

## Views from the Field:

### ARE WE COLOR BLIND TO THE VIOLENCE BEHIND GRAFFITI?

By

Kenneth A. Davis  
Yonkers, New York

#### *Abstract*

*In the early 1990s, I was assigned to the Community Affairs Division. This is the decade that gave birth to Community-Policing, well as the rise of street gangs and graffiti vandalism throughout America suburban cities. Looking back on this decade, I can say that our city's street gangs and prolific graffiti vandals were home grown. However, they were definitely influenced by major cities' trends. Throughout America, street gangs became the major concern due to its criminal and violent nature imposed by its members. Graffiti vandalism, even costly, developed into a quality-of-life issue. Even though gang graffiti accounted for approximately 10 percent of graffiti vandalism, it was still viewed as more deadly than tagging graffiti. The majority of criminal researchers and investigators will conclude that prolific taggers are responsible for the remaining 85 - 90 percent. However, what you don't hear about is the occasionally serious injuries or deaths due to retaliation of crossing-out or going other another tag. This study explores the reasons for verbal and physical confrontations occurring behind the colorful world of graffiti, and why some find these deadly practices far-fetched.*

#### I. INTRODUCTION

In January of 2013, I had the opportunity to testify as a graffiti expert pertaining to deadly retaliation within the tagging world. It was just another homicide linked to disgruntled graffiti writers over a tagging situation. In brief, two rival graffiti crews recognized each other at a graffiti gathering. An argument ensued and suddenly shots fired. One graffiti writer lay on the ground and was later pronounced dead. My expert testimony centered on clarifying to the court and jury about the intense, revengeful

motives of crossing-out another graffiti writer's tag.

Since the early 1990s, I have assisted in operating a community-based graffiti art program, and have worked with a police agency's graffiti and gang unit. I also attended and presented at numerous, graffiti-related and gang conferences on local, regional, national, and international levels. In order to enhance my proficiency in the realm of graffiti and its vandalism characteristics, I am constantly scanning the Web for the latest developments. These developments are constantly occurring within the various services under the categories of apprehension, prosecution, prevention, intervention, restoration, restorative justice, and information management. More importantly, I am part of two online-groups. One of the e-group is comprised of graffiti specialists, while the other mainly consists of gang specialists. Inside both groups, specialists are those professionals that take into account both investigators and researchers' credence into their confidence.

While examining these online articles, I noticed the usual reoccurring trends and two new developments among prolific graffiti writers. For instance, reoccurring trends are that graffiti writers are still being apprehended and prosecuted for graffiti vandalism. Their punishment is still centered on numerous hours of community-services, huge financial fines, or brief-incarceration periods. A small percentage of prolific graffiti vandals continue to suffer from accidental deaths due to hazardous tagging conditions. One new development is that some police agencies are realizing that graffiti writers are involved in other crimes besides larceny and trespassing. Some of these illegal activities consist of possessing illegal firearms or drugs, identity-theft, or manufacturing marijuana.

Another new development addressing the slow and silent rise of deadly retaliations among graffiti writers is linked to disrespect. This type of disrespect is generally associated with crossing out or going over graffiti writer's tags. Surprisingly, victims may include concerned civilians interrupting the graffiti writer's tagging process. This new development seems to be unbelievable to the general public. The large population tends to believe that such deadly practices are more common among notorious gang members rather than prolific graffiti writers. In order to shed some light on these slow and upcoming deadly episodes, we need to identify and discuss several essentials occurring within the Hip-Hop Graffiti Culture.

As a graffiti and gang specialist, I acknowledge these essentials as (1) various graffiti cultures; (2) individual graffiti writers and graffiti crews; (3) comparing graffiti crews to street gangs; and (4) factors blinding us to the violence within the Hip-Hop Graffiti Culture. My primary and secondary sources will be derived from a few graffiti investigators and researchers, as well as other gang investigators and researchers. Most of all, I will reflect back on my past experiences as a cofounder and field-coordinator for a community-based graffiti art program, as well as one of the graffiti/gang officer for a local police department.

## II. VARIOUS GRAFFITI CULTURES

Every municipality possesses some sort of graffiti culture within their boundaries. Some of the most familiar graffiti cultures are generally classified as (a) Communicative, (b) Hate, (c) Gang, (d) Tagging (Hip-Hop), (e) Street Art, (f) Stencil, (g) Poster, (h) Reverse-Graffiti, (i) Ad-Busting, (j) Cultural Jamming, (k) Guerrilla, (l) Conflux, (m) Grafedia, (n) Go-Go, and (o) Latrine. Bear in mind that each graffiti culture maintains its own set of sub-cultural protocols. For the purpose of this deadly reprisal, we will direct our attention towards the Hip-Hop Graffiti Culture.

The traditional tagging culture was reinvented by the Hip-Hop Movement sometime in the mid-to-late 1960s (Neer, 2007). This cultural movement, similar to the British Invasion during the mid-1960s, introduced the lure of utilizing additional elements. Such fundamentals enhanced the graffiti writers' names utilizing specific graffiti formats and various styles. Their new graffiti identities were dominated by elaborated colors, along with intricate designs. It was the Hip-Hop Movement that caused our society to question, is graffiti art or vandalism?

