

COUCH SURFING IN VANCOUVER
AN AGGREGATE STUDY
OF THE
VANCOUVER GRAFFITI SUSPECT NETWORK

by

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Abstract

In the 1970s, a new form of graffiti emerged. By the mid 1980s it had surfaced in other urban centers. This new phenomenon, referred to as Hip Hop graffiti, has been documented in a variety of forms, but aggregate studies remain sparse. While there are valid arguments that justify the artistic merit of graffiti, there are also negative implications experienced by this subculture's lesser known participants. Visual assumptions of graffiti can misconstrue an act of intentional vandalism as an artistic attempt. This dataset uses information on 536 individuals who engage in graffiti in Vancouver. This information was obtained through the Vancouver Police Department for the period between January 2001 and December 2004. Analysis shows that repeat graffiti offenders commit more violent offences, have more criminal charges and have stronger associations to the subculture. Policy implications are discussed and solutions for this problem are proposed.

Dedication

I am thankful to everyone who has helped me along my winding academic path, but most of all to my parents who led me to this wonderful trail head. Everyday I benefit from the influence they had on me during my formative years and even to this day I continue to reap the fruit of their wise lessons. It is to them that I offer this thesis as the symbol of my gratitude and my love.

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Introduction

One could argue that the graffiti artist Dondi officially declared his arrival when he painted a huge “Dondi” piece on the roof of his house on Bradford Street. The piece was fully visible from the passing No. 2 train. While most writers maintained double identities, doing everything to keep their writing a secret, Dondi boldly announced himself. With angry straphangers and graffiti detectives on the prowl, the rooftop piece was a surprisingly incongruous and bold move (White and Witten, 2001: 16).

From anonymity to *all city*¹, graffiti is a fame game. In November 2004, I was driven through Brooklyn by an officer in the New York Police Department Vandal Squad. We were traveling along a busy road next to the elevated subway line. I looked up at the roof of a building and saw a group of youth hanging out. I asked the officer: “What’s going on up there?” In Vancouver, the only time someone is on a rooftop is when they are engaged in repairs or crime. In this case, the officer explained that the roof is their backyard where they hang out with their friends while they have a drink and sometimes even tag their own rooftop.

This experience clarified my understanding of many aspects of the Hip Hop graffiti movement.² Youth living in the outer neighborhoods of New York City used graffiti as a visual expression of their presence. Rather than succumb to the dilapidated buildings and the aging subway system, they overcame the elusive nature of urban existence by leaving their mark wherever they went. Unknowingly, these young people started one of the more significant youth movements of the 20th century. Hip Hop graffiti has become a world wide practice, and an organized rebellion against society’s establishment.

¹ To go *all city* means to have one’s tags visible throughout an entire city.

² Throughout this thesis the word graffiti is used to describe the particular phenomenon of Hip Hop graffiti.

Although graffiti, the act of marking a surface, is as old as human kind, the 1970s saw the emergence of a unique form of graffiti. Chapter one looks at how the Hip Hop graffiti movement evolved. It started in New York City, but by the mid 1980s it had spread to other urban centers across the world. At first, it was an activity based on youth mentorship where younger participants were schooled by older and more established graffiti writers. Then it became a structured subculture in which graffiti's purpose changed from stylistic exploration towards a systematic form of deviant behavior where the value of criminal acts surpassed that of artistic innovation. The academic literature on this topic shows subcultural consistencies. Yet there are very few aggregate studies of this population. The first chapter also explores the qualitative depiction of the subculture in which certain aspects are glorified and the criminal undertones are trivialized. For the most part, academics who focus on this form of graffiti take a direct research approach and they interact with graffiti taggers; some even partake in *bombing spree*s.³ Their research stems from this interaction with small groups of graffiti writers. The qualitative approach used in these academic texts reveals subcultural intricacies, but the individuals who are difficult to access, namely younger and lesser known writers, are not represented in these accounts.

As a graffiti investigator in the City of Vancouver, I have had close dealings with this subculture. While I have never personally participated in the act of tagging, I have observed suspects in the act of doing graffiti, conducted multiple interviews, gone for coffee with some of the most established writers in

³ A spray can is sometimes referred to as a bomb. Bombing is to go out and spray paint. Bombing spree refers to repetitive spray paint tagging.

Vancouver and observed the criminal progression of many participants. Chapter two looks at the individuals behind the tag and compares my own experience of the subculture to the current academic literature on graffiti. Classic delinquency research locates graffiti within a theoretical framework. This chapter also outlines the stages of development that a graffiti writer can experience. This is designed to offer the reader a better understanding of the level of involvement of various graffiti writers. As well, I looked for aggregate studies on this subculture because I felt that too often graffiti research, frequently with small samples, glamorized participation in the subculture and framed it as an acceptable passage from adolescence to adulthood. A thorough search revealed only two studies that utilized a larger sample, Australia with 44 subjects (Halsey and Young, 2002) and Sweden with 134 subjects (Shannon, 2001). The Swedish study showed that there is risk of further criminal involvement in this practice and that some individuals experience adverse effects because of their graffiti. This information reflected what I was experiencing as a graffiti investigator. Rather than add my uniquely subjective viewpoint to the field of graffiti research, I felt it was important to provide information that was supported by aggregate data.

The Vancouver Police Department Anti-Graffiti Unit (AGU) maintains a database of active graffiti suspects.⁴ Chapter three outlines how this information was collected. It explains the methods used to analyze the *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset*. The research focus is to determine demographic information, to

⁴ These are individuals who participate in illegal graffiti tagging. These are suspects and this means that some have never received a formal criminal charge for their graffiti crimes.

explore the breadth of offending, to discover the impact of increased association with the subculture and to establish geographical offender templates.

Chapter four presents the results of this aggregate analysis (n=536). The data included in this thesis was collected from January 2001 to December 2004. In Vancouver, the average graffiti writer is male, Caucasian, lives in Vancouver, and is between the ages of 12 and 37 years with the majority being between 16 and 21 years old. Most graffiti offences occur between 21:00 hrs and 03:00 hrs and peak during the month of June. During this four year period, graffiti suspects in Vancouver had between one to 73 contacts with the Vancouver Police Department with the mean being seven contacts. These suspects received an average of 2.1 criminal charges during this time period. Forty six percent of the subjects in this dataset have graffiti as their first listed offense with the Vancouver Police Department. This chapter focuses particularly on the results pertaining to the graffiti offenders who have committed five or more reported graffiti offences. There are 27 subjects in this category (5% of the dataset). These offenders commit more violent offences, have more criminal charges and have stronger associations to the subculture. A sketch of the repeat offender network is provided in order to illustrate the connectedness of this particular group to the rest of the subculture as documented in the dataset. Future research considerations are discussed for this target population. As well, three examples of the geographic distribution of offences are illustrated using subjects who are within the repeat graffiti offender group.

Chapter five uses the information gathered in the previous section to suggest strategies that can assist in the management of this population and in tackling the physical repercussions on urban structures. Graffiti can easily plague a city and it is viewed as a significant quality of life problem. Indeed, in places such as Italy where historical buildings can be potentially destroyed, alternate graffiti prevention measures are sometimes utilized such as plexi-glass building covers.⁵ Cities across Canada are looking at the Vancouver model as a good example of graffiti management. Vancouver has experienced an 80%⁶ drop in graffiti since the implementation of the program in 2002 (Hammel, 2005).

Beyond the actual visual problem of graffiti, there is individual damage. Service providers within the criminal justice system need to be aware of the potential harm associated with doing graffiti. The goal of chapter five is to provide working tools that can assist service providers and encourage them to intervene at the initial stages of graffiti involvement. Earliest intervention presents the possibility of halting the progression of individuals into what is essentially a criminal subculture. Finally, the underlying goal of this thesis is to set out the groundwork for a longitudinal study which will further illustrate the impact on subjects who have increased participation in this subculture. The *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset* is currently the largest sample of graffiti suspects available and the research potential is explored in this thesis. Future research possibilities exist in this dataset that can be pursued in the future using longitudinal and life-course persistent offending concepts.

⁵ This information was obtained from the nograf website.

⁶ City workers who are part of the Graffiti Management Team go out every six months on designated walking routes in Vancouver. They look at each building front and if the building has one tag it is counted as a tagged building. If the building has 10 tags it is still counted as a tagged building.

CHAPTER 1: Space Invaders: How Art Became Organized Crime

SUBJECTIVE VS OBJECTIVE: Why Does my Opinion Count?

As a participant-observer, Jeff Ferrell (1993) conducted extensive research on the graffiti subculture in Denver, Colorado. This perspective offered him a unique view of a very distinctive group of offenders. When I took on the newly formed position of graffiti investigator at the Vancouver Police Department, I became part of the Vancouver graffiti scene and as such I am also a participant-observer with a special type of participation. While Ferrell (1993) actively assisted with the production of graffiti, my role in the subculture is quite different. The graffiti game is like a bad comic action movie, everyone has a role, and without the appropriate characters, the plot falls apart. I naturally became the “bad guy” who chases down the graffiti writers.

In an effort to truly understand the problem that I was managing, I completed academic research in the hope that it could inform my practice. I learned the history of Hip Hop graffiti, starting with the initial New York movement and was able to understand how graffiti had spread worldwide. However, what I found completely lacking in the literature was aggregate information. Graffiti writers were far too often romanticized and their criminal activities minimized. While I understand that I am working from a biased position, my own experiences of the subculture consistently challenge the current research in this area. The goal of this chapter is to build a theoretical framework which will assist in the analysis of the *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset*. The “I” form is used throughout this section because, like Ferrell (1993), my own experiences have

complemented my research and assisted me in further understanding the people involved in the graffiti subculture.

MACRO: New York City - Subways - Graffiti

We have, in our minds, a very specific, biological notion of what contagiousness means. But if there can be epidemics of crime or epidemics of fashion, there must be all kinds of things just as contagious as viruses are (Gladwell, 2002: 9).

The style of graffiti that we currently see in our communities can be traced back to the mid 1960s, where it emerged from poorer sections of the outer New York boroughs. Although there are reported incidents of similar graffiti in other cities⁷, the urban dynamics of New York City created a situation that gave momentum to this new subculture. The subway was the backbone of New York's industrial economy and graffiti came to symbolize the entropy of a decaying system. On March 24th, 1900, New York made history by being the first city to operate an underground subway line (Lankevich, 2002). This transit system soon became the principal mode of transportation for new immigrants who would travel from affordable neighborhoods to the many factories in downtown Manhattan.

By the 1960s, post-war migration had pushed the city beyond its ability to support this continuously growing workforce (Lankevich, 2002). In 1966, a twelve day transit strike brought the economy to a standstill and the ensuing loss of revenue was disastrous. At the time, New York had the largest transit system in the world, but it was also in severe crisis (Lankevich, 2002). By 1969, New York City was in a full recession and was confronted by a changing economy where manufacturing could no longer support the immigrant labor force. Graffiti started

⁷ Some people think graffiti started in the Hispanic neighborhoods of LA (Manco, 2002) and others say it actually started in Philadelphia with the graffiti writer CORNBREAD (Powers, 1999).

at this precise moment. Its message went beyond the subway system to represent the realities of immigrant youth and the children of immigrants who were now facing an even bleaker future. Graffiti quickly took over the entire subway system and the transit strike in the early 1980s fuelled Mayor Koch's reaction to this problem. By then, the subway was plagued with graffiti, litter, crime and fear of crime. Indeed, the "despised subway system, for all its smell and graffiti, remained one of the city's greatest potential strengths by efficiently delivering labor to jobs; in 1982, however, ridership fell below a billion for the first time since 1917" (Lankevich, 2002: 225). During this time, the fight against graffiti on the subway system acted as a figurative manifestation for the war on crime.

Graffiti is the visual component of Hip Hop and parallels rapping and break dancing in form and style. The first *writer*⁸ to attract public attention was Taki 183.⁹ This individual was a courier messenger, who while working in New York, left his mark behind. His tag was his nickname, Taki, which was combined with the street he was from, 183rd Street in Washington Heights, New York.¹⁰ His job as a courier brought him to explore many areas in the city, where he was then able to place his tag, including the populated Manhattan business district. The tag Taki 183 generated public interest and in 1971 the New York Times published an article on him.¹¹ This publicity fueled the subculture and the practice of graffiti exploded. It became a vehicle for popularity and the recognition it provided was attractive to young people with limited opportunities.

⁸ A writer is a person who does graffiti because s/he writes graffiti.

⁹ For more information on the birth of Hip Hop graffiti refer to Taking the Train by Joe Austin.

¹⁰ The website www.at149st.com provides a list of New York writers with their short biographies.

¹¹ This information was taken from the website www.at149st.com.

Notoriety is the primary motivating characteristic of graffiti. Fame can be attained only with extensive exposure. Public display is best achieved through tag repetition in highly visible locations.¹² The subway lines and stations of New York are a forum for communication. The trains travel throughout the city connecting people from different boroughs. The 1983 movie Wild Style illustrates the importance of subway trains in the New York graffiti scene. The main character played by Lee Quinones¹³ is Puerto Rican and from a poor neighborhood. He develops the tag identity of Zoro and finds meaning through his graffiti. One of the subplots revolves around potential media attention directed toward this new trend. A friend sets up an interview and explains to the media shy Zoro that the “publicity” is important because it will make him rich. In essence, this movie captures the fundamental thrust of the New York graffiti scene. People with limited prospects can gain recognition by using this expressive medium, and the resulting public acknowledgement can convert into financial success.

In Taking the Train, Austin (2001) refers to the New York subway trains as “traveling exhibitions”(21). These trains are a symbol for poverty; as they connect disadvantaged neighborhoods to the thriving areas of Manhattan, the boundaries between these two worlds are challenged. Graffiti transforms poverty into recognition. Through it, young people attain respect from their immediate social group. Their fame extends beyond their community and connects them to a

¹² Vancouver graffiti writers have told me that visibility is their primary goal. As well, they aim to hit challenging locations. High places are valued for the skills necessary to reach these locations. Additionally, traveling tags on vans, trucks, buses assist writers in expanding their territory.

¹³ Quinones was the tagger LEE. He was part of the Fabulous Five who were a group of New York writers and rappers. This information was obtained from the website www.at149st.com.

network rich with possibilities. However, by the 1980s, graffiti had saturated the New York subway system and it became a metaphor for social decay (Gladwell, 2002). For the New York municipal administration, beating the graffiti epidemic was the conduit for resolving the spiraling crime problem. Trains were systematically taken off the circuit and cleaned of graffiti (Felson, 1988). The graffiti writers lost their main communication vehicles and displacement was the result of this strategy.

According to Austin (2001), the second wave of graffiti started in the early 1980s when it emerged in other cities. This expansion can be attributed in part to the New York subway cleanup, but also to the contagious nature of graffiti. Once a writer has successfully *crushed*¹⁴ a city, he attains the rank of King and with this position gains respect from others in the subculture. Going to other cities in order to continue doing graffiti is a natural progression in the practice. The fame generated by this activity is not unlike a band going on a cross-country tour. It is not surprising that the graffiti history of other American cities often starts with a New York writer. In Free Agents, the author refers to Quick, a New York writer, reportedly the first person to write graffiti in Washington DC (Gastman, 2001). This author also explains that the New York writer Lee¹⁵, who was in Washington promoting the movie Wild Style, did the first documented graffiti piece in Washington (Gastman, 2001). Evidently, without a ripe environment, the trend would have never flourished. Nonetheless, graffiti was similar to a virus, when it reached an epidemic level in New York, it spread to other cities through the

¹⁴ To crush a city means to obliterate it with tags.

¹⁵ The graffiti writer Lee Quinones is the leading actor in the movie Wild Style and did this piece Washington DC. Quinones is one of the original New York graffiti writers.

travels of writers originally from the New York scene. Eventually graffiti expanded and captured other urban centers worldwide.

By the mid 1980s, Canadian cities saw the first symptoms of Hip Hop graffiti. The literature on Canadian graffiti continues to be extremely limited. The only comprehensive Canadian study was completed by Janice Rahn (2002) who based her research on ten interviews with Montreal writers. Rahn (2002) describes the Montreal subculture with a particular focus on the educational value of graffiti. Her research reveals that graffiti writers are motivated by this medium, attracted to the marginal subculture and guided by strong subcultural ethics. She argues that their learned skills afford them the ability to find employment in a variety of areas and to advance into business opportunities by starting their own clothing companies, entering Internet ventures, doing skateboard design, or producing legal murals.

New generation writers have paired popularity with actual practices that assist them in legally applying their graffiti trade. By the 1990s, graffiti became an industry that is still thriving. Internet sites sell sweatshirts, magazines, ink markers, videos and a number of other items valued by the subculture. Additionally, websites are museums for this street art and 'city specific' sites are created to catalogue the numerous graffiti writers. This new generation is able to communicate worldwide as the Internet connects the various scenes and encourages global interaction. Graffiti has become a contagious urban product and major corporations recognize its commercial value. Wal-Mart filmed an advertisement at Leaside, which is a popular Vancouver graffiti location under

the Cassiar overpass in Vancouver's eastside. In another example, Fuji used graffiti as a backdrop for an ad campaign, the caption stating: "Art is everywhere".

MACRO: Art - Graffiti - Crime

When World War II ended in 1945, New York City became the post-war art centre. During the war, many artists had sought exile in New York, a city already known as a major cultural centre. The mix of established European artists and developing American artists brought modernism to a new level. Painting expanded in size and the boundaries of the canvas pushed to their limit. Abstract Expressionism made New York the world's *avant-garde* art centre. Immediately, the blend of art, fame and money was injected into the creative process. The European way of the starving artist who would persist in artistic exploration regardless of financial compensation was replaced with fame and the currency that accompanies it. The juxtaposition of Vincent Van Gogh and Jackson Pollock exemplifies this transition. Van Gogh was punished for his artistic innovations and the art market relegated him to the pastures of his own insanity, recognizing him only years after his death. In the New World art market, artists like Pollock were rewarded for their formal innovations and afforded a level of fame equal to that of a movie star.

From 1945 onward, art evolved by rapidly moving further into itself. Art became object, object became artist, and artist was objectified into famous character. By the 1960s, art moved beyond the canvas; American life centralized as subject matter. Andy Warhol orchestrated this momentum into his work and

typified the art of business in business art.¹⁶ Warhol was Pop artist, movie star, and social elite. He channeled this energy in his art studio called The Factory. Many young New Yorkers participated in The Factory and have since become mega-stars; including Madonna and Arnold Schwarzenegger (Bockris, 1990). Warhol constructed a character that existed outside the artwork and his relationship with the art market resulted in a complete shift in the value of art. Just like other commercial products, art was marked with a price tag. The only difference between a store bought Campbell's soup can and Warhol's pictorial representation is supply and demand. Commercial product converted into painting becomes art and beyond Pop Art, painting becomes an exercise in futility.

By the 1970s, painting was declared dead by the art world. Graffiti in effect filled that void. After the effervescence of Pop Art, art gravitated towards highly conceptual practices such as Performance Art, Minimalism and Land Art. Looking at the initial New York graffiti scene, especially through the camera lens of Chalfant (1984) in his documentary Style Wars, the artistic content is undeniable. In fact one of the most famous subway pieces is Fred's Campbell's Soup (Chalfant and Cooper, 1984). In this train piece, Fred depicts eight Campbell's soup cans, each with a different caption: Dada soup, Pop soup, Fabulous soup¹⁷, Fred soup, Futurist soup, TV party soup, Tomato soup and - blank - soup. Here the subtle interplay between the subway graffiti art movement and the New York art scene becomes obvious. However, as graffiti moves away

¹⁶ Warhol referred to his own artistic production as business art.

