

Crips and Bloods

Detective Wayne Caffey, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office

Like anything based on the human condition, the street gang subculture is an ever-changing and adapting phenomenon. This article is based on my experiences growing up in South Central Los Angeles with friends, family members, and acquaintances who were in various Crip and Blood gangs in Los Angeles; my work as a gang unit officer and detective with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD); and numerous contacts and interviews with Los Angeles gang members.

The 1960s–1970s: Early Days

Since the 1800s, gangs have been a part of American society. Ethnic neighborhood youth banded together for self-protection as more and more immigrants came into the country.

The Los Angeles street gangs of the late 1960s were no different. Black youths banded together in neighborhoods for self-protection and as sports teams who played football, baseball, and basketball together against teams from other neighborhoods. Racism, unemployment, poverty, and an oppressive police force caused unrest within the black community. These early gangs became an outlet for the young black men of South Los Angeles who fought against local white youth that did not want these children of black southern immigrants in their neighborhood. These gangs had names like the Slausons, Businessmen, Outlaws, Rabble Rousers, Swamp Boys, Avenues, Ace Duces, Bishops, Brims, Swans, Pirus, and Roman 20s. They ruled the streets, battling with hands, sticks, and the occasional chain. In 1965, after rival gangs, such as the Slausons and the Gladiators, banded together to fight the LAPD and the National Guard, the gangs became more political in nature.

Two leaders of the Slausons, the largest and most prominent street gang in Los Angeles, founded the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP). Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter and John Huggins recruited street gang members as soldiers for their revolutionary army and attempted to organize the youth street gangs with a new political agenda.

One of the most active street gangs on the east side of South Central Los Angeles was the Avenues, led by Craig Munson. One of their members was a short, stocky thug by the name of Raymond Washington. Washington was known for his strength and speed. He probably could have been one of the best football players to ever come out of Fremont High School. Washington led the younger members of the Avenues until Munson pushed him out.

In 1969, the Los Angeles-based chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP) took a heavy blow when their leaders, Carter and Huggins, were killed on the University of California

at Los Angeles (UCLA) campus in a gun battle with members of the United Slaves. After that, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and LAPD systematically disbanded the BPP. Angry black youth in South Central Los Angeles looked for other groups to join and keep up the fight against their oppressors—white or black. Raymond Washington recruited members for a new gang, calling them the Baby Avenues or Baby Cribs. The term *Cribs* eventually evolved into *Crips* in common vernacular. Washington recruited Thomas “T-Bone” Ligon, Paul “Baby” Alden Jones, “Big” Alden Jones, Mack Thomas, Elvis Dexter, L. C. Butler, Craig Craddock, Vertis Swan, “Psycho” Michael Conception, Jimel “Godfather” Barnes, Greg “Batman” Davis, and a few others. Washington was a great recruiter, and his group of Eastside Crips was growing like wildfire. Things really got going when Washington met up with Stanley “Tookie” Williams and convinced Tookie to merge his group with the Crips in 1971, creating the Westside Crips.

While they operated under the guise of protecting their community from violent white youth and other black gangs, these Crip gang members became a menace in their own neighborhoods. Battling with other established non-Crip gangs for territory was still a man-to-man, fist-to-fist adventure. The main groups that fought against the new Crip gangs were the LA Brims and the Denver Lanes, the Inglewood Family, the Swans, and the Pueblo Bishops. Along with the Piru Street Boys (who were once aligned as the Piru Street Crips), these groups banded together against the Crips and formed an alliance that became the Bloods.

Black street gangs in Los Angeles have come a long way since the first gang rumbles of the 1950s. Most of the original fights were over control of parties or hangout spots and revolved around high school rivalries. Weapons were not used often, the gang members preferred fistfights. It was considered a punk move to get a weapon and/or retaliate after a fight. The most common weapons included baseball bats, bumper jacks, or an occasional knife.

