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'Is Your City Pretty Anyway?' Perspectives on Graffiti and the Urban Landscape

Dominant criminal justice approaches to graffiti have understood it as a pre-eminent signal crime, carrying a disproportionate negative impact on blighted communities. However, an emerging body of research has emphasised that graffiti is a culturally meaningful activity that can be understood as a distinct reading of urban landscapes (Halsey and Young, 2006). Surfaces are marked by weather and rust, and damaged by atmospheric conditions such that no area is pristine or unchanging and vulnerable to damage by graffiti. Halsey and Young (2006) found that 'negative urban spaces'[1] are identified as sites for writing in ways that form an alternative visual reading of the city. Graffiti writers often want to express resistance to corporate ownership of city spaces (Docuyanan, 2000). The UK graffiti artist Banksy noted that:

> ' …twisted little people ... go out everyday and deface this great city. Leaving their idiotic little scribblings, invading communities and making people feel dirty and used. They just take, take, take and they don't put anything back. They're mean and selfish and they make the world an ugly place to be. We call them advertising agencies and town planners' (cited in Silwa and Cairns, 2007: 78).

The thrill of graffiti writing is much noted. Ex-graffiti writers in Ferrell's (1993) research stated that they missed the excitement of writing and that the associated adrenalin rush was enhanced by efforts of the authorities to 'get tough' through stronger penalties and powers. Lindsey and Kearns (1994: 11) found that participants were often motivated by the 'thrill of seeing their name displayed', even if their tag was a pseudonym. Schacter (2008: 41) conceived of graffiti as performance involving production, through the physical challenge of pieces 'without authorisation, without permission in such prominent urban locations'. Ferrell (1995) emphasised status and identity among graffiti writers and Lindsey and Kearns (1994) noted that graffiti writers can form a community developed through co-production, and mutual reliance in insecure night-time spaces (Halsey and Young, 2006). Links are often drawn between graffiti and other anti-social activities. The 'broken windows' approach to crime and disorder has often transferred to policy initiatives and this has been continued into reassurance policing focused on quality of life issues beyond straightforward law enforcement (Wilson and Kelling, 1982; Innes, 2004). Public anxieties surrounding incivilities and disorder

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[1] Halsey and Young (2005) found that writers identify negative urban spaces as sites for their writing in ways that drawn upon an alternative reading of the city. Negative places were identified as blank walls, unused and boring that could be improved by graffiti that would brighten them up.

are argued to contribute to fear of crime, a phenomenon that appears to be increasing even while crime rates appear to be in decline (Lee, 2007; Zimring, 2007). Graffiti and tagging epitomise the concept of 'signal crimes' (Innes, 2004): communicative of risk, disorder and the erosion of social capital in ways that are unrelated to their apparent minor status in terms of financial damage or legal consequences. This communicative capacity has underpinned the situational crime prevention frameworks that have characterised the response to graffiti and tagging in countries such as the UK and New Zealand in recent years. The study discussed in this paper considered the perceptions of young people and suggests that some forms of graffiti, in some contexts, might not be communicative of a decline in community cohesion in the ways that crime prevention policy appears to take for granted. The findings presented below provide further evidence that graffiti is a culturally meaningful activity for many young participants. These findings reinforce Millie's (2008) argument that antisocial behaviour more generally is a highly contested category shaped by, among other things, aesthetic interpretations.

Graffiti and Tagging in New Zealand

The purpose of this study was to investigate young peoples' attitudes towards graffiti and tagging in New Zealand. Lindsey and Kearns (1994) noted that studies tend to focus on tags not on taggers: this study sought to fill that gap by focussing on the attitudes of young people, some of whom are taggers or graffiti writers, towards graffiti and the policy responses to it. There is relatively little New Zealand research into graffiti and tagging; the available material also shows a focus on crime prevention rather than the graffiti writer's viewpoint (Halsey and Young, 2002: 166). Graffiti is an issue of significant cost to governments in New Zealand and internationally (Ferrell 1995; Halsey and Young 2002; Ministry of Justice 2006). Local government in New Zealand spends considerable sums on removal: in 2006 Auckland City Council spent approximately $5 million on graffiti eradication. It was estimated that in 2007 Manukau City Council spent $1 million on its Graffiti Management Strategies (Police News, 2008). Despite these efforts, as sites are cleaned up by councils, they are often quickly re-targeted (Craw, Leland et al. 2006). Such rapid removal of graffiti can lead to the illusion that the problem has abated, as the general public do not see evidence of offensive tags or graffiti (Craw, Leland et al. 2006)

