

# Sureno Gang Graffiti: Understanding the Art of War

By Andrew Eways, International Gang Investigators Association: Executive Secretary

Published: 02/13/2012



Over the years, gang graffiti has been repeatedly called *the newspaper of the street*. This label, however, is an oversimplification. Gang graffiti is not only the newspaper of the street, but also the history books, the boundary markings, the billboards, and the public safety bulletins. Gang graffiti is intended to serve many purposes. The most significant of these are to mark territorial boundaries, to warn or threaten rivals, to show size and strength, and to memorialize deceased members. Even so, the

so-called *newspaper of the street* is largely written in a different language; a language intended for gang members to understand. As for the rest of us that move find ourselves moving in their circles and operating in their territories, learning the basics of gang graffiti can prove useful. Since each gang can have its own unique symbolism and items of significance, this chapter will concentrate on the basics of gang graffiti as it relates to Sureno gangs in particular.

## Sureno Identifiers

Ever since La Eme organized the gangs of Southern California into the Surenos, a common identifier of Sureno gang allegiance has been the number thirteen. While there have been different interpretations as to the meaning of the number in Sureno identifiers, evidence supports that the meaning is to represent the letter “M”, the thirteenth letter of the alphabet which, in this case, is meant to represent *La Eme*. Over the years, artistic expression has given birth to several popular variations of the number thirteen in Sureno graffiti including the use of Roman numerals (XIII), combinations of both Roman and contemporary numerals (X3), phonetic versions of the number (3C, 3CE, or Trece), and anything else the *grafitero* can imagine. They may also use the Mayan numbering system, in which the number thirteen is represented by two horizontal lines and three dots. Another, more obvious identifier seen in Sureno graffiti is the word *Sureno* itself or other popular variations of the word including *South Side* and *Sur*, which can either mean “south” or stand for the phrase *Southern United Raza*.

Still another element seen in Sureno graffiti and tattoos are the *Tres Puntos*, meaning *Three Points*. The Tres Puntos symbol is three dots forming a triangle with two on the bottom and one on top. According to many members of Sureno gangs, the symbol represents the three inevitable results of their gang lifestyle; prison, the hospital, and the graveyard. They also represent the phrase *Mi Vida Loca*, or *My Crazy Life*. Unlike the once-popular song by Miami native Ricky Martin, this isn't a reference to endless parties, beautiful women and dancing in the street. Instead, *Mi Vida Loca* is a life out of control; one marred with violence, loss and despair that non-gangsters are oblivious to; one that ends in prison or in a grave.

## **Geographic and Varrio Identifiers**

While the Surenos are united in both name and rivalry with the north, Sureno gangs are in reality separate and unique. Each Sureno varrio has its own name, most often a reflection of their neighborhood, area, or city, but other times simply a unique name chosen by the founding members. In most cases, a Sureno gang's name is represented in graffiti through abbreviations instead of the full name of the gang. For instance, the *Tortilla Flats* varrio from Compton, CA may be represented in graffiti as *TF* (*Tortilla Flats*) and *CVTF* (*Compton Varrio Tortilla Flats*). Similarly, the *El Monte Flores* varrio is represented by the initials *EMF*, *Florencia* is simply represented by the letter *F*, the *Original Gangster Surenos* are represented with *OGS*, and the *Playboy Surenos* use *PBS*. Each Sureno gang has chosen its one to four letter abbreviations with which to represent itself.

Other geographic references common in Sureno gang graffiti as well as other gang graffiti includes the gang's *side*, or which portion of the city, town, or area they claim. In Los Angeles, the 10 Freeway is considered the east-west dividing line. Gangs east of the 10 consider themselves *Eastside*, while gangs west of the 10 consider themselves *Westside*. Other cities and areas have similar geographic boundaries; some populated so densely with gangs that a single street is considered the dividing line and others so spread out that they are more generally or vaguely divided. In any case, Sureno varrios and cliques of large Sureno varrios may include references to *Northside*, *Southside*, *Eastside*, or *Westside* in their graffiti.

Another geographic reference that is often found in Sureno graffiti is the directional arrow, which helps to define the boundaries of a specific varrio. Most commonly, the directional arrow will point to one side or the other as an indication of where the specific varrio begins. Other times, directional arrows point in both directions to indicate that the graffiti is inside the boundaries of the varrio. Still other times, to indicate that the graffiti is inside the boundaries the directional arrow will point straight down – similar in meaning to the notations on map displays that announce “You are here”.

## Nicknames and Roll Calls

Many times, Sureno gang graffiti will contain the nickname of one or more members of the particular varrio. In some cases, a single nickname identifies the artist. In other cases, multiple nicknames are an indication of which members frequent the immediate area where the graffiti is located, the members who were present when the graffiti was created, or a show of strength and intimidation in the form of a gang roll call.