By the late 1960s, handguns became more common. Most gang members still thought it was a sign of weakness to use a weapon, but the use of firearms increased as gang violence escalated. The “Saturday Night Special” and the sawed-off shotgun replaced the zip gun. Most of the weapons were acquired by theft or burglary. In other cases, attacking or beating an armed security guard to acquire his weapon was used as an initiation ritual, along with other violent crimes that demonstrated fearlessness. These crimes included street robberies and strongarm robberies (jacking) and were used to build the gang’s reputation.

One of the first-known and publicized killings by Crip gang members occurred at the Hollywood Bowl in March 1972. A black leather jacket was a very popular item to own in the late ‘60s through the ‘70s. Some of Raymond Washington’s Crips attacked a group of young blacks. During this fight, Robert Ballou (the son of an attorney) was accosted, beaten, and stabbed to death for his black leather jacket. This high-profile incident led to the LAPD increasing its role in street gang enforcement targeting the Crips.

During the 1970s, colors also became a way to signify allegiance to one gang or another. The California Youth Authority gave handkerchiefs to inmates in youth correctional

settings. The Crips began using the blue bandannas as their symbol. However, because the Crips (who outnumbered the Bloods three-to-one) wore blue, the Bloods adopted red bandannas. By the mid-70s, the gangs' territories were well known and defined. Blood versus Crip battles were commonplace on the street, county jails, and prisons.

In the late '70s a new trend became commonplace in the Crip/Blood world. Attempts to bring the different Crip neighborhoods together occurred occasionally but often broke apart into more animosity. The Crip gangs became more and more independent and frequently battled each other. Crip gang members from different sets (cliques) throughout Southern California were involved in street confrontations. A boiling point was reached during 1979–80 when war broke out between the Rollin 60s Crips and the Eight-Tray (83) Gangster Crips. Their war quickly became a raging citywide gun battle that began to polarize other Crip neighborhoods. The 1979 murder of Raymond Washington (Eastside Crips—now East Coast Crips) was blamed on the Hoover Crips (now Criminals). This incident led to an additional war between the Hoover Crips and the East Coast Crips. Uninvolved Crip sets began to choose sides in the battles. Since that time, more Crip gang members have been killed by other Crip gang members from rival sets than are killed by Blood gang members. The Crips solidified their rivalry with the Bloods by killing a Brim member and turning over his casket at the funeral. However, it was the tremendous rise in violence attributed to the Crip versus Crip wars that became the most serious police problem.

The '80s: Era of National Expansion

By the 1980s, the Blood Alliance was growing. Other gang sets who called themselves "Anti-Crips" were organizing and declaring an all out war on Crip Gangs.

The 1980s brought about major changes in South Central Los Angeles, particularly the advent of rock (crack) cocaine. This popular, inexpensive, and easy-to-make drug found an extremely lucrative market in Southern California. Drug organizations and kingpins began to surface, such as Whitey's Enterprise (Steve "Whitey" Robinson), Third World (Four-Trey-43—Gangster Crips), "Waterhead" Bo Bennett's group, Rene McGowan's group (Bounty Hunter Bloods), "Freeway" Ricky Ross, "Honcho" Wayne Day (Watts Varrio Grape Street), "Tootie" Reese, Tony "Bogart" (PJ Watts Crips), "Benzo Boyz" Elrader "Ray Ray" Browning (who was also a Black Guerilla Family member), and a few others. These groups and individuals controlled the flow of narcotics in Watts, Compton, and South Central Los Angeles.

Different affiliations between gangs were formed for the purpose of expanded distribution of rock cocaine. The gangs previously mentioned became the control groups in South Central Los Angeles, Compton, Lynwood, and Inglewood. Crips and Bloods were now into making money. Street sales of rock cocaine were so prevalent that some areas were like drug supermarkets.

Violence rose at an alarming rate. Wars broke out over control of the very profitable drug street sales market, and every corner was a potential moneymaker. Some Crip and Blood neighborhoods formed alliances to protect their sale locations. It was not uncommon in this era to find kids on a corner wearing a blue shoestring in one shoe and a

red shoestring in the other. Narcotics were a significant part of the gangster lifestyle, bringing in large sums of money and more powerful weapons.