¹⁷ Fred's crew reference: Fabulous Five.

from New York, it also turns back onto itself and becomes trapped by its own subcultural practices.

Cresswell (1996) dedicates a chapter to New York City graffiti. He discusses graffiti in the 1970s and the power dynamics between the *place* on the streets and in the art galleries. He explains the various forces that define both the practice of graffiti and the people who do it. He believes that once graffiti entered into galleries, its initial artistic intent was obliterated; graffiti in galleries, therefore, is no longer art.

The meaning of graffiti was subsumed within a lineage defined by art critics and gallery owners. Whereas graffiti artists take their inspiration from the signs and styles of advertising, the art world begins to place graffiti in a different tradition of “pop art” and the “primitive” (Cresswell, 1996: 51).

The recognition of graffiti as an art form was extremely short lived in the New York galleries. Precisely for the reason that Cresswell (1996) describes: graffiti tamed is no longer art because it loses its context. Without context art is reduced to style.

The art world had both a positive and negative impact on graffiti. On the one hand, it introduced graffiti writers to legal alternatives thus exposing them to financially viable opportunities. On the other hand, the art world stamp of approval has further confused the issue of art versus crime. Needless to say, graffiti done without permission always produces a victim. The visual nature of this crime lures people into approving the action. Over the years, destruction and vandalism have been explored in art.¹⁸ Graffiti, in contrast, is based on an internal logic separate from the art logic. Justification is not derived from inventive artistry or creative exploration, but instead from strong subcultural

¹⁸ For example, Dada artists would throw tomatoes at the public. One also thinks of guerilla style art.

guidelines. In his article "Cream of Wheat Paste Cost and Revs Graffiti Art"

O'Brien (1994) states:

But graffiti isn't what it used to be. Style is all but gone, and this outlaw practice, once a field of ambition, daring, rebellion and improvisation has largely reverted to a form of unconscious egoism and conformist vandalism (76).

Graffiti hides under the veil of art and as an art form in itself; graffiti has received very little attention from the art world.

Graffiti had a brief affair with the glitz and blitz of SoHo in the 1980s, but beyond this it remained a street activity and those who do it often phase out of the practice after early adulthood. After the mid 1980s, graffiti was not mentioned in art reviews and it moved completely away from the art world. Graffiti becomes self-perpetuating, its own industry. For example, there is a series of 27 books called Black Book Sessions where graffiti writers submit sketches of their tags which are then compiled in book form. At \$30 per book; it would cost \$810 to obtain this full collection. The commercial value of this product is very apparent.

Some graffiti literature promotes the criminal aspects of the practice, placing crime, not art as the central motive. In All City. The Book About Taking Space, the author provides detailed information on how to do graffiti, including how to steal paint and latex gloves, how to make permanent ink, how to scratch windows and how to avoid police apprehension. For example, he says:

Next time you go to the doctor, bring a backpack. When you get into the exam room, scope it out. Look for a box of latex gloves in it. The box usually looks like a kind that dispenses Kleenex. Put it in your bag right after the nurse leaves and just before the doctor comes in. The gloves are great because they are disposable. Oftentimes, tagging leads to dirty hands, and dirty hands are incriminating (Paul 107, 2003: 17).

Art students are not likely to receive this type of instruction. This sounds more like a “how to commit crime” rather than a “how to do art” lesson. Surprisingly, the funding for this book came in part from The Canada Council for the Arts. Graffiti confuses simply because it is visual and it lures the uninformed into believing that it is art and the unanswered remains whether the artistic process can also be a criminal activity?

Throughout history art pushes the boundaries of our belief system and this process requires rules to be broken. Sometimes these rules are rooted in religion, other times in morality, and in rare occasions in criminal law. However, persistently breaking rules has never been the primary impetus of art. For example, in the early 1900s, Dada¹⁹ artists held a performance where tomatoes were thrown at the audience. This practice did not extend into their ongoing artistic pursuit. Indeed, throwing tomatoes at random people walking on the street would constitute assault; with the context removed the action is no longer art. While some graffiti writers may have artistic intent in the creation of their pieces, criminality continues to define the practice.

MESO: *Couch Surfing*²⁰ in Vancouver

As a graffiti investigator I regularly meet with taggers for coffee. On one occasion, my partner and I sat outside the Starbucks at Granville and Robson with a couple of accomplished graffiti writers. They knew every other person who walked by, stopping for a complex handshake and conversing in a foreign dialect.

¹⁹ Dadaism is an art movement that took place in the early 1900s. The better known participants are Marcel Duchamp and Andre Breton. These artists explored the absurd and many used performance art in their work.

²⁰ Couch surf: crashing on someone's couch for an indefinite period of time.

I commented on their popularity and one of them said to me: "I'm the Godfather." In talking about his position within the subculture, he explained that he was King of Vancouver and that he no longer had to do graffiti. Younger taggers looked up to him and would *hit him up*²¹ in an attempt to show respect. He told me that everyone knew him not as his given name, but as his tag name. Through his graffiti work he had developed a reputation which offered him social rewards.

Pursuing the topic, I asked how much of his day was spent socializing. He replied: "Aside from the 13 hours I'm sleeping? Probably 11 hours." I inquired about the number of people he met in a day and he said 30 to 50, most of them somehow involved in the Hip Hop subculture, either through music, clothing, dance or graffiti. He explained that graffiti is not just something you do from time to time, it is an entire lifestyle, part and parcel of every moment in the day. Curious about the breadth of his social network, I asked if he would be able to couch surf in Paris. He said: "Sure, I know a writer that was in Paris, he'd hook me up with someone." The rest of his living expenses would probably be covered by the *five finger discount*.²²

For a graffiti writer, coffee at Granville and Robson is not an exercise in anonymity, but rather a stage for a social performance. A couple of weeks after this coffee date, my work partner and I sat at the same intersection wondering how many encounters we would have. After an hour, we left not having met one single person we knew for our social networks. The various discussions I had with graffiti writers push me to think about the actual social structure and

²¹ To hit someone up is to replicate their tag as an act of respect.

²² This is a term used in the subculture to describe the act of shoplifting. Theft is a very common activity and is used to obtain food, clothing, spray paint and alcohol.

connectivity that exists in the graffiti subculture. Over the past three years, I have been able to experience this subculture first hand and gain some understanding of its inner workings.

The Vancouver graffiti subculture is similar to ones found in research in other cities. Research indicates strong parallels regardless of geographical differences. Overall, the practice of graffiti follows internal ethics and guidelines whether it is done in Denver²³, South L.A.²⁴, London, New York²⁵, Philadelphia²⁶, Oakland²⁷, Washington²⁸, Chicago²⁹, Montreal³⁰, or Vancouver. Graffiti is learned in a first instance as a viewer, then as an accomplice-observer, and finally as a full participant. In essence, the rules that govern graffiti are passed on from writer to writer, a modern day urban mythology. Graffiti writers thrive on social interaction and through it they are defined as members of a privileged subculture. Their tag represents an alter ego visibly expressed in the community, a mirror for their personal achievement. It is also what connects them to graffiti writers in other cities. Their ability to travel as they get older ensures the continuance of subcultural practices.

²³ Jeff Ferrell (1993) spent time with the writers and was a participant-observer in the Denver graffiti subculture. His book *Crimes of Style Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality* provides an in depth description of this scene.

²⁴ Susan Phillips (1999) approached the South L.A. gang culture from an anthropological perspective. She spent time with the gangs, including the Crips and Bloods. She went with the Hip Hop graffiti crews and was able to give a detailed description of their practices in her book *Wallbanging: Graffiti and Gangs in L.A.*

²⁵ Nancy Macdonald (2001) interviewed several writers in New York and London, England. She offers a thorough description of these two scenes in her book *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, masculinity and identity in London and New York*.

²⁶ Stephen Powers (1999) is a Philadelphia writer and his book *The Art of Getting Over Graffiti at the Millennium* chronicles the history of graffiti in Philadelphia.

²⁷ Michael Walsh (1996) is an Oakland graffiti writer and in his book *Graffiti* he explains the Oakland graffiti scene

²⁸ Roger Gastman (2001) is a graffiti writer. His book *Free Agents: A History of Washington D.C. Graffiti* is a compilation of Washington D.C. writers. His approach is experiential, however, he provides a true insider perspective on the graffiti scene.

²⁹ William Wimsatt (1994) is another graffiti writer who describes the Chicago graffiti scene in *Bomb the Suburbs*.

³⁰ Janice Rahn (2002) interviewed Montreal writers and from these interviews she was able to offer an accurate account of the Montreal graffiti subculture.

There is an existing hierarchy in the subculture, which enacts rites of passage. A young tagger is referred to as a *toy* and his tag, still in the early development, is only acceptable in certain locations. Should he defy this norm, a respected member from the subculture will sometimes cross him out, write *Toy* and subsequently mark the location. As this young tagger progresses, he marks the community, and through this activity gains respect within the subculture. The locations become more challenging as well as increasingly visible. Over time, this tagger is recognized for both his skill and his ability to avoid being caught by the police. With practice, his style evolves into bubble letter form and the area covered expands in the cityscape. This individual may join a *crew*³¹ and together they are able to tackle larger areas. The advanced graffiti writers will practice in sketchbooks and develop a stylized three-dimensional representation of their tag; called a *piece*³² which is short for masterpiece. These pieces are replicated in locations that allow work time and have reduced apprehension risk. Some examples are train yards, *free walls*³³, industrial areas, or legal productions. Individuals who have successfully tagged, done bubble letter *throw ups*³⁴, and intricate three dimensional pieces become recognized as Kings and are respected by others in the subculture. Many Kings then travel to other cities to continue on their graffiti venture and expand their reputation; this is called *going on tour*.

³¹ A crew is a group of taggers working together under a common name. The name is reduced to an acronym.

³² Piece is short for masterpiece.

³³ City officials designate an area where graffiti is permitted.

³⁴ Term used to describe a larger two-dimensional representation of a tag. It is often a compressed version of the full tag, such as the first and last letter. For example, the tag 'SPICER' in bubble form is reduced to 'SR'.

Graffiti in the new millennium is a global practice. Young people find meaning through it, which helps them form strong social connections. The personal glorification charges their developing egos with a powerful sense of self. During the 1970s, graffiti was both site specific and class driven. At first, it was limited to New York City and neighboring urban centers and represented a means to overcome class limitations. By the 1980s, it expanded to other cities spreading like a virus in its epidemic phase. The Internet became a fertile communication ground and helped to connect writers in different cities. At present, graffiti has developed into an extremely organized subculture guided by an internal hierarchy and by specific constructs and ethics. Membership offers social privileges, but also brings these young people into a world fraught with delinquency.

The simultaneous presence in a city of these three stages of graffiti (tags, bubble letters, intricate pieces) is an indication of an advanced subculture.³⁵ Two years ago, Vancouver was considered a centre for graffiti and writers from around the world would come here to leave their mark. The back lanes of the Downtown Eastside were adorned with intricate pieces, walls along the Skytrain route continue to be highly pieced areas, and several locations were deemed quasi free walls (Leaside, the track north of west 6th near Granville Island, and the walls along the beach west of Kitsilano). However, since the implementation of a wide scale graffiti management program, Vancouver has tackled this problem with a reported 80% reduction of graffiti (Hammel, 2005). On the

³⁵ In the spring of 2003, Staff Sergeant Heinz Kuck from Toronto police talked about this phenomenon in his presentation to the Vancouver Police Department's Anti-Graffiti Unit.

Internet, writers have declared Vancouver a *buffed*³⁶ town. Several city staff members partnered with the police and other interested organizations to achieve an overhaul of the graffiti subculture.

The largest challenge continues to be the confusion that exists around the artistic status of graffiti. This confusion rests in a misunderstanding of the connection between the tags, bubble letters and pieces. Usually people like the pieces and dislike the tags and bubble letters. Unfortunately in the graffiti subculture these three forms are inextricably linked and the ultimate goal is always fame and subcultural acknowledgement. The pieces have promoted leniency from the general public which is often lured by their artistic content. Graffiti suspects tend to be viewed as misguided artists. However, as a graffiti investigator I know that crossed out tags are played out on the street as fist and knife fights, that graffiti pieces are most often done with stolen paint, and that addiction³⁷ is often the motivator, not artistic pursuit.

I recently attended the premier showing of the documentary City Space. Filmmaker Craig Noble (2004) produced this piece for his MA project in Communication. The perspectives of different people involved in the graffiti subculture are blended together in City Space, and as a graffiti investigator my voice was also heard. In my previous occupation as an art student, I had been to several student produced projects and, now as a graffiti investigator, I am constantly confronted with this past. I am sure that many in attendance at the showing of City Space were from Emily Carr, UBC or SFU art programs. While

³⁶ To buff means to clean graffiti. A buffed town means a clean city.

³⁷ Addiction and graffiti are paired in a similar manner as addiction and gambling. There is no research on the addictive quality of graffiti. This view point comes from personal dealings with graffiti writers and it is the word that some of them used to describe their relationship to graffiti.

watching the documentary I was confounded by the extreme sense of entitlement of graffiti writers and their complete lack of distinction between public and private space. While referring to graffiti, one of the writers in City Space says: “That’s what public space is for. That’s what public space is. It’s public space.” In the graffiti subculture, public space equals visible space and as such becomes graffiti space. The justification for this belief system does exist in Marxist, post-structural and semiological literature. The articulation of space in art is central and graffiti opens up this discussion, bringing art and crime into dialogue. When I was in art school, graffiti had yet to appear in any volume or intensity in Montreal. I am sure that my art cohort, including myself, would have defended its place in the urban fabric.

However, as an actual practitioner in the social services system as a police investigator, I have revisited these philosophical perspectives that were the underpinnings of my previous undergraduate and graduate work in contemporary Art History. While I can understand the belief system of graffiti writers, I cannot condone the actual practice of it. As an artist, I would have been incapable of factoring harm to property owners³⁸ into my art. In City Space, it is obvious that the graffiti writers understand their acts of vandalism and they understand the victimization, they just don’t care. In essence, these young people are developing extremely complex justification for victimization. Although this may appear as a form of juvenile rebellion, over exposure to desensitization is likely to cause long lasting social implications.

³⁸ In the course of my duties I take several reports from victims of graffiti. Property owners express victimization. Some are frightened by the graffiti and believe there are threats written in their property. Others have to absorb the cost of cleaning the graffiti.

When I first came to the graffiti investigation unit, I had extremely limited knowledge about graffiti writers and the practice. The words on the wall and their associated meaning were completely foreign to me. Police expertise in this area was extremely limited, if not to say non-existent.³⁹ My initial bias came from my background in art. I appreciated both Jean Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring who I knew were associated with the New York graffiti movement. Immediately, I was faced with a confusing juxtaposition of an art bias against the backdrop of the graffiti subculture. I quickly realized that graffiti was a complex product that was internally guided and quite separate from traditional artistic pursuits.

I began to read about this subculture and found that, for the most part, researchers in this area were not painting a full picture. Graffiti was romanticized; the actual associated harms subordinated. The research was not completely supporting what I was seeing. The methods the Anti-Graffiti Unit developed to manage graffiti suspects were in fact very intuitive. Recurrent themes such as addiction⁴⁰, learning disabilities, and parental discipline issues were not reflected in the research. Furthermore, the rehabilitative approaches towards graffiti were not tailored to the actual underlying problems.

The *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset* will provide more detailed information about these young people, thus balancing out the research. Comparing a cross section of graffiti suspects with Emily Carr art students would yield significantly different results. The following statement is only speculative

³⁹ Constable Wendy Hawthorne from Translink is an expert in this area as she has been investigating graffiti crimes in the Lower Mainland since the early 80s. Over the past three years, I have had several conversations with her that have assisted in my investigations. This informal training has been invaluable in my work (both academically and professionally) and her knowledge of the graffiti subculture has helped many police departments with graffiti investigations.

⁴⁰ There were often concurrent addiction problems such as addiction to graffiti and substance abuse with marijuana and alcohol.

and the purpose of my research is not to verify the truth of this statement, but the average art student does not compare to a young tagger in the breadth of their crime or level of involved violence. The analysis of graffiti suspects in this thesis assists in framing the actual issues associated with the practice of graffiti and provides solid information on the people who are involved in the Vancouver graffiti subculture.

CHAPTER 2: Looking Beyond the Markings on the Wall

MICRO: The Individual Behind the Mark

As a graffiti investigator I discovered that graffiti suspects display certain consistent traits. They are most often Caucasian males aged 16 to 24⁴¹ who enter into graffiti for many of the same reasons other youth join gangs. Graffiti is their social outlet and this crime is simply the currency to acquire peer acceptance. Frequent marijuana use and excessive drinking is common. This drug and alcohol use, combined with an anti-establishment mentality, marginalizes graffiti suspects. They are often in alternative school programs and many do not complete high school. Several of them have various learning and social disabilities such as ADHD, ADD, conduct disorders and ODD. They do not fit with their own peers. They are sometimes less athletic types and are not at the top of their class. They are often smaller males and have adaptive problems. However, these individuals are usually highly social within their subculture and band together to assist in strengthening their identities. They are often popular with the girls who perceive them as urban warriors.⁴² This is an extremely tight knit group. For example, graffiti suspects from Burnaby will likely know taggers living in Kerrisdale. This social aspect of the subculture is very attractive to these young people who are often having difficulties fitting into their immediate social group. The bond that taggers form with each other, especially when they are crew-mates, extends into their adulthood. Many taggers who were previously in the same crew are committing other crimes together as adults.

⁴¹ Few writers persist after this age and most grow out of it or find a legal alternative.

⁴² One writer once told me that guys just out of prison for doing graffiti attract attention from the girls.

Aggregate data on graffiti suspects continues to be extremely limited. A meta-analysis research method revealed that graffiti suspects have never been studied at a broad level. A query of various databases did not yield a study with a number of suspects above 135. Only two projects had samples larger than 20 suspects; one was from Australia (Halsey and Young, 2002) and the other from Sweden (Shannon, 2001). The purpose of the Australian project was to find graffiti management strategies compatible with the graffiti subculture. The Swedish study completed by Shannon (2001), reflects findings in the *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset* and suggests that a certain type of graffiti suspect is at risk for future criminal involvement. Shannon's study is in essence very different from other graffiti research simply because it looks at the potential harm associated with the practice.

As someone directly involved with this subculture as an investigator, I have found many contradictions to the conclusions drawn from small qualitative studies. Individual success is extended to collective experience. In other words, the positive experiences of a small number of successful graffiti writers is generalized to the entire population of the subculture. In these small studies, graffiti as a positive outlet is emphasized and the harmful aspects underrated. Twenty years after making his documentary, Chalfant (1984) re-interviewed the graffiti writers from Style Wars. I was shocked to discover how many were deceased. Did graffiti bring them into a risky lifestyle? There is harm related to graffiti involvement and it can be an at-risk behavior. It is my view that youth

involved in this practice should receive the appropriate support to guide them away from potential lifetime involvement in criminal activity.

Social acceptance is one of the main thrusts of adolescent development and the pressures to socially conform sometimes restrict the ability to cultivate self-expression. Delinquency can become a means to resist the established order. Graffiti, which is in effect an organized form of delinquency, is a readily accessible medium and provides direct access to an *identity-building practice*. For young males⁴³, the various traditions inherent in the graffiti subculture offer an alternative arena for constructing their masculinity.⁴⁴ Within this group, they are able to transgress gendered social expectations and enact the rites of passage through their own codes of behavior. Rationale for these subcultural occurrences exists in traditional delinquency research and, while Hip Hop graffiti is really a postmodern phenomenon, these explanations provide insight into the graffiti subculture.