Problems relating to graffiti and tagging in New Zealand have had a high profile in recent years. Attention has been focused on cases[3] where property owners have used disproportionate force against taggers leading to debates about the extent to which private citizens are entitled to directly intervene to protect their premises. Steps taken by courts,

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[3] For example, in 2008 Bruce Emery was sentenced to four years for the manslaughter of Pihema Cameron, who had been stabbed to death after being caught by Emery tagging his garage.

police, local government and parliament to introduce more effective intervention strategies reinforce perceptions that graffiti and tagging are growing problems.[4] In 2008 the Napier court sentenced several teenage taggers to jail, partly, according to press reports, to deter others from contributing to a growing problem in the region (Dominion Post, 2008). In the same period, Wellington police adopted a high visibility response that required offenders to wear fluorescent pink vests while cleaning up graffiti (Dominion Post, 2008). Legal controls on the sale of spray paint were tightened by the Summary Offences (Tagging and Graffiti Vandalism) Amendment Act 2008 and changes to the 1961 Crimes Act established a maximum tariff of seven years imprisonment for intentional property damage (New Zealand Government, 1961). A range of other responses is included in the STOP (Stop Tagging Our Place) strategy that was introduced by the Ministry of Justice in 2008 (Ministry of Justice, 2008b).

While a broadly-based agenda has been developed to respond to graffiti and tagging, it continues to be the case that little is known about the perspectives of young people in general, and participants in particular. This article is based upon a study conducted in 2009 that explored perspectives on graffiti in the urban environment in terms of the processes and dynamics of writing, and attitudes toward desistance and crime prevention interventions. It is shown that graffiti and tagging are culturally meaningful activities valued partly in terms of their liminality but also aesthetically and in relation to technical sophistication and style. Following an overview of the methodology used in the study the article explores young peoples' perspectives on the nature of graffiti and tagging in general terms, and attitudes towards participation, the selection of venues for writing and the importance of the transgressive nature of graffiti. Three key themes emerge: that graffiti writers do not form a group wholly distinct from non-writers in terms of their attitudes towards graffiti; that graffiti is culturally and socially meaningful to participants; and, third, that graffiti writing is associated with a desire for reputation and local celebrity.

Methodology

The research adopted a mixed methods approach to understand offender motivation and general attitudes of young people toward tagging and graffiti. The study was funded by the Ministry of Justice and conducted by the authors in conjunction with the Ministry of Youth Development (MYD). Although social scientists disagree about what counts as mixing methods (Bryman, 2004; Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2007; Gilbert, 2008), this study combined qualitative and quantitative methods: an online survey and focus groups. The survey was designed to get a 'broad brush' view of graffiti and to elicit perspectives on

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[4] There is no reliable data on the incidence of graffiti in New Zealand. Recent initiatives against graffiti have included introduction of a specific offence code to record such incidents that would previously have been aggregated into more general categories. Reporting of crime trends then presents a highly misleading sense of a growing problem.

deterrence-based strategies to stop graffiti in public places. The focus groups examined issues related to graffiti such as its diversity and complexity in more detail, with several different groups of respondents making up the focus group discussions.

The results presented in this article offer an opportunity to examine the contexts in which graffiti and tagging take place, as well as the meanings attached to these behaviours by graffiti writers. This follows in a tradition of 'appreciative studies' (Matza, 1969) of deviant subcultures that seek 'to understand and appreciate the social world from the point of view of the individual or category of individual, with particular reference to crime and deviance' (Jupp, 2001: 12). Developing an appreciation of the meanings and motivations of graffiti writers is important in generating effective strategies to prevent graffiti vandalism and also provides a critical rejoinder to dominant discourses focused upon criminal damage and links with harmful drug and gang subcultures.

The online survey was established on the MYD website, using the Survey Monkey web-tool. The survey comprised 23 questions relating to general perceptions of tagging and graffiti, the deviant and criminal status of tagging and graffiti, factors that might influence desistance, and any relation between this and other forms of problematic behaviour. Respondents had various opportunities to add 'free text' comments and some of these are presented in the discussion below. The survey was hosted on the MYD website in May and June 2009, during which period 773 people completed it. Participants in the survey were self-selected. Although a relatively large number participated it is not clear that the sample is representative of the broader population. There are a number of reasons for this, including that those disinterested might be less likely to participate in the survey than those actively engaged in graffiti. As graffiti is an under researched topic in New Zealand there was insufficient information about graffiti writers as a population to develop representative sampling techniques. Researching those involved in criminal or deviant activities has many challenges not least the recruiting of respondents. The sample was 'open' as its purpose was not to represent a particular population but to keep the collection of data as unconstrained as possible given the specific challenges associated with accessing offenders and young people.

