Graffiti Formats: Are they gangs or graffiti crews?

by
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Since early America gangs' presence, researchers have identified various types of subgroups; in which only a small percentage of them were known to generate graffiti. Whether it is legal or illegal, only a few municipalities are fully aware of which subgroups actually do generate graffiti, and most of all, how to identify them. For example, the city of Aiken- SC reported that the street gangs were responsible for approximately 90% of their graffiti vandalism crisis. Mid-City – San Diego, CA reported that the street gangs and graffiti crews were cooperatively responsible for approximately 90% of their graffiti vandalism crisis, while the remaining 10% were generated by solo taggers (individual graffiti writers). Within the city of Yonkers, NY, it was estimated that individual graffiti writers (IGW) and graffiti crews (GC) collectively generated 80% of the city's graffiti vandalism package. While gangs (GNG) generated 10%, and street teams (STM) and graffiti artists (GRA) each generated 5% (see chart A). In summary to subgroups' participation, the National Council to Prevent Delinquency (NCPD) believe that hip-hop taggers and their crews are responsible for approximately 90% of graffiti vandalism; in which 5% of this 90% consist of elaborate pieces and gangs make up the remaining 10% (Graffiti Hurts, 2003).

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To further illustrate the concept of individual and collective participation, we need to examine a police department's Graffiti/Street Gang Unit's apprehension campaign over a four-year period. Beginning in 1996, 100 graffiti offenders were arrested. In which 23% of them belonged to a subgroup (M) and the remaining 77% showed no subgroup membership (NM). In 1997, 93 graffiti offenders were arrested; 49% of them belonged to a subgroup (M) and the remaining 51% showed no membership to a subgroup (NM). In 1998, 37 graffiti offenders were arrested; 38% of them belonged to a subgroup (M) and the remaining 62% showed no membership affiliation (NM). In 1999, 15 graffiti offenders were arrested; 20% of them belonged to a subgroup and the remaining 80% showed no membership affiliation. Both categories of membership affiliation and non-membership affiliation were based on the graffiti format generated by the offender during their arrest (see Chart B). The majority of graffiti and gang specialists refer to such membership-related graffiti formats as "placas." These types of graffiti formats will display the individual's slang name, along with their group's name (see photo #1 and #2). One graffiti specialist believes that placas originated in New York City, sometime in 1967 (Austin, 2001). However during that era, the groups' names were substituted by the individual's residence (street number or avenue). Besides placas being utilized by gang members and graffiti writers belonging to graffiti crews, they are sometimes mistaken for gang roll calls. Remember, placas generally display the group's name supported by 1-3 slang names; whereas roll calls display the group's name supported by 4 or more slang names.

Another graffiti specialist suggest that true gang members and graffiti writers utilize sub-cultural names, and it is uncommon for their true identities to show up within such graffiti (Rae, 2003).

Is Graffiti the First Indicator of Gangs?

In examining the past apprehension campaign efforts, three fundamentals surfaced. As the number of graffiti offender arrests decreased, so did graffiti formats that were directly associated with graffiti vandalism. There are definitely distinct graffiti formats that represent subgroups, as well as the membership within such groups. Finally, gang-related graffiti formats can easily be mistaken for graffiti crew-related formats, especially placas or territorial acronyms. A great part of the time, this misinterpretation leads to the assumption that graffiti is the first indicator of street gangs. When in reality it could be the first indicator of graffiti crews. However, one gang spokesman believes that graffiti is actually the "first sign" that a problem exist in your neighborhood (Lieberman, 2003). Since the nineties, approximately 120 territorial acronyms from various surfaces have been identified (see Chart C). In brief, approximately 25% of these territorial acronyms symbolized various types of gangs; 64% of them implied the presence of writer-based graffiti crews; while the remaining 11% were unfounded. I believe that this category describes subgroups either existing outside this city, old-school subgroup (pre-1983), or just territorial acronyms, derived from lyrics, waiting for ownership.