The sub-cultural protocols within the Hip-Hop Graffiti Culture govern how writers should create, construct, and circulate their personalized graffiti identities for notoriety. Two popular graffiti researchers described this type of fame and its motives as the repeatedly stated goals of graffiti writers. The competition is intense as the graffiti writer is rewarded by prestige and admiration – satisfactions he finds hard to part with (Cooper & Chalfant, 1984). Mainstream society deems that any graffiti displayed on a surface without the owner's *permission* as vandalism. With such permission, graffiti is regard as art among the general public. However, within the graffiti culture, the *selection* factor determined if graffiti was vandalism or art. In other words, when the graffiti writer selected specific graffiti formats designated for expressing vandalism, he/she was considered a graffiti vandal. When the graffiti writer selected those graffiti formats preferred for expressing art, he/she was considered a graffiti artist. The confusion occurs when graffiti formats designated for the arts are displayed on surfaces without the owner's permission.

## III. INDIVIDUAL GRAFFITI WRITERS AND GRAFFITI CREWS

Individual graffiti writers create, construct, and circulate, their graffiti identity for notoriety. Graffiti crews follow the same sub-cultural protocols, but on a collective level. Graffiti investigators and researchers define the individual graffiti writer or solo tagger, as one who goes around tagging up their graffiti identity for fame. These same professionals will define the basic graffiti crew as two or more graffiti writers. Each graffiti writer within his or her specific graffiti crew can simultaneously belong to two or more crews. Graffiti crews provide two functional needs: protection and information exchange. As a protection mechanism, they provide lookout systems against law enforcement and concerned citizens. As an

informative platform, they assist the group in exchanging graffiti-making techniques and reinforcing sub-cultural protocols. During my endeavors, I have noticed two types of graffiti crews: writer-based and artist-based. Writer-based crews tend to generate graffiti identities, specific graffiti formats centered on vandalism. Artist-based crews tend to produce graffiti identities, specific graffiti formats associated with art.

#### **IV. COMPARING GRAFFITI CREWS TO STREET GANGS**

Gang researchers have symbolized the 3R's as a means to define the gang's inner dynamics (Pacheco, 2010). The 3Rs stands for: respect, reputation, and retaliation. In which any disrespect or challenge towards the gang or its individual members require a reply, retaliation. Generally, this response is violent and criminal. Retaliation, sometimes referred to as escalated retaliation serves as a mechanism to enhancement status for the gang, as well as that disrespected individual members. However, through my experiences, I recognized that two additional Rs: race and resource, should be added to this toxic mix, in which the 5R's truly defines the inner dynamics of a gang operating in various environments. The 5R's governs how the gang conducts its recruitment, leadership/management, criminal activities, external or internal violence, and the exiting practices. These various environments may include but not limited to the street, school, prison, workplace, group-home, and armed services.

As a graffiti and gang specialist, I believe individual graffiti writers and those belonging to graffiti crews share the same zealous needs for psychological and sociological acceptance similar to those operating in street gangs. The graffiti writer's fixation on gaining and retaining their prestige and admiration is no different than the gang member's obsession to gain respect. Both shared addictions are capable of promoting deadly retaliations. For example, gang expert Loren W. Christensen, says that gang officers know -- when there is a drive-by or a street brawl, there will be retaliation. It's rarely an issue of will it happen, rather, when it will happen (Christensen, 1999). Gerard Alarcon, a Denver Police expert, says a war between Denver graffiti tagging crews has sparked the type of murders, knife fights and drive-by shootings usually associated with more established violent gangs. This clash between competing tagging crews has caused at least two homicides (Christopher, 2007).

#### **V. FACTORS BLINDING US TO THE VIOLENCE**

What contemporary delusions blind us to the presence of deadly retaliations within the Hip-Hop graffiti culture? As a graffiti and gang specialist, I believe such false impressions are centered on a combination of essentials. I categorized them as popular graffiti publications, subgroups' leadership styles, the G-Code, and the misleading terms linked to subgroups' classifications. As you read them, you will

see through them.

The first delusional practice addresses basic graffiti publications, exhibits, and forums. These venues neither identify nor discuss motives or acts leading to verbal or physical confrontations within this colorful culture. Such agendas only reinforce the “aesthetics values” or “restricted freedom of speech” associated with making graffiti. Case in point, graffiti has form, color, and other base properties as well as an arrangement of these elements into structures that qualify it aesthetically as being art (Stowers, 1997). For example, when a 28-year old serial graffiti artist painted over an advertisement on a bus shelter, he did so as a form to freely express himself and protest against the global advertising industry. But, the magistrate rejected his defence and convicted and fined the university student \$500 (Petrie, 2012). As of now, I view the only true informer of deadly retaliations within this specific graffiti culture as the news media.

