

TAGGERS TO TAGBANGERS

THE TRANSITION TO GANGS

By Deputy John Maxwell
and Deputy Dennis Porter

Since the late 1980s, graffiti vandals, known as taggers, have plagued Southern California with a form of visual terrorism that has predictably evolved into criminal gang activity. Taggers are no longer content with placing their own unique style of graffiti on the walls of public and private property. Today, it is not uncommon to find organized groups of taggers, called crews, transitioning to gangs or "tagbanging."

Tagger crew behavior often mimics those of gangs. Like gangs, taggers will prey upon small "mom and pop" stores and do "runouts" (take merchandise and run out of the store without paying for it). Or if markers, etchers and spray paint are needed they will descend on a paint store, distract the proprietor, and

steal as much graffiti supplies as they can. When tagger crews engage in this type of conspiratorial behavior including car jacking, bomb making, selling illegal drugs and murder, it is clearly gang activity.

Unfortunately, taggers are often overlooked because they are "just taggers." This presents a problem when identifying them and connecting them to a tagger crew that has just transitioned into a gang. When taggers commit violent crimes, investigators are usually hard-pressed to identify the perpetrators, even when the suspects belong to a known, established tagger crew. This is due to the fact that there has been no concerted effort by most law enforcement agencies to identify taggers and place them in the

California statewide gang tracking system called Cal-Gangs.

Politically, we do not want to acknowledge any more gangs than we already have. However, reality dictates we can no longer view taggers as misguided youth or frustrated artists. Based on the latest data regarding taggers, the transition to gang status is a growing trend that

can only exacerbate the current gang problem throughout Southern California and the rest of the nation.

Two tagger crews, in Los Angeles County, that typify this transition are "Known As Kings" ("KAK") and "213." The latter derived its name from the former telephone area code for the geographical location where the taggers lived. Both tagger crews are now considered gangs.

KAK

Most of the time tagger crews do not claim any specific territory because they live in an established gang area. When that happens, conflicts frequently arise with the pre-established gang in that area, or the tagger crew may decide to associate themselves with that gang – called "cliquing-up." A tagger crew can clique-up with an established gang, or they can be jumped into a gang and then be an adjunct to the gang or a clique of the gang.

KAK started by tagging walls, buses and schools. Later, they changed their crew name to "Known As Kings Compton Varrio Tresce" ("KAK CV13"). Along with the name change came a change in their level of criminal activity. KAK CV13 began selling illegal narcotics and guns, performing car jackings for "chop shops" (where the car is dismantled), and involving surrounding gangs and other tagger crews in gun-fights. After coexisting among an established Compton, Calif., gang called



This tagger activity in downtown Los Angeles will cost hundreds of dollars to clean up.

"Tortilla Flats" ("T-Flats"), KAK CV13 has now jumped into the street gang. Some taggers have subsequently changed their tagger monikers (nicknames) to more traditional gang monikers.

213

Another tagbanging crew, 213, also began by simply tagging. There are approximately 200 "213" members, but only 29 of them are listed in Cal-Gangs. Because of its size, 213 is one tagger crew that has been able to stand alone without cliquing-up with any established gangs.

As mentioned earlier, conflicts frequently arise between tagger crews and pre-established gangs in an area. 213 has been warring with a street gang called "Pico Viejo." Since January 1998, 213 taggers have shot and killed two Pico Viejo gang members. Pico Viejo has retaliated by killing one 213 tagbanger. As of October 1998, the situation is still tense with no cessation of hostilities between the two groups.

Like KAK CV13 taggers, 213 members have been involved in criminal activity such as illegal drug trafficking and murders – stemming from conflicts between rival gang members. 213 tagbangers have also threatened Montebello, Calif., police officers after an officer involved shooting with a 213 tagbanger who was armed with an SKS assault rifle. Since the shooting, 213 tagbangers have continually threatened to kill Montebello police officers or any law enforcement officers in retaliation. Further evidence of their commitment to a criminal gang lifestyle is that two of the crew's members are liaisons with the Mexican Mafia.