Handguns were still the weapons of choice, but more and more drive-bys were committed with AK47s, Mac 10s, and Uzis. Multiround, fully-automatic weapons became trademarks for Los Angeles' most notorious street gangs. High-profile shootings and numbers of rounds fired by these weapons caused a media frenzy in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles street gangs realized that rock cocaine was becoming very popular and new markets were opening up throughout the country. The war on drugs in south Florida caused the Colombian drug cartels to seek new and safer smuggling routes into the United States. California's little known alcohol prohibition smuggling routes were chosen as an alternative method to bring cocaine into the United States. Young African-American male entrepreneurs began to capitalize on the demand for rock cocaine and the abundant supply from the cartels. Expansion was rapid, and the gangs had a consistent income source with ever-growing markets across the western United States.

As their territories spread to areas outside California, these gang members were immediately idolized by would-be gang members in these new areas. Members who were near the bottom of the totem pole in California were raised to shot-caller (controller) status in other cities. The only major competition to the Crips and Bloods were the up-and-coming Chicago-based street gangs. The Black Gangster Disciples, the Vice Lords, and the Latin Kings were the three most notable. Though long-established as gangs in their own cities, they capitalized on the mystique created by the Crips and Bloods. These Chicago-based gangs soon realized that their own reputations were creating the same opportunities for making money and began to expand throughout Illinois and other parts of the Midwest.

Along with the expansion of the Crips and Bloods came ever-worsening violence. Crimes of violence, exciting to gang members, added to their reputation for fearless brutality and became frequent media headlines. The problem that was once isolated to inner-city Los Angeles was now a national issue. Gang units and the war on drugs became a federal priority. Winning back the streets was the cry among law enforcement throughout the country as gang-related homicides in Los Angeles were climbing to all-time highs.

Gangster Rap Fans the Flames of a National Phenomenon

The late 1980s through the early 1990s also brought something new to black youth in Southern California. Rap music, which originated on the East Coast, started out with a self-promoting theme as the artist bragged about his ability on the microphone. The underground voice of ghetto youth from New York neighborhoods eventually found its way to Southern California. Once rap reached the West Coast, a metamorphosis began in its rhetoric and presentation. Rap was taken to another level when former gang members and/or gang associates took the self-promoting theme of rap music and mixed it with boasting about the individual's gangster lifestyle. Gang members, or those claiming to be gang members, adapted rap to describe their lifestyle. Sergeant Ron Stallworth, gang intelligence coordinator for the Utah Division of Investigation, is a nationally recognized

expert on gangster rap music. In his analysis of the music, he found seven main themes. The number one prevailing theme is the glorification of the gang lifestyle and mentality.

Rap music had already become the voice for the disenfranchised minority youth of America. Now through gangster rap, purported gang members had a medium to speak to the youth of the world about their world and their rules, cultural values, and laws. It was mainstream America's first look at the lifestyle of street gang members. This medium was the catalyst for criminal street gang culture that spread across the nation. Gangs were no longer an inner-city problem. The Los Angeles gangs capitalized on the mystique of being the originators of the "thug life," and this gave them status across the nation. The rap industry also provided many gang members and dope dealers with an opportunity to launder illegal drug money. Any dealer with some homeboys that had the gift for "Banging on Wax" (the name of the first Blood and Crip gangster CDs in the underground market) could finance a career and start up their own production company.

Many of the most popular gangster rappers began to expand from the underground rap world to the mainstream. Radio began to give them heavy play. The cable station Black Entertainment Television (BET) created hard-core rap shows for their videos. The movie industry embraced the gangster lifestyle as their popularity soared and the industry's thirst for realism in gangster theme movies became a goal. The underground rap industry was the real moneymaker, but the world was now exposed to these young men and women who glorified drug usage and dealing, robberies, assaults, drive-by shootings, alcohol abuse, and the violence directed at their perceived enemies.

Youth from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds began to idolize gangster rappers in the same way that rock and roll stars had been idolized during the 1960s.

