

Tattooed Officers and Departmental Image: A Content Analysis of Police Department Tattoo Policies in the United States

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Abstract: Police officers in the United States enjoy the same First Amendment rights as the general public, although courts have ruled repeatedly that those rights may be limited when they conflict with public trust. Police leaders seek to portray their officers positively, encourage professional appearances, and enact policies that seek to prevent extremist affiliations. This study used a qualitative document analysis approach to examine police departments' publicly available policies, analyze the precision of policy language, identify exclusionary criteria that prohibit certain body art on officers, and determine whether policies are objective and enforceable or left to administrative discretion. The research investigates the changing culture around tattoos and whether police departments can suffer a decline in applicants if they refuse to update tattoo policies in the future, as well as the constitutional overreach departments might face if the policies are too strict and prohibit the rights of the individual officer. The study concludes with recommendations on how police departments can develop and implement fair policies as tattoos become more mainstream and no longer seen as taboo.

Keywords: First Amendment, Free Expression, Extremism, Workplace Regulation, Tattoos

Introduction

American society has always struggled between the individualistic nature of its citizens and the need for semi-rigid societal structures in a collectivist country (McCann, 2024). Pressures to conform are abundant, and the need for young people to go against the grain of what is expected of them is part of what it means to be an American. The twentieth century, shaped in part by mass exposure to media, first with the radio, then television, and finally the internet, led many members of society to adopt a countercultural persona, much to the disdain of the nation's elders (Borry, 2021). However, as years pass, what once was considered taboo can sometimes become mainstream and accepted. Tattoos donning the arms, neck, limbs, and torsos of current police officers are no exception. What once was banned in American policing is becoming more accepted and tolerated by the general public and departmental leaders who are being replaced by attrition.

One in five American adults has at least one tattoo, and most young Americans no longer believe their chances of employment will be negatively affected by their tattoos (Oken-Tatum, 2018). Research Calvasina and Calvasina (2017) contends that organizations that once banned the showing of body art, at least what was visible to the general public, may be moving away from those strict policies. It remains unclear why this shift in policy occurred. Research by Rowe, Jones, Millie, and Ralph (2023) points toward a societal shift in the views of officers' appearance and the informalization process of the police uniform.

Other research suggests that American police departments cannot continue to restrict body art due to the decline in police applications and some departments' inability to staff their agencies adequately. Whatever the cause, body art is becoming more accepted in American police departments. Some agencies continue to have strict policies, while others are lenient.

Through qualitative document analysis, this study will examine the range of restrictiveness, the justifications agencies use to enact prohibitive policies, and the themes in their publicly available policies and general orders. By examining formal policy content that applies to currently employed police officers, this study will fill the existing gap in research, which focuses almost entirely on police recruiting policies.

Tattoos and other body art have become less taboo in recent years, particularly in the workplace. While many organizations, including those outside of police agencies, have relaxed restrictions on tattoos in the workplace, other research by Clark (2023) suggests that even with the lifting of restrictions, some biases may still be present in the hiring process unofficially. Many executives and hiring managers prefer a professional appearance, especially among public-facing employees (Zhang et al., 2020). Therefore, even when tattoo policies are lenient, they may require employees to cover up their tattoos or refuse to hire them in the first place. This is especially important in more conservative organizations such as policing (Elzweig & Peebles, 2011).

Police agencies are aware that even police officers themselves have First Amendment rights of self-expression (Morrison & U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). However, as courts have ruled in the past, such as in *Pickering versus Board of Education*, agencies may restrict public employees' free speech when it is detrimental to an agency's public image or hinders the performance of its mission (Raban, 2023). As with social media posts or political affiliation, restricting body art without a legitimate purpose could expose a police agency to litigation (Ward, 2024).

Some police executives point to public perception when considering a tattoo policy for their officers (Shin, 2021). These sheriffs, chiefs, and executives tend to be older and less willing to surrender to dogma and agency norms. Research by Thielgen, Schlade, and Rohr (2020) concluded that these police executives may be correct. In their study, police officers with tattoos were viewed by a subset of the criminal population more negatively. This finding indicates that even known criminals hold a dim view of officers with visible tattoos. However, the research did not examine the type of tattoo or its location, nor did it investigate whether these variables had any impact on the responses.

