

Gang-related graffiti locations and relationships to certain types of crimes

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Widespread graffiti has traditionally been regarded in contemporary society as a nuisance; evidence that the affected communities have in effect lost some form of control. As a “quality-of-life” offense that transcends both urban and suburban communities, graffiti has proven to be problematic in a myriad of different contexts and situations¹. Indeed, the monetary cost of graffiti in the United States is quite significant with the government spending approximately \$12 billion dollars to address the issue². To politicians, policy strategists, police officers and community members, graffiti represents a persistent problem. While a discussion on the different forms of graffiti *and* the specific motivations driving each form is beyond the scope of this brief, it is absolutely critical to note the importance of addressing the specific graffiti problem within the contextual environment of a specific, targeted community.



Based on prior literature addressing gang-related graffiti, we can argue that gang-related graffiti is related to gang-related offenses as such graffiti is utilized as a *means*, rather than as an end³. In other words, the apparent incoherent and arbitrary acts of graffiti found in the streets are riddled with value-laden undertones and connotations. This is evident in most forms of graffiti; however, it may be especially important to acknowledge overt, as well as obscured, messages in gang-related graffiti for investigative and academic purposes.

In the realm of urban street gangs, graffiti serves a purpose far beyond mere visual presentation; it serves as a form of “public advertising” for gangs⁴. Gang-related graffiti may be used as a vehicle to:

- identify a ruling gang in an area and establish territorial boundaries/borders
- insult a rival gang(s)
- declare a challenge or threat to a rival gang(s);
- reply to challenges or threats from a rival gang(s) and;
- establish a gang “roll-call”⁵

Within this context, our research briefed here investigates the location of gang-related graffiti and how it relates to gang-related crimes and their incident locations. We elaborate on the current empirical knowledge of gang-related graffiti and expand the applicability of gang-related graffiti to police investigations, strategic decision-making and tactical action. Utilizing Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology, this study addresses the geo-spatial relationships between specific locations as they relate to gang-related graffiti and crime. Furthermore, our study identifies and maps territorial boundaries of gangs based upon information derived from gang-related graffiti markings. In addition, we identify specific community/environmental characteristics of locations with and without gang-related graffiti to assess what makes locations riddled with gang-related graffiti attractive targets for gang members. Lastly, we assess whether social networking sites found on the internet can be utilized for investigative purposes in relation to gang-related graffiti and gang-related crimes. Specific research questions include:

1. What spatial and non-spatial information is communicated through the use of gang-related graffiti?

2. How and where is gang-related graffiti used in relation to known drug market areas?
3. To what extent is the location of gang-related graffiti correlated with other types of crimes and their incident locations?

Inherent in this study is the contention that if gang-related graffiti does in fact act as a vehicle to deliver *specific messages to specific people within certain spaces*, then there must also be an intended audience to receive such a message. By deciphering the explicit and implicit motivations driving specific examples of gang-related graffiti, investigators may also be able to unravel the intended audience as well. Such findings may provide explanations as to why specific areas have been marked by gang members and further, whether such markings increase the criminogenic risk-level of a specific area by virtue of its message.

This study incorporates a new factor within the Terra-Standardized Contextual (TSC) method of risk assessment⁶. Previous scholars have questioned the potential benefits of utilizing graffiti to “predict the location of potential conflict”⁷; in essence, utilizing gang-related graffiti to assess the potential level of *risk* in an area. While a prior question may have been restricted by data and technology, we currently have the necessary tools to address such a question. By utilizing the TSC method, we will empirically determine whether or not gang-related graffiti is related to the level of potential conflict (i.e. risk) in a specific area.

The possibility of being able to *forecast* potential gang-related conflict in specific areas could prove to be an invaluable tool for investigators. While gang-related graffiti has been acknowledged in the past as a significant aspect of gang dynamics; our research will further assess its spatial instrumentality, not only as it relates to previous and current gang-related matters, but also matters in the future.

¹ Snyder, G.J. (2009). *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Urban Underground*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

² Weisel, D.L. (2004). *Graffiti*. Problem-Oriented Guides for Police. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Policing Services.

³ Phillips, S.A. (1999). *Wallbangin': Graffiti and Gangs in L.A.* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Davis, K. (2003). Street gangs: Utilizing their roll calls for investigative and research purposes. *Journal of Gang Research*, 10(3), pp. 25 – 36.

⁴ Knox, G.W. (2000). *An Introduction to Gangs* (Rev. 5th ed.). Chicago, IL: New Chicago Press, Inc.

⁵ Phillips, 1999; Davis, 2003; Weisel, 2004.

⁶ See Caplan and Kennedy (2009) for a brief description on the Terra-Standardized Contextual (TSC) method and risk terrains:
http://www.rutgerscps.org/publications/RiskTerrains%20as%20Intelligence_Brief.pdf

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