

# **SUMMARY OF BACKGROUND TO “TAGGER” GRAFFITI CULTURE.**

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Illegal Graffiti called 'tagging' is done by members from traditional gangs, as well as by 'graffiti writers' from the Hip Hop sub-culture. To leave their mark, gang-members use spray paint such as aerosol cans, wide-tipped markers, nametag stickers/stickers/printed stickers (these are easily and quickly affixed to almost any surface) and even scratch (etch) glass or Perspex with sharp objects.

To claim their turf or territory, taggers mark their neighbourhoods with graffiti that represents the group or crew or gang they belong to. They leave their mark on fences, schools, sidewalks, soundwalls, and road and street signs. Some areas, little rival gang /crew graffiti exists, because rival gangs will not risk getting caught or are outnumbered at these primary locations.

Different types of gangs / crews create different types of graffiti. Typically, graffiti will include the name of the gang/crew, nicknames of the members of the gang/crew, and even the names of affiliated gangs /crews (these are called shoutouts), slogans or symbols (such as \$) exclusive to the gang/crew, and often the territory claimed (i.e. postcodes such as 4114). Graffiti also can include threats and challenges to rival gangs/crews. In addition, graffiti can be used to show disrespect of rivals or to antagonize the party or authority or rival that the tagger perceives as his/her competition- this is often prevalent at legal walls where one tagger is jealous of another. Because members of different gangs/crews often live in close proximity to one another, graffiti can provoke confrontations. When graffiti is not cleaned off immediately, it will often multiply as different gangs/crews cross out rivals and add their own messages or tag.

Taggers and gangs use graffiti to gain recognition or to express the identity of the group. Gang/crew 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 'king' to put up graffiti to show their worthiness to join, and to prove they are "down for" (loyal to) the gang. Gang /crew members often use tag nicknames to identify each other, and it is common for these names to show up on "graffiti roll calls" or "placas". Graffiti is used to promote and enhance the names and reputations of the gang/crew and gang/crew members. In some cases taggers use graffiti to brag about crimes they have committed. It is also not uncommon to find tags at the scene of a burglary or other crime.

### **Graffiti Specifics**

Street gangs or crews use their 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/crew is usually abbreviated to two or three letters in gang graffiti- this is typically of both graffiti 'crews' whose members are interested in Hip Hop culture as well as crews who exist for drug use/selling and crews who are involved in other antisocial recreational sub-cultures such as Neo-Nazis, Satanists and skinheads etc.

Numbers also have significant meanings to gang / Crew members. The number 187 is frequently used by older graffitiists (old skool), and represents a copy-cat of American graffiti gangs who use the number as it represents the Californian Penal Code for homicide so that graffiti using 187 is literally making a death threat. For the Gold Coast gangs/crews from Nerang, the number 13 (often written on the streets as XIII), represents the fact that these gangs are southerners. The number 13 represents the letter M (M is the 13<sup>th</sup> letter of the alphabet), short for "EME" or the Mexican Mafia.

Many gang names, particularly those from Logan and Beenleigh (the Beenleigh Line representing the trainline) include the postcode number of the suburb on which the gang/crew was founded, for example 4114 or MfC 4207. Gang graffiti may also include the territory claimed by the gang/crew. Often, this is represented by a symbol such W – a directional coordinates for the West Line or Ipswich .

When gangs/crews make threats in graffiti, these threats are often very direct. Threats include writing derogatory terms for rivals, such as writing 'wak' or 'dog' or add a term such as 'murda'. In addition to the unsightly appearance of tags making people feel unsafe in their suburbs, gang graffiti can have frightening results. Tags can provoke gang rivals into a violent confrontation. Gang members take the messages they read seriously, and the longer graffiti is left up in a neighbourhood, the greater the risk that the threats will be acted on.

To some graffiti writers their tags can be more involved than a simple scribble and the work can be a filled in letter (called a throw-up) or include a simple icon (such as a duck). Many of these taggers see their work as art and 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 mark or art. Serious taggers are primarily between the ages of 15 years and 29 years old. Some will also belong in subculture, and wear alternative labels such as *skaters* (skateboarders), punks, Nazi and skinheads, *Straight Edge* (anti-alcohol & tobacco but into chemical drugs such as 'e' or 'speed') and *anarchists*. Taggers tend to have risk taking personalities, and may be attracted to extreme sports like skateboarding, snowboarding and break dancing (another part of the graffiti or Hip-Hop culture).

Graffiti 'pieces' 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 just tag graffiti, and may include pictures such as characters or cartoons, as well. A graffiti gang or crew can have as many as 90 members such as BWP, but the average size is from 3 to 10 members. Graffiti gangs or crews are frequently co-ed, with males and females tagging side by side. Females will often carry the spray cans because they are considered to be less likely to be searched by police or railway squad. It is not uncommon for there to exist just girl crews/gangs, such as in Browns Plains – high school girl crews/ gangs primarily do tagging.

