

## **THE HISTORY OF GRAFFITI**

First, a little history: The graffiti we see today originated in the city of New York in the early 1970's. It was confined mainly to the Hip-Hop culture and was used as "advertising" for Hip-Hop "MC's." Just like everything from music to the beanbag chair, graffiti made it's way to California.

Graffiti hit California hard. In the mid to late 80's, Southern California was painted over with every color imaginable. Graffiti battles (when one vandal puts his work against another) were no longer limited to neighborhoods or cities. These battles went regional, with notoriety given through underground videos, magazines, and newsletters. In the early days, graffiti vandals (that's exactly what they are) worked independently, battling against other vandals for fame and notoriety. The bigger the "tag", in a high visibility area, gives the graffiti vandal bragging rights within their social group.

Don't be fooled either. When we use the term social group, we are not identifying one specific social or economic class. It's important to understand that this crime is not isolated to any one particular group of people. In order to engage our adversary, we must know as much about the "tagger" as we can. We will try to put a face on this menace to our community. When we do, ask yourself: "Do I know this person?"

## **PROFILE OF A GRAFFITI VANDAL**

1. 11 to 26 years old.
  2. Mostly high school age, 13 to 18 years old.
  3. Majority is male.
  4. All ethnic backgrounds.
  5. All economic and social backgrounds.
  6. Often very organized.
  7. View Tagging as an Extreme Sport rather than a crime.
  8. Computer Literate.
  9. Most are discouraged from further activity after first SERIOUS police contact.
  10. Those not discouraged move on to more serious crimes (carjacking, burglaries, arson, etc.)
  11. Associates with skaters, party crews, ravers and gangs.
  12. Low self-esteem or looking to belong.
  13. Believe this is a freedom of expression (1<sup>st</sup> Amendment)
  14. Looking for notoriety or fame (egotistic)
  15. Extreme loyalty to other taggers
  16. Views police as the adversary in a game.
- Education is the key to combating this CRIME. We're all in this together, Merced.

## **TOOLS USED BY GRAFFITI VANDALS**

The easy answer is that the vandals will use any substance to apply a color (any color) onto a different color surface. We've even seen tagging done with charcoal on the sound wall at Flanagan Park.

In the recent past, most of the graffiti was done with aerosol spray paint. The vandals would acquire this paint by any means necessary. Recently a 15-year-old graffiti vandal was interviewed and he laughed when we said a person has to be 18 to purchase paint. He said that most stores in Merced would ask for ID. Some however, would sell it to anyone who has five bucks. This vandal then said that he would often sit on a bicycle in front of a store and ask customers to buy the paint for him so he could "paint his bike."

With the recent media coverage of the MPD stings on graffiti vandals and educating the local stores, spray paint tags have decreased quiet a bit. The down side is that these vandals are very adaptive and have started using other substances. The most common I'm starting to see is a large water-based acrylic marker. These markers have 1 inch felt tips. The kids love these. They can conceal them in a pocket and tag a sign, pole, utility box or wall, in broad daylight. The best part about it is these markers are refillable and are relatively cheap. We still see a lot of permanent markers like the "sharpies" and "Magnum 44's." What surprises me is that some parents of these caught vandals have purchased these huge permanent markers and never asked, "what do you need that for?"

Some of the other popular "tools of the trade" are shoe polish daubers. This stuff is a pain, but not as bad as paint or markers. If you find yourself a victim of graffiti and the tag looks like it was put on with a dauber, try using Windex to remove it. It's still a crime, but most of the time it will come off.

Some other items that have been used but we really haven't seen in a while:

**Acrylic Paint.** The stuff that is in a small tube that you get from craft stores. This stuff runs about \$6 a tube.

**Paint in a Can.** The 1-gallon house paint. It can be seen on large tags, but it's rare.

**Items or Substances to etch windows.** Window tags are very costly for the victim. These attacks are often done for reasons other than to gain fame and notoriety. Most taggers won't etch up windows unless the tag was down for political or hate purposes.

## TYPES OF GRAFFITI VANDALISM

There are types of graffiti. It's these types that allow us, (the cops) to investigate and identify the graffiti vandals. I think this will surprise you.

1. **COMMUNICATIVE:** This is a message type of graffiti, mostly political in nature ("*Your life is for sale with a wage system*" "*Free the animals*").
2. **HATE CRIME:** Used to intimidate. Race, religious, or sexual orientation hate based. Used mostly by white supremacist groups. We see a lot of this directed at MPD. "---- the cops."
3. **GANG:** Gang names or members monikers. Non-descript, usually intended to identify a "gangs turf."
4. **TAGGER:** Tagger monikers or Crew (krew) Names. Intended to gain fame for the tagger or his krew. Mostly in high visibility areas, and they gain more status for the higher level of risk.
5. **ARTISTIC:** Has permission to tag. Often on "free walls." (Merced has NO free walls, to include the Skate Park.) At times a business may allow a "piece" to be put up on their business, however this should be discouraged. Ok, any guesses on what plagues Merced. If you said gang graffiti your as off target as I was. In Merced only about 10% of the graffiti identified is gang graffiti. These gang knuckleheads don't spend a lot of time figuring out what location they want to tag up. 90% of the graffiti around town is TAGGER graffiti. An easy way to tell is that most tagger graffiti will have all letters and one of the letters will be a "K". Why a "K"? These literary geniuses spell crew with a k, i.e. "krew." MGK = Merced Graffiti Krew. Most of the gang graffiti is limited to specific areas and you'll see graffiti with stuff like "X14", "SUR" and "NORTE." This, of course, is a small sample.

Chances are if graffiti springs up in your neighborhood, it's not a sign of a major criminal cartel, but rather the 14-year-old numbskull that has moved into your area. A very small number of graffiti vandals commit a majority of the graffiti. Also, studies have shown that if graffiti is removed within 12 hours after it is applied there is only a 5% chance of re-occurrence.