Tagger/Tagbanger Interview

We have interviewed over 100 taggers and tagbangers in the past, including two specifically for this article. The results of the two interviews brought out at least two things that the taggers made perfectly clear. First, tagging is highly individualistic, but it is an intentional counter culture activity that taunts the establishment. Second, taggers are not concerned

with the cost of cleaning up their graffiti; it's art to them. However, this "art" costs \$40 million to \$60 million to clean up Los Angeles County each year.

We asked these interviewees if there is anything that could have dissuaded them from becoming a tagger. Both of them, and others we've interviewed, believe nothing could have prevented them from becoming involved in tagging. All of



These hard-core KAK taggers are part of a tagger crew that has predictably transitioned to tagbanging.

their friends are taggers, and they feel being involved in similar activities helps them be closer to their friends.

Both interviewees claim they are still active taggers but do not participate in any tagbanging activities; however, they have close ties with tagbangers. Both of them feel it is an individual choice to participate in graffiti or gang activity. They could not offer any solutions to stop the violence and haven't given it much thought; they just accept it as a fact of life that's dealt with every day.

The question of why they tag always yields an interesting answer. Like other

taggers we've interviewed in the past, their response was the same: "It's a rush, risky and exciting." The excitement from tagging comes from knowingly doing something illegal and trying not to get caught by the police or rival tagbangers. Because of the risk involved, taggers often call one of their tagging escapades a mission. This type of activity often becomes addictive. By their

own admission, taggers want to keep experiencing this rush. The more the danger, the greater the rush.

These hard-core taggers we interviewed stated they would never stop tagging in one form or another. They also accept being caught as part of their overall commitment of doing graffiti.

The taggers would like to keep tagging non-violent. But as taggers hunt for walls and billboards to graffiti, they often come in conflict with gangs who view them as interlopers encroaching on their turf. In the past, taggers

have been robbed, beaten and murdered by gang members. Initially, taggers responded to these assaults by arming themselves with guns and knives for protection. However, the escalation that followed was predictable. The guns, previously used for protection, were now used to go after rival tagger crews or enemies. We asked one of the interviewees if it was possible to resolve differences with enemies without fighting. His response was a definite "no." It is his belief that once you're enemies, you can never be friends again because you can never trust a former enemy.

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The interviewees believe tagger crews that are trying to become famous have one of two options. They can become famous by doing graffiti, or they can become famous by their level of tag-banging. According to the interviewees, a tagger crew gains respect and notoriety by doing massive amounts of graffiti or participating in violent gang activities.

Taggers Need to Be Tagged

Taggers that have gone beyond tagging and are participating in organized criminal activities such as claiming turf, drive-by shootings, car jackings, selling illegal drugs and robberies are considered tag-bangers. Graffiti is no longer their main focus of activity.

Not all tagger crews have made the transition into gangs, but it is becoming an alarming trend among tagger crews that have been active for a year or more. We have dealt with tagger crew members who do not perceive themselves as being gang members, yet they carry guns to protect themselves from rival tagger crews and gangs.

According to a reliable source with the Compton Unified School District, the problem of tagbanging, on- and off-school campuses, is at epidemic proportions. Taggers are carrying "shanks" (stabbing devices) and guns to protect themselves or to attack rival taggers or gang members. Approximately 70 percent of the graffiti in the city of Compton is due to tagging activity. The remainder is from gangs.

It cannot be emphasized enough that tagger crews should be dealt with on a more serious level and should be targeted just like a street gang. If these tagger crews are dealt with in the early stages of tagger activity, many of them could be turned away from this behavior or guided in positive directions. However, the longer they are involved in tagging, the greater the risk that these taggers including the two we interviewed for this article will slip by and become full-fledged gang members — either individually or as a whole crew.

For more information on taggers and methods of dealing with taggers, please contact Deputy John Maxwell or Deputy Dennis Porter with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's Safe Streets Bureau at (310) 603-3100. ■

Tagger Terms

All City - Tagging all over, not just in one area

Arrowheads - A type of scribe or glass drill-bit, shaped like an arrowhead

Back-Up - This is another tag name a tagger will use but is less frequently known. (Members in the same crew may only know it.) It is usually used when a tagger's main tag name is known by school authorities or law enforcement.

