

Graffiti

The Newspaper of the Streets

Graffiti is done by members from traditional gangs, as well as by graffiti writers called taggers. To leave their mark, gang members use spray paint, wide-tipped markers, and even scratch (etch) glass with sharp objects.

Gang Graffiti

To claim their turf, gangs mark their neighborhoods with graffiti. They leave their mark on fences, schools, sidewalks, walls and even homes. Primary gang hangouts are usually heavily covered with graffiti, including streets and street signs. Sometimes, little rival gang graffiti exists, because rival gangs will not risk getting caught or are outnumbered at these primary locations.

Different types of gangs create different types of graffiti. Typically, graffiti will include the name of the gang, nicknames of the members of the gang, slogans, or symbols exclusive to the gang, the territory claimed, and even the names of affiliated gangs. Graffiti also includes threats and challenges to rival gangs. In addition, graffiti can be used to show disrespect for rivals. Because members of different gangs often live in close proximity to one another, graffiti can provoke confrontations. When graffiti is not cleaned up immediately, it will multiply as different gangs cross out rivals and add their own graffiti messages.

Gangs use graffiti to gain recognition or to express the identity of the gang. Gang members are motivated to put up graffiti because it reflects their loyalty to the gang. In some cases, new gang members or associates may be ordered by their gang to put up graffiti to show their worthiness to join, and to prove that they are “down for” (loyal to) the gang. Gang members often use nicknames to identify each other, and it is common for these names to show up on graffiti “roll calls” or “places.” Graffiti is used to promote or enhance the names and reputations of the gang and gang members. In some cases, gang members use graffiti to brag about crimes they have committed. It is also not uncommon to find graffiti at the scene of a burglary or other crime.

Graffiti Specifics

Street gangs use their own language to communicate with one another through graffiti. This language includes common numbers, letters, words, or phrases which are easily understood on the streets. The name of the gang is usually abbreviated to two or three letters in gang graffiti. Hispanic gangs may include phrases in Spanish, which are sometimes misspelled. Common phrases include loco/loca (crazy), Rifa/Rifamos (we control), por vida (for life), vatos (homeboys), jura or hudda (police), and calle (street).

Numbers also have significant meanings to gang members. The number 187 is frequently used in gang graffiti around the United States, and represents the number of the California Penal Code for homicide. Graffiti which includes 187 is literally making a death threat. For Hispanic gangs from southern California, the number 13 (often written on the streets as XIII), represents the fact that these gangs are Surenos (southerners). The number 13 represents the letter M, (M is the 13th letter of the alphabet), short for “Eme,” or the Mexican Mafia. Gangs from northern California, called Nortenos, may use the number 14 (XIV), which stands for N, the 14th letter of the alphabet.

Many gang names, particularly those from Southern California, include the numbers or names of the streets on which the gang was originally founded. Some examples of these types of gangs include 18th Street and 38th Street. In addition, many Los Angeles-style gangs will use telephone area codes in their graffiti. Gang graffiti may also include the territory claimed by the gang. Often, this is represented as directional coordinates, such as East Side or West Side. These coordinates may also be abbreviated to E/S or W/S.

When gangs make threats in graffiti, these threats are often very direct. Threats can include writing derogatory terms for their rivals, such as writing slob in place of Blood, or crab in place of Crip. Gangs may also add the term killer or

kill a rival, or simply add the letter “K” after initial of a rival gang, as in B/K (Blood Killer) or C/K (Crip Killer).

Results of Graffiti

Graffiti devalues property and makes people feel unsafe in their neighborhoods. In addition to its unsightly appearance, gang graffiti can have frightening results. Graffiti can provoke gang rivals into a violent confrontation. Gang members take the messages they read in graffiti seriously, and the longer graffiti is left up in a neighborhood, the greater the risk that the threats will be acted upon.

HOW TO READ GANG GRAFFITI

Names: Gang names are usually abbreviated to two or three letters, but may include the affiliation of the gang written out (Crip, Blood, Surenos/SUR, Folk, etc.), as well as slogans, such as “Brown Pride.”

Nicknames: The nicknames of gang members are frequently included within the graffiti, often in a roll-call list or placard. These names may be simple, and typically are descriptions of the appearance or personality of individual gang members: Green Eyes, Casper, Smiley, Goofy, or other similar names.

Territory: The area claimed by the gang, including directional locators (east side), street names, city names, and telephone area codes.

Threats and Challenges: Often graffiti threatens or challenges rival gangs. A gang may “X” out or cross out the graffiti of a rival gang or gang member, or write “187” (homicide) next to it. A gang member may also write “killer” in conjunction with a rival gang’s name or abbreviate it with the initial of the gang and the letter K (i.e., B/K).