Twenty one focus groups were conducted in locations around New Zealand in April and May 2009. Fourteen of these were facilitated with the help of MYD staff. Another series of seven groups were conducted with young people engaged to various degrees in tagging and graffiti behaviour. Focus group participants were recruited via MYD networks. Some groups incorporated youths engaged in alternative education and mentoring programmes. Further participants were recruited through graffiti clean-up and community groups; others were

members of youth panels that inform policy development across a range of government sectors.[5] Participants were aged between fourteen and twenty four years of age; no demographic data was recorded for these participants.[6]

The extent to which respondents were or had been engaged in writing graffiti was not always clear. Ethical and logistical considerations prohibited access via the criminal justice system to those who had been arrested and convicted.[7] In discussing illegal behaviour with young people a direct approach focussing on personal behaviour is not appropriate as this may cause respondents to 'shut down' such that little data is forthcoming. Therefore the approach taken was to ask for the opinions of focus group respondents around a series of issues relating to graffiti and tagging. Seven of the focus groups contained respondents thought to be directly involved in graffiti and tagging. The other fourteen groups contained respondents who may have been involved in graffiti and tagging (some respondents from these groups referred to their own illegal activities), and those who were not directly involved in graffiti and tagging. Researching this issue was problematic because it is embedded in youth culture, so many respondents had detailed knowledge about graffiti and tagging and used slang terms such as 'bomb' and 'wackie'.[9] They also often referred to peer group, as well as their own, behaviour and attitudes.

Findings

General attitudes toward graffiti

Respondents responded in complex ways that often celebrated graffiti and tagging but retained a normative moral framework that valued, among other things, a sense of 'respect' towards artistic creativity and property that is not considered a legitimate site for writing. A review of the literature reveals that it is important to clarify the terms 'graffiti' and 'tagging', which are not synonyms (Halsey and Young 2002). A tag is usually considered as a 'simple, stylised self-elected name or signature written in public' while graffiti is referred to as 'markings on a surface', definitions which are not mutually distinctive (Tearaway, 2009). Recent debates have focused on the extent to which 'graffiti' extends to other forms of non-

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[5] The help of Jo Cox, Sen Thong and Lorraine Gittings in organising and facilitating the focus groups is gratefully acknowledged.

[6] This was to ensure respondents remained anonymous and to encourage honest responses to the questions posed.

[7] Due to budgetary contraints the project had 6 months to collect and analyse the data.

[9] To bomb or hit is to paint many surfaces in an area. Bombers often choose throw–ups or tags over complex pieces, as they can be executed more quickly (Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graffiti_terminology). Wackie (or Wacky) refers to joint letter tags that are joined up, 'all wackied out' (Manurewa Focus group participant explanation, May 8, 2009, Auckland, New Zealand).

figurative street art (Dickens, 2008b). For the purpose of this discussion 'tagging' and 'graffiti' are used synonymously but it is recognised that writers themselves often attach considerable significance to specific terminology.

The survey asked some introductory questions about graffiti. Table 1 indicates a broad distribution of views in relation to the status of graffiti as 'vandalism that should not be tolerated', with almost equal proportions of respondents selecting each category. A significant minority of respondents (39.0 per cent) strongly agreed or agreed that graffiti is vandalism that should not be tolerated. Conversely, the survey also showed a high-level of agreement (81.9 per cent agreed or strongly agreed) that graffiti is an urban art form that should be valued in some circumstances. Both responses suggest that no distinct perspective was articulated about the nature of graffiti in general terms.

Table 1: Attitudes toward graffiti and tagging (per cent)											
	Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		Total	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Graffiti is vandalism and should never be tolerated	17.3	124	21.7	155	21.8	156	21.7	155	17.5	125	100	715
Graffiti is an urban art-form that should be valued in some circumstances	41.8	312	40.1	299	9.4	70	5.2	39	3.5	26	100	746

The diverse nature of graffiti writing was highlighted in additional comments made by survey participants:

> 'There is a line that defines graffiti and tagging. Graffiti art is different to tagging. That needs to be established'

> 'There are two types of graffiti. One, vandalism and two, the creative artistic side. Understand this'

> 'I strongly disagree with tagging, I'm sure you understand this but taggers are also a problem for graffiti artists. They tag our artistic work also making it go from respectable art to a hideous mess.'