Although the nicknames alone don't necessarily identify the gang member, they are a useful tool in establishing gang membership. Although the gang or intelligence officer may not know subjects in each area by their nicknames, it is more likely that patrol officers working every day in those areas will. Once nicknames have been located in gang graffiti, the investigating officer should make an effort to contact local patrol and narcotics officers, who may very well be able to provide real names and other information that corresponds to the nicknames. This will essentially provide the investigator with a partial membership roster of the gang that is identified in the graffiti.

## Signs of Rivalry and Disrespect

While the elements of graffiti outlined above will help to identify the name of a varrio, its boundaries, the part of town where it can be found, and one or more of its members, another important element still remains; overt signs of rivalry and disrespect between gangs.

In some cases, the grafitero will incorporate signs of disrespect to rival gangs in his or her graffiti. A common example of this in Sureno gang graffiti is the practice of writing the letter N backwards as a sign of disrespect to *Norteno* gangs in general. In other instances, signs of disrespect toward a specific varrio or gang may be included, such as inverting the letter A to disrespect the *Avenues*, or reversing the letter B to disrespect the *Bloods*. Other times, the artist will insult rival gangs by using disrespectful derivations of the gang's proper name, such as using the term *Mariposa* (*Butterfly*) to insult the *Maravilla* varrios, calling members of the *Tortilla Flats* varrio *Tacos*, or referring to the *Toonerville* varrio as *Tunaville*, or simply *Tunas*.

Other signs of disrespect such as cross outs and write-overs are not the work of the original graffiti artist. These elements are actually evidence that one or more members of a rival gang have made an incursion into the varrio. Cross outs and write-overs should be taken very seriously as they are potential warnings that rivalries are escalating – that insults are about to be replaced by acts of violence.

## Reading Sureno Graffiti

With the elements of Sureno gang graffiti outlined above, it is possible to immediately identify a gang as being Sureno-affiliated by the presence of the number 13, the word *Sureno*, or one of the commonly used variations of either. The specific varrio can be identified through the presence of its name or, more often, its chosen initials, and the area of town in which the varrio operates may be evident through references to *Northside*, *Southside*, *Eastside*, or *Westside*.

Directional arrows found in Sureno gang graffiti can help identify where territory begins, in what direction territory can be found, or whether or not the graffiti is within the territorial boundaries. The presence of one or more nicknames, combined with a little investigative work, can help identify as many members of the varrio. The presence of several nicknames, in a graffiti presentation commonly referred to as a *roll call*, can serve as a form of intimidation or warning to officers, civilians and rival gangs.

Signs of disrespect that have been incorporated into Sureno graffiti such as transposed, reversed, or inverted letters, can indicate ongoing rivalries with other gangs. The same is accomplished by the presence of derogatory terms for rivals that are included in the graffiti. And finally, cross-outs or write-overs are not only an indication of rivalries, but they are a sign that rivals may be frequenting the area and that insults are about to be replaced with acts of violence.

In the future, when you are told that gang graffiti is the *newspaper of the street*, you'll understand what the speaker means. At the same time, however, you'll understand that the *newspaper* is actually a history book, a pledge of loyalty, a membership roster, a warning, a territorial map, and a declaration of war. Understanding the basic elements of Sureno graffiti can help communities determine the gangs that operate in their area, can help police identify active gang members, and can assist all parties involved to intervene in gang rivalries before they become violent.

*Corrections.com author, Andrew Eways has been a sworn law enforcement officer since 1994, and is currently a member of a municipal police department in the Denver Metropolitan area. He previously served with the Maryland State Police, where he worked as a patrol officer, criminal investigator and a supervisor of both investigative and patrol personnel. He has worked in various specialized investigative fields including Criminal Intelligence, Homeland Security and Organized Crime. He was also a field Gang Enforcement Unit supervisor. He has been recognized by the courts as an expert witness and provides instruction to law enforcement and correctional personnel in gang history, recognition and investigative techniques. He is a member of several professional associations including the International Gang Investigators Association, of which he is the current executive secretary. He can be reached at [aeways2010@gmail.com](mailto:aeways2010@gmail.com) or by telephone at (410) 977-9589.*

*This article is an excerpt from his upcoming book **BEST: Barrio Eighteenth Street, Mara Salvatrucha and Other Sureno Gangs Across the United States**, which will be available in Fall 2012.*

*[http://www.corrections.com/news/article/29911-sureno-gang-graffiti-understanding-the-art-of-war?utm\\_source=CCNN\\_ezine&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=CCNN\\_ezine\\_2012feb08](http://www.corrections.com/news/article/29911-sureno-gang-graffiti-understanding-the-art-of-war?utm_source=CCNN_ezine&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=CCNN_ezine_2012feb08)*

