

Criminologists explore motivations behind graffiti

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Taggers interviewed for the UT Dallas study said they paint graffiti on buildings like these in North Texas to relieve boredom and stress, and gain recognition for their artistic talent. Credit: University of Texas at Dallas

Youths who paint graffiti on businesses and public property, also called street taggers, say they don't view their actions as criminal because they are not injuring anyone and the graffiti can be easily erased, according to a new UT Dallas study.

Two criminologists from the School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences interviewed 25 Dallas taggers to explore why they paint [graffiti](#) and how they rationalize the crime. The researchers' goal is to help policymakers design better solutions to address tagging.

The study, published in the academic journal *Deviant Behavior*, found that the taggers paint graffiti to relieve boredom and stress, and gain recognition for their artistic talents.

Dr. Lynne Vieraitis, associate professor and program head of criminology, conducted the research with Arthur Vasquez, a criminology doctoral student at UT Dallas and senior lecturer in criminology and criminal justice at The University of Texas at Arlington. Vasquez, who has experience working with at-risk youths, made contacts in the tagging community to arrange the interviews.

"By going out and talking with active taggers, we were able to gain better insight into why they do it. From a policy point of view, it is important to understand the taggers' motivations," Vasquez said. "If cities try to reduce graffiti by increasing the punishments, then they are not actually addressing the underlying motivations of why they do it in the first place."

The study defined tagging as a type of graffiti not associated with gang activity. The tag is the offender's personal alias, acronym or marking.

"We all want to be heard or be recognized for something we did, and taggers are no different," Vasquez said. "Although many people use social media to tell others that they had a good or bad day, taggers use walls."

The youths interviewed for the study mostly lived in low-income neighborhoods where they said they did not have access to many recreational activities. Taggers said they got a rush from "getting up," or putting their moniker on public spaces, Vieraitis said.

"They're teenagers, and they get bored," she said. "They find a lot of satisfaction in tagging. It's exciting, it's status-enhancing and it becomes addicting."

The researchers explored a theory in criminology that offenders use justifications to minimize or avoid guilt over their crimes. In addition to claiming that nobody got hurt, taggers said that instead of tagging, they could have been involved in gang activity or other crime. Some said that by defacing property they were providing work for cleanup crews.

Learning offenders' thought processes can help officials address crime, Vieraitis said.

"A lot of them say no one got hurt. Well, but we had to clean it up, and it was costly. Maybe that business owner didn't have a lot of money," Vieraitis said. "By identifying those rationalizations, you can start to challenge them on their excuses."

More information: Arthur Vasquez et al. "It's Just Paint": Street Taggers' Use of Neutralization Techniques, *Deviant Behavior* (2016).

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