Numbers: Gangs often use numbers as part of their name (18th Street), or area codes to identify where the gang is located. The numbers 13 and 14 are very common in Hispanic gang graffiti, and the letters 5 or 6 may be found in Chicago-style graffiti.

Symbols: Some gangs use a common symbol to identify their affiliation. Examples of this include 5-pointed stars (People Nation), 6-pointed stars (Folks Nation), and others.

Tagging Crews

Some groups of graffiti writers could not be accurately classified as gangs, and are more accurately referred to as tagging crews. These groups have different motivations for creating graffiti. To most citizens, their work is vandalism. However, to taggers, their work is graffiti art.

In many areas, taggers are individuals from middle and upper income homes, whose source of entertainment comes from vandalizing public and private property with their art. Serious taggers are primarily between the ages of 18 and 22. Some taggers also belong to subcultures, and wear alternative labels such as skaters (skateboarders), punks, Straight Edge (anti-drug, alcohol & tobacco), and anarchists. Taggers tend to have risk-taking personalities, and may be attracted to extreme sports like skateboarding, in-line skating, and snowboarding, as well.

Tagger graffiti can often be easily recognized because it is more stylized and artistic, with fat, wild-style, or geometric letters. It usually contains brighter colors and more detail than gang graffiti, and may include pictures, as well. Taggers will also use the following tools in addition to spray paint: wide-tipped markers (44 Magnum size), nametag stickers/printed stickers (these are easily and quickly affixed to almost any surface, resulting in an instantaneous tag), paint sticks, and sharp objects (with which to etch glass).

When taggers join together, the group is called a crew. A crew can have as many as 50 members, but the average size is from 3 to 10 members. Crews are frequently co-ed, with males and females tagging side by side. Females will often carry the spray paint because they are considered to be less likely to be searched by law enforcement. When crews put

up pieces of graffiti together, sometimes one member will outline the design, and the other crew members will fill in the colors. After the design is finished, all the crew members will sign their names or monikers around the piece (short for masterpiece).

The individual tagger typically uses a nickname or tag name, generally a short word which contains 4 to 6 letters, like Choke, Brisk, Sledge, Dime, Factor, or Avoid. The crews generally use a 3 to 4 word crew name, such as Controlling All Boundaries, Only the Chosen, and Superior and Destructive Kings. The names reflect their rebellious attitude, and the fact that taggers are often highly intelligent with a somewhat ironic sense of humor. When tagging, the crew members will abbreviate the crew name to initials such as CAB, OTC, or SADK. The initials are often more important than the name, and may stand for more than one name, such as CAB for Crowned At Birth or Choke and Brisk. Taggers will generally write their own nickname and their crew initials. They may also write the names of other crew members, but this is usually done only when the group is working together.

Fame and Culture

The “fame” of the individual tagger or crew is measured by the number of tags, by the size of the area the graffiti covers, or the degree of challenge required to place the graffiti. Since fame and notoriety are what they seek, tag crews are not usually territorial. They will display their work wherever they can find a clean wall or “canvas.” They love to tag freeways or trains so that their graffiti will be seen by a wider audience. Many taggers thrive on finding spots which have never been hit by graffiti so they can claim the fame for breaking new ground. Taggers often feel an adrenaline rush when they tag an unusual location, like a rooftop or overpass. The element of danger involved in tagging these areas only adds to the rush. Taggers will generally stay away from residential property, committing most acts of vandalism on business or public property.

To many taggers, graffiti is a culture and a way of life. Many taggers believe they are creating a form of artwork, which they call “aerosol art.” As a tagger begins to build a reputation, he or she will choose a style and nickname. As taggers gain more experience, they will look for larger walls and locations that are more difficult to reach. It is difficult for habitual taggers to resist the urge to put up graffiti. When they are not doing more graffiti, most taggers will talk about graffiti and carry sketchbooks to draw ideas. Many will keep ledgers or records of their activities, including where they tagged and how long the graffiti stayed up before it was removed. Some will travel to other areas to learn about graffiti techniques. They also study the work of other taggers, often from other areas around the world. Of course, the Internet has only facilitated this process. Taggers are proud of their “art,” and will often photograph or videotape their “work” as it is being drawn by the tagging crew. They will take their friends to see it.

