





Richard Valdemar

Membership in the Nuestra Familia prison gang is sometimes shown with a sombrero and dagger tattoo. Only members of the prison gang can sport this tattoo.

Mexican Mafia prison gang members frequently tattoo their right hands with the word "Eme." Also displayed in their tattoos is an eagle holding a snake in its mouth with the letter M or the phrase "Eme Mexicana." The Mexican Mafia gang members also identify with the term Sur, an abbreviation for the word "sureno." The Latino street gangs also started to band together under "Sur/13" once in prison. The number 13 was used because it represented the 13th letter of the alphabet, the letter M.

Once this gang formed, victims of its illegal activities tended to band together for protection. As a result, more prison gangs developed.

## NUESTRA FAMILIA

At the correctional training facility in Soledad, Calif., a second Latino prison gang known as La Nuestra Familia or "NF" was formed by other Latinos during the mid-1960s to compete with La Eme and to protect younger northern California Latino inmates from older, "experienced" inmates.

Northern Latino prison gangs adopted the number 14, representing the 14th letter of the alphabet, N. This corresponds with the Spanish word "ene." The symbol can be written or tattooed as "14/NF." NF tattoos also picture a sombrero and bloody dagger with the words "Nuestra Familia," or the letters NF and a sword.

## PRISON GANG DYNAMICS

Competition developed between these two gangs for control over criminal activity within the prison system. The majority of La Nuestra Familia members came from Latino street gangs in Northern California. When the gang initially formed, an imaginary geographical boundary through the city of Bakersfield was established that divided California into a northern and southern region.

In theory, any Latino gang member from the city of Bakersfield and north of the city would align himself with the La Nuestra Familia prison gang. These gang members became known as "nortenos" and became the power base

for La Nuestra Familia. Latino street gang members who lived south of Bakersfield became known as "surenos," and formed the power base for the Mexican Mafia.

When members of these two prison gangs came in contact, there was often violence. Both gangs began attacking one another wherever and whenever the opportunity presented itself. The conflicts grew to such a level that by 1980, the California's corrections department began to separate gang members from these two prison gangs by placing them at specific institutions.

As a result of the ongoing conflict between La Eme and La Nuestra Familia, two separate alliances were formed. These alliances involved two other major prison gangs in California: the Black Guerrilla Family (comprised of black inmates), which became allies of La Nuestra Familia and the Aryan Brotherhood (comprised of white inmates), which allied itself with La Eme.

In the late 1960s, the California Youth Authority (CYA), a facility that now operates under the California Division of Juvenile Justice, began to house its wards on a north/south regional basis with the idea in mind that it would ease transition back into general society. The program, instead, unintentionally further polarized the young gang members. And, as a result, the rivalry between the Mexican Mafia and La Nuestra Familia soon spread to CYA. This rivalry even expanded to the street, whereby Northern and Southern California street gangs fought each other for power, protection and control of drug sales, inside and outside of the prison system.

By the 1980s, Latino gang members from the north referred to themselves as Chicanos, while those from Southern California called themselves Mexicanos. Frequent violent encounters are still common between these two gang rivals. While all prison gangs thrive on extreme and brutal forms of violent assault, Mexican Mafia members are known for their willingness to murder rival and peer gang members who do not follow orders.



California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

The three leaf clover and the letters AB denote membership in the Aryan Brotherhood. AB members sometimes have the number 6 inscribed on the leaves of the clover, which is the mark of the beast.



This shank, which was found in a local county jail during a routine search, was made by a gang member from part of his bunk.

## ARYAN BROTHERHOOD

As Latino prison inmate populations grouped together to survive, so did the white and black inmates. The Aryan Brotherhood was founded in 1960 by white inmates who brought white supremacist philosophies with them. This white supremacist prison gang went through a number of name changes before becoming known as the “AB.”

Most Aryan Brotherhood prison gang members are housed at San Quentin and Folsom prisons in California, forming a loose alliance with the Mexican Mafia. They have supported each other with “contracts” or “hits” within the prison system, and armed robberies and narcotics trafficking on the streets.

The Aryan Brotherhood is well-organized, with specific leadership positions and responsibilities that include accounting for all activities within and outside the prison system. Like all prison gangs, Aryan Brotherhood membership is a lifetime commitment.

There are specific profiling characteristics that are unique to this gang, such as tattoos. A cloverleaf, swastika, lightning bolts, the number 666 and the letters AB are commonly seen together. The phrases “Supreme White Power,” “White Power,” “Supreme White Pride” or “White Pride” may also be found.

