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Sureños: Understanding Kanpol and Pilli

The soldiers of the Mexican Mafia prison gang identify themselves with various levels of sophistication.

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Two expressions of Sureño gang allegiance include the Aztec symbol for 13 (left) and the Nahuatl word "kanpol." Photo: Rich Valdemar

Threats posed by Latino Sureños may be one of the most misunderstood and underestimated gang problems in this country.

"Sureños are focused on a complete ideology and belief in their gang, and they display a dedication and loyalty that surpasses that of any gang I've ever dealt with," Chuck Schoville of the Rocky Mountain Information Network (RMIN) writes in the report "Sureños 2008."

The confusion about Sureños may stem from the various expressions of this umbrella movement, so let's start from the beginning.

In the 1930s and '40s, a Latino gang culture spawned at the U.S.-Mexico border near El Paso, Texas and Juarez, Mexico. This "pachuco" (from "chuco," meaning a person from El Paso) culture migrated

with the legal and illegal immigrants to California. These Texas-style pachucos came from gangs like the El Paso Tip (EPT) and tattooed themselves with a "t" to represent the Texas Tip.

In Los Angeles, similar pachuco-style gangs were spawned, especially from the area around the Maravilla Projects in East L.A. To distinguish themselves from the Texas chucos, they used tattoos such as "LA," "M" (for Maravilla) or "13" (M is the 13th letter of the alphabet).

Gangster style characterized this movement. There were many different Latino gangs in northern and southern California with this "Califas" (California) pachuco style. The movement pre-dates the Mexican Mafia and Nuestra Familia prison gangs.

By the mid-1950s, this Califas style and mostly the Maravilla gang coalition formed the base that spawned the Mexican Mafia at the Deuel Vocational Institute (DVI) in Tracy. Back then, northern and southern California Latino gang members joined the Mexican Mafia. From 1956-'65, there was no other prison gang. The Mexican Mafia expanded from controlling inmates at the DVI youth authority facility to controlling gang inmates in most California prisons and jails.

Gang members who objected to this control broke from the Mexican Mafia and formed Nuestra Familia in about 1965. Some of those who objected and opposed the Mexican Mafia were from Los Angeles gangs, while others were from as far south as San Diego. It was not geography that divided California gangs; it was the two prison-gang lifestyles and whether members felt loyalty to the Mexican Mafia or aligned with Nuestra Familia.

The over simplification of the Sureño (southerner) and Norteño (northerner) conflict seems to be leading gang investigators to believe that the terms only denote and differentiate gangs from north and south of the Bakersfield line. This is wrong thinking. Investigators have even entered Sur 13, South Side, or Sureños as a specific gang in their computer databases. Sureños are an umbrella designation, a coalition.

And despite what you hear about Norteño gang migration, Norteño gangs don't exist for long in Southern California. However, numerous Sureño gangs thrive in Northern California. Both have migrated to other areas of the country.

Just what is a Sureño? A Sureño is a Latino gang member who belongs to a street gang that identifies with, and is subservient to, the Mexican Mafia. He may be from northern or southern California, or from your city, or from Central America. Sureños identify with the color blue and use tattoos with the number 13, sureño, sur, south sider, or "**kanpol**" (a word taken from the ancient Aztec language of Nahuatl that means southerner). In this culture, the number 13 was expressed with the symbol (see above picture).

The **Nahuatl** word "**pilli**" can be translated as "señor" or sir, but is more correctly noble man or royalty. This is term used by Sureño gang members to refer to actual made members of the Mexican Mafia. The subtle differences these Nahuatl terms convey can help you understand how the huge Sureño army is controlled by the Mexican Mafia.

The terms are similar to those used during the American Civil War. At that time, southerner meant more than just a person from the southern portion of the U.S. It also conveyed that the person supported the rebellion, slavery, and war with the Union forces. A northerner supported the Union, the freeing of slaves, and the Union army.

When a gang member identifies himself as a Sureño either verbally or by clothing or tattoos, he escalates his position from a mere Latino gang member to a soldier in the service of the murderous Mexican Mafia. This is what kanpol is meant to convey.

When pilli is used to identify an Eme member, it signifies that he's held in high regard. He's considered a noble man or royalty lording over the kanpol (common soldier) army. Initially, the Mexican Mafia's ambition was simply to control the DVI facility. Later, they warred to control the California prison system,

and then the federal prison system. Today, they covet control of the southwest and the entire nation. They plan to do with their growing kanpol army.

How do you measure the danger posed by your local Sur 13, South Side, or Sureño gangs? Their level of sophistication will tell you. Talk to them. Do they use the terms pilli or kanpol? Do they identify themselves as a Sureño? Have they tattooed Southside, Sur or Sureño on their body? Are they "piasas" (a person from Mexico) or are they from Central America?

The most dangerous Sureños are hard-core California gang members who have done prison time and have been indoctrinated in the schooling system of their master (pilli). The second type of Sureños are converted local Latino gang members who emulate the Sureño gang style, even if they've never been to California. Some of them are still dedicated enough to act just like kanpol soldiers.

Following the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles, Sureños locked up in Nevada and Arizona jails and prisons rioted and attacked blacks on orders originating in the Los Angeles County jail. During the Los Angeles Mexican Mafia RICO investigations (1995-'99), we learned from gang informants that the Mexican Mafia was running Sureño gang meetings in Phoenix parks.

I've read that these local Sureño converts are not real Sureños because they don't pay taxes or follow all the Mexican Mafia edicts. Many gangs in Los Angeles aren't taxed as they were in 1995. The amount of tax depends on which Mexican Mafia member controls the turf. Some Eme members only tax drug dealers and not the Sureño gangs themselves. Many unsophisticated young gang members deny that their gang takes orders or is taxed by the Mexican Mafia, even in Los Angeles, but the truth is that they do. So if your 15-year-old local Southsider says his gang doesn't pay taxes, he may be right or may not know. That's not the measure of his loyalty.

I've heard so-called experts say that MS-13 and 18th Street gang members are not really Sureños, because they don't pay Eme taxes in some states. On their mother turf, I've personally witnessed them paying taxes many times and booked the many thousands of dollars of "tax" money into federal evidence.

The further away from California that Sureño gangs are, the more autonomy they exercise. This is because they're on the frontier outposts of the Eme's control. The MS-13 "Mara" in El Salvador may act independently, but when they find themselves in the U.S. facing federal prison or state commitments in facilities controlled by Sureños they tow the Sureño line and follow the Sureño "reglas" or rules.

By far, the strangest Sureños are Mexican born or Central American Sureños. These paisa Sureños are under the influence of the American Sureño gangs that operate on the border and facilitate human

smuggling. During their odyssey from their native land to the U.S., they have adopted the style of the Sureño gangs that transported them.

There are also a few Sureño gangs that have been spawned in Mexico, but most of the illegal-immigrant Sureños have never heard of kanpol or pilli. They have never been to California, and really don't get what the Norteño and Sureño war is all about. Don't judge your Sureños by these gang members.

Kanpol Sureño gang members will become more sophisticated with time. Their codes of conduct and rules of engagement will be more regulated and controlled by their pilli prison-gang heavyweights in California's Pelican Bay State Prison and at ADX Florence supermax prison in Colorado. Don't underestimate them.