Taggers often test different types of paint to determine which types are most effective. They choose colors for intensity and coverage, not to reflect group affiliation. Many taggers confess to stealing/shoplifting the majority of the spray paint they use. Taggers will buy or steal special spray tips/nozzles for spray paint cans to make the paint flare, to create thin lines, or to cover a wide area. They also alter spray nozzle tips from household products to create different spray styles. Underground magazines, newsletters, and Internet e-zines publish photos of tagging hits from across the country, and offer ideas of how to create similar art pieces. These magazines may also publish advertisements for special supplies, clothing, and instructional videos. Taggers access the Internet to share information with other taggers around the world on tagging techniques, product preferences, and magazines.

Taggers and Gangs

Tagger graffiti has increased at an alarming rate in most cities around the U.S. It often appears in even the most affluent neighborhoods and business districts. Community members may at first be confused about the fact that “gangs” are appearing in their area. Taggers, however, are not traditional street gangs. In most parts of the U.S., taggers are less violent than traditional street gangs, although they may carry weapons. Taggers typically will not cross out the graffiti of other tagging crews or gangs. Taggers do, however, create most of the graffiti damage in many communities. “Battles” or wars between tagging crews are common, but are normally not violent. Two or more crews will agree to conduct a battle, and will use another crew to judge the competition. The battle is staged in a specific area and over a predetermined period of time, such as on a weekend, week, or night. The crews are judged on style, quality, quantity,

and original locations. The competition determines the best writers or crew. Often, the losing crew will split up, with former members joining another crew.

Taggers and gangs tend to stay separate from one another. Occasionally, taggers will be hired by gangs to advertise on the gang's behalf through creating graffiti. Sometimes gang members will join a tagging crew to learn graffiti art and style. In some states, taggers who hit up in gang territories are threatened or assaulted, which has led to many taggers carrying weapons to defend themselves.

Law Enforcement

Graffiti is the tagger's voice, their way to express themselves and to snub or tease the people in authority. Sometimes, taggers will strike with a deluge of graffiti to retaliate for news reports. Many crews will meet and then spend an entire evening putting up graffiti. Graffiti wars are also scheduled in the early morning hours. This timing creates a problem for law enforcement, whose numbers may be smallest during these hours. Business owners are generally not present, and homeowners are usually asleep. Taggers will frequently drive to a desired location, park their vehicles, and walk to their targets, making hits as they go. Because they are on foot, they can split up and are more aware of their surroundings. Their chances of being caught in the act of tagging are slim. Traditionally, the chances of arrest and prosecution for graffiti crimes have been minimal. One thrill of the tagger lifestyle is to stay one step ahead of the law. For every action law enforcement takes, taggers generally find an alternative.

There are signs that parents and other adults can look for that might indicate a young person is a graffiti writer. For taggers, the urge to tag is very strong, so their tag name will be written on many items the young person owns. They will often write their tag somewhere in their bedroom. Adults should also look for graffiti-style writing in the form of a piece book (sketchbook which includes pictures/words done in graffiti-style), practice sheets, school folders, and notebooks. Taggers may also keep a collection of various types of aerosol spray paint, surgical gloves, loose spray can caps/nozzles, paint sticks, wide-tipped markers, nametag or printed stickers with graffiti written on them, and photographs, magazines, or videotapes of taggers and their work. Adults can also look for paint or marker dye on a young person's hands, under his/her fingernails, or on his/her clothing. Use of pullover jackets, large coats with hoods, military jackets, and small backpacks used to store paint supplies, baggy pants with large pockets, and clothing with paint manufacturers names (Krylon is a favorite of taggers) on it are common attire for taggers.

TAGGER LANGUAGE

Battle: A contest between crews, judged on hits.

Bomb: Multicolored tag in large bubble letters.

Buff: To remove graffiti

Crew: Group of individuals that tag together.

Caps: (Fat/skinny) Spray can nozzles used to vary the style and width of paint.

Fade: To blend colors.

Fresh: Really good graffiti.

Get Up: To put up a large amount of graffiti tags.

Graf: Graffiti

Heavens: Hard to reach high areas such as freeway signs and the tops/upper floors of buildings.

Hit/Hit Up: To tag.

Landmarks: A prime location where graffiti won't quickly be erased.

Mob: A whole crew doing graffiti on a wall at the same time.

Piece Book: A tagger's sketch book.

Rack: To steal from off the store rack.

Streak: Short for mean streak, solid paint stick that looks like chalk and is used on dark surfaces.

Tag Banging: To use violence to defend a tag.

Toy: A new, inexperienced writer.

Throw Up: One layer of spray paint filling in bubble letters that are outlined in another color.

Wild style: A complicated piece constructed with interlocking letters.

Yard/Train Yard: Gathering place.

Zine: Short for magazines.

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