When crews put up 'pieces' of graffiti together, sometimes one member will outline the design, one member will sketch up the design and other crewmembers will fill in the colours – this ensures the 'piece' is completed very quickly. If a camera is thought to be in the vicinity of where the piece is to be painted-, a cockatoo (look out person) will spray over or destroy the camera first then remain on the look out for any law enforcement – such as security officers, police or residents. After the design is finished, all crew/gang members will sign their names or tags (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 'Exit', "Veins", 'Casino' etc. The crews /gangs generally use a 2 to 4 word crew name, such as Rapid Fire- shortened to RF; Pregnating Teenage Girls – shortened to PTG ;TBK- The Brisbane Kings; Bed-Wetting Posse- shortened to BWP. 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 crewmembers will abbreviate the gang/crew name to initials such as BWP or FM. The initials are often more important than the name, and may stand for more than one name, such as FM – Funny Money; Fame Maniacs etc. Taggers will generally write their own nickname and their crew initials. They may also write the names of other crew/gang members, but this is usually done only when the group is working together as a team. It is not uncommon for a tagger to claim multiple 'crew' affiliations, sometimes involving rival crews for example a BWP member may also belong to PTG. Existing gangs may change the name of their gang and existing crews may suddenly merge and form a new gang.

Either the quality of artwork they produce or the number of tags measures the "fame" of the individual tagger or crew , 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/gangs are also territorial. They will display their work wherever they can find a clean wall or 'canvas' so as to

claim that territory for their crew. They love to tag highways or trains so that a wider audience will see their graffiti. 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 an overpass or back of highway sign (called 'tagging the Heavens').

To many taggers, graffiti is a culture – HIP-HOP CULTURE and a way of life. As a tagger begins to build a reputation, he or she will choose a style and a nickname and the preferred name they like to be called is 'writer' (although in this text the word tagger will be continued in use). As taggers gain more experience often tagging every sign, telegraph pole and fence to learn can control they will look for larger walls and locations more difficult to reach. It is difficult for habitual taggers to resist the urge to put up graffiti. When they are not out painting, most taggers will talk about graffiti often over the Internet in chatrooms or draw in sketchbooks they call blackbooks. Even when caught by police taggers will draw their tag if a pen and paper is left in the holding cell. Many taggers keep ledgers or records of their activities, including data bases of where they have tagged and how long the graffiti stayed up before it was removed. Some will travel to other areas to learn about graffiti techniques or to study the artwork of other taggers. They also study the work of interstate and international taggers via photo penpals or the Internet or distribution of underground magazines. Taggers will photograph either with still photo, digital or video their work sometimes documenting their whole process on video for other crew members to watch as well as to exchange videos from other taggers overseas or interstate. It is important to ensure they are evidence of their artwork to show other graffiti taggers.

Taggers often test different types of paint to determine which types are most effective. They choose colours for intensity and coverage, not to reflect group affiliation. Many taggers confess to stealing/shoplifting the majority of the spray paint they use (this is called racking). Although some paint companies are known to 'sponsor' individual artists so that they can by example show how good their paint is to other artists as well other companies have been exposed of selling out the back down boxes of paint (mainly reject cans) to taggers at a reduced rate to encourage them to buy their brand. Some taggers will also act as agents for these paint companies and distribute at wholesale prices paint often to underage buyers. Taggers or writers will buy or steal special tips/nozzles for spray paint to make the spray paint flare, to create thin lines, or to cover a wide area quickly depending on the size of the hole the paint will come out of the nozzle. They also alter spray nozzle tips from household products to create different spray style for example Mr. Sheen nozzles produce clean, thin lines. Underground magazines, newsletters, flyers and Internet e-zines publish photos of tagging hits and pieces 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 such as information on tagging or painting techniques, product preferences, where they will tag, and magazines to advertise their fame in.

Tagger graffiti has increased at an alarming rate in most cities around Australia. It often appears even in the most affluent neighbourhoods 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- although they carry weapons and much of the sub-culture is now involved in some form of drug use.

In most parts tagging crews are less violent than traditional street gangs, they do, however create most of the graffiti damage or wilful damage in many communities." Battles" or wars between crews are usual with two or more crews agreeing 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 a weekend, week or night. The crews are judged on style, quality, quantity and original locations. The competition determines the best writers or crew and they earn the name

“KINGS”. Often, the losing crew will split up, with former members joining another crew. Sometimes individuals who believe they have been unfairly judged will cross out or line out the winning crew and challenge another battle – this behavior also sets boundaries for territory and the quality of locations where the tagger can paint without violence – sometimes these wars carry on for months or years such as the THC , TBK war against AC and ELM. Tag banging – to use violence to defend a tag is however increasing as numbers of crews increase in.