Delinquent Boys by Albert Cohen (1955) is a founding text on delinquency theory. His analysis is primarily geared toward the impact of social expectations on young individuals. In their development phase, young people measure their identity in relation to a number of factors such as: social norms, established values, expected codes of behavior and shared beliefs. According to Cohen (1955), the main goal of youth social development is to achieve social status, thus ensuring financial success. From this analytical perspective, delinquency is an act carried out by a subculture resistant to these social

⁴³ Over 94% of Vancouver graffiti suspects are males.

⁴⁴ In Masculinities and Crime: Critique and Reconceptualization of Theory, Messerschmidt (1993) describes the processes used to construct masculinity. He refers to this as "structured action" (63).

expectations. Undoubtedly, individuals incapable of ascending the social class ladder must find other means to secure their identity. By banding together in delinquency, these individuals redefine the norms to which they are now able to conform (Cohen, 1955: 65-69).

Schooling plays an important role in Cohen's (1955) study of delinquency. Education is a means to attain prosperity. Lack of skills limits young people in their ability to achieve financially secure employment. He explains that educational standards replicate the larger social context. Even the social position of the teacher helps to re-enact middle-class values. Within this framework, delinquency is perceived primarily as a working class phenomenon. Young people unable to succeed in school and, therefore, unable to attain social success sometimes choose the delinquent subculture. Crime becomes a means to gain peer acceptance. Although graffiti is no longer limited to a specific social class, graffiti does resist mainstream philosophies and espouses separate social standards. This is very attractive to young people who are not fitting into their direct social group or not succeeding in school.

From a similar perspective, Merton (1967) proposed that the primary thrust in the social process is the "success-theme" (Merton, 1967: 166). Undeniably, within North American culture, there are numerous mythologies based on the concept of financial prosperity. During the 1950s, when both Merton (1967) and Cohen (1955) wrote these theories, American culture was strongly marketed as a commercial product. Social status became associated to a well-defined paradigm that extended into material conformity. Merton (1967)

explains that when individuals are unable to attain this status, they revert to other social strategies. Rebellion is a tactic of resistance, which carries social rewards. Within the rebellious subculture, attainable norms become attractive substitutes for the “success-theme”. Peer acceptance both in the 1950s and in the graffiti subculture is a fundamental reason for being rebellious.

In Causes of Delinquency, Hirschi (1967) goes beyond the limitation of social class and explains that delinquency occurs throughout society. He believes that social strain theorists such as Cohen (1955) and Merton (1967) constructed delinquency as a class-defined term (Hirschi, 1967). He is not satisfied by this explanation and proposes that any individual who lacks conformity can be delinquent. The basis of Hirschi’s (1967) argument is “control theory”. Using a range of tactics, society instills values and behavior codes into individuals. Delinquency, therefore, is the result of a breached relationship between an individual and society (Hirschi, 1967). He argues that delinquents are not fully socialized. This alienation can occur regardless of class position. Moving away from the typical American model is an important step in delinquency research. Class-based analysis falls short of addressing the entire scope of current delinquency problems (Hirschi, 1967).

These three theoretical models can be applied in part to the graffiti subculture. Graffiti is an act of delinquency. It is an act of mischief, not unlike throwing rocks at a vehicle or tearing down street signs. Graffiti tags left behind, however, are more permanent and speak to others involved in the practice thus setting up the potential for competition. At first, graffiti came from poor New York

neighborhoods and was used as a vehicle to overcome social class limitations. In this context, Merton (1967) and Cohen's (1955) theories are applicable.

Deconstructing the act of graffiti reveals a transposition of social norms and aesthetic values. The activity of graffiti provides both a communication outlet and a self-defining visual representation. At night, people would sneak into the subway yards and proceed to cover entire trains with graffiti. In the morning, these colorful vehicles would leave the yards and travel the system exposing the work of poor, urban artists to the entire city.

The physical urban layout of New York City plays an important role in the emergence of graffiti. Without a doubt, housing developments place people in ghettos in the outskirts of Manhattan (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1984: 302). The geographical division between the ghetto and the metropolis highlights social class boundaries. This living arrangement pushes people away from the city centre and their place in society is marginalized. Graffiti becomes an act of visual resistance; a means to exit physical urban borders and communicate a message beyond determined city limits. Graffiti tags travel throughout the city on the subway system and the voices from the margins are heard. The delinquent action of graffiti provides writers with a means to challenge their social class limitations.

This analysis extends into Merton's (1967) theories where rebellion is seen as one response to social class limitations. Graffiti as resistance is also a form of rebellion because it confronts both the aesthetic and social order. In New York, the marginal expression of graffiti renders city boundaries abstract and

brings forward a new medium for visual communication. By the early 1980s, the New York art scene turned its attention to graffiti art (Fineberg, 1995). This form of expression challenges the art world to reflect on its ability to exclude certain voices. In the beginning, graffiti was in effect a marginal and ethnic practice, a form of street art that pushed its way into the pristine SoHo art galleries. Some theorists argue that once graffiti enters the established art scene, it loses its discursive power (Cresswell, 1996). However, from a different perspective, the accepted presence of graffiti in the art world can also represent the collective social success rooted in the initial rebellious act.

Merton (1967) explains that rebellion does not happen on an individual basis, but rather it is a collective process. The Hip Hop movement is in effect a collective cultural experience that resists the established aesthetic. It includes music, dance, fashion and graffiti. Although Hip Hop is closely associated to criminality, it also speaks strongly about the reality of living in disenfranchised neighborhoods. From a sociological perspective, the shared context behind Hip Hop helps propel the movement forward. The artistic value grows outward, spreading worldwide as it relates to the experience of others faced with similar social realities. Graffiti resists the values that are connected to American cultural standards. Major corporations use billboards to advertise their products. Graffiti writers defy the rules of advertisement and place their product throughout the city. Their tag name receives free publicity and the attention they attain defies the rules of commerce. When the New York Times became interested in Taki 183, graffiti successfully withstood the challenge posed by the advertising industry.

For young people from poor neighborhoods, Taki 183 was a success story. He did the necessary graffiti work, got his name out there, achieved fame and with self-expression he overcame his social limitations.

Hirschi's (1967) theory is used to understand the continued popularity of graffiti as it expands beyond the milieu of American poverty. Currently, graffiti is not confined to any specific social class. It is appealing to anyone who wishes to challenge the current social model. It is an act of differentiation. Young people, who refuse to participate in standard activities, find recognition within this defiant subculture. This form of communication is attractive because it is inexpensive, accessible and direct. Graffiti is in effect a fringe activity that causes broader social ties to weaken. Ferrell (1993) believes that graffiti is an anarchistic act where writers challenge the value of material possession. They develop their own normative standards separate from more generalized social values. They see their self-expression as more important than any other person's right to expression. Personal property is secondary to their drive to mark the urban landscape. In essence, Hirschi (1967) would view these individuals as lacking in socialization.

Howard Becker (1963) has researched criminal subcultures. He adheres to the labeling theory and believes that delinquency can be further perpetuated by both imposed and self labeling activities. In his book Outsiders, he states:

A final step in the career of a deviant is movement into an organized deviant group. When a person makes a definite move into an organized group – or when he realizes and accepts the fact that he has already done so – it has a powerful impact on his conception of himself (Becker, 1968: 37).

The subcultural pull of graffiti is very compelling. First it provides justification for criminal activity and second, it provides extensive, exciting social connections. For a young person, entrance into this world can mean disaster. Traditional research assists in understanding some of the basic dynamics of organized delinquency. However, it is also important to look at graffiti from a contemporary perspective.

Graffiti is a repetitive behavior. The individuals who become involved in this activity are different from the general population. The risks associated with the practice likely match certain personality traits. As such, graffiti suspects should be studied as a group allowing for the identification of these characteristics. Hagan and McCarthy (1997) recognized that street involved youth were in effect a unique sub-group and found that they exhibited distinctive aspects of life on the streets. In Mean Streets: Youth, Crime and Homelessness, Hagan and McCarthy (1997) state:

Although minor forms of delinquency are well distributed in the youth population, this is less true of rarer forms of social behavior, such as being on the streets, and involvement in serious delinquency and crime (62).

Graffiti seen as a single occurrence can be viewed as a minor act, however when it is situated within the subculture it becomes a different criminal product. As with street cultures, Sutherland's (1966) concept of "differential association"⁴⁵ is extremely applicable. Indeed, crime in the graffiti subculture is also learned through exposure.

People adopt criminal definitions when this exposure exceeds contact with non-criminal behaviors and attitudes, and they are most likely to engage in crime when they encounter opportunities to translate these definitions into action. In other words, differential association provides people with the knowledge, skills, and definitions that encourage

⁴⁵ The basic premise of this theory is that people learn criminal behavior by associating with other criminals.

them to interpret situations as potential opportunities for offending (Hagan and MaCarthy, 1997: 136).

Graffiti is intrinsically a group activity; it is either done in a group or for the group. In either case, this connection to graffiti group ethics only increases as the tagger evolves. Eventually, graffiti writers become completely entrenched in a criminal lifestyle and their formative years of criminal associations can negatively influence their adult development.

As such, graffiti offending should be studied within the framework of life course persistent offending. Early detection is a primary concern for researchers in this field of study because it can assist with prevention and with risk management. Svensson (2002) states:

It is not the offence itself that should serve as the primary focus for such measures, but rather the group of individuals who commit a certain type of offence at the beginning of their criminal careers. The offence itself is indicative of a certain lifestyle, which in turn involves risk for a continued criminal career. The first opportunity available to the justice system to intervene is when those individuals engaged in such a lifestyle become registered for offences (395).

Many violent offenders have previously committed low level property offences at a younger age. While the implication is not that all graffiti taggers eventually become serious offenders, their offending behavior does indicate that they are at risk of becoming involved in severe criminal offences.

My attention to this aspect of graffiti increased after multiple dealings with graffiti suspects. I found that some of them initially presented as mischief offenders. However, as they aged their criminal choices included a wider variety of crimes. As an example, some of the graffiti taggers in the documentary City Space produced by Noble (2004) are very well-known to me. Some of them state that they *just* write on walls and that graffiti is not really all that serious in the full

gamut of crimes. However, many of these graffiti writers have been involved in very serious criminal offences, but they are unable to see the link between their graffiti and other criminal offending. In addition, I have dealt with 14 year olds involved in what some consider entry level criminal behavior such as graffiti tagging who then spiral into full blown criminal careers by the time they reach their 18th birthday. I have observed youth whose criminal associations lead them to joint adult offences. For example, three 14 year olds may form a graffiti tagging crew, but as adults this same group may commit robberies.

According to Moffitt (2001) there is a distinction between life course persistent offenders and adolescent limited offenders. Graffiti is attractive to both these criminal groups. For life course persistent offenders, it represents another criminal activity which concurs with their lifestyle. Indeed, it introduces them to a network of likeminded criminals who pay little regard to societal expectations and norms. Within this subculture, they find acceptance for their criminal attitudes and behaviors. For adolescent limited offenders, it offers a perfect defiant activity where society's rules can be broken within the constructs of an organized subculture. Graffiti appears as a safe alternative. While some graffiti offenders would never consider stealing a car, they are perfectly willing to cause \$100,000 worth of damage in the pursuit of their graffiti, and are actually proud of the damage they have caused. These two types of offenders mix socially as they are involved in a common activity. Over time, they build friendship networks which carry them into adulthood. As such, an individual who might have ceased

criminal activity at the end of adolescence may persist into adulthood because of these social ties.

EVOLUTION: From the School Bus to the Train Yard

A person does not wake up one morning and walk up to a wall with the capabilities necessary to execute a clean cut *wild style*⁴⁶ piece. A graffiti writer may take several years to become fully accomplished and held in high regard by other graffiti participants. These skilled writers are referred to as *Kings* and they are the rarest portion of the subculture. The bottom end of the subculture is comprised of *Toys*, these are usually young people who are experimenting with graffiti tagging. These individuals are in the majority and most of them will never ascend to the rank of *King*. In between these two stages, there are the developing writers and the *mad bombers*. These are individuals who are committed to the subculture and captivated by the fame it generates. These two aspiring groups are responsible for the most extensive damage and they are also the most difficult groups to steer out of the practice. This diagram depicts the graffiti hierarchy.

Figure 1: Graffiti Subculture Hierarchy



⁴⁶ Wild style refers to an intricate graffiti piece utilizing several colors where the letters are abstracted and difficult to read.

The following categories describe the most common evolution of a graffiti writer. Three categories were inspired by the work of Wendy Hawthorne from Translink who has been investigating graffiti crimes for the past twenty years. I have supplemented her information with my own experiences, but it should be noted that most of these observations were first documented by Hawthorne in the form of a PowerPoint presentation.⁴⁷ The last category I created to describe a unique group of graffiti suspects who appear to be driven by purely destructive motives.

Novice and Experimental Phase

This graffiti suspect is usually a younger person between 13 and 15 years old who most likely started doing graffiti upon arrival to high school. At this stage, a tag is selected, but it may not stay with the writer for his or her entire graffiti career and it often stems from a nickname or an attribute. It is practiced over and over again in notebooks, on school work, on pieces of scrap paper at home, and on various articles of clothing. To test this tag and to build confidence, the graffiti suspect will most likely select a felt marker and tag close to home, at school or on the way to and from school. The selected locations provide cover to assist in minimizing detection. The tags tend to be smaller. As the suspect develops confidence, more visible locations are hit and the tagging becomes more frequent.

Novice graffiti taggers have not been desensitized by repetitive criminal activity and usually have not created complex justification for their actions.

⁴⁷ In the spring of 2004, the Anti-Graffiti Unit designed and delivered a course for graffiti investigators. Hawthorne assisted in the design of the course by providing her Powerpoint presentation. These three categories come from this presentation. Hawthorne also participated in the instruction of this course and elaborated on these categories during the training session.

Intervention at this phase can prove to be highly successful. They can distinguish right from wrong and have not yet been lured by the fame graffiti can give them. When comparing graffiti to shoplifting they tend to understand that the two activities are similar. However, they admit that they would not have considered shoplifting and they believe that graffiti is a lesser offence. Once graffiti is contextualized as a criminal offence, they understand the potential ramifications and endeavor to cease their activities.

Developing and Committed Phase

These graffiti suspects are older (16 to 21). Some may persist in this criminal mode until their late 20s. By this time, they have become very committed to graffiti and most of them have developed some form of justification for their actions. They believe it is their right to do graffiti and that they are entitled to their practice. Their audience is the graffiti subculture and it is their acceptance that they seek. For this reason, their target locations are more difficult to access (rooftops, highway signs, highly visible walls, trains, trucks) and more varied. Hitting these difficult targets captures the attention of the subculture which is able to recognize the skills needed to complete these acts. These individual also go on graffiti expeditions that take them further away from their frequented areas and exposes them visually and socially to the larger group of graffiti taggers.

This heightened visibility boosts their self-esteem and they attain notoriety, which could be construed as a form of peer acceptance. This acceptance is subverted to accommodate young people who have a difficult time attaining recognition through other, more traditional means. In other words, if someone

takes the risk and does the crime, then the reward is peer acceptance. This central need of all adolescents can be so compelling that most forms of appropriate punishment do not provide deterrence. During this phase, it is very difficult to intervene, because by this time, these suspects have joined crews and reaped the benefits of their tagging popularity. As well, they are likely to be involved in other forms of criminality such as shoplifting paint, alcohol and clothes. They may enter into low end drug dealing to help finance their lifestyle. Some become involved in group violence such as swarmings.

The main hurdle in intervention is their obsession with graffiti which displays quite similarly to an addiction. A person who has attained this level has most likely been involved in graffiti for three to five years, has solidified a friendship network and has developed habitual graffiti practices that are extremely difficult to cease. Furthermore, alcohol and drug abuse (marijuana) are often concurrent with the graffiti activity. These suspects may recidivate after a party where they consume alcohol and find themselves in the presence of other graffiti taggers.

Accomplished and Skillful Phase

Although very few writers reach this stage, this group and what it produces dominates the literature on graffiti. Usually skilled writers are attracted to graffiti for artistic reasons and are committed to depicting their letters in order to achieve a visually complex piece. These writers use sketch books to practice and are likely utilize their graffiti skills in their employment. These individuals are easy to convert from their illegal practice to legitimate options because their ultimate goal

is an artistic one. These writers select targets where police apprehension is minimal (under a bridge, train yards, industrial areas or secluded rooftops). They require time to execute their pieces and they often document their work. Legal city mural programs are an attractive alternative because the walls they can access are much more visible and there is no risk of apprehension. Generally speaking these writers have minimal police contact and most of the accomplished Vancouver writers do not show up in the *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset*.

Mad Bomber and Frustrated Phase

There is a small group of graffiti suspects who are very similar to the *developing and committed phase* except that they also choose targets valued by the community such as legal murals. They tend to use more acid etch and execute more glass scratched tags. These are graffiti suspects who are incapable of skilled piecing and use other means to keep their tags up longer. Hitting up murals and using glass etch is one way of avoiding rapid tag removal. The clear motivation in this case is to attain visibility. These individuals are willing to take the risk. Most mad bombers are involved in other crimes. They constitute a high proportion of graffiti repeat offenders⁴⁸ with records of violence. Deterring these individuals can be very difficult. They require strict, enforceable conditions.

THINKING GLOBALLY: Graffiti Network Analysis

I spend my days tracking graffiti. Whether I am actually working or on days off, I am constantly looking for graffiti. In fact, even when I go out of town, I

⁴⁸ These are the offenders that are in the category of five or more reported graffiti incidents.

continue to look for graffiti. Based on this habit, I have learned to look at the city differently. It is possible to see that opportunities are expressed through specific cues and that graffiti writers develop an action template. The urban landscape is not static, but rather a latent expressive canvass. Graffiti writers have maximized the communicative value inherent to the city structure. As they master their skills, their activity space⁴⁹ becomes much broader. Eventually, they look to extend their practice to a larger social context. Inter-city travel is attractive, because it offers new possibilities. Discovering a new environment poses added challenges. Unlike most other property offences, graffiti carries a social message. It is larger than the single act because it refers back onto itself. A graffiti piece cannot exist in isolation, since it is in conversation with the body of work produced by the subculture.

I went back to my home town of Montreal in the summer of 2004. My younger brother invited me out to have a drinks with friends. We ended up at a place called *Foufounes Electrique*. Even with the 12 year age gap between my brother and I, this continues to be a hip place to go. It has gone from being a punk rocker, body slamming hangout to a Hip Hop, graffiti, courier messenger meeting place. The outside walls are covered from top to bottom with graffiti pieces, and bathroom stalls are tagged up. I found many Vancouver tags on these washroom walls as well as a small *East Van* tag by the pay phone. One of my brother's friends who was having a drink with us used to be a bicycle courier

⁴⁹ An awareness space is more fluid than an activity space. It is a space that a person is aware of, but may not visit regularly. On the other hand, an activity space is where a person conducts their daily routines. These concepts are described by Brantingham and Brantingham (1984: 352).

messenger and comes to *Foufounes Electrique* to meet her previous work colleagues.

We talked about the relationship that exists between taggers and courier messengers. Nearly 35 years after his emergence in the New York City graffiti scene, Taki 183 who was both tagger and courier messenger, continues to epitomize the social drive inherent in the practice of graffiti. His job allowed him to explore the inner structures of New York City and his tagging transformed his anonymity into recognition. Later during my visit to Montreal, I spent an afternoon walking in my old neighborhood. Walls that used to be clean were now completely tagged and pieced. Camera in hand, I took picture after picture and found 15 Vancouver graffiti taggers on various Montreal walls, some in multiple locations. I also recognized several Montreal taggers who are now active in Vancouver. The connection between the subcultures in these two cities was clear. As a police investigator there are very few crimes that would allow me to easily make this connection.

