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## Growing Texas gang draws ex-cons and kids

By Tanya Eiserer  
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DALLAS — They tattoo themselves with Dallas Cowboys stars and the area code 214. They proudly proclaim "D-Town" and brag about their hometown affiliations on MySpace and YouTube.

The Tango Blast, a violent, drug-dealing gang born in the Texas prison system, is growing in popularity and could change the Dallas landscape because it rejects old notions of prison gang exclusivity and lifelong commitments.

Authorities say the trendy look and loose rules of the Tango Blast are proving irresistible to kids. Tangos can maintain affiliations with gangs they joined outside prison, a hybrid approach to membership that allows them to plant tentacles in many of Dallas' established Hispanic neighborhood gangs.

"It's almost like a bandwagon effect," said Lt. Santos Cadena, head of the Dallas Police Department's gang unit.

And law enforcement officials worry that ex-cons, members of some of Dallas' 90 other gangs and school-age recruits could be organized under one Tango umbrella - potentially bringing together rival factions.

"All they need is some charismatic leader to put them all together," said Sigifredo Sanchez, who heads the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's security threat group office.

Police won't say publicly how many Tangos are in Dallas, but a gang unit database shows more than 200 confirmed, hard-core members. Hundreds still classified under their original gang affiliations also may be Tangos.

Law enforcement officials said there may be 1,000 Tangos in the city involved in crimes ranging from petty theft to murder.

This new type of prison gang came to being in the early 1990s when Hispanic inmates from Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth and Houston banded together to protect themselves against more organized prison gangs such as the Mexican Mafia and the Texas Syndicate.

They called themselves the "Four Horsemen," after the four cities they hail from, and became known as "Tangos" - which came to be known as slang for hometown.

While old established gangs such as the Texas Syndicate, which was weakened last year as part of a federal racketeering investigation, have seen their fortunes decline, the Tango Blast's loose affiliation rules have made it attractive.

Earlier this year, Texas prison officials added the group to their list of regularly monitored gangs. So far, they have identified about 700 confirmed Tango Blast members.

Prisoners flocked to the Tango Blast because its laissez-faire philosophy is the antithesis of the established prison gang mentality of blood-in, blood-out - the notion that members have to commit an act of violence to get in and that the only way out is to die.

"Tango will take anybody," said Randy Moreno, an ex-con who joined the Houston branch of the Tango Blast, dubbed "Houstone."

"You don't even have to be down from Houston to be Houstone," he said. "They're like the headless horseman. He pops up out of nowhere. He's chaotic, but he has no head to tell you what his goals are."

### **From the prisons**

Fewer than 10 percent of the prison system's inmates belong to monitored security threat groups - highly organized prison gangs. Tango members now frequently outnumber those individual groups.

Tangos didn't have the strict organizational structure, leaders or constitution of a traditional prison gang - at least initially.

"In the early days, they were footloose and fancy-free," said Cmdr. Terry Cobbs, a prison gang expert who works for the Office of the Inspector General of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

"Their propensity for violence is just the same as anything else, but they just didn't have that allegiance yet or the accountability yet that the traditional prison gangs have."

More recently, authorities say, Tango Blast has been locked in a pitched battle for control of illegal prison activities. The group is becoming more predatory, and prisoners who refuse to join are getting beaten over it, prison officials said.

Sgt. Michael Marshall, a Dallas police gang unit supervisor, first heard about the Tango Blast four or five years ago from a professor who mentioned the gang in a book. "We just didn't have them on our radar," he said.

But cops on the streets were soon encountering ex-cons with the Tango Blast tattoos.

"Any Hispanic that has been arrested or has prior conviction in this area ... has a high potential of having a connection to Tango Blast," Sgt. Marshall said.

Paul, who asked that his last name not be published, went to prison in early 2005 for burglary of a habitation and theft. He said Tango stands for "Tejanos Against Negative Gang Organizations."

He became a member because he liked the idea of not having any strict obligations as a Tango. "I knew they weren't going to ask me to go beat up or kill," he said.

Joining was as simple as meeting several inmates in the prison yard and getting "jumped in" - a beating that serves as an initiation. It lasted about a minute.

He's been out of prison since 2006 and says he's not involved in criminal activity.

### **Into the schools**

With the traditional prison gang's rigid, hierarchical structures, it once would have been unthinkable to allow juveniles who haven't been locked up to claim membership or adopt gang tattoos.

Not so with Tango Blast, where kids are drawn by what they see as a cool look. Gang experts say many of the students are emulating what they see on social networking sites or older relatives or friends who have been to prison.

David Garcia, a Dallas school district gang intelligence specialist, said he first encountered the Tango Blast phenomenon in the schools two summers ago when he saw a kid writing "Tango" on his hand. He asked the middle school student about it and was told that a relative who had gone to prison had become a Tango Blaster.

Officials say schools now see elementary students sporting Tango Blast symbols.

"There are more kids becoming involved," Mr. Garcia said.

Michael Dovick, a gang prevention specialist, works part time at an Irving parks and recreation center and said he sees youths coming in with the Tango Blast stars. Carrollton-Farmers Branch schools also have seen some Tango Blast presence.

"This is going to be a new type of gang," said Antonio Montanez, who runs the gang intervention program Nuestro Barrio and serves on the Dallas Achieves Commission, a board whose mission is to reform the Dallas school district.