Because the lines are being blurred between drug gangs (and Biker gangs) and graffiti gangs occasionally taggers will be hired by these 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. It is unfortunate that most graffiti gangs now have members who are involved in drug trafficking to some extent, ranging from street-level sales to wholesale distribution- however, the level of drug trafficking by crew members varies depending on age. Crews are also migrating from larger cities to smaller communities, a move fueled in large part by an increase in crew involvement with drug trafficking and availability of fresh (new) locations to tag. As popular culture uses and spreads the graffiti culture the gang culture is frequently ‘tweaked’ and modified by groups of youths that are attracted to the ‘gangsta’ subculture such as around areas of Logan Hyperdome and Nundah. They are examples of the ‘hybrid’ gang culture, in which local youth cut and paste bits of Hollywood gang lore and American popular culture gang lore into a localized version of tagging gang affiliation. These youth have modified the traditional graffiti culture lore with their personal interpretations and agendas, and become much more of a criminal and societal problem in the community than any other group. Asian criminal activity, much of which is by transient gangs, is having an increasing impact on graffiti gangs in Goodna and the Valley – these young taggers will live in one region but travel to commit crime in another suburb and do not have the same identification issues as other taggers. Frequently, profit potential outweighs old gang loyalties and this is where the drug culture is infiltrating the graffiti culture. These taggers also continue animosity with other crews and have violent encounters with local crews. Some taggers who ‘hit up’ in other crews territories are threatened or assaulted or have their girlfriends raped, which has led to most graffiti taggers now carrying weapons to defend themselves. This creates a problem when someone startles the tagger when they are painting and in some individuals leaves the risk of them assaulting a member of the public.

There also exists the risk of accident if a graffiti tagger is startled working on the highway of them running across lanes of traffic and potentially being hit. In some cases taggers have been hurt riding on top of trains ‘surfing’ or vehicle as a method of reaching to tag a dangerous location.

Graffiti is the way taggers express themselves and to snub or tease people in authority. Taggers will strike with a deluge of graffiti to retaliate for news reports or news articles especially when one of their friends is caught. Many crews will meet and spend an entire evening putting up the graffiti. Graffiti wars are 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 chance of being caught in the act of tagging is slim. Other taggers will wear surgical gloves so that their fingerprints are not left. Witness intimidation is dramatically affecting the prosecution of violent graffiti artists who bully younger members of the crew. Graffiti crews, for most parts, are more sophisticated than ordinary gangs as there exists a strong hierarchical structure and these days members are becoming much more organized encompassing politics, technology (Internet), the railways and the media. Traditionally, the chances of arrest and prosecution for graffiti crimes are minimal as for every action law enforcement takes taggers generally find an alternative. It is part of the lifestyle and culture to stay one step ahead of the law.

Other reasons why graffiti tagging has increased dramatically is that social workers and youth workers who are not experienced in the culture are often used by the taggers. These youth workers believe they are assisting in reducing tag activity by provision of legal paints but these almost always end up with paint stolen to be used in later vandalism attacks and if mentor older graffiti artists (who have come from illegal tag background) are used often they will encourage tagging in younger impressional youth with their stories of the culture and peer influence. Younger youth 'toys' see them as role models to impress so that they can join a gang or brag to their friends that they have pieced with this person.

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 that the young person owns. They will often write their tag somewhere in their bedroom. Adults should look for graffiti-style writing in the form of a BLACKBOOK ( a sketchbook which includes pictures/ words done in graffiti style – it will often also have news articles stuck in etc) , practice sheet called 'outlines', school folders and notebooks. Taggers may also keep a collection of various types of aerosol paint, surgical gloves, masks, loose spray can caps/nozzles, empty cans of prized paint brands, wide-tipped pens , nametag or printed stickers with graffiti written on them, and photographs, magazines, or videotapes of taggers and their work.

These days increasingly taggers will scan artwork and photos onto their computers so that in police raids evidence of their tagging will not be seized. Adults can also look for paint or marker dye on a young person's hands, under his/her fingernails, or on his/her clothing and shoes. Use of pullover jackets, beanies, 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 favourite as is 'damage') on it are common attire for taggers.

Society has many obligations to its young people, whilst tagging embodies much of the frivolity of youth - it is important that a clear message about right, wrong and responsibility to others be sent. Over the years, many things have been tried by authorities to curb the spread of tagging. Councils have devoted designated public space for graffiti art which has failed because it has been set up by the older vandals who hold a town in siege 'tag it up' when they feel they need more space or they may be loosing their jobs and target hardening of sites such as railway seats etc has stopped a degree of wilful damage. Still crimes against property is the fastest growing crime in Australia, in conclusion, it is imperative that maintenance authorities and law enforcement agencies, both large and small, understand the continuing changes in the dynamics of graffiti gangs/crews as the tagging problem continues to spread. It is vital that agencies maintain updated training of staff and monitor the specific chemistry of the graffiti gang culture within their own jurisdiction. There is no all-encompassing response by a law enforcement agency, which will work universally. The response to tagging gangs must be based on an accurate assessment of the local problem by experts, updated intelligence, an examination of resources in the community, updated community cultural training, and a realistic appraisal on how to gauge success. It is essential that efforts always include every available community agency, community government and police administration, which aids in the intervention and prevention effort.