Graffiti can be used as one indicator of juvenile delinquency. It can also show how participants in the subculture interact. As described before, most writers are between the ages of 16 and 24. As they get older, both their activity and their awareness space⁵⁰ becomes significantly larger. The city is in effect their playground. They use various methods to commute from their home, to their school, to their friends, or to an entertainment area. As they travel throughout the city, their mark is left behind making it possible to trace their pathways. Mapping

⁵⁰ An awareness space is more fluid than an activity space. It is a space that a person is aware of, but may not visit regularly. On the other hand, an activity space is where a person conducts their daily routine (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1984: p.352).

graffiti can assist in further understanding the spatial distribution of juvenile delinquency. It traces the pathways of young offenders as they travel both to the city core and to high crime locations. Kelling and Coles (1996) believe that graffiti is a crime indicator and that areas saturated with graffiti are also plagued with high crime rates. The Downtown Eastside of Vancouver is a prime example. The back lanes are covered with graffiti, even with weekly clean-ups, it continues to proliferate. This would indicate that graffiti writers are in constant contact with a criminally entrenched population, which is not inherently part of the subculture, but instead consistent with other risks associated to the practice.

Based on an ecology drawn from botany, Shaw and McKay (1969) study delinquency crime rates in relation to the growth of a city. Using Chicago as an example, they show the concentric composition of the city. Crime is closer to the centre and concentrated in transitional areas. Notably, these are neighborhoods where buildings are dilapidated and stable residents have moved to safer suburbs. They develop a predictive crime model, which is transferable to other similar cities. This research supports the idea that crime is attracted to areas affected by urban decay. Poverty, crime and deteriorating housing are significant elements that cause cities to grow outward. McKay and Shaw (1969) demonstrate that juvenile crime distribution is consistent with the structure of the city (Shaw and McKay, 1969: 43-89). They are able to transfer this model to other cities such as Philadelphia, Boston, Cincinnati, Cleveland and Richmond. They find consistencies in crime rate distribution and explain that crime follows the natural evolution of cities.

Interestingly, with the Shaw and McKay (1969) study both offense locations and offender residences are found in the same areas. This finding further supports the argument that most young offenders are from poor neighborhoods. However, it is important to note that they base their study on “male juvenile delinquents brought before the juvenile court” (Shaw and McKay, 1969: 51). Certainly, class background impacts the course of criminal investigations. Young offenders from privileged families are much less likely to enter the court system. A realistic view of juvenile delinquency would have to calculate offenses from a different perspective. Arguably, even police records may carry predisposed class biases. Delinquency should actually be viewed on a continuum with behaviors ranging from ‘at risk’ activities to clearly defined criminal acts. With this definition in mind, graffiti can help to further explain actual delinquency crime distribution.

Graffiti draws from a full activity range. It can show offender movement. It is possible to show where an offender has traveled by tracking his individual tag. Graffiti can also expose offender association. Interestingly, graffiti writers often tag very close to their friends’ homes. For example, a basketball hoop at the back of a suspect’s residence becomes the sign-in bulletin board for his friends. Pre-court cases and pro-active police checks offer a more valid measurement. For example, a case where a young person is caught doing graffiti mischief and returned to the custody of his parents should be considered in the study of graffiti suspects. Finally, graffiti can assist in identifying tempting and interactive locales. Young people are attracted to areas that offer heightened social interaction.

Graffiti writers are likely to seek out these areas to carry out their mischief. These locations offer a larger audience which then recognizes and acknowledges the presence of graffiti tags.

A preliminary analysis of graffiti in Vancouver completed by the AGU in 2003 shows that although offender distribution is fairly consistent across the entire city, the majority of offenses are committed in the downtown core. This high offence area can be separated into two main zones: the Downtown Eastside and the Granville Mall. Shaw and McKay's (1969) differentiation theory is applicable to the Downtown Eastside. This area is in transition. Many buildings are either abandoned or in the process of being demolished. Lack of community attachment makes this an attractive place for graffiti vandals. They are able to commit their mischief and less likely to attract attention. The second area, the Granville Mall, is attractive for other reasons. A consistent theme in graffiti theory revolves around the social rewards associated to the practice. The Granville Mall is a strong attractor of young people where graffiti writers see social opportunities. They frequent this location for both social and criminal purposes.

Graffiti is an informative striation in the city structure. Mapping this phenomenon helps to explain the mobility of juvenile delinquents. Clearly, these offenders are attracted to areas in the city where people come to socialize. Their goal is visual exposure. Notoriety takes precedence over the criminal act. They are motivated by the interactive essence of urban living. They are attracted to this challenge. Graffiti becomes a means to access and support a social network. They use their tag as an alter ego and their true identity remains undisclosed.

Through this activity they subvert urban conformity and escape societal constructs. On the street, graffiti writers will recognize each other through their affinity to certain fashion styles, thus opening the door to conversation. Quickly they exchange their tag names and recognize each other as part of the same subculture. The collective pursuit of graffiti remains a strong bond regardless of where it is practiced or who is producing it.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

RESEARCH PROJECT: Why Study Graffiti Offenders?

“It’s an addiction-an all-consuming addiction-one that ruins lives.”
(Paul 107, 2003: 7)

It is 2 o’clock in the morning, a suspect jumps over a fenced-in construction site, steals materials, escapes, and the next day uses these materials to build his back deck. It is 2 o’clock in the morning, a suspect cuts open the gate padlock to a construction site, lights the unfinished structure on fire, and leaves the scene only to look back at his handy work from a safe distance. It is 2 o’clock in the morning, a suspect cuts open a space in a fence to access a construction site, he climbs to the highest and most visible wall, spray paints an intricate graffiti piece, and leaves only to come back the next day to photograph his work.

These are different examples of break and enter which under the Criminal Code of Canada is a criminal offence. The only difference in these cases is the indictable offence committed therein. In the first situation, it is theft, the second arson, and the third mischief. All three criminal acts produce a victim: the property owner. The offences are committed at night indicating that the offenders know their acts are against the law and doing them after dark reduces the risk of police apprehension. When it comes to graffiti, the offence is taken lightly because it is perceived as an artistic expression rather than a criminal activity. One could also say that some arsonists see their work as beautiful and something worth looking at from a distance.

However, no one would consider deconstructing arson to articulate its aesthetic value, nor would they use art as a defense where beauty is in the eye of the beholder and space becomes a fluid concept. But when it comes to graffiti, property owners are taken to task, accused of being oversensitive about their space, and told to appreciate the actions of the tagger. The concept of space is manipulated with semiotic tactics and the idea of private property subverted into a complex discussion of public versus private space. The artistic value of graffiti is misleading because no matter how articulate we are about this activity, the victimization of property owners is real, and using philosophical concepts to buffer harm is dangerous and insensitive. Society in general needs to take responsibility for the way in which this act is framed. Painting someone's property without permission from the owner is a crime, regardless of the end product. As long as this misconception is perpetuated, young people will continue this practice and experience the risks associated with a belief system that condones repetitive criminal behavior.

As a police officer investigating graffiti offences, I have formulated certain premises based on contact with the graffiti subculture. Although the criminal potential of graffiti is still only speculative, I have drawn some tentative conclusions and I am aware that my close connection to the subculture may skew my perspective. The research conducted as part of this thesis provides the necessary distance to answer important questions about graffiti offending, thus transferring exploratory ideas into factual information. In current academic research, graffiti involvement is seen as an artistic exercise as well as a positive

expression of youth. Yet once graffiti is clearly positioned as also being an act of vandalism, like fire setting, throwing rocks from an overpass, or kicking in windows, it can be understood as a juvenile at-risk behavior. From a preventative perspective, young individuals involved in this practice should be given the appropriate attention from the criminal justice system.

Doing graffiti is more than a single act; it is in fact a way of life with an accompanying belief system that justifies criminal activity. In most cases, it is the committed participation in a subculture which often results in doing crime within small groups. Most graffiti suspects join crews and write both their tag and their crew name. Many crew names refer to criminal behavior and use words such as destruction, vandalize, death, hate, and weapons.⁵¹ Younger taggers are schooled by older ones who teach not only the tricks of the graffiti trade, but also related criminal acts like stealing spray paint, clothes or alcohol. Furthermore, battles between crews for prime graffiti real estate often result in physical assaults and carrying prohibited or concealed weapons.⁵² These become learned behaviors which are often displayed in other social contexts.

Most graffiti writers start in early adolescence⁵³ and crime quickly becomes a habitual activity. The social interactions they experience are limited to like-minded individuals simply because others within their age cohort would not condone their actions or their criminal attitudes. The bonds they form with each

⁵¹ This is the case with new generation crews. Old school crews made more references to art rather than criminal and aggressive behavior.

⁵² Graffiti suspects sometimes carry bear mace which is a prohibited weapon. This is used for protection against other rival crews and also when they go into the train yards. This information is obtained from the suspect files of the AGU.

⁵³ Offender age is explored in the documentary by Chalfant (1984) *Style Wars*. Several graffiti writers are interviewed and state that they were introduced to graffiti as 12 or 13 year olds. This information is confirmed in other research. However, the peak involvement seems to be between 15 and 19 years old. The age variable is explored at an aggregate level in both the Shannon, and Halsey and Young projects.

other can be very deep and carried over into adulthood. The kinship experienced in a tagging crew is very powerful and sustainable. The research in this thesis will show that increased association with the subculture results in a higher level of criminal involvement, which may be correlated to life-course persistent offending. In order to fully investigate this relationship between graffiti offending and future criminal involvement, it is important to set out the groundwork for further research. In a first instance, the following questions need to be answered:

- 1- **General graffiti suspect profile:** age, gender, race, criminal history.
- 2- **Geographic profile:** suspect residence and offence location.
- 3- **Suspect association:** number of associates within the subculture.

As this cohort ages, it is possible to track the associations and criminal paths of these subjects. The study of graffiti suspects from an aggregate level provides practitioners in the criminal justice system with knowledge about consistent traits. This type of analysis assists in determining a basic suspect profile and illustrating the social and criminal impact that accompanies participation in the graffiti subculture, which in turn helps in the development of appropriate intervention and rehabilitation strategies.

This aggregate analysis shows that graffiti suspects are involved in a variety of crimes and that their crimes are geographically predictable in a way consistent with the Routine Activity Theory of Cohen and Felson (1979). Cohen and Felson (1979) state that crime occurs where there is a “convergence in space and time of *likely offenders*, *suitable targets* and the *absence of capable guardians*” (598). In the case of graffiti, practically every visible space in the city is a suitable target.

Graffiti can also illustrate many of the concepts discussed in Patterns of Crime (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1984). Graffiti is a very interesting property offence to map out, because unlike other offences it can trace very distinctive offender pathways and illustrate the subtleties of an offender's awareness space. For example, graffiti can show whether the path of choice is streets or alleys⁵⁴, whether the mode of transportation is bus or bicycle⁵⁵, or whether an offender prefers one side of the street over the other.

Graffiti shows the impact of offender association and it is speculated that increased association may be linked to a larger awareness⁵⁶ space and possibly a prolonged criminal career (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1991). The *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset* contains 536 subjects who can be tracked and analyzed at a later date. The theory is that some graffiti suspects are at risk for becoming life-course persistent offenders. Longitudinal research has been conducted for other types of offenders who commit crimes at a younger age. The repetition of certain offences correlates with future criminal involvement⁵⁷. Except for the Shannon study, the offence of graffiti mischief has not been studied from a longitudinal perspective. The belief system inherent in the practice of graffiti is harmful. The premise is anti-social and the activity is purposely destructive. Furthermore, the primary objective, which is to promote oneself, comes at the

⁵⁴ Graffiti writers will tag dumpsters in back lanes and street objects such as mail boxes or street lights.

⁵⁵ Graffiti writers will tag the back of buses (sometimes referred to as bus taggers) and bicycle taggers will regularly tag well traveled bike routes.

⁵⁶ Offender search patterns include the following variable: "multiple offenders", "non-uniform distribution of targets or victim", and "home, work or school, shopping and recreation bases" (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1991: 46-47). These are the classic variables that exist in a graffiti tagging crew scenario.

⁵⁷ The Svensson (2002) article explores "strategic offences". These are offences that when committed at a young age predisposes offenders to becoming life course persistent offenders. Svensson finds that offenders who have a first time offence of car theft are far more likely to become chronic offenders while those who shoplift as a first offence are much less likely to become repeat offenders (501-502).

expense of society and with a complete disregard for victims. It can be argued that the lessons learned in the graffiti subculture during socially formative years are far more destructive than they are valuable.

This research is anticipated to be useful in a practical setting. As a graffiti investigator, I am often asked to provide a suspect profile and to assist with preventative measures. I also present to various agencies that work with youth and that develop intervention techniques. In these situations, it is important to present founded information stemming from a sound research design.⁵⁸ The purpose of this study, therefore, is to develop a consistent suspect profile that will assist in formulating offender-specific strategies and in redirecting young graffiti vandals toward more positive outlets. Most academic research on graffiti suspects is based on extremely small qualitative samples. The subculture is elusive and it is challenging for outsiders to make contact with graffiti writers. It appears that many academics have based their research on accomplished graffiti writers. This may be because these are the individuals who are easier to identify and with whom it is easier to interview. Within this context, graffiti can be a constructive practice because those who are accomplished are those who demonstrate personality traits such as hard working, committed, diligent and industrious. However, those who have succeeded because of graffiti are rare and represent a skewed sample.

I have met accomplished writers who are now fully employed through their skills. Graffiti is in fact a positive motivator. I have also met young graffiti

⁵⁸ Due to the lack of research and insight into this particular offender group, actors within the criminal justice system are intuiting their viewpoint into the interpretation of these offenders, which in turn affects the type of programs and sentences they receive.

suspects who are dragged into repetitive criminal behavior, who become obsessed with graffiti and who suffer because of their involvement in the subculture. I have experienced a sharp distinction between various graffiti offender groups and I have also come to realize that writers who benefit from graffiti are a minority compared to offenders who are negatively impacted by this activity. This research provides an evidence-based contrast to current academic writing on the successes in the graffiti subculture. It offers the actual perspective of offenders who are difficult to track down because they are not accomplished and have not received notoriety.

DATA COLLECTION: *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset*

In April 2002 the Vancouver Police Department formed the Anti-Graffiti Unit (AGU). The mandate of the AGU is to track and prosecute serial Hip Hop graffiti offenders. It is also responsible for developing appropriate alternate measures for these offenders. In order to undertake these tasks in an efficient manner, the AGU developed a database that contains graffiti offenders who are active throughout the Lower Mainland. Graffiti suspects are not specific to jurisdictions since they often travel to various areas to do their crimes. The City of Vancouver used to be considered a graffiti hub. Writers would travel to the city for the expressed purpose of showcasing their work. The management of this problem population could not be successful without a structured approach to graffiti offender identification.

Multiple investigative methods were used to identify suspects. The AGU liaised with other Lower Mainland police departments⁵⁹, delivered training to patrol and partnering organizations, networked with American police agencies and conducted advanced queries in PRIME (the Vancouver Police Department's report management system).⁶⁰ Often, graffiti suspects are involved in various crimes and come to the attention of the police not because they have committed a mischief, but because they are involved in other criminal activities. For example, a shoplifter caught stealing spray paint at Canadian Tire can indicate graffiti involvement. As well, a victim of an assault by a known graffiti writer can be battling over graffiti territory.

In the fall of 2002, the AGU conducted graffiti training with the Department's patrol teams and asked that the Unit be notified of pertinent graffiti information. Reporting rates increased significantly which assisted with the identification of offenders. The Unit also trained other partnering agencies and requested assistance with graffiti investigations.⁶¹ This training modified the perception of graffiti offenders who were often dismissed in their criminal behavior. Police units would not hesitate to rush to a theft from auto in

⁵⁹ The Anti-Graffiti Unit meets regularly with Constable Wendy Hawthorne from Translink. Hawthorne has been investigating graffiti mischief offences for 20 years and is recognized in the field of policing as a graffiti expert and shared her knowledge of graffiti offenders with the AGU. Hawthorne also acts as a link between many Lower Mainland police departments and promotes information sharing.

⁶⁰ This system came online in February 2001.

⁶¹ The AGU trains all incoming call taking (emergency and non-emergency) classes at E-COMM. E-COMM is the Greater Vancouver Regional District 911 centre. The AGU also trained Downtown Business Improvement Association (DVBIA) ambassadors and loss prevention officers. DVBIA employees often witness graffiti offenders in the act of tagging. The AGU also trained specific agencies such as the City Property Use Inspection section in how to track and read graffiti.

progress⁶², on the other hand, in progress graffiti mischief offences were sometimes downplayed by citizens⁶³, 911⁶⁴, and the police.⁶⁵

However, a business window tagged with acid etch can be significantly more costly than a theft from auto. As well, graffiti offenders tend to commit mischief offences at a higher rate.⁶⁶ For example, a theft from auto suspect may commit 10 offences on a busy day. Whereas a graffiti offender can easily damage 50 business windows in a few hours, will tag the bus on the way there, every other dumpster, mail box, and street sign between these businesses.⁶⁷ Through training, graffiti was properly framed as a criminal code offence and the associated costs were expressed in actual dollar figures. Patrol and 911 reacted immediately in a positive manner. The artistic paradigm that shelters graffiti offenders was eliminated and when caught they were being treated like other property crime offenders.

At the same time that the AGU was conducting training, the City of Vancouver's Graffiti Management Team was running an education campaign. This helped to raise the profile of graffiti. Reporting increased, and with the education of E-COMM and patrol, police response rates were extremely effective. In the spring of 2003, the AGU found that 97.5% of in progress graffiti mischief cases in Vancouver resulted in the apprehension of suspects. Fifty two

⁶² These are calls to 911 where a witness is observing and reporting a crime as it is occurring.

⁶³ Citizens sometimes felt reluctant to report this activity while it was in progress and would choose to report it through the non-emergency number. By the time the call was re-directed the suspects were gone.

⁶⁴ Graffiti mischief cases were often put up as a suspicious person which is a lower priority than a mischief in progress.

⁶⁵ Suspects caught in the act were sometimes released with a warning.

⁶⁶ This is a statement is from personal experience. Having observed both graffiti and theft from auto suspects in action, graffiti writers repeat their crimes at a higher rate. The search pattern of a graffiti writer is much more rapid, repetitive and erratic. Their goal is volume.

⁶⁷ In "Hot Spots of Predatory Crime: Routine Activity and the Criminology of Place", Buerger, Gartner and Sherman (1989) discuss the intersection of routine and criminal activity. In graffiti offending the relationship between space, routine activity and crime is extremely visible. Graffiti offenders regularly commit their crimes during routine activities and graffiti becomes a visual manifestation of the relationship between offending and routine activities.

percent⁶⁸ of these cases resulted in charges.⁶⁹ As well, police pro-activity rates increased.⁷⁰ Early identification of offenders was greatly improved.

