

# Origin of the Gang Name “Crips”<sup>1</sup>

Wilson Gray

*Boston, Massachusetts*

Gerald Cohen

*University of Missouri, Rolla*

The “Crips” derive their name from “cripples,” which in turn derives from the “pimp canes” they carried as their badge and as a weapon with which to cripple anyone who messed with them. The original motivation was self-defense, but that, of course, changed with time.

---

The Crips were originally the “Cripples” who used an early version of the “pimp cane” as their coat-of-arms, so I’ve heard. Well, having been resident in Los Angeles during their rise to fame, I know that they were originally the Cripples and carried canes. The rest is hearsay.

Don’t know much about the history of the Bloods. The name *Blood* itself is probably just the decades-old shortening of “blood brother,” used as both a term of address and in the meaning, “any random black male.”

A “pimp cane,” from my point of view, is a modern doodad that came in when pimps no longer dressed like gentlemen of leisure in three-piece suits that would have fit(ted) in on Wall St. It’s a kind of swagger stick for pimps, very roughly modeled after the bishop’s crosier. Instead of having the crosier’s crook, it’s straight, about 5 feet long or so, with a flashy, bling-bling nob at the top. A WAG is that it was introduced by today’s version of Iceberg Slim, a guy who calls himself “Bishop” Don Juan (or whatever his “sporting name” is).

The presence of the cane enabled its bearer to have a cool “walk.” In my day (ca.1940-1960, in Saint Louis), this special way of walking was known as a “cut walk” and everyone had his own version. Members of gangs all used the same walk to emphasize their unity. Later, in the early sixties, in the Southeast LA area, such a walk was known as a “pimp walk” or a “pimp strut,” this despite the fact that pimps didn’t walk or strut in those days. Rather, they drove in their pimpmobiles, the “white on white in white”—white top in a white body with a white leather interior—Cadillac convertible.

Mad TV had a long-running sketch series featuring the pimp Dolomite, whose pimp cane has been stolen and he and his bottom woman are conducting a world-wide search for it. Also, there's an old, neo-blaxploitation comedy titled *I'm Gonna Git You, Sucka*, starring Keenen Ivory Wayans as "Jack Spade" and featuring Antonio Fargas—the pimp, "Huggy Bear," of Starsky & Hutch fame—as the pimp, "Fly Guy." It has a scene featuring Fly Guy in all his glory: sombrero-sized fedora, fur coat, platform shoes with fishbowls containing live goldfish in the heels thereof, etc., strutting along the sidewalk with his pimp cane. Actually, it's more like a staff topped with a fancy knob than a mere cane.

As for the name "The Cripples," it was motivated by the fact that they carried walking canes of the usual type as their badge and as a weapon with which to cripple anyone who messed with them. (This was back in the mid-sixties, before firearms became readily available.) They could have called themselves "The Cripplers," I suppose, but then there'd be no obvious connection with their carrying of canes and it would also be less cool. Cf. the old R & B song that went:

I don't claim to be bad  
I don't claim to be strong  
I just want to keep bad people  
From doing me wrong.  
But I'm like poison ivy  
I'll break out all over you

The original motivation for forming the gang would have been to protect themselves from bad people and not to frighten anybody else. But, once they had formed, it would have become necessary for them to demonstrate that they were actually able to protect themselves, lest they be (choke! gasp!) disrespected. At that point, the stone begins to roll downhill.

#### Note

1. For the past eight years Wilson Gray has been sharing information with the American Dialect Society, based on his lifetime of experiences as an African-American and on his graduate training in linguistics at MIT. In January 2006 he sent several replies to queries about the gang name "Crips." I excerpted the most important information in his replies for presentation in my series of working papers *Comments on Etymology* (36: 20-21, 2007). With his permission I now submit this somewhat revised item for the *Festschrift* in honor of my friend, Ed Lawson (G.C.).