Battle - A contest between different taggers or crews to see who can write their tag the most times in a certain area within a given period of time

Billboards - The advertising signs on buses

Bitches - A derogatory term applied to a person who will not back his crew or other crew members (See rank-out)

Bite - Adopting the same name as another tagger or crew

Bleeder - A type of paint that bleeds through when painted over, defeating the paint-over

Bomb - To put a series of large letters on a wall usually in more than one color

Bombing Run - When a tagging crew comes together with the express purpose of putting up as many of their tagger and crew names as they can on public or private property

Boot - Kicking someone out of a tagging crew

Buff - To remove graffiti from an object by wiping it clean

Burner - Doing a really good wall mural (See piece)

Burnt - Something that no longer can be used

Bust A Cap - To shoot at someone

Cap - Spray paint tips or nozzles including "fat" caps, which spray a wide line, and "testers," which spray a thin line

Check-Courting - Beating a fellow tagger in a crew as a form of discipline

Crew - A group of taggers with their own distinct name

Def - A really good tagger who's considered to be "cool"

Destinations - The front of the bus

Dis - To disrespect someone by writing over or on another tagger's work

Famers - A tagger that will only write his or her tag name and seldom writes the tagger crew name

Fresh - Pieces or tagging styles that are considered good

General - Not considered a unique style of graffiti

Getting-Up - Putting your tag on objects

Grills - The back of the bus, either inside or outside

Head - The best tagger in a crew art-wise

Heads-Up - To put graffiti on an object

Heavens - Large overhead freeway signs, also refers to any high objects used for tagging

Hero - A citizen who tries to stop someone from doing their graffiti and attempts to detain them for the police

Hit-Up - To place graffiti on an object

House Name - A unique nickname by which a dancing posse or crew member is known

Housers - Dancing group, posse or crew that dances at parties held in a house

Illegal Wall - A place where a tagger does not have permission to do his graffiti

Jack - To steal a tagger's supplies, usually by robbery

Jump-In/Out - Like street gangs, several members will beat a person who wants to get into the crew or wants to leave the crew.

Kill a Wall - To put graffiti all over a wall

Kings - Better than all others

Landmarks - Fixed street objects, such as city signs, electric poles, light poles, etc.

Legal Wall - A place where taggers have permission to put graffiti

Mob - Putting as much graffiti on an object as possible, usually in a short period of time

O.G. - Original graffiti artist who has been tagging for a long time

Oner - A tagger who does not belong to a crew

One-Time - The police

Paint Stick - A type of marker pen filled with paint

Piece - An elaborate graffiti mural put on a wall or other large object

Piece Book - These books sometimes have the appearance of a photo scrapbook and have pictures of graffiti writing or murals that a tagger or the crew he or she belongs to has done. A book used by taggers to practice their own unique style of graffiti writing or murals they plan to do in the future or have already done

Rack - Stealing and shoplifting paint, markers, etc.

Rank - Status within the crew, usually a veteran tagger who has some say as to what the crew will do

Rank-Out - Failure to claim your crew when asked

Rolled Up - Arrested

RTDs - Buses belonging to the Rapid Transit District

Sakuras - A brand of marker containing paint

Scribe - An object used to write on glass or plastic

Slash - To cross out another tagger/crew's name, meant as an insult or challenge

Streak - A brand of marker called Meanstreak that is similar to a large crayon

Swested - To be questioned about being a tagger by the police or gang members

Tag - A nickname or the act of putting graffiti on an object

Tagger - A person who adopts a unique nickname, then puts it on objects

Take-Out - To defeat another tagger/crew in a battle

Throw-Ups - Large bubble style letters painted on an object

Toy - A beginner or a tagger who writes like an amateur

Transits - Non-RTD buses

U/C - Undercover, plain clothes police or anything that is not what it appears to be, like a scribe inside an ink pen

Wak - A style of tagging that is considered incorrect or out of sync

Wild Style - Unique style of tagging that exhibits overlapping letters

Write - To put a tag or graffiti on an object

Writer - A writer is someone who does murals (pieces) or a person who puts his or her tag on objects. Note: Those who do pieces consider themselves to be artists and refer to themselves as writers; they do not like to be associated with taggers. A person who just tags may also call him or herself a writer.

Yard - A place where taggers and graffiti artists go to do their murals