

Cyberbanging, it's called, but gang threats are real Web pages give police new look at violent lives

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By Allison Klein, Washington Post | April 16, 2006

WASHINGTON -- The threat from the Street Thug Criminals was explicitly clear: Antonio's death would be avenged.

The message from the Washington-area gang was delivered the way almost everything seems to be these days: on a website.

The Street Thug Criminals have an Internet page, and they used it to issue a threat to a rival gang in Langley Park, Md. Police call it "cyberbanging," gang members openly bragging about affiliations, skipping school, getting high, and battling rival gangs.

Many postings deal with Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, a Latino gang that has been spreading quickly across the Washington region in recent years.

There is no way to know for certain whether these cyberbangers are gang members, but they're probably not phonies, said Sergeant George Norris, a police officer from Prince George's County, Md., who heads a 16-member regional gang task force.

"If you portray yourself as being MS-13 and you're not, when they find out about it, they kill you just as if you're a rival gang member," Norris said.

Prince George's police and other investigators use the sites to track the growing gang problem and to catalog members.

Most cyberbangers on Web pages examined by The Washington Post are teenagers and design their pages to flash in-your-face images of gang flags, hand signs, marijuana, women, stacks of cash, and "original gangster" scrolls certifying them as legitimate. Some show pictures of themselves with guns and bandannas covering their faces below the eyes, casting menacing glances.

The sites use the members' nicknames and rarely refer to legal names. The pages are legal; it is not against the law to be in a gang.

Barney, a 15-year-old from Langley Park, says he likes fashion, video games, and basketball. According to his page, he is into photography, does not have a girlfriend, and is a member of two violent street gangs, the Lewisdale Crew and Brown Union. The gangs, better known the LDC and BU, are bitter rivals of MS-13.

Some guesswork is involved in deciphering the slang, misspellings, and gang speak. The word boy is often spelled "boi." Girls is spelled "gurlz." Maryland is usually "Murderland." The codes extend to ages. A 15-year-old, for example, may write that he is 1 gun 5 bullets or 1 joint 5 hits.

Often when people are reading a page, their cursor will turn into a handgun, forcing them to shoot something to click on it. At other times, cursors turn into smoking cigarettes or sports cars.

Police said that because they cannot stop the sites, they use them to gather intelligence. A page for Vatos Locos, a gang known for violence, has an RIP for someone named Noel. It reads: "Somebody will pay what they did to you cuz what goes around comes around."

The sites also offer a public glimpse into the lives of some of the area's gang members: On Yoshi's site, his

gang affiliation is posted next to pictures of his baby nephew, Christopher. Krazy Yayo, who represents Sur 13, writes of growing up on the streets and killing without mercy. He ends with "click, click bang, bang."

Gang members create Web pages in part to seek respect and validation, said Luis Cardona, a former gang member who is now the youth violence-prevention coordinator for the Department of Health and Human Services in Montgomery County, Md..

"You're looking to get some kind of recognition or affirmation," he said. "And there's a certain level of solidarity for gang members who might be in a different location."

Norris said the department doesn't know how many gang members are in the county or the region. He said he has documented 1,300 members and their associates in Prince George's. The Web pages have led to several arrests.

According to a study from 2002-03 conducted by the Washington-based National Youth Gang Center, there are 731,500 youth gang members across the country.

Quarrels that start on the Internet will sometimes turn into face-to-face confrontations and spill blood, Norris said. "It's a natural progression." ■

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