Guidance from police unions and the Society for Human Resource Managers (2025) contend that agencies may restrict visible tattoos, but not unlike other policies that restrict free speech or expression, they recommend sound policies that are equally applied across the board to all employees rather than arbitrary policies at the whim of an agency head. Many agencies do not prohibit employees from having body art, although many require them to be covered during work hours and while on duty. This creates a balancing act between the agency's views on what constitutes an off-duty appearance and professionalism during hours of employment.

Purpose of the Current Study

The current study seeks to identify publicly available departmental policies on tattoos in American police departments. Although an abundance of research exists on tattoos in the workplace and societal acceptance of body art, a gap remains in the research that identifies patterns across a sample of police agencies to determine common policy themes. This study will address the following research questions:

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R1: Do police departments have policies on tattoos, and if so, how do tattoo policies vary across agencies?

R2: Are current tattoo policies vague and left to the police executive's discretion, or are they objective and articulated in an enforceable and fair manner?

Methodology

Police departments' websites and publicly available policies were analyzed using a qualitative document analysis method to collect the data. The precise language of those policies was analyzed to determine thematic language using NVivo qualitative software for a categorical analysis of policy language. Each publicly available policy was coded using a preliminary codebook developed to assess the clarity and enforceability of the policy and whether variations exist in policy depending on the department's size and geographic region. A sample of departments categorized as small (<50 sworn employees), medium (50-199 sworn), and large (>200 sworn) will be selected from four regions of the United States: the Northeast, South, Midwest, and West. To be included in this study, departments must have a publicly available website or database that addresses the appearance of sworn employees, or a tattoo or body art policy available to the public.

Themes from R1 will be policy variation by region, size, and type of policy. These policies will be grouped from a complete ban on tattoos to a conditional allowance, to complete freedom for officers to display tattoos anywhere on their body. Themes from R2 will be an analysis of policy language. These data will be grouped based on the absence of any written policy, objective guidelines, specific prohibited content, discretionary enforcement, and, finally, vague language that is subjective or ambiguous.

Results and Discussion

A qualitative document analysis (QDA) was conducted using NVivo software to analyze collected data from the public records of police departments in the United States (N=18). A sampling of agencies using the Bureau of Justice Statistics website of larger, medium, and small police departments was examined from four regions of the United States to reflect a sample from the geographic areas accurately. It is noteworthy that all Three dominant themes were identified within these policies: (1) Tattoos and body art that are extremist, indecent, sexist, racist, or prejudicial against any person are prohibited anywhere on the body as they are detrimental to good order and discipline within the agency, (2) Tattoos depicting gang affiliation or discriminatory artwork was prohibited, and (3) Variability in policy language and enforcement discretion among the agencies. The first two themes were common language used in the advertised policy. While themes in police officers' First Amendment rights to self-expression were an initial part of this research, no agency in the sample addressed this theme within policy.

Two of the agencies surveyed explicitly listed 2018 as the year that policy changed, and since that year, officers are now permitted to have benign tattoos on their arms and are exposed during work hours. Both agencies listed a caveat at the end of the policy stating that the Chief may rescind this policy at any time, thereby demonstrating extreme discretion held by the executive to change the policy without notice. None of the agencies permitted body art on the face, neck, scalp, or hands from the fingertips to the wrist. However, three of the agencies permit a tattoo on one finger, which can resemble a ring.