This study utilizes information gathered by the AGU over the course of four years and the suspects who were identified between February 2001 and December 2004 formulate the initial dataset. At the time of the research, PRIME was queried using the following words: graffiti, grafitti⁷¹, spray paint, spray can and tagger. Each file was then reviewed to ascertain whether the suspects are participants in the graffiti subculture and the suspects are subsequently entered in the dataset. This dataset was then reviewed to remove offenders who are not involved in Hip Hop graffiti.⁷² After this review, a master list was established and is currently kept on the secured computer systems of the AGU for future research. A secondary list was compiled from the master document and all identifying information removed. The two lists can be linked through an identifying number. The following categories are included in the final dataset:

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Identifying number: | numerical starting with 1 and going to 653 |
| Gender: | male or female |
| Age: | Age of the offender at the time of analysis |
| Age 2: | Age of the offender at the time of the offence |
| Offender address: | reduced to 100 block |
| Offence location: | reduced to 100 block |
| Date of the offence: | Year and month |
| Time of the offence: | Time of the offence |
| Number of associates: | Number of associates as listed in PRIME |
| Number of graffiti associates: | Number of graffiti associates within the dataset |

⁶⁸ This statistic comes from the first year end report of the AGU. The AGU reviewed the graffiti cases that occurred after the training and found that response rates had greatly increased as well as charging rates. For more information on the graffiti reduction and police response rates see Elizabeth Miller (2003) "Administrative Report: A One Year Update of the Anti-Graffiti Unit."

⁶⁹ The reasons for not laying a charge usually related to a witness refusing to testify, not enough evidence at the scene, or the individuals were simply acting suspicious, but not committing an offence.

⁷⁰ These are cases where the police generate a call as opposed to responding to a 911 report.

⁷¹ People often misspell graffiti.

⁷² There were initially 676 subjects and 400 repeat entries. 113 subjects were removed for the following reasons: duplication of name, no last name, subject not on PRIME, not a Hip Hop graffiti writer, other gang member, or there was not enough information to determine the nature of graffiti involvement.

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Charges: | Number of charges listed on PRIME |
| Police contact: | Number of contacts with VPD since 2001 |
| Types of contact: | Types of contacts with VPD |
| Nature of first contact: | First contact with VPD. |

Special consideration is brought to the geographical component of this thesis. Graffiti is a visual crime; everyone can see it. When a graffiti writer is active in a particular neighborhood, several residents know who it is. Others involved in the subculture most certainly know this writer. Reducing addresses to 100 blocks may not be sufficient to protect the identity of the subject. To guarantee anonymity in the mapping component only depicts the major streets of Vancouver. This approach is sufficient and the necessary information is contained within the offender templates. The 100 blocks are contained in the dataset on a secured computer system and with no public access.

GRAFFITI SUSPECT CATEGORIES: From Unknown to Known

The purpose of this research is to identify distinguishing characteristics of Vancouver graffiti suspects. This will be done using a known suspects identified by the AGU. This is an exhaustive sample that contains all the suspects that are identified by the AGU. This data is reviewed and subjects are categorized based on the following criteria: known graffiti suspect, associate of known graffiti suspect, and persons believed to be graffiti suspects. Separating offenders into three categories allows for a more detailed analysis. The three categories are defined as follows:

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| <u>Known graffiti suspect:</u> | A person caught in the act of doing graffiti. The graffiti sample is reviewed and qualifies as Hip Hop graffiti. This |
|--------------------------------|---|

person has a known graffiti tag that is readable and identifiable. The AGU can trace this tag within the community. The person may have crew affiliations.

Associate of known graffiti suspect:

A person is checked in company of a known graffiti suspect. The parties are checked due to a specific incident. It is undetermined whether this individual is an active graffiti tagger.

Person believed to be a graffiti suspect:

A person is believed to be involved in the graffiti subculture due to a variety of circumstances not limited to the following: caught stealing spray paint, checked in the train yards, near a graffiti incident, or at a graffiti hangout.

Each category is assessed individually to establish the different relationships between the variables. Known graffiti suspects are of particular interest since these subjects can be traced to an actual graffiti tag that helps determine their level of activity and involvement.

In future research it would also be interesting to track the progression of the associates and the individuals who are suspected graffiti writers. For example, a person who associates with a graffiti tagger may eventually become a writer and progress into other criminal behavior. As well, a person believed to be a graffiti suspect may become a confirmed writer and in future research, qualify as a known graffiti writer. From a sampling perspective, it is important to note that many graffiti suspects evade police apprehension. Their crimes are repetitive, rapid and often committed at night. Sometimes, multiple police contacts are necessary to be confident of a person's involvement in the graffiti subculture. The majority of known graffiti writers have been interviewed by the AGU. This is often

the most accurate way to determine their level of involvement. At the time of this research, several tags in the City of Vancouver are not associated with a suspect. It is likely that there are offenders who have not yet come to the attention of the police. There could be subjects who are listed as associates or persons believed to be graffiti suspects, who could in fact be very active taggers, but who have yet to be cleared to a specific tag and crew.

Demographic Information - Police Contacts - Temporal Analysis

The master dataset is contained in an Excel spreadsheet and is numerically coded. This list is transferred into SPSS for statistical purposes. The first level of statistical analysis is descriptive and provides the following general suspect information: gender, race and ethnicity, age, and age at the time of the offence. Both age variables are divided into the following categories: under 12; 12 to 15; 16 to 18; 19 to 21; 22 to 24; over 25.⁷³ The frequency function is used to determine these general patterns and these statistics are presented in the form of percentages.

The AGU tracks the time and date of the reporting of offences.⁷⁴ In order to simplify this analysis, the date is reduced to month. Time of offence is defined under the following categories: 00:00 to 03:00 hrs; 03:01 to 06:00; 06:01 hrs to 09:00 hrs; 09:01 hrs to 12:00 hrs; 12:01 to 15:00 hrs; 15:01 to 18:00 hrs; 18:01 to 21:00 hrs; 21:01 to 23:59 hrs. There is a speculation that graffiti offending peaks in October and then again in May. This is based on two periods when more

⁷³ There will be two age categories one which determines the current age of the offender and the other which determines the age of the offender at the time of the offence.

⁷⁴ In PRIME the actual time of the offence can be recorded. Most of the cases in this dataset involve suspects that are caught in the act. Therefore the time of the offence is very accurate.

school related offences occur. The AGU has not found any pattern in time of offence, however, this detailed analysis may reveal a pattern of interest.

Charges in PRIME are counted to find out the relationship between the number of criminal charges and other variables. The police contact category refers to the other various forms of interaction between the police and graffiti suspects. These contacts are separated into the following six offence categories that represent the possible scope of offences: violent offences (robbery - assault - weapons charge); property offences (theft - break and enter - mischief); sexual offences; drugs; breach and, driving offences. A separate category is created for arson in order to determine whether there exists a strong relationship between graffiti offending and arson. The AGU noticed a possible pattern between graffiti offending and arson. It is undetermined whether the incidences of arson within the graffiti population is consistent with the pattern found in a general population of offenders in this same age category. Three additional non-criminal categories are created to reflect the variety of contacts. These included: missing person, victim, and witness. Several graffiti suspects are on curfews and it is common for them to be listed as missing. These are usually 24 hour incidents and the youth returns the next day.

Graffiti suspects are also victims of crimes. The AGU noticed that many offenders first come to police attention as victims. It has not been determined whether this is a significant occurrence within the graffiti cohort, and if so, whether this is also the case within the general population. Finally, many graffiti suspects are witnesses. In some of the cases, they are witnesses to a graffiti

related incident such as an assault over graffiti space. At other times, they are witnesses to unrelated offences.

The AGU tracks repeat graffiti offenders. This information is also kept in the database and therefore contained within the master dataset. These are cases where the offender is apprehended by the police for graffiti on multiple occasions. These are also cases where there is a reported mischief offence and the AGU has reviewed the tagging evidence and cleared the case to a known suspect. This data is used within this research project to describe the repetitive criminal behavior of graffiti writers. There are three offender groups: no graffiti offence repeats, one to four graffiti repeat offences, and five or more graffiti repeat offences. The five and over is considered the most active offender subgroup. This subgroup of repeat graffiti suspects is measured against the other variables to determine whether there are any distinguishing characteristics in this offender group. As well, this subgroup is analyzed from a geographical perspective to determine specific offender movement and the offender templates are derived from this info.

Geographic Information - Mobility Information

The geographic component of this research project is completed using ArcGIS 9 and comparing the results with PRIME reports. The driving history of the subjects is analyzed to determine their mobility potential. The first two age categories⁷⁵ do not qualify simply because these offenders are not old enough to drive. Other forms of transportation are also taken into consideration such as

⁷⁵ The categories are 12 and under and 12 to 15 years.

bus, skytrain, bicycle or skateboard. Other points of interest include proximity of offences to the residence of an associate, localized offending of persons with no fixed address, and incidents occurring at popular graffiti spots or in higher social areas of the city.

Subjects who are listed five or more times in the dataset are analyzed in order to establish offender specific profiles and three offender templates are provided. Their graffiti mischief offences are mapped out in relation to their residence and other significant locations. These locations are also mapped out when these subjects are cross offenders. The patterns displayed by these offenders are compared to the other variables and distinguishing categories are created.

Networking Information

Graffiti suspects are very social and like to meet other people who are interested in graffiti. For the past year, I have been involved in a restorative justice program called RESTART.⁷⁶ In this endeavor, I met several graffiti writers and discovered that they have a very strong commitment to graffiti. Some of the participants are willing to travel two hours each way to attend the sessions and will not arrive late. While in the program they work hard, they easily accept team work strategies and they are extremely communicative. These are the qualities that Rahn (2002) illustrates in her research on graffiti writers. She sees the educational value and recognizes the motivation of writers who are involved in the graffiti subculture.

⁷⁶ RESTART (Restorative Art Project) is a program using Restorative Justice principles and it was piloted by the Vancouver Police Department in April 2004.

A graffiti writer develops skills through his work and exposure affords him additional recognition from the subculture. In turn, this recognition fuels his graffiti and further commits him to the subculture. A writer who has been involved in graffiti for an extended time knows many others in the subculture and eventually may become completely focused on graffiti. Indeed, graffiti can be all consuming. It is a complex product. To live it means becoming an integral part of the subculture. As with most adolescent offending, graffiti is not a solitary process, but is often done as a group activity (Farrington, 2003). Those found in the company of a graffiti writer are sometimes crew members. Other times they are being introduced to graffiti or are people who come along to experience the graffiti rush. A person who is significantly involved in the subculture has, in most cases, multiple associates.

Within the context of this thesis, increased association is believed to be linked to future criminal involvement. While suspects appear highly motivated by the practice, the criminal undertones of the subculture are seen to have a negative impact on the development of a young person.⁷⁷ Suspect association is captured in the dataset and is analyzed from two perspectives. The networking information is drawn using Microsoft Visio to show the connectedness of subjects within the subculture. Strength and breadth of association is analyzed and correlated to criminal background.

The speculation is that the number of associations has a probabilistic link to criminal involvement. As graffiti subjects evolve, so does their connection to

⁷⁷ This is an opposing view to Rahn's perspective. Rahn (2002) posits graffiti as a positive and educational tool. While I have also experienced through RESTART the extreme motivation of young graffiti taggers, I am reluctant to view graffiti and its implements as positive educational tools. In fact, my personal view of spray cans and the attraction to this implement is based in concepts that are more akin to addiction than to positive artistic motivation.

the subculture and eventually they become completely immersed with the majority of their social network directly linked to the practice of graffiti.

Subcultural values begin to dominate while other social rules are rejected. Crime is explained as a necessary component of graffiti; justification for criminal behavior becomes habitual. In his book Outsiders, Becker (1963) states that:

Thus, the deviant who enters an organized and institutionalized deviant group is more likely than ever to continue in his ways. He has learned, on the one hand, how to avoid trouble and, on the other hand, a rationale for continuing (39).

This criminological perspective is applied to graffiti offending. Graffiti has become an institutionalized subculture and increased association to this subculture is seen to have negative results on the overall development of young people who do graffiti.

Future Data Considerations

The only study that includes more than 50 graffiti subjects was conducted in Sweden by David Shannon (2001). His research is unique in that it actually talks about the potential risks associated with graffiti involvement. His findings indicate that there are two graffiti offender groups: one in which the offenders eventually choose to stop doing illegal graffiti and are not negatively impacted. In the other group the offenders take part because they are risk takers. In this second group, graffiti is found to have a negative impact. The *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset* is significantly larger than that of the Swedish study.

Furthermore, the Vancouver dataset pools from a pre-charge population as opposed to a criminally charged population. Criminally charged subjects are usually more advanced in the subculture, while other offenders may have begun

their criminal career with graffiti, but have never been charged with this offence. The use of pre-charge police data provides a much more accurate view of this offender population. To date, the lack of aggregate data on this specific offender group means that general conclusions cannot be reached. Once this population is studied within the confines of a valid research design, it will then be possible to study them on a long term basis. The *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset* can be re-analyzed in a few years in order to determine the progression of criminal involvement. The initial analysis in this thesis tracks a wide range of variables with many future research possibilities.

As a researcher of life course persistent offenders, Farrington finds that: “adolescent convictions for non-violent crimes actually predicted adult violence better than adolescent violent convictions” (Corrado et al, 2002: 322). It would seem logical that graffiti mischief offences would also be a valid indicator. The multi-faceted aspect of this practice puts young people at risk for future criminal acts. Not only is graffiti a crime in itself, it is also part of a subculture that justifies the crime. Young people involved in this activity find themselves slowly indoctrinated and lose their ethical attachment to societal values.⁷⁸ They adopt the values of the subculture that offers them a rationale for their criminal offences. Furthermore, graffiti has powerful ties to the developing ego of a young person. As they progress in the subculture, their entire self-definition becomes inextricably linked to graffiti. Extracting them from this subculture is extremely difficult simply because the majority of their peer group is usually involved in

⁷⁸ Hirschi's “control theory” is applicable in this case.

graffiti. Leaving this subculture means that they have to give up both their identity and the friends they have made through their graffiti alter ego.

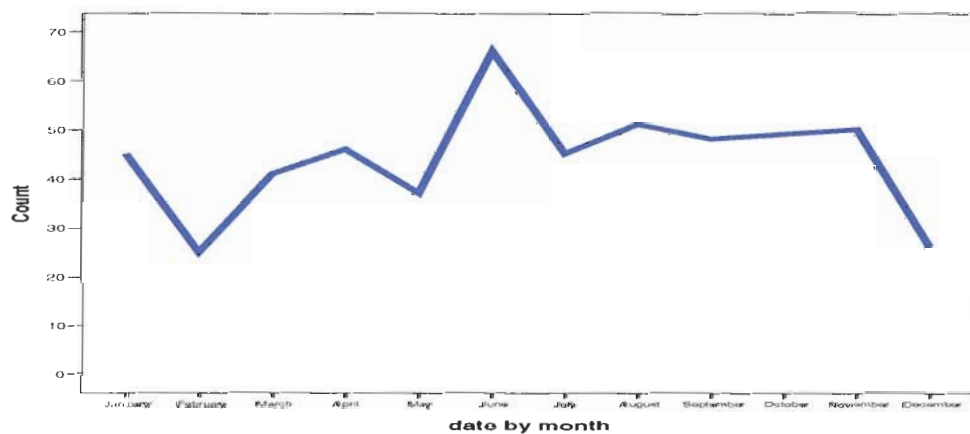
As a graffiti investigator, I have become increasingly aware of the potential risks connected to graffiti. I have seen young people who seemed to be progressing as normal adolescents spiral into a flurry of crime. Their lives are completely altered and irrevocably damaged because of the graffiti lifestyle. When I talk to a parent whose child has been caught for the first time doing graffiti and provide the profile we know to be consistent with graffiti offenders, they often agree that their child is facing a similar situation. Commonly, there are problems at school, peer acceptance issues, concerns with house rules (curfews and parental discipline), introduction of a new friend (most often already involved in graffiti), the beginnings of a substance abuse problem, sometimes learning disabilities (ADHD, ADD or dyslexia) and finally, behavioral problems (ODD or conduct disorders). Although these variables are not explored in this thesis, they should be considered within the framework of future research. These potentially impacting factors described above should be kept in mind when looking at long term deterrence strategies. However, the purpose here is to address basic questions surrounding offender profile, criminal history, offender movement and association. This information can assist in the early identification and deterrence of graffiti writers.

CHAPTER 4: Results

Temporal Information: Incidents by Month

Graffiti incidents take place on a regular basis throughout the year. While weather factors create some technical limitations with the medium of spray paint⁷⁹, Vancouver accommodates graffiti year round. The main factor that appears to impact incidents of graffiti is the school year.⁸⁰ Two significant drops occur in December (Christmas holidays) and July (summer holidays). The peak time for graffiti is in June⁸¹ when school age youth take the opportunity to skip school and head for the beaches where there are known graffiti hang outs (west of Kitsilano beach). As well, this is a time for parties and youth who are involved in graffiti have more opportunities to socialize and consume alcohol or marijuana, which can act as a trigger for graffiti.

Figure 2: Date by Month



(This graph is based on 529 cases – 7 cases are missing)

⁷⁹ Spray paint does not work below a certain temperature.

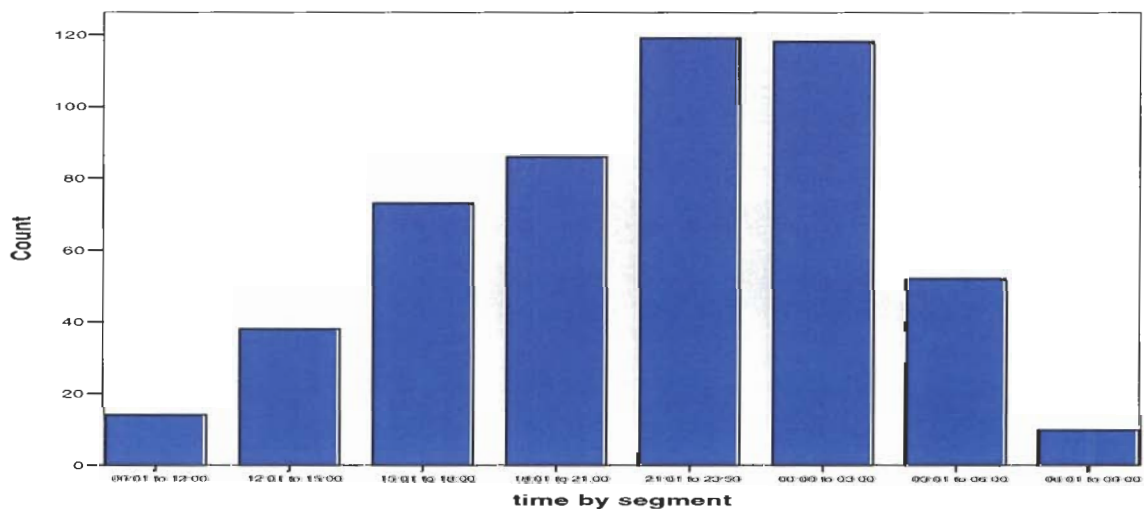
⁸⁰ This is a theory put forward by Wendy Hawthorne who has noticed a peak of graffiti in October and May.

⁸¹ This result is different than the previous observation of May and October that is based on investigative experience. In order to understand the June peak further research is necessary.

Temporal Information: Incidents by Time Periods

The distribution of graffiti throughout a 24 hour period shows a clear pattern where incidents spike between 21:00 hrs and 03:00 hrs.⁸² Forty four percent of the cases occur during this time period. This figure helps to understand some of the social dynamics of this crime. Graffiti is a social practice that often accompanies some form of substance abuse.⁸³ It is done on travel paths to and from home, friends' homes and social gathering places such as bars or parties. Certain events attract taggers and incidents of graffiti coincide with these events. Graffiti offenders attend these events and while on smoke breaks, they take the opportunity to tag the surrounding area. These events or parties also trigger other graffiti related incidents. For example, fights occur when rivaling crews show up at the same party or event.

Figure 3: Time by Segment



(This graph is based on 529 cases – 7 cases are missing)

⁸² Only cases when the actual offence time is correct are included.