Such distinctions and definitions reflect findings from other researchers such as Ferrell (1993) and Halsey and Young (2002) who noted that defining 'graffiti' can be problematic, and that there is tension between 'graffiti' and 'tagging'. Docuyanan's (2000) respondents noted that tagging over a finished piece is considered disrespectful. Usually graffiti writing that had been marred in this way was quickly painted over by other writers due to competing demands for space in certain areas. As described in Docuyanan (2000: 112)

> 'Some basic graffiti yard etiquette. Go over a piece with a better piece. Go over messed up pieces before those that haven't been damaged.'

Respondents to the current study similarly referred to informal rules surrounding the location of graffiti writing and noted that some venues were deemed inappropriate for 'genuine' graffiti writers. Those who broke these informal rules were seen as engaging in vandalism and highly disapproved of in ways that suggest that graffiti and tagging is not simply nihilistic. One focus group participant summarised the informal criteria surrounding the location of graffiti thus:

> 'There are rules, you know, even the graffiti guys have rules – so when someone breaks them it's the pits. You know, the OG[10] writers don't tag churches or private property, schools. But people break those rules, most of the time it's just hooligans'.

Focus group participants established a binary hierarchy between graffiti as art and tagging as vandalism. The distinction was often cast in terms of an artistic judgment, as the focus group excerpts below indicate:

> 'Art. It is just expressing yourself'

> 'If you are professional, it is art'

> 'To other people it is vandalism, but to us it is art'

> 'Vandalism is when it is on someone's property'

> 'If it is graffiti then it is art, if it is tagging then it is vandalism.

Additionally Dickens (2008a) described the emergence of 'post graffiti', a style that entails 'breaking the unwritten graffiti rules to create new graphic forms and images outside 3-D and wildstyle lettering' (Dickens, 2008a: 473-4). This diversity can be problematic when trying to examine attitudes towards graffiti. As Halsey and Young (2006: 283) found graffiti writers used 'an extensive vocabulary to describe their activities'. Their respondents justified graffiti writing along three dimensions; skill, intent, and aesthetics. Time spent developing the skill to do large pieces warranted a label of 'art'. Tagging, on the other hand, was seen as unskilful

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[10] It is presumed that 'OG' refers to 'Original Gangsters', i.e. first generation/older generation writers.

and so regarded as vandalism – or less than art – by graffiti writers. Art in graffiti writing was associated with intent; using time in a productive way to express a particular viewpoint was seen as 'art' while marking surfaces in a meaningless way was seen as vandalism. In terms of aesthetics graffiti writing that was pleasing to the eye was seen as 'art', although graffiti writers acknowledged that this was a subjective judgement (Halsey and Young, 2006).

To explore this diversity, participants in this study were asked to respond to various positive and negative statements attributed to graffiti. Table 2 ranks these items according to the percentage of respondents who 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with the list of problems and benefits. These results reinforce the complex perceptions of graffiti and its impact. While a clear majority agreed to some extent that 'graffiti is an art form' there was also a strong agreement that 'graffiti damages property' and some agreement that it impacts on perceptions of neighbourhoods.

Table 2: Positive and negative attributes of graffiti

Positive attributes	Strongly agree/ Agree		*Negative attributes*	Strongly agree/ Agree	
	%	n		%	n
Graffiti is a form of art	84.7	648	Graffiti damages people's property	80.9	621
Graffiti is a way for people to express themselves	84.0	639	Graffiti affects how people feel about the area they live	62.1	465
Graffiti requires creative skills	75.2	569	Graffiti is illegal	51.5	378
Graffiti is a way for people to gain status and respect	52.0	390	Graffiti looks messy	45.5	345
			Graffiti is associated with other dangerous activities	40.3	303
			Graffiti makes places feel unsafe	38.3	289

Focus group discussions often reinforced these quantitative findings. In particular, distinctions were drawn between legitimate graffiti and vandalism. One focus group participant reflected the ambiguity of distinguishing graffiti art from vandalism, noting that graffiti is 'vandalism. Well, I reckon it's art, but in the law it is vandalism'. The distinction between art and vandalism was sometimes couched in narrow legal terms ('if you are allowed to do it [it is art]') but the difference between the two was articulated in terms of the content and style of

what was written. Some reflected on the impact that graffiti has on audiences, and suggested that this influenced whether it should be considered as art or vandalism. Participants were asked what elevates some forms of graffiti into art, common reflections included:

> 'when it looks good' (Focus group participant)
>
> 'if it is an expression of who you are – that is art. But if it is a message, something written on a wall just to say "I wrote something on a wall", that is vandalism' (Focus group participant)
>
> 'some people have a real passion for it, to express their feelings and also for the story' (Focus group participant)
>
> 'it is an outlet of your emotions so depending on how you feel at the time' (Focus group participant)
>
> 'I reckon it is just mindless: "there's a good spot so let's just hit it"' (Focus group participant)
>
> 'graffiti is an element of hip hop so it is not anything negative' (Focus group participant).