Only four agencies specified what art was extreme or prohibited. Examples of listed art include pentagrams, swastikas, rebel flags, iron crosses, iron eagles, the Punisher, the KKK, Nazi, SS, or street gang symbols. One agency, the Billings, Montana Police Department, specifically guided applicants and current officers to the website of the Anti-Defamation League to learn which organizations were considered extremist. Any art or

symbols identified by the ADL as extremist were prohibited. The Los Angeles Police Department's policy on tattoos focused more on gang-affiliated artwork than on any other department. The agency states explicitly the methods for covering arm tattoos, which go into great detail concerning the covering protocol by stating:

“For tattoos/brandings above the elbow, an officer may wear a black or flesh-toned sleeve/bandage that is as close to the wearer’s skin color as is reasonably available and does not extend below the elbow; or, if the tattoo is below the elbow and there is only one tattoo/branding that is three inches by three inches or less, the officer may cover the area with one patch/bandage that is no larger than three inches by three inches and as close to the wearer's skin color as is reasonably available; Officers shall not use a covering greater than three inches by three inches; nor shall they display any additional tattoos/brandings. Note: If an officer has a tattoo/branding that requires a larger than a three-inch-by-three-inch patch/bandage or has multiple tattoos/brandings that require multiple patches/bandages to cover, then the officer shall wear a long-sleeved uniform.”

Not all agencies use explicit language to describe what is permissible. NVivo’s word frequency showed that "racist" was present in only 22% of the policies; Nearly half (44%) of the policies identified the words "inappropriate" or "offensive"; All policies contained words mentioning "sexually graphic", "profanity", and "discrimination". More than half (N=12) of the policies vested the Chief of Police with the authority to decide what constitutes an acceptable tattoo and what is prohibited. One agency permitted an appeal by a disciplined officer by submitting a waiver request, which was ultimately reviewed by a three-person panel to decide whether the art was acceptable.

Consistent themes associated with this research were (1) body art and tattoos are acceptable, (2) all agencies have exceptions, while none allowed officers to have tattoos of their choice on any part of their body, (3) no agency outright banned tattoos (as of 2025), (4) tattoos below the wrist were unacceptable except a tattoos ring no greater than 3/8 inch in width on one finger, (5) tattoos are not permitted on the face in any policy, (6) officers may cover tattoos in order to comply while on duty. According to past research, these themes are much more lenient than policies of a few decades ago, when many agencies outright banned tattoos.

The variability in policies and enforcement techniques suggests an overall subjective enforcement embraced by many agencies. Only one agency permitted a waiver, only one used an independent review if the officer challenges a decision, and eight of the agencies failed to specify the punishment or disciplinary measures in cases of non-compliance. Matrix coding queries in NVivo tended to show that smaller police departments, irrespective of the geographic location of the agency, tended to have more vague policies with the Chief having ultimate authority, while larger urban agencies better defined what was acceptable, as well as a method of recourse for the officer.

Conclusions

This study examined publicly available tattoo policies from a sample of small, medium, and large police departments across the United States using qualitative document analysis. Using qualitative software, these were uncovered across agencies, revealing variability in discretionary procedures, as well as commonalities, including prohibitions on sexual, racist, discriminatory, and extremist content of officers' tattoos. Furthermore, the research revealed a consistent theme of prohibiting officers' and applicants' tattoos on the face, neck, and scalp. The study revealed inconsistent enforcement policies and disciplinary procedures, which create a subjective environment where one person, the police executive, is empowered to decide what is appropriate and what is extreme. As with any agency policy,

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issues of fairness and consistency may arise, and the officer's First Amendment rights may be in jeopardy without clear, concise, and equally enforced procedures that are publicly available for review. This research uncovered that, at least concerning this diverse sample, no agency outright forbade tattoos on its officers. However, no agency gave officers complete autonomy to decide the location or content of the tattoo. All agencies surveyed permitted body art with exceptions.

This novel research cannot be compared to past data to determine the direction of departmental policies, as none exist. However, future research could evaluate a path to analyze policy changes over time using these same methods. Other recommendations include using a larger sample size, incorporating officer perspectives into the research, conducting qualitative interviews with chiefs who, in many cases, are the ultimate decision-makers, and finally, a study incorporating public perceptions and community input into the research. Police departments, accrediting organizations, and police unions should develop model policies that are easily adopted, using standardized language, identifying prohibitions, and incorporating waiver options into the policy. Furthermore, adopting a committee of decision-makers rather than one individual will help ensure fairness, openness, and transparency.

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