⁸³ In *Crimes of Style Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*, Ferrell (1993) refers to this aspect of the subculture where crew mates not only do graffiti together, but they also socialize for other purposes which often includes drinking. I have confirmed this finding through conversations with multiple graffiti writers. As well, when arrested, graffiti offenders are often intoxicated by marijuana or alcohol.

Demographic Information

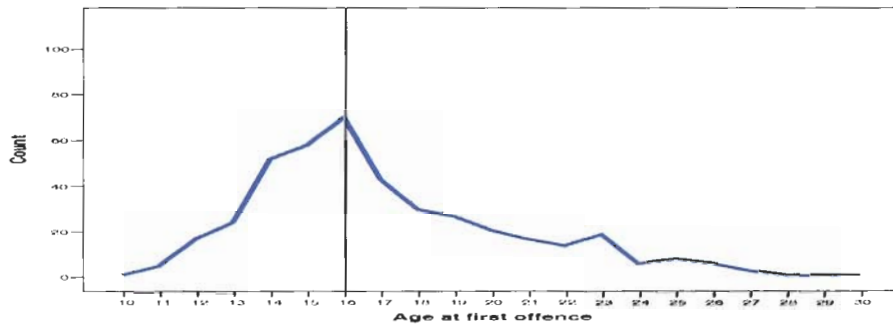
The research on the graffiti subculture indicates that the vast majority of writers are male (Halsey and Young, 2002; Macdonald, 2001; Shannon 2001). Ninety four percent of the subjects in the *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset* are males. This finding is consistent with other criminal offences where males are predominantly the offenders (Boyd, 2000 and Messerschmidt, 1993).

Table 1: Gender

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|---------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Male | 504 | 94.0 | 94.0 | 94.0 |
| | Female | 31 | 5.8 | 5.8 | 99.8 |
| | Not available | 1 | .2 | .2 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 536 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

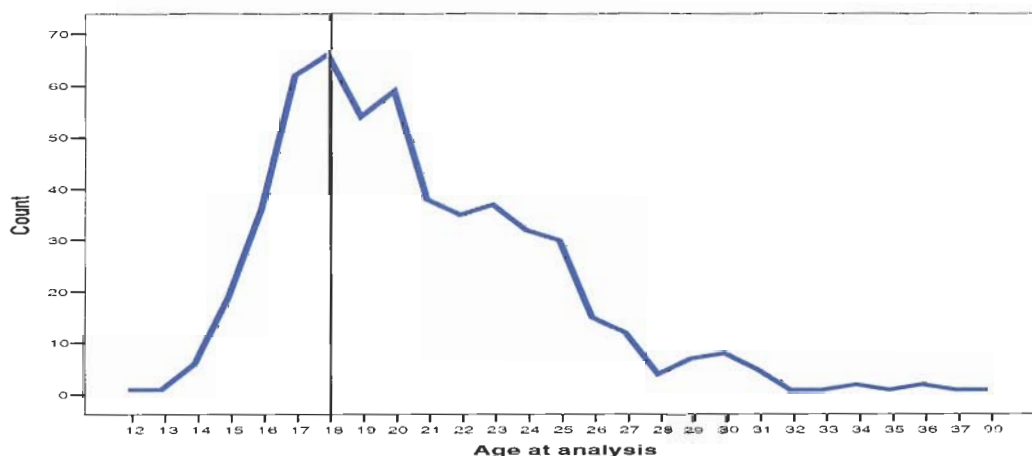
The research on graffiti does not give an aggregate indication of the age at which graffiti writers commit their first offence. Information in the *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset* was queried to determine the first offence. The difficulty with this information rests in the lack of compatibility between various police records management systems. The time required to query for an individual on all Lower Mainland police records systems would be extremely onerous. Individuals who did not appear to have grown up in Vancouver were excluded. The assumption with the remaining individuals is that their first offence was committed in Vancouver. Further research is necessary to test the validity of these results. One hundred and eleven cases were excluded and of the remaining sample, 42% committed their first offence by the age of 16 years.

Figure 4: Age at First Offence



A second age category is included in the dataset and provides the age of the offender at the time of analysis. Graffiti offenders are often referred to as 'kids', yet 65% of the subjects are over 18 years old (one case is missing). There is a sudden drop after 25 years, which is again consistent with other criminal populations.⁸⁴ This offence should not be reduced to a juvenile offence. It should be noted that the offenders who are capable of the most damage are the older ones who are able to travel from city to city. In tracking graffiti offenders, age becomes a significant variable to take into consideration.

Figure 5: Age at Analysis



⁸⁴ Gottfredson and Hirschi (1983) put forward the age crime curve theory, but do not provide tangible explanations as to why this occurs. In "Why Men Commit Crimes (and Why they Desist)", Kanazawa and Still (2000) put forward evolutionary explanations that help better understand the dynamics of graffiti offending. Of particular interest is their theory that "smaller and unpopular boys will be more criminal and violent than their larger or popular counterparts" p.445. This theory mirrors some of the observations of graffiti suspects made by graffiti investigators.

In New York City graffiti was predominantly ethnic practice (Austin, 2001). Once it evolved into an established cultural movement, the racial boundaries were blurred. In Vancouver, the majority of graffiti writers are Caucasian (77%). There are cross-racial and ethnic associations within crews in Vancouver. This was also the case at the onset of the graffiti subculture in New York as some of the initial crews had mixes of ethnic backgrounds (Miller, 2002).

Table 2: Ethnic Breakdown

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|---------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Caucasian | 415 | 77.4 | 77.4 | 77.4 |
| | Asian | 20 | 3.7 | 3.7 | 81.2 |
| | Aboriginal | 39 | 7.3 | 7.3 | 88.4 |
| | Black | 11 | 2.1 | 2.1 | 90.5 |
| | Hispanic | 10 | 1.9 | 1.9 | 92.4 |
| | East Indian | 6 | 1.1 | 1.1 | 93.5 |
| | Middle Eastern | 5 | .9 | .9 | 94.4 |
| | Information not available | 30 | 5.6 | 5.6 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 536 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

A few years ago, Vancouver was certainly considered a graffiti center where people would come to do illegal graffiti. In my conversations with writers, many say that the presence of graffiti influenced their future involvement. Seeing the graffiti made them curious and therefore drawn to the practice. It could be argued that the presence of this graffiti triggers future generations to participate. This could explain why there are a greater number of graffiti writers from Vancouver.

Table 3: City of Residence

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid No fixed address | 16 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 3.0 |
| Vancouver | 371 | 69.2 | 69.2 | 72.2 |
| Lower Mainland | 96 | 17.9 | 17.9 | 90.1 |
| Elsewhere in BC | 16 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 93.1 |
| Elsewhere in Canada | 7 | 1.3 | 1.3 | 94.4 |
| Elsewhere in the USA | 10 | 1.9 | 1.9 | 96.3 |
| Info not available | 20 | 3.7 | 3.7 | 100.0 |
| Total | 536 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Police Information

The information contained in this dataset is based on reported contacts with the Vancouver Police Department. This data is more descriptive than arrest rates because it captures the variety of criminal involvement. Very few writers are arrested for their graffiti mischief. On the other hand, many writers, especially accomplished ones, are not in this dataset. These are likely individuals who are more interested in the artistic side of the subculture and tend to choose targets where police detection is minimal. These writers require time to execute their intricate pieces and some have now gone entirely legal. As well, these individuals are less likely to participate in associated criminal behavior such as stealing paint. The subculture generally looks down on these individuals calling them *art fags* since stealing paint is considered integral to graffiti. Of the graffiti suspects identified, the range of police contacts goes from one contact to 73 between 2001 and 2004. The mean is seven contacts with the Vancouver Police Department.

Table 4: Police Contacts

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|---------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | One contact | 159 | 29.7 | 29.7 | 29.7 |
| | 2 to 5 contacts | 194 | 36.2 | 36.2 | 65.9 |
| | 6 to 9 contacts | 78 | 14.6 | 14.6 | 80.4 |
| | 10 to 19 contacts | 53 | 9.9 | 9.9 | 90.3 |
| | 20 or more contacts | 52 | 9.7 | 9.7 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 536 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

In PRIME, when charges are put forward to Crown, the incident is listed as *charged*. This dataset tracks the number of charges laid per subject. Not all cases actually go to charge once the file is with Crown Counsel. The PRIME information would be further validated through a query of Justin (the management system for Crown Counsel). However, given time restrictions, these queries were not conducted and should be included in future studies. The number of charges in PRIME varied from zero to 26 with the mean being 2.1 charges.

Table 5: Charges

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | No charges | 304 | 56.7 | 56.7 | 56.7 |
| | 1 to 2 charges | 163 | 30.4 | 30.4 | 87.1 |
| | 3 to 4 charges | 29 | 5.4 | 5.4 | 92.5 |
| | 5 or more charges | 40 | 7.5 | 7.5 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 536 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The research on juvenile offending indicates that most offenders begin their criminal career committing property offences (Corrado, 2002 and Farrington 2003). In this dataset, 55% of first contacts with the Vancouver Police Department are property related. It is interesting to note that 11.6% of these subjects initially came to police attention as a victim. The category *Other*

represents 16% of the dataset. The offences in this category are lesser offences that relate directly to delinquent behavior.

Table 6: First Contact

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|----------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Victim | 62 | 11.6 | 11.6 | 11.6 |
| | Witness | 22 | 4.1 | 4.1 | 15.7 |
| | Missing | 25 | 4.7 | 4.7 | 20.3 |
| | Violent | 24 | 4.5 | 4.5 | 24.8 |
| | Property | 297 | 55.4 | 55.4 | 80.2 |
| | Arson | 2 | .4 | .4 | 80.6 |
| | Drugs | 19 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 84.1 |
| | Other | 85 | 15.9 | 15.9 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 536 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

As with the first age category (age at first offense), the following list details the nature of the first offense as listed with the Vancouver Police Department. These are not offenses where the subjects were necessarily charged. Several categories were created to show the variety of conducts displayed. Again, there are several cases missing due to the complexity in the various police record management systems. Forty six percent of the sample had graffiti as the first offence. The rest of the first offences all fall under 5%. It is possible that graffiti in itself has long term effects on criminal activity and the offenders who started their offending pattern with graffiti should be tracked in order to determine the level of risk associated with this practice.

Table 7: First Offence

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid Graffiti | 249 | 46.5 | 46.5 | 46.5 |
| Assault | 13 | 2.4 | 2.4 | 48.9 |
| Break and enter | 14 | 2.6 | 2.6 | 51.5 |
| Fight | 8 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 53.0 |
| Drinking related offence | 20 | 3.7 | 3.7 | 56.7 |
| Theft | 26 | 4.9 | 4.9 | 61.6 |
| Theft of vehicle | 5 | .9 | .9 | 62.5 |
| Pellet gun incident | 8 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 64.0 |
| Threat | 5 | .9 | .9 | 64.9 |
| Arson | 2 | .4 | .4 | 65.3 |
| Marijuana offence | 2 | .4 | .4 | 65.7 |
| Robbery | 5 | .9 | .9 | 66.6 |
| Mischief (other than graffiti) | 8 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 68.1 |
| Other property offences | 10 | 1.9 | 1.9 | 70.0 |
| Delinquent behavior | 15 | 2.8 | 2.8 | 72.8 |
| Drug offence | 26 | 4.9 | 4.9 | 77.6 |
| Weapon offence | 5 | .9 | .9 | 78.5 |
| Sex assault | 2 | .4 | .4 | 78.9 |
| Other contacts | 1 | .2 | .2 | 79.1 |
| Info not available | 112 | 20.9 | 20.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 536 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Graffiti is a group activity that is best described by crew association.

Furthermore, complex graffiti productions are produced by a crew. The subjects in this dataset ranged from having zero associates to 86 associates. The mean is 3.7 associates. This is an interesting figure within the graffiti subculture since most crews have three to five active members. Although co-offending is not documented in this dataset, many of the cases reviewed involved co-offending. As a police practice, co-offending is documented through association.

Table 8: Associates

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-----------------------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | No associates | 101 | 18.8 | 18.8 |
| | 1 to 4 associates | 305 | 56.9 | 75.7 |
| | 5 to 9 associates | 89 | 16.6 | 92.4 |
| | 10 or more associates | 41 | 7.6 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 536 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Graffiti Suspects: From Unknown to Known

The known graffiti writers are subjects who have an identifiable graffiti tag, are known to participate in Hip Hop graffiti and their tags can be traced within the community. This category represents 44% of the dataset. They are much more likely to have repeated police contact. Forty three percent of these subjects have six or more police contacts compared to 27% for the associates of known graffiti writers and 28% for the suspected graffiti writers.⁸⁵

Table 9: Type of Graffiti Writer

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|------------------------------------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Known graffiti writer | 234 | 43.7 | 43.7 |
| | Associate of known graffiti writer | 37 | 6.9 | 50.6 |
| | Suspected graffiti writer | 265 | 49.4 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 536 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Known graffiti writers are the most likely to commit repeat graffiti incidents. While this may sound redundant, it does reveal that the subjects that are known as graffiti writers are also the individuals who have five or more repeated incidents of graffiti. Of the 27 subjects that fall within the five or more category,

⁸⁵ See Appendix B for more details. The Chi-square test of significance is used in this case and this is a statistically significant relationship with a probability that is less than .01.

26 are known graffiti writers. This means that the AGU can clear a graffiti tag to these 26 individuals.

Repeat Graffiti Offenders: Five or More Reported Graffiti Incidents

Within the field of developmental and life course of persistent offending, it is accepted that a small portion of the criminal population commits a large majority of offences (Farrington, 2003). Farrington's type of cohort study attempts to identify the offences that, when committed at an early age, indicates a stronger potential for continued criminal and anti-social behavior. Such information assists in early identification and can help direct the focus of service providers within the criminal justice system. In his article "Strategic Offences in the Criminal Career Context", Svensson (2002) states that:

Since chronic offenders commit more offences and more serious ones than other offenders, it is important that steps be taken at an early stage to obstruct the path of the criminal career and to prevent an individual from becoming a chronic offender (396).

The *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset* provides information on the core group of graffiti repeat offenders. These are subjects that have five or more graffiti related contacts with the Vancouver Police Department. This group is analyzed to assess how they differ from the rest of the offenders contained in the dataset.

It is important to note, that there are only 27 of these individuals and that in order to generalize the findings on this group, a larger sample of repeat graffiti offenders in multiple cities would have to be identified.⁸⁶ These 27 offenders and their tag and crew associations are well known to the Anti-Graffiti Unit. Those who have repeated graffiti contacts are indeed those who are committing many

⁸⁶ It would be interesting to identify similar samples of graffiti offenders in other cities as this would probably produce a good representative sample.

of the graffiti offences. Unlike other crimes, graffiti is visual and tracking the *dark figure* becomes a possibility. The graffiti repeat offender categories (the group of five or more offences and one to four incidents) consists of individuals who are known to participate regularly in graffiti offending. These two categories include the core individuals in the Vancouver graffiti subculture.⁸⁷

Table 10: Graffiti Repeat Offender

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|---------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Not a repeat | 397 | 74.1 | 74.1 | 74.1 |
| | 1 to 4 incidents | 112 | 20.9 | 20.9 | 95.0 |
| | 5 or more incidents | 27 | 5.0 | 5.0 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 536 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Five percent of the dataset consists of graffiti offenders who have committed five or more reported graffiti offences. Twenty nine percent of this 5% have five or more criminal charges (compared to 6.2% of offenders with one to four graffiti incidents and 6.3% of those who have no repeat graffiti offences).⁸⁸ This small group is more likely to be engaged in violent offences. Indeed, 63% have a police contact that relates to a violent offence (compared to 39% of offenders with one to four graffiti incidents and 24% of those who have no repeat graffiti offences).⁸⁹ This group is less likely to have their first reported incident as a graffiti offence (30% of repeats have graffiti as their first offence, compared to 56% of offenders with one to four graffiti incidents and 61% of those who have no repeat graffiti offences). However, graffiti offenders who have committed five or

⁸⁷ This information is derived from my own police experience and can be substantiated through police investigations.

⁸⁸ See Appendix C for more details. The Chi-square test of significance is used in this case and this is a statistically significant relationship with a probability that is less than .001.

⁸⁹ See Appendix D for more details. The Chi-square test of significance is used in this case and this is a statistically significant relationship with a probability that is less than .001.

more reported offences are more likely to have a drug or drinking related first contact with police (23% of repeats have drinking or drugs as their first offence, compared to 10% of offenders with one to four graffiti incidents and 10% of those who have no repeat graffiti offences).

The Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Network

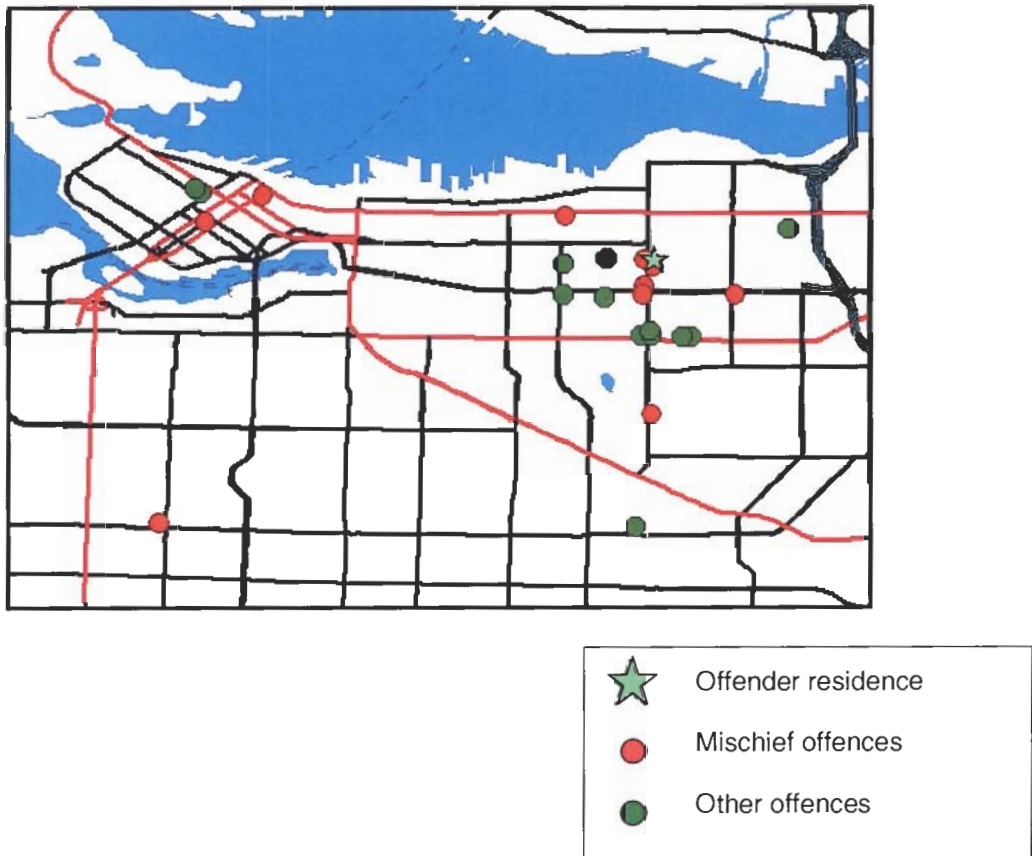
Suspect association is drawn out using information contained within PRIME. This process started with the subject in the dataset who has the most repeat incidents of graffiti (n=23). This subject has 19 associates, 18 of whom are contained within the *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset*. At the time of analysis this subject is a 21 year old Caucasian male. At the age of 16 years, he committed shoplifting as his first reported offence with the Vancouver Police Department. He has 34 PRIME entries from January 2001 to December 2004. His criminal portfolio includes 17 criminal charges, four violent police contacts, 19 property police contacts and two drug related contacts. He has not graduated from high school and is not employed. He has a drinking problem as most of his contacts involve alcohol or drug abuse. He is the a member of three graffiti crews and is very well known within the graffiti subculture.