Much media and political comment regards graffiti and tagging as gateway offending that becomes associated with other illegal and problematic behaviour. Focus group participants reflected this complexity by providing mixed perspectives on the extent to which tagging and graffiti are linked to deviant behaviour. While some respondents noted an association with other illicit youth activity, others suggested that more dedicated writers avoided alcohol and drugs in order to focus on graffiti, or even that writing is an alternative to these activities:

> 'Alcohol and drugs sort of put you in that … mood' (Focus group participant)
> 'No, I know heaps of people who do it just for fun' (Focus group participant)
> 'Instead of taking drugs or getting drunk they tag' (Focus group participant).

Some survey respondents also highlighted that 'to damage something' or 'to destroy something' was an unpopular reason for doing graffiti and were highly critical of the researchers for including it as a category. More on the relation between illegality and graffiti follows later in this article.

Writing graffiti and tagging

Respondents were asked about their (non)participation in general terms, and also about the type of writing they had done: the survey found participation in graffiti varied by gender, age and ethnicity, and also that different forms of graffiti were pursued to different degrees. For example, 55.4 per cent of male respondents agreed that they had written graffiti, at least occasionally. In contrast, 75.5 per cent of females reported that they had not written graffiti.

Although there was variation in the extent of participation, respondents who engaged in some form of graffiti were most likely to identify their activity as 'graffiti art'. Males reported that they engaged in different types of graffiti at a greater rate than females, although graffiti art was the biggest category selected by those who participated of both genders. Of those who have written graffiti 24.9 per cent (n=192) reported that they had done 'graffiti art'; those who 'sometimes' participated also selected this category above the others, although only 19.4 per cent (n=150) chose it. Exceptions to this trend were the youngest age cohort (under 14s) who were more likely to have tagged (18.2 per cent, n=141) or done stylised writing (9.1 per cent, n=70), Māori (who were more likely to have tagged, at 23.3 per cent, n=180, than to have done graffiti art) and Pacific Islanders (who were more likely to have done stylised writing).

Focus groups elaborated types and styles of writing and that consideration in these terms informed perceptions of legitimacy. Fine gradations existed between, for example, 'scribbles', 'tags' and 'bombs', which were forms of relatively unsophisticated writing that require no particular skill and were often associated in group discussions with vandalism. More complex pieces, valued by young people, could, they noted, be subject to degradation by being tagged: such that graffiti itself was sometimes vandalised. One focus group participant expressed the distinctions between different forms in the following terms:

> 'There is a difference between tagging and bombing. We have that in south Taranaki. A lot of areas where the community youth get together and done a cool bomb on the wall. And yet when it is done like that and the youth are proud of something they have done, they don't tag it, like we don't see tagging as much. We get the youth involved in making bombing. It is still a problem but it is not as bad as it used to be.' (Focus group participant)

The survey found that 'creative expression' was the most significant reason why respondents wrote graffiti, with 47.2% (n= 146) reporting this as the reason they engaged in graffiti. Only small proportions reported that they were motivated by a 'sense of danger' (1.6%, n=5) or the desire to 'damage something' (1.9%, n=6). The youngest cohort, those under 14, was most likely to report that they were motivated by group culture and a desire to damage something. Older cohorts, who answered in small numbers, were more likely than others to suggest that their participation was related to protest of some kind. Few survey respondents, reported that they were attracted by a sense of danger, excitement, or by a desire for celebrity ('to get my name up'), although these themes did emerge from focus group discussion with graffiti writers. Similarly, qualitative comments included in survey responses sometimes reflected the range of motivations for writing graffiti. The comment below illustrates something of this, as well as the distinctions drawn between different types of writing:

'There are two types of graffiti artist, the bad type and the good type. The good type just want to express there [sic] art, the thrill of getting ur [sic] piece up for a couple of people to admire before it is removed, it's addictive. But there are the bad ones that ruin it for the good ones. They tag because of the group of people the hang out with and the competition they have with each other. The art they do doesn't express any meaning.' (Online Survey respondent)

It was clear that many respondents had complex reasons for engaging in graffiti which has implications for deterrence based strategies. Online survey respondents felt that graffiti was a central part of their lifestyle and an important form of expression.