"In a sports sense, the prison gangs are the major leagues, and they [the teenagers] are being accepted by a major league team," he said.

Many students who don't fully understand the meaning of the symbols may be placing themselves in danger from rival gangs or from Tangos who view their wearing Tango symbols as a sign of disrespect because they haven't earned the right by going to prison.

At 16, Ricky already wears the stars of the Tango Blast. He was 14 when he acquired them, not so much because he wanted to join, but because he saw gang members in his Dallas neighborhood sporting the Tango Blast tattoos. To him, they looked cool.

But once those Tango Blast members spotted his tattoos, they were none too happy.

He said they told him that he'd get beaten up every day if he didn't join them.

"I didn't feel like getting jumped every day," said Ricky, who asked that his full name not be used.

So he said he met them in a field and they "jumped him in" to the gang.

### **Split within the gang**

Some older Tango Blast members have put out the word to the younger wannabes that they need to stop presenting themselves as Tangos because it is drawing unwanted attention.

Increased law enforcement scrutiny may be contributing to a split within the amorphous Tango Blast: Mr. Montanez said older members want to remain strictly a prison gang. Newly released Tangos tend to want to expand and recruit juveniles.

"The original Tango Blasters, if they see a kid with a star on them, they will beat up that kid," Mr. Montanez said.

But the issue is far from settled. And while kids may be drawn to what they see as Tango Blast's cool-sounding lingo, faddish tattoos and hip Web pages, like most gangs, Tango Blast is about crime and violence.

Members are behind crimes such as drug deals, auto theft, burglaries, illegal immigrant smuggling, home invasion robberies, kidnappings and murder.

"I don't think they are committing their crimes for the purposes of the gang," Assistant District Attorney Hector Garza said. "They are just all thugs."

Because they are so disorganized, it's not unheard of to see Tango-on-Tango violence, or even cases in which one Tango unknowingly kills another.

"With these people, there are just no absolutes," said Heath Harris, who heads the Dallas County district attorney's gang prosecution unit. "The loyalty factor is just not there."

But there is still reason for concern, given their growing numbers and the fear of gang members uniting into a more cohesive group.

Police say they've seen Tangos who were originally members of gangs that didn't associate with each other, now running together and committing crimes.

"You may have two individuals who operated in different street gangs, but now they're both out of the pen and Tango Blast," said Sgt. Mark Langford, a gang unit supervisor. "That feuding doesn't take place between the two. There's not quite the animosity. They coexist much better because of that Tango Blast connection."

### **Tango Blast run-ins with the Dallas law**

A few examples:

-On Nov. 16: A gunfight outside a downtown nightclub that started with an argument over a woman involved several Tango Blast members. Alejandro Vasquez, 25, was caught in the crossfire and killed. He and at least one of the shooters had tattoos indicating Tango Blast affiliation, police said.

-On Nov. 5: Dallas police pulled over the vehicle of Christopher Alvarez, 26, in the 400 block of North Oak Cliff Boulevard on a traffic violation. Police found that he was a convicted felon, and there was a 9 mm loaded with eight hollow-point bullets - popularly known as "cop-killer" bullets - in the vehicle.

As officers placed Mr. Alvarez in a squad car, he threatened one of them, telling the officer that he had a "hollow point" for him. Mr. Alvarez, who had a star tattooed on his neck and under his eye, along with the words "Tango Blast" on top of his wrist, told police that he had been a Tango Blast member for eight years and that he was also a member of a West Dallas gang.

-May 2007: Jesus Elizondo, 22, shot and killed a 15-year-old boy and was charged with engaging in organized crime. A jury believed Mr. Elizondo acted in self-defense. He was convicted of manslaughter last month and received a six-year prison sentence.

Prosecutor Hector Garza said Mr. Elizondo was both a Tango Blast member and a member of a large Dallas gang based in northwest Dallas. Mr. Elizondo had a star tattooed on the side of his torso, "214" stamped on his wrist and a skyline on his leg. He said that he wasn't a Tango anymore and that he had joined only for protection when he was previously behind bars.

"They claim to be so tough, but in the courtroom, he cried for two straight weeks," Mr. Garza said.

### **At a Glance: The name game**

The four biggest Tango Blast groups - called the "Four Horsemen" - are in Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth and Austin.

Houston - Their hometown is Houston. They use the Houston Astros star and the area code 713 as their main symbols.

D-Town - Their hometown is Dallas. They use the Dallas Cowboys star and the area code 214 as their main symbols.

Foritos, Foros or Funky Town - Their hometown is Fort Worth. They use various nicknames and the area code 817 in tattoos.

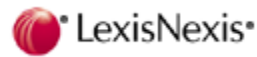
A-Town or Capiucha - Their hometown is Austin. Frequently seen tattooed symbols are ATX, the Capitol building and A-Town.

Elsewhere in Texas: Tango Blast groups also formed in West Texas and the Rio Grande Valley. Those two, along with the original four groups, became known as "Puro Tango Blast." There are also Tango groups in other parts of the state.

The look: Tango Blast tattoos typically depict the hometown sports team or its logo, a city skyline, area code numbers representing gang members' hometowns or slang terms for their hometown. Sometimes they brand themselves with the tattoo "16-20-2" to represent the letters in the alphabet for "PTB," which stands for "Puro Tango Blast."

Their motto: "If you ain't blasting, you ain't lasting."

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