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In a City of Graffiti, Gangs Turn to Violence to Protect Their Art

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LOS ANGELES, March 12— "Sometimes when I'm walking down the street and I see this bare wall, the urge hits me and, like, I just can't control it," Alex Alvarez said, explaining why he is one of thousands of teen-agers scribbling graffiti in Los Angeles.

"I write my name up there and then maybe paint a little extra picture around it," he said, "and -- KA-POW! -- I'm famous. It's a real rush."

It is much more than that to this city that may now be the graffiti capital of the United States, exceeding even New York in messy gaudiness.

Over the past 18 months, some of the ego-driven graffiti scribblers, who call themselves "taggers," as in name tags, and who compete in neighborhood "crews," as in gangs, have turned to violence. Many taggers now refer to themselves as "tag bangers," carrying guns, knives and clubs along with their marker pens and cans of spray paint. **Beatings Over Tagger Turf**

Once crews engaged in spirited but friendly artistic rivalries, holding "paint offs" to show off their skills. Now there are frequent beatings over tagger turf and, worse, periodic shootings and stabbings over real and imagined slights and insults.

"It's very common these days to find armed taggers," said Officer Carlos Lopez, a Los Angeles policeman whose speciality is tagger crews, "and now we're having to go after them for violence as well vandalism."

The police say one tagger, still on the loose, was responsible for three recent slayings. They also say some taggers are turning from graffiti to burglary and robbery. They have lost track of how many tagger fights they have broken up and investigated. But they will not soon forget the rifle-carrying tagger they nabbed several months ago on a roof, standing guard for his crew as it painted up another group's territory. Guns and Brushes

While there are no comprehensive crime statistics available, all police divisions in the Los Angeles area are reporting increases in violent tagger-related crimes.

"It used to be that we'd seldom find an armed tagger," said Sgt. Gary Twiford, a transit police officer who supervises anti-graffiti squads. "Now, out of every hundred or so arrests, we pick up a dozen or more guns and knives. One kid pulled his gun and shot at some officers trying to make an arrest."

Alex Alvarez had heard about that shooting.

"You can get hurt out there these days," conceded the 17-year-old high school junior whose tagger nickname is Judas and whose 50-member crew,

Uneducated Clan, operates in the graffiti-smeared Hollywood section.

Like all taggers, Mr. Alvarez survives by stealth, tagging and banging when no one in authority is looking. But he agreed to surface this week at a Hollywood gym for a talk about life as a tagger and a member of Uneducated Clan, which he calls "my true family."

"These days I carry a knife sometimes," he said. "You have to carry something -- a shank, a gun, a bat. There's more and more fights with other crews and sometimes with street gangs that aren't into tagging. Mostly I just try to use my fists. Some of my buddies have been cut. But our crew hasn't had a shooting, not yet." "That's Sort of the Thrill

Why continue to tag if tagging has become violent, with crews now carrying names like Chosen for Krime and Shoot to Kill, and members adopting tags like Terror and .357 Magnum?

"Well," Mr. Alvarez replied, "that's part of the thrill, too. I mean, like you tag this wall with spray real fast -- sizzzzt! sizzzzt! -- and nobody catches you, and then another crew sees what you've done and tries to tag over you and you have to go after them. Hey, like I say, it's a rush."

Though graffiti is an ego trip tracing back thousands of years, it has no history of violence. But the police say violence was an inevitable consequence in Los Angeles once the taggers organized themselves into more than 200 crews and began collectively and competitively tagging virtually every wall, utility pole, billboard, highway sign and transit bus in sight.

"It's organized illegal behavior, nothing less than deliberate group vandalism," Sergeant Twiford

said. "Violence is sure to follow if you get 5,000 to 10,000 kids competing to outdo each other in destruction and at the same time they're tangling with the police, building up arrest records."