'I do it because I like it, why I like it is complicated but mostly has to do with being able to take control of my environment' (Online Survey respondent)

'Stopping me from doing it? That would be impossible. Graffiti is already part of my lifestyle and doing it is like therapy for me' (Online survey respondent)

An older respondent who no longer wrote stated that:

'Young people will stop tagging when they feel they matter and have purpose and hope. Tagging is not the issue, the society and families that they come from are' (Online survey respondent)

Other studies have suggested graffiti writers see their activity as bringing colour and life to drab urban environments (Ferrell, 1995; Docuyanan, 2000; White, 2001; Schacter, 2008) a view endorsed by some respondents:

'I don't like tagging but love murals and big pieces of aerosol art in public spaces, legal or not! It certainly brightens the dull and lifeless cement and is more stimulating to look at than advertisements as big as 10 storey buildings! ….And is your city pretty anyway?' (Online survey respondent)

'Without graffiti there would be no glittering bright spots in our decaying trash riddin [sic] inner cities. The colours can inspire a little happiness to the darkest of places' (Online survey respondent)

'Cos they think the city is ugly. They want to make it beautiful by writing their name all over it. Colourful' (Focus group participant)

Creative expression, expressing sentiments, and sharing opinions were reasons for doing graffiti writing that were highlighted by the online survey respondents.

'I find it an easy way to express how I am feeling about current economic time and the current government' (Online survey respondent)

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'Why stop expressing myself? I do it to share an opinion or art, not to destroy' (Online survey respondent)

The idea that graffiti writers (re)appropriate public space emerged from Schacter's (2008) finding that graffiti writers considered that corporate businesses had 'taken over' urban spaces. Graffiti writing was a protest at this 'corporatisation' and an attempt to engage with with urban landscape in a way that represents more than private commercialism. Young (2005) noted that even authorized visual imagery and signage present in the urban landscape is contested in terms of planning regulations and civic by-laws. Unlike graffiti though, such challenges do not tend to lead to calls for the 'eradication' of all 'legitimate' signage.

In addition to reporting on their own participation, respondents were asked to rank reasons why people write graffiti in general terms. Survey respondents who stated that they wrote graffiti were asked to rank a series of possible causal factors for their own writing (between 1,'most important reason', and 6, 'least important reason'). Similarly those who did not write were asked to rank causal reasons for graffiti in general terms, using the same scale. The table below combines these findings. On that basis, the creativity of graffiti again emerges as an important causal factor and the desire to cause damage as the least significant factor. This is also supported by the online survey respondents who stated that expressing themselves creatively was an important reason for graffiti writing.

Table 5: Ranking of Reasons for Graffiti	Score	
Because it is a form of being creative	2.53	*most significant*
Because it is fun	2.90	
Because I enjoy it	3.15	
Because it is exciting	3.18	
Because it is part of a group that I hang out with	3.91	
Because I want to damage things	5.08	*least significant*

Focus group participants noted that graffiti writers in general often participated for pleasure, enjoyment and to achieve a measure of local celebrity:

'They wanna get famous' (Focus group participant)

'No, they do it cos it's a fact that you get noticed by other people' (Focus group participant)

'For some people it is the only thing they are good at' (Focus group participant)

All survey respondents, whether they reported that they wrote graffiti or not, were asked whether they felt the illegal nature of writing made it more attractive. A majority of respondents, whether they wrote or not, tended to agree that the illicit nature of graffiti made it more exciting. Analysis of the survey results showed no differences in terms of age, gender or ethnicity. Agreement was strongest among those relatively involved in graffiti activity: with 22.9 per cent of those that said they wrote 'strongly agreeing' that illegality made it more attractive. However, all groups (writers, 'occasional writers' and non-writers) broadly agreed that the transgressive nature of graffiti added to the excitement. A majority of writers (61.0 per cent), 'occasional writers' (55.7 per cent) and non-writers (60.8 per cent) strongly agreed or agreed that illegality made writing graffiti more attractive. Online survey and focus group respondents cited the 'thrill' of illicit activity by stating that they stopped because of:

> 'Not feeling the buzz to hit up anymore' (Online survey respondent)

> 'Yeah, you get a buzz but not because it is exciting' (Focus group participant)
> 'It's exciting. If you see a cop and you haven't finished your piece you got to get away' (Focus group participant)
> 'Just do it because we do it. Nothing else to do in the 'hood" (Focus group participant).