## BLACK GUERRILLA FAMILY

The Black Guerilla Family is the most politically oriented of all the California prison gangs, following and espousing Marxist Leninist Maoist revolutionary philosophies. The Black Guerilla Family was established around 1966 by a Black Panther leader, George Lester Jackson, in San Quentin prison. Jackson established this group because he believed the Black Panther Party was not responding to the needs of black prison inmates. First called the Black Family, prospective members were solicited by suggesting their crimes were a result of white oppression.

Jackson soon changed the name to the Black Vanguard after a sizable membership was established. This name

remained with the gang until 1971, when Jackson was killed during an escape attempt. Since that time the gang’s membership has grown and its name changed to the Black Guerilla Family.

The Black Guerilla Family has a very close relationship with a splinter group of quasi-criminal revolutionaries, the Black Liberation Army. Some prison gang experts believe the Black Guerilla Family is just an extension of the Black Liberation Army.

There are two tattoos that are commonly associated with the Black Guerilla Family. One is a prison watchtower surrounded by a dragon with a quarter moon depicted in its body. The second shows the silhouette of a rifle with a sword lying over it to form an X, and includes the initials BGF.

## BLOOD AND CRIP GANGS

The Crips and Bloods have also founded their own groups in state prisons. While on the street, the two gangs may war with each other; however, inside the prison system there seems to be a truce and alliance between these groups — probably for protection from the existing prison gangs.

In West Coast prisons, the Crips formed the Consolidated Crip Organization and the Bloods founded the United Blood Nation. As new Crips and Bloods were incarcerated, members from both groups would join together, ensuring protection and guidance.

## TEXAS SYNDICATE

Another Latino prison gang, the Texas Syndicate, was formed by inmates at Folsom Prison who were originally from Texas. This is an ethnic-based prison gang, and no white or black inmates are allowed.

When these prison gang members are on parole, they tend to involve themselves with the transportation of illegal aliens, drug trafficking and contract murders. The most common tattoos are the letters T and S, which are sometimes formed with figures of dragons or flowers and ribbons. Other tattoos illustrate female figures and faces to hide the T and S symbols.

## ASIAN

Due to the ever-increasing population of Asian-American street gang members in the prison system, it is expected that Asian prison gangs will develop for the same reasons other prison gangs form: for protection. However, Asian gang members in prison tend to become model inmates, adapting well to the rigid rules of prison life. It is not uncommon to find Asian inmates on parole who say prison life was not a problem for them.

## CUBAN

During the Mariel Boat Lift movement of 1980, thousands of violent and hardened Cuban inmates entered the U.S. as refugees when the Cuban government swept its prison system of its worst offenders. The Cuban offenders, known as Marielitos, presented a whole new set of prob-

lems for law enforcement and the prison systems. Most had been military-trained due to Cuba's mandatory three-year military obligation, and in addition, Cuba's prison inmates were often subjected to physical and psychological torture. For the first time, the U.S. had to deal with a group of offenders who not only possessed a criminal mentality, but were also trained military fighters familiar with many types of weapons and tactics. Today the Marielito presence in U.S. prisons is small, but it continues to polarize incarcerated Cubans.

Marielito tattoos are almost a secret code or language. Most of the tattoos are found on the hand and between the first finger and thumb. The tattoos indicate the type of crime(s) in which the individual was involved. Five dots forming an X represent a habitual offender; four dots forming a box indicate homicide. Three dots forming a triangle indicate a crime of theft, while three dots in a straight line indicate a crime of robbery. Symbols are sometimes used to represent specialty trades. A heart with an arrow pointing to it with the word "Madre" is the symbol of an executioner. A Christian cross on its side indicates that the person wearing it can supply weapons, cars or equipment. Three descending and diverging lines with two horizontal lines indicates a narcotics trafficker.

## TRENDS

Going to prison is a goal for some street gang members. It can be equated to going to college, graduating and obtaining a Fortune 500 company job. Unfortunately, the

prison system is where many street gang members learn the secrets of becoming professional criminals. In the gang subculture, a prison veteran receives the respect and admiration of street-level gang members. As prison populations change, the formation of more recognized Hispanic, black and white prison gangs is likely to occur. And as prison sentences are lengthened, an older prison gang population can also be expected.

Some criminal justice professionals will contact prison gang members as parolees. During these contacts, one should be aware that all prison gang parolees are street-smart professional gangsters who are often aware of police procedures and unafraid of law enforcement. When prison gang parolees have a job to do, that job is more important than their lives. They know if they fail at their assigned task the punishment could be worse than death. To some, law enforcers present themselves as a nuisance, not as a threat. With this attitude, attacks on law enforcement have been documented in and out of prison. The best thing to remember is one rule of prison gangs: Clearly, there are no rules. Be safe.

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