

Surge in graffiti adding to South Tahoe's rundown look

By Kathryn Reed

Art isn't usually the first word business owners or residents think of when they see graffiti marring structures.

While tagging is nothing new on the South Shore, it has been cropping up in more visible locations in the past six weeks.

Adidas was hit in early May just below the roofline, with taggers covering up a good part of the high wall along Highway 50. It took several weeks for it to be painted over.



Graffiti on the back of the Miller's Outpost.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

A large tag still remained Thursday afternoon on the back of the old Miller's Outpost with the word "kind" and the number 420 in a circle dotting the I. The number represents California Senate Bill 420 regarding medical marijuana cards. And April 20 is known as an international pot smoking day.

Some businesses do patch jobs to cover up the graffiti; others like at the Y Factory Stores do a better job so there is no

evidence of the vandalism.

The cumulative cost to businesses to clean up after the vandals is unknown. But it definitely is an unbudgeted expense.

“It’s not just the Y, but there it has been the most brazen and more public,” Detective Nick Carlquist said.

Carlquist is South Lake Tahoe Police Department’s point man for gang and graffiti activity. He works odd hours – much like the taggers. He’s not in a uniform most of the time – much like the taggers who don’t want to be easily identified.

His is a world where people don’t like to talk. While interviewing people about all the tagging on the interior and exterior of the old C&M Lodge on Bonanza Street, one guy said he wouldn’t name names for fear of retaliation from the gang members allegedly involved.

Taggers don’t stop at the state line. Law enforcement believes some of the same people are working that area – at the casinos, and the run down, closed motels on Cedar Avenue. Nearly every pillar at the bankrupt convention center site is tagged.

Experience counts

Carlquist has been with SLTPD for about three years, having come from the Hollister department. Even when departments like the K-9 unit were cut there, the gang unit stayed intact.



Taggers like

large areas
where they can
leave their
mark.

His experience in these matters helped him get the job in Tahoe.

What he noticed when he arrived is not a lot of talk going on between neighboring jurisdictions. Now gang investigation meetings are taking place on a regular basis for detectives of various agencies to share info. That wasn't happening a year ago.

When Carlquist asked about South Tahoe's "gang registry" his bosses had no idea what he was talking about.

The department now has that registry which is allowed per a California law passed years ago. It works in somewhat the same as the sex offender registry. Once a gang member is out of prison they must register with the law enforcement agency where they reside.

But there are no limitations of where they can live or with whom. However, it gives cops an address for at least a one-time gang member, if not current.

While Carlquist won't give the exact number of people on the registry, he said it's high for the size of city South Lake Tahoe is. But it has become a tool for law enforcement.

"It has proved to be a deterrent," Carlquist said of the registry. "About 95 percent of registrants are not repeat offenders. It has helped some get out of a gang and some have moved to another town."

Who is doing the tagging?

As is tradition in Tahoe, the taggers come out as the snow

melts. Winter isn't a big season for them.

It's not that there are necessarily more of them, but there are more places to vandalize. Carlquist has noticed the sagging economy in South Tahoe has left more vacant buildings – commercial and residential – for taggers to use as a canvas.



Brick is hard
to restore
after it's
been
vandalized.

People aren't at the buildings so there is more opportunity to get away with the crime.

He sees the graffiti being a mix of taggers who think what they are doing is creating art and gang members marking their territory. Either way, it's criminal activity. When these men and boys, that is the predominant gender, are caught they are often charged with vandalism, burglary, breaking and entering, and trespassing.

About two-thirds of the crimes are committed on commercial sites, with the other third being a mix of residential and city property like pump houses and street signs. Businesses are easier to hit because usually they aren't occupied at night.

The culprits don't fit into a nice profile. It's all races, ages and genders. With gang members, oftentimes the affiliation is passed from parent to child or sibling to

sibling.

They are a bit like male dogs, though, in needing to leave their mark without any regard to the property they are doing it on.

In 2009 and 2010 the Surenos hit the Ski Run Boulevard area, putting out a roll call with all the monikers the individual members go by. While this helps law enforcement put together a profile, those monikers don't always stay the same. Some have four or five ways to sign a tag.

This gang also has been known as the Southside 13.

South Tahoe also has Nortenos. N is the 14th letter of the alphabet and represents northerners.

With the convictions in three Cyclones gang members in 2010 for the 2009 stabbing of a South Tahoe teen, it basically wiped out that group.

Carlquist doesn't believe the gangs mentioned above are responsible for the spike in graffiti at the Y. He won't say anything more until arrests are made.

With the South Shore being along the triangle of Reno, Carson City and Sacramento, the area has a lot of transient gang members. Some stop a while, some pass through.

Drug sales, trafficking and transporting weapons are common.

When it comes to taggers not in a gang, it's all about being creative.

"It's a mindset thing. Taggers really think they are doing artwork. They say 'we are great artists and want to show the world'," Carlquist said. "They say the world is their canvas and there is no such thing as private property."

These people know about the websites touting which tips on

spray paint cans will do what, what markers are good, how to tag or bomb or scratch.

And taggers in Tahoe don't just need a wall. They hit granite rocks and bike trails.

Proactive possibilities

Property owners can make their buildings less attractive to taggers by using motion sensor lighting, cutting vegetation away so taggers can't duck behind it, and putting up chain link fences instead of wood so there isn't a surface to tag.

It's creating defensible space to stop would-be taggers.

Heavenly Village rarely has graffiti because security officers are constantly roaming the area and lighting plays a role in deterring that kind of behavior.



Dumpsters are a common item to be tagged.

Carlquist recently met with security for that center to talk about gang awareness so they understand indicators.

The city has a graffiti abatement program to provide some assistance with cleaning up tagged buildings and structures. But call officers before painting over the crime scene.

Parents and teachers can pay attention to what might seem like innocent doodling when in fact it's miniature graffiti on their notebooks or in their rooms – sketches possibly before

hitting the streets in a bigger way.

Carlquist wants to talk to concerned adults about whether something might be an indication a person is in a gang or potential tagger. He may be reached at (530) 542.6121.

He wants to do more outreach with the community and is hoping grants the police department is applying for will pay for that. In the mean time, when he's not out searching for the bad guys, Carlquist is doing what he can to talk to local groups.

"Enforcement and prevention are the two important points," Carlquist said to ridding the area of graffiti and those responsible for it.