The attraction of the illicit nature of graffiti was apparent in focus groups discussion. Many respondents spoke about the adrenalin rush associated with graffiti and tagging activity and that this would be muted in legitimate sites. Others reported that being caught would change attitudes toward potential future offending. The following excerpts reflect these views:

> 'I reckon it would be just the same [if graffiti were legalised] … you would see much more than what there is today' (Focus group participant)

> 'Depends on whether you've been caught or not. Before you get caught it is exciting but after you have been caught then you just don't wanna get caught' (Focus group participant)
> 'You don't get a rush from something you are allowed to do' (Focus group participant)
> 'It would still be exciting if it was legal but it would be way reduced' (Focus group participant).

It has often been found that graffiti writers are motivated, in part, by the thrill of engaging in illicit activity in a climate of increasingly severe penalties (Ferrell, 1995). However, Halsey and Young (2006: 292) argue that 'only very rarely do writers mention the thrill accompanying *the breaking of the law* as their *primary* motivation' (emphasis in original). Our findings would

appear to demonstrate that the illegality of graffiti is a strong motivating factor, although in common with Ferrell (1995) and Halsey and Young (2006) it is not the *only* factor associated with graffiti writing.

Discussion and conclusion

The results presented above have myriad implications but three themes of general significance emerge: first, it is clear that graffiti writers do not form a group wholly distinct from non-graffiti writers in terms of their attitudes towards graffiti; second, graffiti is a meaningful cultural and social practice made more attractive by its illegality; and third, for some, graffiti writing is associated with a desire for local celebrity. Each of these is discussed in turn, and policy implications are highlighted.

The findings provide little evidence to suggest that graffiti writers are a distinct sub-group with perceptions of graffiti different from the wider population. Although graffiti writers were less likely to report that graffiti was 'always a bad thing', both participants and non-participants shared a contextual view that recognised negative consequences of graffiti in some circumstances. Similarly respondents to the survey tended to 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that graffiti is a creative art form. They also tended to agree that it had negative attributes in terms of property damage and affect on residents' perceptions of their neighbourhood. Attitudes toward graffiti were shaped by nuanced judgements relating to the perceived legitimacy of the venue, the physical challenges overcome to write on that location, and the aesthetic value of the graffiti itself. Even those who engaged in graffiti writing and appreciated it as an artistically worthwhile activity tended to report that some venues, such as schools or maraes, were not legitimate sites for graffiti. Responses to graffiti writing that cast participants as antisocial criminals are unlikely to coincide with young people's perceptions and attitudes toward graffiti and tagging, which seem to conceptualise property in terms of use rather than ownership.

A second key finding from the study is that participants understand graffiti writing as an activity that is meaningful in cultural and aesthetic terms. Young people invest intensely in activities such as graffiti that have myriad meanings to them. Those involved in graffiti writing see it as meaningful and intend to continue writing. The informal codes that deem some sites as valid for graffiti while defining others as unacceptable are themselves mediated by aesthetic judgements about the content of graffiti and tagging. More than 80 per cent of respondents (strongly) agreed that graffiti is an art form and it was apparent from focus groups that it is an activity imbued with cultural meaning greatly valued by participants. Artistic meaning is evident in the careful distinctions made about different forms of writing and the relative merit of highly crafted conceptualised '[master]pieces', which are ranked as more significant than 'bombs' (stylised writing), which themselves compare favourably to

'tags'. Focus group discussion showed that graffiti is understood by writers as an engaging physical event, something that happens and is corporeal: it connects the writer to the urban landscape. For non-writers – willing or unwilling consumers, viewers or spectators – it is a product: a material outcome that signifies criminal damage or trespass of some kind that may not be judged in aesthetic terms. Writers have very different relations with graffiti and value the skill, imagination and audacity – and perhaps the collaboration – that has been invested in the production of a piece. This contrasts vividly with the relationship of the passive viewer to the finished product. The pleasure and enjoyment that participants derive from writing graffiti is associated not with the damage to property that preoccupies owners – which graffiti writers recognise as they report that they would be unhappy were their own property targeted – but with the physical challenge of producing complex artistic forms in difficult circumstances. The illegality of graffiti is an important dimension of the excitement (often described in focus groups and online surveys as the 'adrenalin rush') associated with writing, and many respondents spoke of the fun associated with evading authority. The importance of illegality in understanding graffiti is further complicated since it is also apparent that graffiti is not always easily equated with criminal damage or vandalism although it often incorporates damage to property (Craw, Leland et al. 2006). Graffiti artists do not necessarily engage in other forms of vandalism, or in crime related to gang-activity or drug and alcohol use (Halsey and Young 2006). While graffiti writers' defence of their activities in aesthetic terms might seem a disingenuous response to concerns about crime and damage to property it is not without parallel and similar subjective judgements have been made in other contexts about the artistic merit of work that might otherwise be charged as obscene (Young, 2005). Presdee (2000) noted that 'artistic merits' have influenced debates about work that might otherwise be considered as paedophilic and Kidd (2003) explored similar debates relating to the 'cultural wars' over the work of artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe. That graffiti contests established notions of what messages and forms of art can be legitimately conveyed in public is also apparent in claims that graffiti is an authentic challenge to the commercialisation of public property. Ferrell (1995) noted that young people and urban spaces are increasingly regulated and controlled and so graffiti writers refer to their activities as a 'war of the walls'.

