

Santa Cruz County

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Crime & Criminals - Graffiti

Six graffiti vandals arrested

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SANTA CRUZ — HTK is still out there, and still "hard to catch." But AKT and SWT are out of business, Unek is in jail and Woozy, Horrid, Treck and Tacker have been busted.

Six prolific graffiti taggers were arrested this week after a sweep that sheriff's deputies say will net more arrests next week. And under a new punishment, they face the loss of driving privileges or having them held up for a year when they turn 16.

"This is probably going to make a lot of people happy," said Sgt. Len Lofano of the Sheriff's Office. Graffiti is "certainly high profile and people hate it."

Lofano is the deputy who arrested two of the county's most notorious and prolific taggers, Noah Levine, who used the tag "8edge," and Michael Carrillo, whose "FTL" tag refers to the law, and cannot be spelled out in the newspaper.

Deputies began an intensive crack-down this week when they noticed an upsurge in tagging after Christmas.

The teen-age vandals were arrested on charges they spray-painted or etched their cryptic nicknames — known as tags — on dozens of locations throughout the county.

"None of this is gang graffiti," Lofano said. "It's straight, pure vandalism."

The six boys arrested ranged in age from 14 to 17 years old; their names

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were not released because of their ages.

Their tags, however, are well known in the county, said Lofano.

"Treck" and "Tacker" are two 17-year-old taggers who leave their own monikers plus their crew name of "SWT," which Lofano said stands for "Society's Worst Threat."

A second crew is known as AKT, or "Artistic Kreation Team," and includes "Unek," a 15-year-old tagger Lofano said is the county's third most prolific, after Levine and Carrillo.

A second tagger, age 14, has practiced his tag but not used it yet, Lofano said, and writes only the crew tag of AKT.

AKT is responsible for graffiti on at least 30 sites between Aptos and Watsonville, including Aptos High School, Caltrans property and Waste Management garbage dumpsters.

Besides being prolific with spray paint, Unek also etched his tag on windows throughout the county, Lofano said.

The third crew arrested was COR, or "Criminals on the Run," he said. It in-

cludes taggers Woozy, 16, and Horrid, 17, who allegedly zig-zagged their tags between Santa Cruz and Aptos.

COR's victims include the Grand Auto store on Ocean Street, the Soquel Avenue Thrifty store, Santa Cruz Cyclery and Branciforte Elementary School.

The list continues, and is limited only by the suspects' memories, Lofano said.

"We can find more, but they do so much that they can't remember," he said.

Treck and Tacker were caught in the act, Lofano said, and Unek was picked up by police in Arroyo Grande, where he was reportedly caught tagging while visiting relatives.

The others were arrested at their homes, after a concentrated week of what Lofano called "regular good old-fashioned police work."

All but Unek were cited and released to their parents' custody on misdemeanor vandalism charges, Lofano said. Unek remains in custody in Arroyo Grande, he said.

Their fate will depend on several things, he said, including their attitudes, their victims' wishes and whether they have prior records.

Probation, time in Juvenile Hall and restitution are all possible punishments.

If convicted, the teens also face a punishment that just went into effect: the loss of their driving license for up to a year. Teens who don't yet have a license will have theirs held up once they're old enough.

Deputies haven't even started to put together a damage estimate, but Lofano guessed it will probably be in the tens of thousands of dollars. Parents of the six youths are liable for the damages, he said.

"Blatant vandalism is one of the worst types of crimes," Lofano said. "Honest people work so hard to make ends meet, to own something, to make a business work. ... When someone comes over and defaces their property, you not only deface the property, you deface the person. Personally, it really burns inside me."

Kids don't understand that, Lofano said. They get caught up in something that's easy to start, he said, but hard to stop.

There's a rush in eluding the cops, he said, a thrill in competing with other graffiti teams.

"It's very seductive," Lofano said. "... They get used to that rush and they keep on doing it."