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Be that as it may, it is important that front-like operatives in the fields of anti-graffiti and gang apprehension, prosecution, prevention, intervention, restoration, restorative justice and information manage-ment be able to detect the various types of graffiti and the subgroups that commonly generate them. One graffiti specialist believes that most media coverage lump graffiti crews and urban gangs together as if they were as one. When only gang-related graffiti consist of only about 20% of US Graffiti (Walsh, 1996). The scope of this article will introduce some basic graffiti identification/analysis skills, and some general group characteristics that can assist in distinguishing gangs from graffiti crews. Both frame of reference will be presented in the categories of basic definition, central controlled and multi-coordination, primary and secondary concerns, and finally both subgroups' distinct graffiti formats.

The Basic Definition of a Gang and Graffiti Crew

In order to develop a solid frame of reference, I will offer you a few interpretations of the term "gang". The Godfather of gang study relates, a gang cannot be simply defined by a dictionary or by scanty literature on gangs. This definition must come from a careful examination of actual cases and a comparison of them with related social groups…No two gangs are just alike – a mechanism of collective behavior (Thrasher, 1927). A second gang specialist renders a four-part interpretation of a gang. It's an organized group with a recognized leader and associated with less powerful lieutenants. Second its an unified group

which remains together during peaceful conflicts, in contrast to a mob. Third it shows unity in obvious ways, such as wearing the same jackets or speaking a special language. Finally its activities are either criminal or somehow threatening to the larger, dominant part of society (Haskins, 1974). A third gang specialist, Executive Director of the National Gang Crime Research Center, interprets a gang as informal or formal in nature, whose members recurrently commit crimes and where these crimes are known openly to the members, often conferring statues or profit upon those members who commit the crime (Knox, 2000). Two other gang specialists went on to distinguish between a "youth" and "street" gang. They both described a "youth gang" as maintaining only a membership of adolescents; whereas a "street gang" maintaining much older adolescents and adult membership. At times a street gang may include adolescents, whereas as youth gang will never include adults (Howell and Decker, 1999). As for the overall definition, another gang specialist believes that this term can rest on one's perspective or the social climate during such times. For example, various perspectives will include law enforcement, youth intervention group, educational environment, political agenda, community residents, news and documentary segments, as well as the entertainment industry (Spergel, 1995). To piggyback on these various perspective concepts, some affluent communities substitute the term gangs for problem youth groups (Brenner, 1993). In addition to the basic terms of a youth gang and street gang, gang researchers will utilize other common terms such as a super gang, gang nation, locality-based group, hybrid group or modern gangs. In brief, super gangs maintain larger membership, along with subset structures; their criminal and social activities will encumber regional or national territories (Spergel, 1993). Gang nations only describe group alliances, not the actually gang itself. The most common gang nations are called People Nation and Folk Nation; two separate alliances that originated in Chicago, IL (STIU, 2004). Locality-based groups will maintain smaller membership; their group's name is generally acquired from their claimed turf (Miller, 2001). Hybrid groups, or modern gangs, describe those groups with integrated race, ethnicity or gender. In addition to these characteristics, they generally function with unclear roles, disregard traditional roles or codes of conduct (Starbuck, Howell and Lindquist, 2001).

Graffiti crews, a.k.a. tagging crews, are examined more extensively in graffiti research, more so than gang research. However, this article will utilize both graffiuti and gang references in an attempt to define a graffiti crew. Two graffiti specialists define this term as a loosely