The findings show that graffiti writing is imbued with meaning derived from an appreciation of aesthetic merits combined with evaluation of the effort and risk involved in its production. Focus group respondents spoke about graffiti as a craft that requires dedication and learning as practitioners develop from informal scribbles and tagging to pieces that required greater technical skill and an appreciation of artistic and cultural reference points associated with the art-form. Some of these techniques and conventions were learnt and developed through association with more established practitioners in ways similar to conventional apprenticeships. Not all those who do 'throw ups', 'bombs' or 'stompies' will develop the necessary talent and application to progress to more aesthetic pieces worthy of greater

respect. In these terms young people discussed different styles and levels of graffiti in ways that might often be associated with the practice of legitimate art forms and skills.

Policy makers need to understand the cultural meaning and value attached to many forms of graffiti and to move beyond simplistic dichotomies between art and criminal damage. One of the key findings of this research is that young people recognised harm caused by graffiti writing but that the artistic merit associated with complex sophisticated pieces was held to outweigh problems of crime and property damage. This perspective also raises questions about programmes based on the prompt eradication of graffiti. Largely based on an epidemiological approach that assumes the presence of graffiti encourages imitative behaviour, removal programmes effectively contest territory in ways that exacerbate the risks and challenges that attract writers in the first place (Ferrell, 1995).

A third key feature of the findings is the importance of celebrity and local fame associated with graffiti writing. The gaining and sustaining of respect through graffiti was clearly an important motivator for young people, and even those who did not participate in writing spoke about reading local tags and graffiti in these terms. Pursuing peer group credibility might take other forms among other sections of society but it is not an activity pursued only by youth subcultures (Halsey and Young 2006: 281). Indeed graffiti and tagging might be considered a form of micro-celebrity not wholly divorced from other forms of media in contemporary society. The proliferation of websites and social media that celebrate graffiti tend to reinforce the idea that this form of recognition be considered on a spectrum with other more apparently legitimate avenues to secure respect through recognition. The increasing salience of hip hop culture, from which much graffiti culture emerged in the United States in the late 1970s and 1980s, within mainstream TV, music, film, internet and gaming media underpins the blurred boundaries between celebrity status that can be gained from illegal graffiti and legitimate cultural forms (Ferrell, 1993; Halsey and Young, 2006). The work of artists such as Banksy, and before that Jean-Michel Basquiat, and the staging of exhibitions such as 'Born in the Streets' by the Cartier Foundation in Paris in 2009 indicate that graffiti is liminal in terms of artistic as well as legal boundaries. The extent to which street art has been appropriated by dominant cultural authorities has led some to proclaim the 'death of graffiti' as anarchic counter-cultural phenomena (Dickens, 2008b). While gaining respect was an important facet of writing for many respondents to this study this was sometimes tempered by the need to protect identity in order to avoid detection. An attractive part of the subterfuge associated with writing is the distinction between securing recognition for tags or particular graffiti style and the maintenance of individual anonymity. This might have consequences in terms of crime prevention and detection since efforts to collate databases of prolific local taggers serve to reinforce recognition and cement writers' reputations for renowned high-profile work.

The implications of this study for policy responses to graffiti and tagging are many and various. Key among these is that young people expressed a wide-range of perspectives on graffiti and tagging, and that those who admitted some degree of participation did not always differ greatly from those who do not participate. Young people had nuanced views such that some forms of writing are valued for their artistic content and the risks overcome and skill required in producing pieces. Only a small minority of young people suggested that vandalism and criminal damage were primary motivations. Even those who admitted participating in graffiti and vandalism maintained that there were areas and types of property that were not acceptable sites for writing and that these should not be subject to the damage and 'disrespect' sometimes associated with such activity. The cultural and artistic merit associated with some forms of graffiti suggests that its status as a signal crime communicative of antisocial behaviour needs to be rethought.

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