At the end of this exercise, 23 of the 27 repeat offenders were plotted out as being connected to the network through their associates. Had I also used my own information on the subculture, I could have connected all 27 subjects. In the following diagram, the four subjects who are not connected to the network through reported association are included.

It should be noted that my information, which incorporates crew association which is displayed in graffiti tags, would add several linkages within this diagram. However, plotting just the reported associations still shows the connectedness of this subculture. One hundred and eleven subjects are charted, who represent 20% of the dataset. If this exercise was continued and the offenders who have one to four graffiti offences were also linked to their associates, the number of subjects represented would grow significantly. Indeed, 49% of the offenders in the one to four graffiti incident category have five or more associates.

Single Offender Pattern

Figure 7: Single Offender Pattern

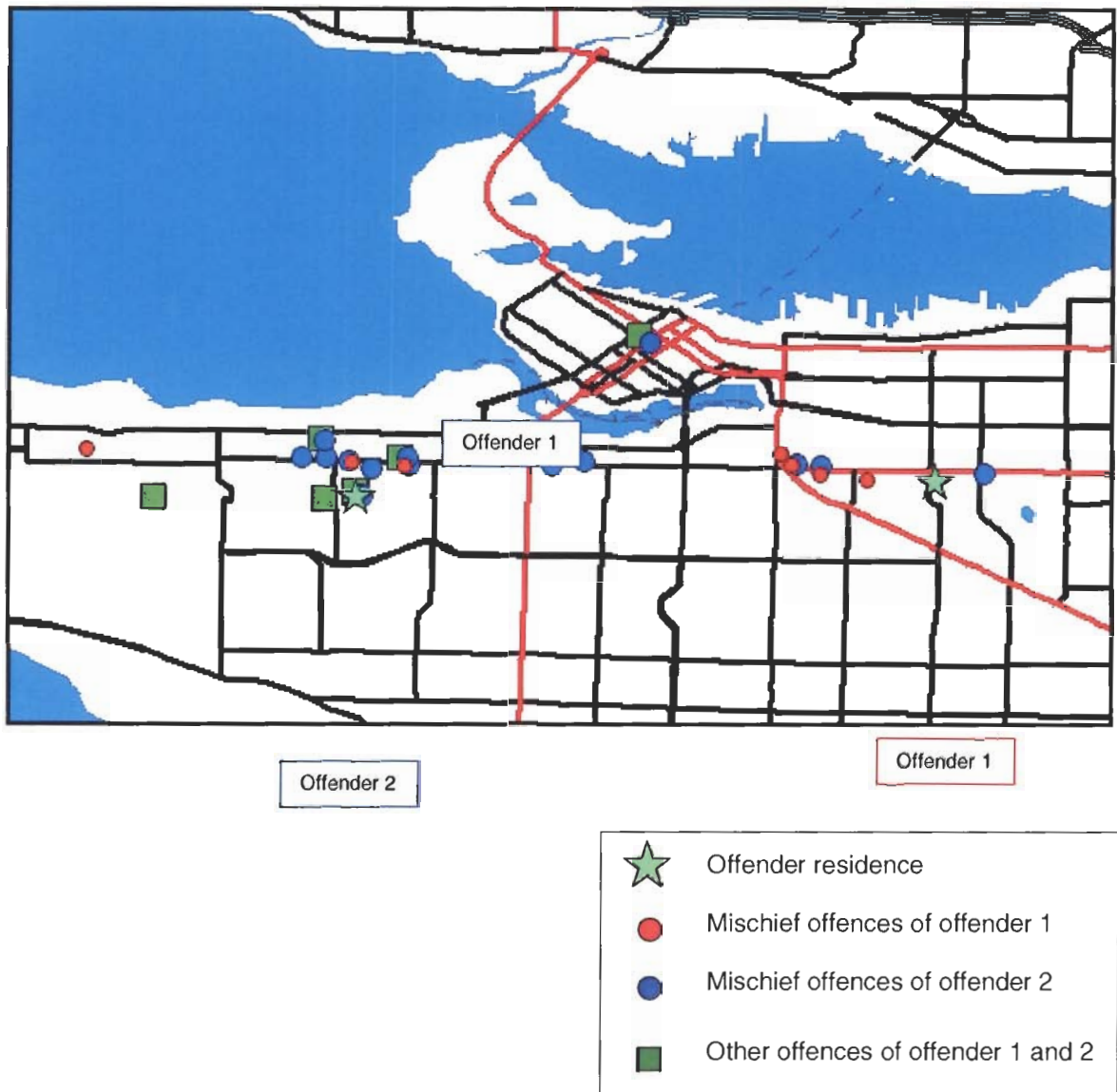


Typically graffiti writers tag close to home. The above example shows that this subject commits graffiti closer to home than his other offences. However, the tagging and these other offences follow the same location pattern. This subject falls within the category of five or more graffiti offences and he is a cross offender. The other offences constitute drinking related incidents and property offences. Only the reported incidents of graffiti are represented. The AGU tracked and found more than 50 other tags in close proximity of his residence. This is not an unusual occurrence, but rather a behavior that is consistent with a developing graffiti writer. Other subjects that are within the five or more repeat graffiti incidents display a similar offending pattern.

Crew Associates Offending Pattern

When graffiti writers are crew mates, the travel paths between the two residences tend to be the preferred tagging locations. In this case, there is a concentration of tags produced by offender 1 closer to his residence and the same is true for offender 2. The other offences, which combine offender 1 and offender 2, are for the most part very close to the residence of offender 2. This is not an uncommon characteristic within graffiti tagging crews. There is usually a preference to one area. Factors such as entertainment possibilities and social activities come into play. These geographic variables impact offender movement and the Brantinghams (1991) discuss the influence of such factors in their article "Notes on the Geometry of Crime".

Figure 8: Crew Association Offending Pattern



No Fixed Address Offending Pattern

Even though subjects with No Fixed Address represented only 3% of this dataset, their offending pattern reflects the potential risks associated to graffiti offending. The subject in figure 9 is a Caucasian male in his thirties. He is addicted to methamphetamines and was previously addicted to heroin. He does not work and commits property offences to support his addiction. He has been an

CHAPTER 5: Discussion

GRAFFITI RISK FACTOR: Do Taggers Become Bank Robbers?

Measuring the positive or negative outcomes that result from participation in the graffiti subculture is a difficult task. The purpose here is to provide balance to the current academic research that categorizes graffiti as a creative and artistic practice. Once graffiti is framed as a delinquent behavior in the same realm as vandalism then offender motivation moves away from artistic intentions and toward more destructive ones. From this perspective, it is possible to insert graffiti offending within the context of life-course research. Multiple offender types exist within the subculture and mixing these types can negatively influence the development of many participants. Those who benefit from graffiti are a minority.

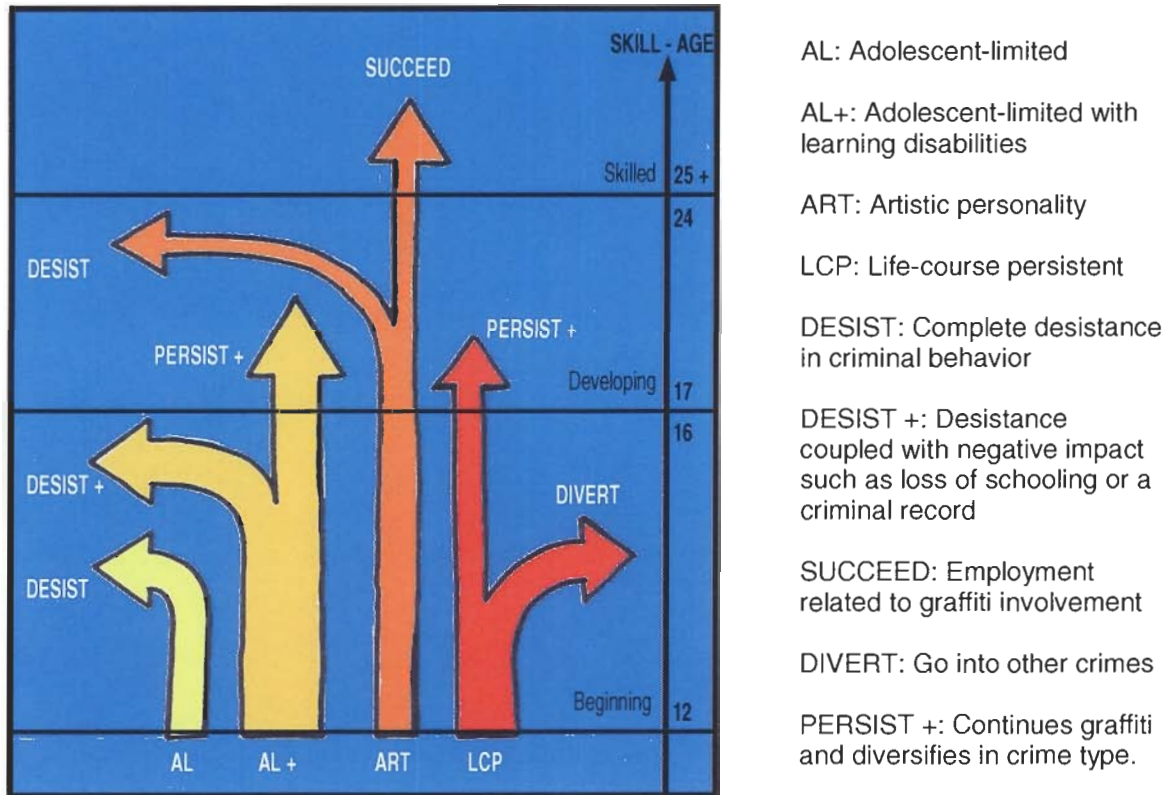
The graffiti subculture offers compelling social rewards in exchange for criminal behavior. Many offenders, who would choose not to participate in other criminal acts engage in graffiti because of this social component. Figure 10 is inspired by Loeber's model "Three developmental pathways in disruptive behavior, status offenses, and delinquent acts" (Farrington and Loeber, 2000: 744). The offenders fall within Moffitt's (2002) categories: life-course-persistent (LCP) and adolescent-limited (AL) which are defined as:

life-course-persistent (LPC) offenders, whose antisocial behavior begins in childhood and continues worsening thereafter, versus adolescent-limited (AL) offenders, whose antisocial behavior begins in adolescent and desists in young adulthood (179).

The third category is comprised of primarily artistically inclined youth, which is a very small observed portion of the subculture. It could be argued that these youth

would succeed in the art field regardless of graffiti and would experience fewer consequences through the pursuit of traditional artistic paths.

Figure 10: Possible Graffiti Offending Outcomes



My observations of the graffiti subculture lead me to conclude that positive elements pale in comparison to the potentially negative outcomes. Furthermore, I believe that many youth who would not normally stay in a criminal environment are lured by graffiti and, while mixing with a diverse range of offenders, are exposed to a wide variety of crimes. Some graffiti participants persist in their crimes to maintain the social rewards. They find themselves entrenched in the subculture and estranged from the mainstream adolescent social network. This has a corroding effect and slowly these youth become unable to function socially as normal adolescents and are isolated because of the subculture. The long term

effects can impact normal progression at school, adolescent socialization, peer acceptance and self-esteem. Many graffiti taggers enter early adulthood as socially immature individuals who may continue to engage in several at risk behaviors.

Anecdotally, I have watched many young people progress through graffiti into a full criminal career. In these cases, graffiti appears to be the driving crime. Offenders become desensitized and are then willing to explore other criminal options. If the majority of graffiti suspects were to be artistically inclined, it would be easy to extricate them from the subculture; this would be no different than asking an artist to switch from pencil drawing to ink drawing. The social and criminal elements of the subculture are the key to understanding the graffiti involvement. It is currently a popular activity for a certain segment of youth but it must be acknowledged that some participants experience harm because of graffiti. Rather than assuming that all graffiti writers become artists, we need to consider that some may become bank robbers. The goal should be intervention at the earliest possible opportunity.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS: Managing a Criminal Population

The foremost problem with the legal system is the relationship between single criminal acts and criminal careers. Graffiti serves as an excellent example since the core activity is prolific repetition of a particular criminal act. Most graffiti cases are presented to the courts as a single event as opposed to the manifestation of serial offending. The evidence required to prosecute serial graffiti offences is difficult to collect, present and prosecute, however it may not

always be in the public interest to pursue these cases. Serial graffiti cases in Canada and the United States⁹⁰ are extremely rare and the forensic element in these cases is still in the early stages of development.

Tag identification continues to be a problem when the suspect is not caught in the act. There are forensic considerations that have to be resolved. Michele Jenion (2003) was also faced with this issue in her MA thesis and was unable to conclude that the tagger she tracked was indeed the person responsible for the documented tags (72-76). Jenion (2003) consulted with a handwriting expert who was unable to provide a conclusive statement on authorship, leaving the possibility that multiple writers were doing the documented tags (Jenion, 2003: 76). Although tag identification and comparison is akin to handwriting analysis, there are also critical differences between the practices. The variety of implements and surfaces⁹¹ in graffiti tagging necessitate an entirely different form of expertise. As well, it is very common within the graffiti subculture for a writer to explore new letter styles. In fact, one of the most prominent and successful graffiti writers states that “graffiti is like deconstructing the skeleton of the alphabet” (White and Witten, 2001: 16). One could argue that the difference in tag lettering is the result of a writer exploring a new style. Graffiti subcultural expertise coupled with specific tag identification training is required to draw conclusions on common authorship.

⁹⁰ This applies to a case where a graffiti suspect was previously caught doing graffiti and there is a known sample of his tag. Through tag comparison it is possible to tie this suspect to other mischief offences. This continues to be a new area in graffiti investigations that is rarely tested in the courts.

⁹¹ In *Handwriting Identification: Facts and Fundamentals*, Huber and Headrick (1999) make references to paper, ink pens, ball point pens and pencils. In graffiti the surfaces are extremely varied and there is a wide variety of implements, including home made ones which utilize special ink recipes.

The criminal courts set an extremely high standard of proof. Defense attorneys can introduce a variety of concepts which lead to doubt, but would never occur in reality. For example, in the case of glass etching, defense counsel could say: "is it not possible that someone else other than the accused practiced copying the tag in their backyard on glass windows?" While this may be possible, it would be highly unlikely. In Vancouver there are very few graffiti writers who choose glass etching as a medium. This type of graffiti requires a specific skill set and the uniqueness of the tag becomes quite obvious. In order to obtain fluidity of movement, the writer needs to be extremely rehearsed. While it is possible for a copyist to practice in private, graffiti subcultural values and etiquette make this unlikely.

Graffiti cases prosecuted at a civil level fall under different standards and the evidence presented would face different challenges. From an academic standpoint, graffiti offending can be viewed using this same standard which is based on the balance of probability. These two legal standards, beyond a reasonable doubt and the balance of probability, are accepted within specific circumstances and they cannot coexist. Using the balance of probability within the research context of graffiti offending provides a much more thorough understanding of this criminal behavior. Both research and investigative experience show that it is very uncommon for someone to do another writer's tag. When this is done, there are usually specific circumstances and experienced graffiti investigators can detect the tag as not belonging to its writer. From a subcultural perspective, writing someone else's tag is extremely rare and when

presented with a grouping of tags the most probable outcome is that they were produced by one writer.

As a graffiti investigator, I am inextricably linked to this subculture and I can recognize tag patterning, including the unique features of hand styles. While the criminal courts are still struggling with this concept, both graffiti suspects and graffiti investigators easily recognize ownership of individual tags. Therefore it is possible to determine the level of activity a tagger is engaged in. For those who are very active, the court system can act as an accelerant. They realize that they are able to get away with their crimes and that the consequences never match the damage they have caused. For an active tagger, the risk of being caught is often not a deterrent. In fact, the risk itself makes the graffiti practice even more exciting. The adrenaline kick that accompanies the act is what makes graffiti highly addictive. Escaping the law bolsters an individual's popularity. In All City the Book about Taking Space, one writer states:

I got caught at least fifteen times. In the beginning it was easy; I never ran away. My attitude was that if I didn't put up a fuss, I'd get locked up and released the next morning. That didn't really bother me too much. I tagged in broad daylight in front of mad people, 'cause I just didn't have any fear. One day this cop tried to catch me, but I pushed him down and ran away. Ever since that day, I haven't spent too many nights at the police station (Paul 107, 2003: 62).

Graffiti is a game for many writers and the criminal justice system is one opponent in this game. Tougher sentencing is not necessarily the right solution, but on the other hand, many Montreal or Vancouver writers would not dare write in the United States where they know graffiti is a felony offence that comes with a stiffer punishment.⁹² In 2002, the City of Vancouver changed the graffiti bylaw

⁹² In my conversation with graffiti writers we have explored this reality. Some writers have told me that they would never think to do graffiti in the United States because of the penal penalties.

and included a fine for graffiti mischief. The fine is \$500 and if the incident goes to court the judge can order a fine that is up to \$2000. Receiving a \$500 fine is in some cases a greater deterrent than a criminal charge.

In Canada, mischief is a minor crime sometimes considered by the courts as being on par with a petty shoplifting. As such, first time offenders will most often be referred to probation for diversion. As cases are sent to diversion, the issue continues to be lack of programming. While the concept of diversion is valid, suitable programs must match this judicial course of action. In fact, in the case of mischief, diversion can be more labor intensive than traditional sentencing. Graffiti vandalism is quite different from other criminal acts. This offence brings up subcultural considerations, identity issues, and addiction concerns. Rehabilitative services for this particular crime do not take the full offending pattern into account. Parents of graffiti suspects ask for specifically designed services, but very few are available. Addiction counseling is a common referral, yet the focus is not usually on the graffiti addiction⁹³, but rather on the other substance abuse issues. Diversion programs mostly consist of community cleaning activities and the recidivism rates are high. As well, art programs in Vancouver do not offer graffiti style art classes specifically designed for male adolescents.

One effective deterrent appears to be sustained police contact with these offenders through weekly graffiti clean-ups. However, this approach is not only time intensive, it does not seem to address the full gamut of graffiti related

⁹³ At a recent forensic conference I used the word addiction in relation to graffiti and received some opposition from some of the health professionals in the room. I use the word addiction because graffiti writers describe their graffiti as an addiction and very often use this word to explain how difficult it is to stop.

problems. Under the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA), police are required to consider alternative measures for young offenders. The Anti-Graffiti Unit (AGU) determined that a graffiti specific program should be designed to include pre-charge young offenders, diversion candidates as well as post-charge probation clients. After applying for funding in November 2003, a program was set up for graffiti taggers.⁹⁴

From the inception to the execution of this idea, the AGU was perceived as an anomaly in the system because the practice of Restorative Justice does not usually rest with the police, even though the YCJA sets out the specific principles for the police to follow. To date, the AGU has run four sessions and the program has now been formalized as RESTART (Restorative Art Project).⁹⁵ My belief is that police have always been involved in informal Restorative Justice and RESTART formalizes some of these practices. The police can actually play a very important role in this setting because the archetypal images of police as authority and establishment is flattened and personalized. Graffiti taggers are, by their very acts, anti-establishment. Personal interaction between the police and graffiti writers builds a relationship that helps to address some of the core issues that fuel graffiti offending.