The second fallacy centers on graffiti crews’ leadership dynamics as being “lax.” So what does this mean? It leads us to believe that graffiti crews tend to foster a more sociable and less treacherous existence. Such belief will lead us to assume that street gangs, possessing a *non-lax atmosphere*, promote criminal and violent behaviors. Specifically, one graffiti researcher reported that graffiti crews are less violent and criminally orientated because they have a higher percentage of diversity (Walsh, 1996). The notion that diversity acts as the suppressing agent to deviate or criminal behaviors within a group presents a skewed perspective of a complex issue.

Starbuck (2000) highlighted three gang experts who suggest that the presence of diversity and absence of traditional leadership styles are two of the several transformations associated with today’s street gangs. Three other gang researchers introduced the presence of committee-like and social-like leadership styles, as an alternative to traditional leadership style (Landre, 1997). In brief, committee-like organization defines a council rule, in which several gang members act as leaders and share decision-making responsibilities depending on the illegal activities. The social-like organization defines an alpha-dog rule, in which the aggressive member rises to leadership under certain criminal activity. The term “lax” only excludes one type of leadership style, traditional. However, it does not exclude the other two types of leadership styles: committee and social. Notably, it is imperative to recognize that any type of leadership style is capable of cultivating deadly retaliations on the streets. The third misconception diverts our attention from the constant verbal and physical abuse occurring within the graffiti word. We must bear in mind that graffiti writers adhere to the same “G-Code,” as gang members do. What is the G-Code? Its better known as *manning-up* or *don’t snitch*. One hip-hop researcher stated that if you do dirt, then rat on your comrades that is considered as snitching (Coleman, 2012). However, if we see graffiti and call the police, that is not considered as snitching - despite what Cam’Ron will tell us; therefore, it is crucial to understand these differences. The constant, verbal or physical abuse among rival graffiti participants

rarely draw the attention to police, or even the public unless a serious injury or death occurs. When this occurs, a police report is required because the victim is either dead or finds it difficult to conceal his/her serious injury. For instance, a 19-year-old graffiti writer was smashed across the back of his head several times with a brick because he tagged over a 15-year-old's graffiti tag (Wilton, 2011).

The final misconception is connected to the practice of classifying certain subgroups with misleading 'g' terms. For instance, some classification of certain groups leads us to believe that particular groups are less hostile or criminal-orientated than others. For example, we may perceive that a graffiti crew or party crew is less violent than most street gangs or drug gangs. Even the term "tag-bangers," compared to graffiti crews can offer conflicting assumptions. It's not until the police or even the public witnesses a horrific incident caused by a solo tagger or tagging crew, when we question their perceived existence. Still such a horrific incident by either one will still be professed as inconceivable. For example, Detective Mike Brown, of the Santa Barbara Police Department, emphasized that tagging crews are getting to be just as hard core as gang members (Cooper, 2012). In another example, The Los Angeles City Attorney's Office was successful in applying a gang injunction to a popular graffiti crew known as MTA - Metro Transit Assassins (Romero, 2012). Whenever we get the chance, we should read each graffiti writer's criminal history attached to this accusatory instrument. Then see if each graffiti artist, in questioning, possesses a peaceful or an aggressive demeanor.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In reference to this deadly trend, I have developed three major thoughts. First, it's a unified perception that deadly retaliations are more likely to occur among gang members than graffiti writers. Second, prolific graffiti vandals are exposed to the same dangerous elements that notorious gang members are exposed to whenever their mind is set on setting scores on the street. Third, any person on the street, living and operating under street codes, has a greater ability to possess dangerous instruments, such as illegal knives or guns. Importantly, similar to the information the 2013 Denver Graffiti Unit's discovered, "There seems to be a greater amount of established data linked to deadly- retaliations among gang members, as compared to graffiti writers." Finally, as a graffiti and gang specialist, it is my recommendation that the next time we encounter an elaborate graffiti piece on the wall, or attend a graffiti exhibition, or purchase a graffiti pictorial publication, we must remember one thing: behind this colorful world, of daring writers, there exists a strong and silent presence of violence.

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### **About the Author**

Ken Davis is a detective within the Yonkers Police Department's Gang/Narcotics Unit. This unit received the 2012 Gang Unit of the Year Award by New York Gang Investigators Association. As a prominent researcher and investigator in the field for approximately 20 years, Detective Davis continues his work on topics that focus on graffiti and street gangs within the City of Yonkers, NY. As a graffiti and gang specialist, he is a seven time recipient of the Frederic M Thrasher Award presented by National Gang Crime Research Center (NGCRC) in Chicago, IL. In October of 2013, Detective Davis was the award recipient for "Recognition of Expertise in Graffiti Enforcement & Dedication" by The Anti Graffiti Symposium #8 in the City of Nanaimo, Vancouver Island, BC. In addition to his influential contributions as a researcher and investigator, Detective Davis is also one of the well-respected instructors invited to present at the Annual Gang Specialist Program sponsored by the NCGRC.