The 1990s and Beyond: Black Gangs Continue to Evolve

Black street gangs continued to change and adapt during the 1990s. The events surrounding the 1992 Los Angeles riots caused many of the older gang members to reexamine their gang lifestyles. Most of the Southern California-based Crip and Blood gangs had already become more monetarily driven. Though these young men could be from the same gang, their loyalty was given to a select few homeboys from their peer group within their larger gang. Most of the largest street gangs have many distinct cliques or criminal crews within the gang structure itself. Each clique or crew acts autonomously and engages in whatever criminal activity is the most profitable and provides them with the most excitement and status.

During this time period, gangs in the housing projects split into smaller cliques based on the numbered streets that run through the area and crews of friends from the same generation (i.e., Aceline/111 Street, Duece-line/112 Street, Four-line/114 Street, Five-line/115 Street, The Crazy Brew, and the Kill Squad). These smaller sets of larger gangs operate autonomously and may engage in conflicts with other cliques within the same gang. Gang members expanded the range of their criminal activities, and smaller gang cliques within larger gangs have been involved in bank robberies, narcotic sales, carjackings and thefts, smash-and-grab burglaries, and gang warfare with any perceived enemy. The profits from the criminal ventures are generally shared only with the individuals involved and are not distributed to all the members of the larger gang.

These internal gang conflicts have occurred primarily along generational lines. The gang leaders (Original Gangsters or OGs) of a number of gangs began to have difficulties controlling the activities of the younger members in their gangs during the 1990s and early 2000s. Some of these conflicts caused major divisions within some of the oldest, most prominent gangs. A prime example is the Bounty Hunter Bloods gang based in the Nickerson Gardens housing project in South Central Los Angeles. Older members found no support from the younger members when they returned to the community from prison or other absences. Often, the older members were challenged for control of the cliques involved in narcotics distribution. Some of these conflicts turned into violent confrontations. Consequently, when a Bounty Hunter Blood gang member is killed in the Nickerson Gardens projects, other Bounty Hunter members and/or associates have become likely suspects.

The 1992 Los Angeles riots have been referred to by gang members and their supporters as “The Uprising” or “Rebellion.” Many of the antiestablishment/radical groups viewed the riots as an awakening for the impoverished neighborhoods and their resident youth gangs throughout Southern California and the nation. Disillusioned street gang members have created connections with groups that purport to be fighters for the people and the answer to their battle against society for recognition and respect. Radical political groups, such as the BPP, the Black Liberation Army, the Nation of Islam, the Black Guerilla Family (prison gang), the United Blood Line, the United Blood Nation, the Bluenotes (Crip affiliates on death row in the San Quentin State Prison), and the 415 African Nation have again become active within the street gang culture.

New groups, such as the New African-American Vanguard Movement (BPP offshoot), the Black Riders Liberation Army (started in the California Youth Authority), the All African Peoples’ Revolutionary Party, and a handful of other radical groups, have also formed. These groups bear careful attention. Numerous gang members have begun to show interest in politics and have been successful as reformed gang members, attempting to change the neighborhoods.

The most notable and successful is a self-educated, admitted-killer named Kody Scott, a.k.a., “Monster” of the Eight-Tray (83) Gangster Crips. His autobiography gave the world an inside look into the mind of the street gang soldier. Scott, who changed his name to Sanyika Shakur, has changed many preconceived notions about how and why gang members operate. He also expounded on society’s responsibility for the creation and glamorization of the gangster lifestyle, almost romanticizing it in the same fashion as Bonnie and Clyde, Jesse James, Billy “The Kid,” and other famous cold-blooded killers. More and more gang members are coming out with autobiographies, telling their stories to mainstream society. The level of sophistication of the street gangs has risen to new heights.

Detective Wayne Caffey has served for 24 years with the Los Angeles, California, Police Department (LAPD) and has worked in gang enforcement and investigations for 20 of those years. He is currently assigned to the Gang and Operations Support Division – Gang Support Section and is a nationally recognized expert and speaker on African-American and Hispanic street and prison gangs.

©Wayne Caffey, 2006. All rights reserved. Reprinted with the permission of the author.