

# Graffiti: Art or eyesore?

January 12 2015

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"People are starting to recognize that graffiti is not just something done by kids to break the law, even though that's the way the media continues to frame it," said Toby Ten Eyck, associate professor of sociology at Michigan State University. Credit: G.L. Kohuth

Graffiti is slowly starting to be seen as an art form for the disenfranchised, yet you'd never know it by reading the news, a Michigan State University sociologist argues in a new study.

Toby Ten Eyck analyzed a year's worth of [news coverage](#) in U.S. local

and national publications and found the majority of articles tied the presence of graffiti to crime and blight.

Yet in some stories, graffiti was used to describe something else—such as an expression of solidarity among alienated youth, a public platform for social commentary or even a community builder.

That fits with Ten Eyck's larger body of research indicating graffiti is becoming more accepted around the country. In New Orleans, he noted, city officials looked the other way when a clear plastic pane was put up to protect a Hurricane Katrina-related stenciling on a vacant building. The stencil, by renowned graffiti artist Banksy, portrays a girl holding an umbrella, yet rain is coming from within the umbrella (signifying that things meant to protect people can also harm them).

"People are starting to recognize that graffiti is not just something done by kids to break the law, even though that's the way the media continues to frame it," said Ten Eyck, associate professor of sociology.

According to Ten Eyck's analysis of news coverage in 2012, graffiti was tied to "negative civic justification"—i.e., community problems such as blight and crime—50 percent of the time. Graffiti was framed in a positive light only 11 percent of the time and in a neutral manner 39 percent of the time.

In a typical quote about graffiti, a police officer told the *San Jose Mercury News*: "Prostitution, graffiti—if you let it go, it can sprawl, and the city will be full of urban blight."

However, a few articles focused on graffiti as a potential way to build community. A story in Crain's Detroit Business, for example, explored the pros and cons of a controversial project to place murals by well-known street artists at a busy Detroit street corner.

"These efforts, which are referred to as both street art and graffiti in the article, offer another angle on whether these activities are about civic order or disorder," Ten Eyck writes. "Some argue they bring people together, and others that they destroy the community."

Ten Eyck said it's not his intention to come out for or against graffiti, but instead to investigate the motivations behind it.

"When you look at [graffiti](#) and say it's a crime, period, you're missing the factors that play into why people do it," he said. "And that's what we need to have a conversation about."

The study appears online in the *Social Science Journal*.

Provided by Michigan State University

Citation: Graffiti: Art or eyesore? (2015, January 12) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-01-graffiti-art-eyesore.html>

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