organized group of writers (Chalfant and Cooper, 1984). One gang specialist defined this term as a crew; where each crew has a name and each member within this crew has a nickname or tag name. They tag for fame and recognition, and members are most likely to become addicted to tagging (Sakamoto, 1995). One pro-graffiti website defined this term as a group of people who like to go writing together… Benefits of a crew are clear: protection, the pooling of ideas, supplies and an identity (Farrell and Art Crimes, 1994). Another graffiti website, anti-graffiti, describes this term as having 3-5 graffiti writers and each member has a unique graffiti moniker; their groups' names generally consists of 3 words (As They Sleep) represented by 3 letters (A.T.S.). They ban together for the purpose of achieving what the subculture call "frame" (NoGraffiti, 1993-2001). Another graffiti specialist described this term as an informal group that often results from friendship groups, shared neighborhoods and school connections (Wilson-Merritt, 2003). Finally, another graffiti website, pro-graffiti, mentioned that a [graffiti] crew can have up to 50 members. The average size consists of 3-10 members; they are frequently co-ed with males and females tagging side by side. In which females will often carry the spray paint because they are considered to be less likely to be searched by law enforcement (Rae, 2003). In addition to its definition, graffiti crews can be classified into two categories: writers-based or artist-based. A writer-based graffiti crew tends to maintain an atmosphere of destruction; whereas an artist-based graffiti crew tends to cultivate an imaginative atmosphere, a need to break or expand traditional barriers surrounding composition, design and color. However, some police departments believed that artist-based crews still secretly indulge in the illegal acts of bombing or tagging. In Chicago, investigators suspect a [crew] of graffiti artist may be responsible for vandalizing museum exhibits and downtown business… The Made You Look crew, composed of artist and painters has vandalized trains, buildings and road underpasses in cities throughout the nation… Organizers make no secret of their activities… They have a website that features pictures of members at work (Kelly, 2003).

Central Controlled or Multi-Coordination Structures among Gangs and Graffiti Crews

The presence of gangs, and their criminal activities, will generally induce controversy pertaining to their abilities to maintain central controlled or multi-gang coordination. Some gang investigators and researchers will accept this idea; against a backdrop of escalating

violence, declining drug prices, and intensified law enforcement. Los Angles area gang-related drug dealers are seeking new venues to sell…crack cocaine… Respondents claim to have participated in or have knowledge of Blood or Crip crack operations in 22 states and at least 27 cities (Skolnick, 1990:8). On the other side, some gang investigators and researchers believe this concept, of central controlled or multi-coordination, is an attempt by gang members to create an impression of fear, and the existence of larger and powerful organizations (Miller, 2001). In reference to the latter belief, one gang researcher stresses that most gangs do not have the skills or knowledge to move to other communities…it is true they can and do function on their own turf… [But] they are often like fish out of water when they go elsewhere…They are not like organized crime figures…who have capital, knowledge and power (Waldorf, D., 1993:8).

        Graffiti crews do promote multi-membership involvement. However, in the areas of central controlled or multi-coordination, this concept seems to be puzzling. In order to address central controlled or multi-coordination among graffiti crews, the author recruited e-mail responses from three popular online-resources (GANGINFO, MIGA and NoGraf Network). Their replies, strings, consisted of a member of the Sanford Maine Police Department replied "I know of some local vandals here in Sanford (Maine) that had tagged their tags and their crew tags, and tagged the crew tags of another crew. I believed that these vandals were members of the other crew as well" (Champlin, 2003). A member of the Riverside Community College Police Department replied, "Yes in California we have graffiti and party crews that are connected in the same fashion" (Goldstein, 2003). A citizen from Sweden replied, "About 5-6 years ago, he observed a graffiti crew called VIM (Vandal in Motion) from Stockholm, Sweden and another graffiti artist called MOA (Monster of Art) from Copenhagen, Demark attempting to become Scandinavia's largest graffiti crew" (Giles, 2003). A member of the Federal Heights Police Department replied that he personal knew several graffiti crews that have ties to other graffiti crews, with the same crew name in other cities and states. One of his examples included a graffiti crew called SK (Stolen Kings, Steady Krushing, Spray Klan, Spray Kids, Serrated Knives, or Serious Kontamination). Members of this graffiti crew regularly travel to California, Washington, and Oregon to tag with members of SK in these States (Cirbo, 2003). A member of the Calgary Police Service replied, "In Western Canada graffiti crews set up alliances with other graffiti crews like street gangs." She further related that the

