

Gangs turn to Internet to recruit, advertise

Police say they use sites to ID members

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North County gangs are recruiting new members and claiming new turf — on the Internet.

The phenomenon, sometimes referred to as “cyber-banging” has been growing for the last few years, along with the popularity of the Web sites the gangs use, such as MySpace and YouTube, authorities say.

Gang members and associates from virtually every local gang boast their affiliations on these sites.

In videos and pictures, they flash gang signs and wear gang colors.

Sometimes, rivals spar on message boards.

Oceanside Detective Gordon Govier, who investigates the city’s resident Crips and Bloods, said it’s not hard to find well-produced, self-promoting songs and videos featuring local gang members.

He pointed to a video by a rapper called “Lil Slim” posted on YouTube.

“Getting \$,” viewed more than 15,000 times according to the Web site’s count, shows two bikini-clad girls jiggling next to Slim in front of a new Bentley while a storm of \$20 bills whips the all-white set.

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The homage to gang life looks Hollywood-produced, but “Lil Slim” is an Ocean-side-based gangster who boasts about local crimes in the song, Govier said.

“...bring the yellow tape, secure the whole scene,” the rapper/gangster says over an electronic beat. “... Lil Slim was seen fleeing the scene.”

Govier refused to give the rapper’s real name or details of the alleged crime extolled in the rap, citing an open investigation.

But he said the song was a rare instance of gangsters mentioning specific crimes on a public Web site.

More often, police use the Web to identify gang members and their associates, Govier said.

While it is not illegal to be in a gang, and Internet sites

that reference gang activities are protected free speech, a MySpace page with a message board full of gang references and snapshots of people flashing gang signs goes a long way in court to prove that someone is a gang member, he said.

A recruiting tool

Jon Moffat, a youth violence prevention coordinator with the Vista Community Clinic, said he suspects gangs use the slick videos and MySpace pages to target their primary recruits: middle school students.

“On their pages, they will use their gang names, they will throw gang signs,” Moffat said. “I consider it to be a recruiting tool. They show that they have money, drugs, girls. If you find any gangbanger’s MySpace page, they all say that they make \$250,000-plus.”

He pointed to a slide show presentation called, “Vistero Roll Call,” on YouTube, apparently done by Vista Home Boy

gang members.

A rap that plays behind the images appeals to the notion of loyalty.

"I'm ready to die any day for the gang I (expletive) claim/Until I'm lying in my grave I will remain/banging for the Vista Home Boys gang/ Hit the ground when you see me taking aim/ with that 12-gauge, tearing your face apart."

One slide shows a gang member in a casket, wearing a number 22 Chargers jersey, code for "Vista," because "V" is the 22nd letter of the alphabet, Moffat said.

In another slide, heavily tattooed gang members drink beer. In another, three handguns sit next to plentiful ammunition clips.

"Each scene has its own symbolism," Moffat said. "You get to see into a world that's pretty crazy."

An easy link

The Internet is an insidious way for gangs to spread their

message because it's so easy for kids to become associated with the gang-related sites, Moffat said. A middle-schooler may find a hometown gangster rap or a gangster's MySpace page and link to it without much thought.

"Ninety percent of the kids who have this stuff on their Web sites don't even understand the seriousness of it," Moffat said. "They say, 'I just wanted to be cool. I just wanted to represent my hood.' But now you're affiliated, and you're putting yourself in danger, not only from the police, but from rival gangs."

It's unclear if any young people have joined local gangs based on something they saw on the Internet, and neither Moffat nor others were able to point to a kid who said the Internet made him a gangster.

Moffat guesses the relationship is less direct.

"This is just one aspect of a way to pull them in, videos

glorifying the 'hood,' " he said. "It's just one element glorifying the criminal lifestyle — no one element pushes it over the top and makes them join a gang."

The vulnerable few

Cristian Rodriguez, a 17-year-old student at Rancho Buena High School in Vista, said he spends hours every week on the Internet.

He agreed that gang-themed material is readily accessible, but he said he has doubts about its seriousness and danger.

He said he typed in "Vista" on YouTube and found a video called "Gang Fight." But he recognized some of the people in the footage and knew they weren't gangsters.

"Some of this stuff is mostly a joke," he said. Supposed "gang challenges" on MySpace message boards more often than not are a parody, he said.

However, Cristian said he

also sees legitimate gangster postings. Ultimately, he said, their power depends on the individual viewing them.

"I say the risk is there, but I'm going to say it's up to the kid," Rodriguez said. "If the kid is dumb enough to get involved when he sees that stuff, that's up to him."

A lieutenant with the North County Gang Task Force agreed that gang-related Internet advertisements appeal to the same kinds of people gangs always target: kids from dysfunctional families looking for status and a place to belong.

"I look at (the gang Web sites) and think they're stupid and I think the people involved in them are out of their minds, but somebody who has nothing, somebody who has no direction, they could take a look at it and think it's pretty cool," Lt. Derek Clark said.

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