



Partnering with Communities
to create a better
Prince William County

Recognizing Tagger and Gang Graffiti

It is unfortunate that graffiti has become a ubiquitous presence in our community. Left unchecked, graffiti becomes an accepted part of our environment. This has the effect of lowering our quality of life and property values while emboldening those who practice this form of vandalism.

Not all graffiti is the same. There are the expressions of love such as "John Loves Mary;" the existential statement "I was here;" or politically motivated statements like "Stop the War." These are usually benign and do not pose a threat, unless unwanted by the property owner. The other types of graffiti which pose a larger threat to the community are **Tagger** graffiti and **Gang** graffiti.

Tagger graffiti can be classified into three basic types or styles known as tagging, bombing and piecing. **Tagging** is the simplest and quickest, involving only the tagger's initials, symbols, or alias. This may be in the manner of unreadable writing or initials, often made with spray paint in large rounded, bubble-style letters. They can also use markers to place their initials or "tag" on a variety of surfaces. These taggers are called "writers."



Bombing takes a little more time to complete and may be multi-colored and detailed. **Piecing** is the most complex and often takes extensive time and work to complete. Those who create these elaborate graffiti are called "piecers" after the "masterpieces" they put up. Taggers usually operate independently or in small groups called crews. The more elaborate and public the graffiti, the greater status is for the tagger or tagger crew.

Gang graffiti will always carry the name of the gang and sometimes the street name or "moniker" of the person who put it up. It often will be in the form of a list of the monikers of the gang members. This is called a role call. Gang graffiti is usually done for a purpose: to claim territory; to issue a challenge to a rival gang; to show an affiliation between gangs; or to memorialize a deceased gang member. Common gang symbols are crowns, stars,



pitchforks, the number 13, a series of numbers, the numbers 5 or 6; and RIP (“rest in peace”) to memorialize a deceased gang member. Gangs will often put up their own graffiti in a rival gangs territory as a challenge, or they might come into a rival gang’s area and cross out their graffiti as a challenge. Graffiti that has been crossed out is an indication of tension between gangs.

Differences Between Tagger and Gang Graffiti	
Tagger Graffiti	Gang Graffiti
Communication secondary, if present at all	Intent made to communicate
Artistic effort a major consideration	Artistic effort secondary, if present at all
Territorial claims infrequent	Territorial claims prominent
Explicit threats rare	Explicit threats made
Explicit boasts about the tagger common	Explicit boasts made about the gang
Pictures & symbols dominant, letters & numbers secondary	Letters, numbers, and symbols dominate
Limited police intelligence gathered	Intelligence to police provided

For additional information or resources please contact the author of this piece and Prince William Gang Response Intervention Team Coordinator, Richard H. Buchholz at 703-792-5392 or rbuchholz@pwcgov.org.