norm in Western Canada is for graffiti writers to remain part of their graffiti crew until they can establish a new crew in a new locally or they become eligible or invite to join another graffiti crew (Dubois, 2003). A director of a downtown business association replied, she has come across several graffiti crews with affiliates in multiple cities. She included that HOD (Hand of Doom) runs between Portland and Atlanta and TITS (The Infamous Triple Six) and KTY (Killing Your Town) runs up and down the entire West Coast (Thaler, 2003). A Sergeant, with the San Antonio Police, replied that a group of older writers generally put on an annual event called "Clogged Caps." They frequently pool their resources and travel all over the country to other graffiti events. He also mentioned how another event called "Tagfest" encourages graffiti writers to go out and bomb the city, usually held in conjunction with Halloween. However, this event started to frizzle when law enforcement started making numerous arrests after gaining intelligence on this event (Slate, 2003). Another source mentioned how graffiti gangs (crews), in southern suburbs, are beginning to communicate on the Internet websites that urges graffiti participates to work together and to resist police interventions. This source further quoted how graffiti crews are also displaying photographs, of graffiti ridden locations, on the Internet (Hockley, 2003). Then another graffiti researcher mentioned how some graffiti crews, with 14 and 15 year-olds membership, are associated with a motorcycle group called Hell's Angels. These graffiti crews' activities include traveling to national and international Hip-Hop Jams disturbing or selling illegal narcotics (Giles, 2003). Finally, this same graffiti crew specialist expressed that as the [graffiti] crew develops…formalized leadership structure changes only slightly. Power and authority are usually held evenly between various [graffiti crew] members; with the most respected writers often being allowed to select first space on a wall, sought advice, and given supplies. As a recognized King explains, in a graffiti crew, everyone is their own leader (Wilson-Merritt, 2003). Based on the above e-mail responses, strings, it appears that some graffiti crews are more interested in strategic alliances, and participating in annual events, more so than strategic control.

Primary and Secondary Concerns among Gangs and Graffiti Crews

Even though gangs and graffiti crews produce similar graffiti formats, but their inner group dynamics are quite different. Under the category of gangs, their primary concerns are centered on developing leadership/ management styles in order to enhance their street-level

survival. In which graffiti making becomes a secondary concern; just to help broadcast their group name, territorial claims, core membership and criminal intentions. In contrast to gangs, graffiti crews' primary concerns are focused on boosting their group's reputation as masters in styles. Their masterships will either represent excellence in creativity, as seen in graffiti artist-based crews; or proficiency in vandalism, as seen among graffiti writer-writer-based crews. Promoting leadership/management mechanisms among graffiti crews are viewed as secondary concern. The majority of gang or graffiti-related publications will view their leadership/management mechanism as being lax. However, two gang researchers give these advices about graffiti crews. Whenever a graffiti crew's membership increases, they will have the tendency to look and act like a street gang (Nugent, 1998). While another gang researcher believes that when confronted with violence, graffiti is no longer their primary concern. In which graffiti crews will evolve into gangs (Christensen, 1999).

Distinct Graffiti Formats Among Gangs and Graffiti Crews
    Across the board gang and graffiti specialists generally utilize 2-5 categories to identify various types of graffiti. For example, one assistant professor utilized four categories such as gang, tagger, conventional and ideological graffiti. Gang graffiti mark gang turfs or convey threats of violence; tagger graffiti will include isolated or spontaneous acts of youthful exuberance, which can be malicious or vindictive; and ideological graffiti include political, hate, religious or ethnic slurs messages (Weisel, 2003). One criminal investigator utilized five categories such as popular, community-based, gang, political and hip-hop. In his interpretation, popular graffiti has no true meaning to the person who is writing and community-based graffiti were messages that have meaning in only certain geographic locations. Gang graffiti is evidence that a particular gang control an area or is trying to move into an area; in which it shows membership, or affiliation with other gangs, or expansion of the gang's reputation. Political graffiti is used to make a political statement, in which this type of graffiti is used when people want to talk about something that is usually not a mainstream topic and Hip-hop graffiti …is used by youngsters to claim their place as the best artist or tagger (Grascia, 2002).
    For the purpose of this publication, three major categories were identified, extreme, common and hip-hop graffiti. Extreme graffiti expresses hate, bias, culture supremacy ideology, as well as far left or far