Another legal limitation is the separation of young offenders from adult offenders. While the YCJA sets out specific alternative solutions for offending,

⁹⁴ James Fearn, an exchange MA student at SFU, assisted in setting up this program. He is currently writing his thesis on the initial session that took place in April 2004. He interviewed participants after the session to obtain their perspective on this Restorative Justice program. He is doing his graduate work at Sheffield University.

⁹⁵ This is a Vancouver Police initiated Restorative Justice program. RESTART stands for Restorative Art Project. Over four days, a variety of people come together to work on the graffiti problem. The end result is a legal mural. Graffiti offenders, legal graffiti artists, police, Restorative Justice practitioners, addiction counselors, art therapists, victims and community volunteers work together and are guided through the process. These murals can be seen at the entrance of Granville Island and in 700 block of Pacific Avenue.

the Criminal Code of Canada is far more limited. Graffiti offenders are not age discriminate; a 16 year old is likely to hang out with a 20 year old. RESTART mixes both young and adult graffiti offenders. The program has been successful, and many workshop participants are guided into legal alternatives. The *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset* tracks RESTART participants and the longitudinal impact of this program will be assessed at a later date. Graffiti is addictive therefore RESTART is designed to work on this offending continuum. The goal always remains to stop the graffiti offending despite repeated failed attempts.

Graffiti is considered a low risk crime, and most of these crimes go unreported. As such, there is more latitude in dealing with these offenders. Public pressure only demands that the police deal with the problem. Views on how to do this are not vested with moral panic and, unlike violent offending; the public is not alarmed by graffiti. For this reason, graffiti suspect management practices can incorporate different policing methods and individualized solutions can be tailored to each offender. In Vancouver, graffiti offending has declined significantly and with the beginning of another school year there are very few new taggers. A core group of repeat offenders remains extremely involved in graffiti and requires extensive follow-up, but for the most part, unconventional offender management strategies have helped reduce this offender group.

Policy Implications: Effectively Managing the Graffiti Problem

Graffiti is a complex social product. Its presence is not a recent occurrence. Once graffiti is converted into a subcultural practice and combined

with the technological advances such as aerosol spray paint, then the graffiti problem becomes very serious. Should a small group of vandals be allowed to vandalize a city? Would they stop and think about 2000 years of art history as they tag the Acropolis? This offender population needs to be managed because they destroy under the guise of art. And in the name of art and architecture, city planners, police personnel, business representatives, Crown Counsel, probation, forensics, and community members must partner to tackle this problem.

Over the past ten years, I have returned to my home town of Montreal and watched as it slowly became engulfed in graffiti. As a Fine Arts student studying in the late 1980s, no one in my cohort was a graffiti writer. This form of artistic expression was barely noticeable on city walls. Now it is everywhere and the historic buildings that I used to walk by and appreciate are overtaken by this subverted art form. As a graffiti investigator, I realize that this problem is manageable and cities can be reclaimed. The primary motivation of a graffiti writer is *to get up*, which means to get fame. This is not an altruistic activity, it is one that is self-centered and ignores the rights of other citizens. The subculture needs to be dismantled because if it is allowed to progress cities around the world will find that scribbles on the walls have replaced years of architectural and urban planning.

The solution rests in partnerships with each entity accomplishing the necessary tasks and the goal always remains to stop graffiti. In the City of Vancouver, the synergy between services has yielded remarkable success. While the subject of this accomplishment could produce a thesis in itself, the

purpose here is to allude to potential solutions and use Vancouver as an example of achievement. It is also important to realize that every activity within the Vancouver program would not produce the same result if executed on its own.

1. City Tasks: The City of Vancouver has acted as a leader and has allotted the appropriate resources to allow staff to properly address the problem. The program was designed to encourage graffiti rapid removal. This required a bylaw revision thus giving property use inspectors an enforcement avenue. This was combined with free paint-out kit provisions and a mural program. Corridors such as Terminal Avenue used to be covered in graffiti, now they remain clean and graffiti is removed quickly when it appears. This program relies on the work of several city staff personnel who are extremely committed to this task (Hammel, 2005).
2. Police Tasks: Traditionally, the police have included graffiti within the heading of community policing. In Vancouver, this was also the case and the majority of police resources were spent organizing community clean-outs. In the Vancouver model, this is the City's responsibility and the police are left with the task of managing the offender population. The Vancouver Police Department is currently the only Canadian police force that dedicates two full-time detective/constables to graffiti investigations. These resources have allowed the Vancouver Police Department to manage these offenders which has resulted in increased arrests and convictions. As well, specifically tailored rehabilitative programs have been implemented (Miller, 2003).
3. Public Transit Tasks: Since the inception of the Hip Hop graffiti subculture, transit vehicles have been a prime target. Without the knowledge and expertise of Constable Wendy Hawthorne at Translink, the situation in Vancouver would be more difficult to address. Hawthorne was keyed into graffiti before anyone knew how bad it was going to get. Her persistence with this problem has spared the transit system as it is well-known within the subculture that she exists and that she is capable of tracking and prosecuting graffiti writers. Furthermore, she is currently the only person in Canada who has developed a comprehensive method for graffiti style comparisons and has obtained several guilty pleas based on this methodology.
4. Legal Graffiti Writers: Several accomplished legal graffiti writers have joined the City's mural program. They have produced murals that celebrate the positive aspect of Hip Hop graffiti. These murals add vitality to the community while providing writers with a legal alternative.

5. School Board Tasks: The City of Vancouver School Board has a 24 hour graffiti rapid removal program. Graffiti cannot proliferate within this setting. Since most graffiti writers begin this activity in high school, it is critical that schools remain graffiti free.
6. E-COMM Tasks: E-COMM provides 911 and police dispatch services to the Vancouver Police Department. The call-takers at E-COMM are trained to properly handle these calls and this has greatly improved response rates for graffiti mischief in-progress calls.
7. Crown Counsel and Probation: Graffiti cannot be tackled if the Criminal Justice System does not respond accordingly. In Vancouver, both Crown Counsel and Probation have acted on information received and continue to work with the Anti-Graffiti Unit by providing several diversion and probation referrals.
8. Business Associations: Several business associations work with the City and the police in order to tackle this problem. These associations assist in removal strategies and promote the mural program.
9. Community Organizations: A variety of community organizations also work on this problem by implementing clean outs, murals and graffiti oriented programming.
10. Other Police Departments: The Anti-Graffiti Unit shares information with Lower-Mainland police departments and police agencies across Canada and the United States. Graffiti suspects are mobile and require that police services share information.
11. Community Members: Graffiti is a problem that affects all of society and many community members want to help solve this problem. Some citizens document and report graffiti which helps the City remove it and the police track active offenders. Other citizens participate in cleaning programs or put up murals on previously graffitied walls.

These combined efforts have produced an 80% reduction in graffiti since the inception of the program in 2002 (Hammel, 2005). This also means that there is less graffiti to be seen which impacts the next generation of graffiti writers. There will likely be a decrease in entrance level graffiti writers and eventually this fad will subside.

Future Research Considerations

The primary purpose of this thesis is to provide a graffiti suspect profile that is based on aggregate data. The *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset* contains information that goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Several other tests can be applied to this data in order to obtain a broader picture:

1. Distance to crime analysis: Suspect residences and relative offence locations are tracked within the dataset. Using a mapping program such as ArcGIS 9 it is possible to calculate the average distance to a crime and then compare this to other property offences. As well, repeat graffiti offenders are tracked along with their multiple offence locations and given the amount of information contained within the dataset, this analysis would be very reliable.
2. Impact of age on distance to crime: Graffiti investigative theory proposes that as offenders age the area they cover gets larger. This dataset includes statistically significant samples of offenders who are within various age groups. It is therefore possible to look at how their age can impact their distance to crime.
3. Impact of suspect association on distance to crime: Suspects are tracked in relation to their associates and this information can be factored into the distance to crime analysis. As well, other significant locations can be included: schools, popular graffiti hangouts and work places.
4. Networking information: A preliminary sketch of the repeat offenders and their associates shows the potential for network analysis. Using a software program such as Ucinet 6 it is possible to determine the level of connectedness in this suspect network. Additionally, the associate suspect information for the other subjects can be entered to create a more comprehensive Vancouver graffiti suspect network.

While completing the data collection, several additional data fields came to mind as being useful however, for this thesis, these fields were discounted. A revised data collection should take these following fields into consideration:

1. Co-offending: While reviewing files, co-offending was not tracked except within the associate category. Future research should look at co-offending and see whether graffiti suspects who persist in criminal behavior continue to co-offend with previous graffiti crew mates in their other crimes.

2. Qualitative information: Each file should be reviewed to assess the qualitative value that is contained within the text. Several files were categorized as lesser crimes and a qualitative review would assist in extracting more information. For example, some graffiti offenders use fire in their tagging, yet these crimes were still categorized as mischief as opposed to arson.
3. Additional fields: Several fields within the files were discounted because of time constraints. Additional fields should be contained within future studies. For example, the following fields would be of interest; primary and secondary offences, school attendance, and the nature of all the police contacts.
4. Other police information: The suspects in this database should be queried using a variety of police records systems including: PIRS (the RCMP records management system), and other police management systems.
5. Outside information: In order to obtain a comprehensive dataset, the suspects need to be queried in a variety of other databases. Information from School Board would assist in determining level of education and possibly identified learning disabilities. Forensics could assist in determining diagnosed disorders. Probation could assist with additional offending information.
6. Suspect interviews: Most graffiti research is based on interviews with graffiti writers. Suspect within this dataset could be interviewed from a variety of perspectives. They could provide self-reports on their criminal behavior. They could be asked to identify who they know in the suspect network. They could describe the risks and benefits that they experience through their participation in the graffiti subculture.
7. Assessing the dark figure: Graffiti is rather unique in that it is possible to track most instances of this mischief. A comparison between observed graffiti in the community and suspect information could assist in confirming the reliability of this dataset. Furthermore, it would be possible to determine the rate and scope of offending.

Finally, it should be noted that this graffiti suspect cohort can be tracked as these individuals age. This would allow for a longitudinal study of graffiti offenders and assist in determining the risk involved in this practice. Forty six percent of the dataset committed graffiti as their first reported offence with the Vancouver Police

Department. As well, the repeat graffiti offender cohort is large enough to produce statistically significant results. Looking through the files in May 2005 provided insight into the criminal growth potential as many of the subjects had escalated their criminal behavior.

Conclusion

Hip Hop graffiti started in the outer New York boroughs and received an initial boost from the art market. Notoriety was possible and for disenfranchised youth, graffiti was a viable creative outlet. It quickly became a contagious urban product; a means for youth to enter into organized delinquency. The ethics and practices of graffiti became concrete and communicable to what is now a worldwide subculture. In Vancouver, graffiti thrived because the weather permitted year round painting and the social rewards provided new taggers with an established friendship network. However, there are risks involved in this criminal activity.

The existing research in this area seems to downplay the negative impact of graffiti and promote individual success. An overview of the research did not yield a large aggregate study of the graffiti subculture. The Vancouver Police Department Anti-Graffiti Unit maintains a database of active graffiti suspects which helped build the *Vancouver Graffiti Suspect Dataset*. The long term goal is to determine the criminal progression of these offenders. This can assist in answering questions that relate graffiti to career offending, and offer service providers an actual understanding of these suspects. Mischief is viewed as a minor offence and as such it is most often dealt with out of court. Some criminologists have found that repetitive non-violent youth crime is a strong indicator of violent adult offending. With this in mind, it is important that agencies do not further minimize such crimes as graffiti mischief, but rather develop the appropriate programming to focus on the specific dynamics of this behavior.

Over the past three years, I have had the opportunity to meet and talk with numerous graffiti writers. This is an experience that I value because it has given me insight into a very complex social network. I have yet to meet a graffiti tagger whose perspective I did not enjoy hearing. I have found most of them to be thoughtful, intelligent and sensitive young people. Yet many appear to be angry at society. I cannot excuse their criminal behavior, but I am able to understand their feelings of exclusion. It would seem that our society overlooks the needs of some of our young males. They do not want to sit in front of an easel and paint a still-life. They want to climb buildings, jump over fences, explore train yards and leave their mark on society.

In other activities such as skateboarding we build areas where they can display and explore their skills within safe boundaries. Unlike skateboarding, graffiti is illegal and it requires that young people violate societal norms. This breach creates a sense of community and a basis for unity within the subculture. Unfortunately, the repercussions that accompany graffiti can adversely affect the development of the youth involved in this activity. They can find themselves on a slippery slope where tagging leads to shoplifting, leads to assault, leads to dropping out of school, which can result in lost opportunities. It is with the youngest participants in mind that I felt compelled to complete this research. I did not want to present yet another melancholic recollection of old school graffiti; instead I wanted to show the true impact that it can have on young offenders. These are the people that no one has ever interviewed. These are the people who never accomplish a masterpiece. These are the people who become

addicted to tagging, whose names are written on the back of the bus and in the cells of the Youth Detention Centre. They are not artists; they are vandals and they need our attention.

Old school graffiti artists are now producing outstanding legal murals in the City of Vancouver and throughout the world. Their values rest in a different place than the new generation of writers. But they have developed their skills through illegal activity and some believe that this is the only way to establish their name. As they pass their name to the next generation, the young taggers who have not succeeded live the true consequences of graffiti. Those who have learned and have benefited from graffiti do art and teach art, not destruction and vandalism. Their audience is all of society. Street art captures the interest of many viewers. This is why the trains of New York City could not be ignored. The graffiti on these trains was subverted into a member's only club where the fame game is played out in a secluded scene. The original writers believed they were offering art and not crime; they wanted an audience larger than the subculture most graffiti writers currently strive to impress.

Appendix A: PRIME Keyword Search Results

On 04-12-20 queried PRIME for the following categories to find missing files for the time period of 01-01-01 to 01-12-31

Graffiti: 215 records
Graffiti: 23 records
Spray paint: 376 records
Spray can: 51 records
Marker: 253 records

Located 55 additional 2001 reports

On 04-12-22 queried PRIME for the following categories to find missing files for the time period of 02-01-01 to 02-12-31.

Graffiti: 605 records
Graffiti: 97 records
Spray paint: 557 records
Spray can: 95 records
Marker: 416 records

Located 32 additional 2002 reports

On 04-12-22 queried PRIME for the following categories to find missing files for the time period of 03-01-01 to 03-12-31.

Graffiti: 1732 records
Graffiti: 151 records
Spray paint: 963 records
Spray can: 172 records
Marker: 994 records

Located 30 additional 2003 reports

On 04-12-22 queried PRIME for the following categories to find missing files for the time period of 04-01-01 to 04-12-31.

Graffiti: 2763 records
Graffiti: 147 records
Spray paint: 895 records
Spray can: 164 records
Marker: 1015 records

Located 55 additional 2004 reports

Appendix B: Graffiti Writer Type and Number of PRIME entries

Table 11: Graffiti Writer Type and Number of PRIME Entries

Type of writer * Prime1 Crosstabulation

| | | | Prime1 | | | | | Total |
|----------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|--------|
| | | | One contact | 2 to 5 contacts | 6 to 9 contacts | 10 to 19 contacts | 20 or more contacts | |
| Type of writer | Known graffiti writer | Count | 47 | 87 | 46 | 27 | 27 | 234 |
| | | Expected Count | 69.4 | 84.7 | 34.1 | 23.1 | 22.7 | 234.0 |
| | | % within Type of writer | 20.1% | 37.2% | 19.7% | 11.5% | 11.5% | 100.0% |
| | Associate of known graffiti writer | Count | 16 | 11 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 37 |
| | | Expected Count | 11.0 | 13.4 | 5.4 | 3.7 | 3.6 | 37.0 |
| | | % within Type of writer | 43.2% | 29.7% | 8.1% | 10.8% | 8.1% | 100.0% |
| | Suspected graffiti writer | Count | 96 | 96 | 29 | 22 | 22 | 265 |
| | | Expected Count | 78.6 | 95.9 | 38.6 | 26.2 | 25.7 | 265.0 |
| | | % within Type of writer | 36.2% | 36.2% | 10.9% | 8.3% | 8.3% | 100.0% |
| Total | Count | 159 | 194 | 78 | 53 | 52 | 536 | |
| | Expected Count | 159.0 | 194.0 | 78.0 | 53.0 | 52.0 | 536.0 | |
| | % within Type of writer | 29.7% | 36.2% | 14.6% | 9.9% | 9.7% | 100.0% | |

Chi-Square Tests

| | Value | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|---------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square | 24.291 ^a | 8 | .002 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 24.712 | 8 | .002 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 12.944 | 1 | .000 |
| N of Valid Cases | 536 | | |

a. 2 cells (13.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.59.

Appendix C: Repeat Offenders and Criminal Charges

Table 12: Repeat Offenders and Criminal Charges

Crosstab

| | | | Charges1 | | | | Total |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------|--------|
| | | | No charges | 1 to 2 charges | 3 to 4 charges | 5 or more charges | |
| number of repeats in graf | Not a graffiti repeat offender | Count | 251 | 109 | 12 | 25 | 397 |
| | | Expected Count | 225.2 | 120.7 | 21.5 | 29.6 | 397.0 |
| | | % within number of repeats in graf | 63.2% | 27.5% | 3.0% | 6.3% | 100.0% |
| | 1 to 4 reported graffiti incidents | Count | 49 | 46 | 10 | 7 | 112 |
| | | Expected Count | 63.5 | 34.1 | 6.1 | 8.4 | 112.0 |
| | | % within number of repeats in graf | 43.8% | 41.1% | 8.9% | 6.3% | 100.0% |
| | 5 or more reported graffiti incidents | Count | 4 | 8 | 7 | 8 | 27 |
| | | Expected Count | 15.3 | 8.2 | 1.5 | 2.0 | 27.0 |
| | | % within number of repeats in graf | 14.8% | 29.6% | 25.9% | 29.6% | 100.0% |
| Total | Count | 304 | 163 | 29 | 40 | 536 | |
| | Expected Count | 304.0 | 163.0 | 29.0 | 40.0 | 536.0 | |
| | % within number of repeats in graf | 56.7% | 30.4% | 5.4% | 7.5% | 100.0% | |

Chi-Square Tests

| | Value | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|---------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square | 66.444 ^a | 6 | .000 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 52.374 | 6 | .000 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 40.499 | 1 | .000 |
| N of Valid Cases | 536 | | |

a. 2 cells (16.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.46.

Appendix D: Repeat Offenders and Violent Police Contacts

Table 13: Repeat Offenders and Violent Police Contacts

number of repeats in graf * Violent Crosstabulation

| | | | Violent | | Total |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------|--------|--------|
| | | | No | Yes | |
| number of repeats in graf | Not a graffiti repeat offender | Count | 300 | 97 | 397 |
| | | Expected Count | 280.0 | 117.0 | 397.0 |
| | | % within number of repeats in graf | 75.6% | 24.4% | 100.0% |
| | 1 to 4 reported graffiti incidents | Count | 68 | 44 | 112 |
| | | Expected Count | 79.0 | 33.0 | 112.0 |
| | | % within number of repeats in graf | 60.7% | 39.3% | 100.0% |
| | 5 or more reported graffiti incidents | Count | 10 | 17 | 27 |
| | | Expected Count | 19.0 | 8.0 | 27.0 |
| | | % within number of repeats in graf | 37.0% | 63.0% | 100.0% |
| Total | Count | 378 | 158 | 536 | |
| | Expected Count | 378.0 | 158.0 | 536.0 | |
| | % within number of repeats in graf | 70.5% | 29.5% | 100.0% | |

Chi-Square Tests

| | Value | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|---------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square | 24.605 ^a | 2 | .000 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 22.874 | 2 | .000 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 24.063 | 1 | .000 |
| N of Valid Cases | 536 | | |

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 7.96.

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