including school and other pro-social activities
- rebellion and dissent as an expression of disobedience and defiance of social norms
- boredom and frustration associated with limited prospects and few legitimate recreational possibilities
- desire to participate in an art form, especially with street art and more developed forms of hip hop piece art (Bandaranaike 2001; Frost 2003; Halsey & Young 2002a; White 2001).

Interviews with graffiti writers to determine their motivations for engaging in graffiti and involvement in graffiti culture suggest that their initial involvement comes from a combination of aesthetic appeal and an expressive activity through which they could establish new friendships (Halsey & Young 2006). Once engaged in graffiti culture, continued involvement in graffiti writing was characterised by several positive feelings such as pride, pleasure and enjoyment from sharing the experience with friends and gaining recognition from the writing community (Halsey & Young 2006). Motivations such as boredom and rebelliousness, while present, were less common.

Implications for policy and practice

The lack of criminological research exploring the characteristics of graffiti offences and offenders and their motivations poses certain challenges to those attempting to develop effective crime prevention strategies. A range of different strategies have been developed and implemented to address graffiti problems including rapid removal, target hardening (eg graffiti-proof paint), the use of security cameras, education campaigns, increasing penalties for offenders and urban art projects. However, graffiti remains a significant problem. Despite the popularity of many of the approaches listed, there has been limited research and evaluation to examine the effectiveness of these strategies in reducing graffiti. Further research into both the nature and prevention of graffiti is therefore required.

Nevertheless, it is possible to identify several useful ideas for policymakers and practitioners attempting to develop and implement graffiti prevention initiatives from the research findings outlined in this summary paper. Strategies to reduce graffiti should:

- recognise that there are different types of graffiti and graffiti writers, and be based upon an understanding of the nature of graffiti and who is involved, including the range of complex motivations for participating in the production of graffiti

- be based upon information relating to the precise nature of the problem in the local context, including the types of graffiti being produced in the local area, the extent or incidence of graffiti, methods of graffiti writing, locations targeted by graffiti writers and when it occurs
- target those locations that have been identified using local intelligence as at risk of being targeted by graffiti writers and implement strategies that reduce opportunities for graffiti to occur
- be developed through meaningful consultation with young people and graffiti writers as well as the broader community to ensure that the range of diverse interests and values are reflected in the approaches taken
- establish mechanisms to identify and work with graffiti writers (before and after they come into contact with the criminal justice system) to address their reasons for engaging in graffiti production to prevent future reoffending
- incorporate multiple interventions that draw upon both social and environmental approaches to crime prevention
- aim to find an appropriate balance between prevention and more punitive responses
- establish mechanisms to encourage and facilitate better reporting of graffiti when it occurs and to increase the amount and quality of information provided to authorities in order to:
 - assist in the detection and apprehension of graffiti writers
 - ensure that information on the nature and extent of the problem, and reliable data to measure the impact of graffiti prevention strategies, is available (Halsey & Young 2006; Sutton, Cherney & White 2008).

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