right beliefs. Common graffiti expresses heterosexual, homosexual, and non-sexual comments. Whereas as hip-hop graffiti express signatures or artistic pieces associated with a new trend of fashion, music, dance and slang. It is evident that gangs and graffiti crews exist well within the paradigms of hip-hop graffiti. Inside the categories of gangs, their graffiti can be divided into three sub-categories such as territorial markers, simple message and roll calls. In brief, territorial markers display the gang's name, initials or common totems; they indicate the group's existence, as well as their physical boundaries. Simple message provide several functions for the gang such as naming their allies or enemies, promoting criminal intent, informing members, rivals or the community of timely events and deaths. Rest-In Peace (RIP) memorializes deceased gang members and Rest-In-Hell (RIH) is generally used to mock deceased rival members.

At times, gangs will utilize Rest-In Peace (RIP) to disrespect rival gang members in the re-mix of Rest-In-Piss. Roll calls tend to list the gang's core membership ether in a list or cluster format; each gang member's true identities are encoded in slang names. Generally a basic gang roll call consists of a territorial indicator(s), along with 3 or more gang names; in which mini-roll calls or placas will consist of 3 or less gang names. In some incidents gang roll calls will include the names of their allies rather than nicknames. Placas, are also utilized by gang members, similar to individual graffiti writers belonging to graffiti crews; gang members display them outside of their claimed turf.

At times, a writer-based graffiti crews' placas will sometimes be mistaken for a gang's placas (see photo #1 and #2). You should know that gang-related territorial acronyms, totems or symbols within graffiti are good indicators that the group is a gang, rather than a graffiti crew. Some examples of well-known gang indicators are five-pointed crowns for the Almighty Latin Kings; the Puerto Rican flag for Neta; Crossed out C's and Upright B's for Bloods; 031 for Bloods; 13 for Southern Mexican gangs; 14 for Northern Mexican gangs; or 88 for White supremacy street gangs. Other good indicators of gang graffiti is the multi-use of simple messages and traditional roll calls.

In the category of graffiti crews, there are basically two types: writer-based crews and artist-based crews. Writer-based graffiti crews are known for displaying wild writing styles depicting personalized tags, personalized tags proceeded by territorial markers (palacas), cluster of tags and throw-ups (see photo #3). Some of their throw-ups can range from simple to complex throw-ups (see photo #3).

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Writer-based graffiti crews will reflect multi-membership privileges within their graffiti formats (see photo # 5); such membership privileges are restricted among gangs. In which gangs graffiti will reflect this strict membership (see photo # 6). Artist-based graffiti crews will display huge complex throw-ups, elaborate pieces or murals (see photo # 4). They are more likely to generate canvases, more so than writer-based graffiti crews. As one graffiti researcher related, "innovation pushed hip-hop graffiti towards the creation of larger, more complex masterpieces; often incorporated cartoon figures and other embellishments such as these increasingly organizing themselves into [artist-based] crews. Groups of [artists] who collaboratively designed and painted elaborate [formats] for which hip-hop graffiti was now known (Ferrell, 1993).

Conclusion

Today the inner dynamics of gangs and graffiti crews are changing. Attempting to distinguish gang graffiti from graffiti crews' graffiti can be difficult. Thus as graffiti and gang specialists, it is important that you update your graffiti identification and analysis skills through various online and off-line publications. Most of all, known what subgroups, gangs and graffiti crews (writer-based and artists-based) inhabit your jurisdiction.

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