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Does Study Really Link Tattoos, Deviant Behavior?

By Lita Beck

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A study by researchers at Texas Tech University found a link between the number of more tattoos a person has and the amount of "deviance" they were involved in. But that isn't the whole story.

A survey of close to 2,000 college students by a group of researchers known as the "Body Art Team" found that people who have four or more tats are more likely to report the regular use of marijuana, the occasional use of other illegal drugs and a history of being arrested. To a lesser degree, they were also more likely to binge drink, cheat on college work and be sexually promiscuous.

Sounds bad, right?

But once you look past the surface, the study doesn't actually say that people who have more body art are more likely to do bad things.

Because tattoos and piercings are so common, the researchers wondered if people who saw body art as more of a subculture would turn to deviant behavior to show they weren't part of mainstream culture.

After all, just having tattoos isn't particularly rebellious anymore. Research suggests nearly one in four people have a tattoo somewhere on their body.

So the Texas Tech researchers wondered if people who were "old-school enthusiasts" might act badly to further separate them the posers who just have a tat of, say, a dolphin or a rose.

In other words, just having tattoos or piercings isn't enough to set body-art enthusiasts in college apart from everybody else, so they have to get a bit crazier. And that's not quite the same as saying that getting tattoos means you will start to use pot or sleep around.

But the idea that there is a correlation between body art and "deviance" raised eyebrows among people who have tattoos.

"Does this mean on my fourth one or fifth one that I'm going to go out and do more deviant behavior? Of course not," said Jarod Root, who was getting inked at Elm Street Tattoo in Dallas.

"You are going to have to broaden your demographic before you make any kind of claim like that," said Dean Williams, his tattoo artist.

Williams, who has been slinging ink for 22 years, said his clients include attorneys, dentists and

doctors.

The Texas Tech study was careful to say that the research was "limited in both scope and interpretation" and did not necessarily say anything about settings and contexts outside of the college populations it studied.

Root, a Dallas medical technician, said he's never been in trouble with the law. He doesn't even drink or smoke, he said.

"This is kind of my way to, you know, have fun," he said.

Jerome Koch, a sociologist on the "Body Art Team," said the correlation with "deviant" behavior came among the 4 percent of the 1,753 students surveyed who had four or more tattoos, seven or more piercing or an "intimate piercing," according to the Chicago Tribune.

According to the study, the students who had just one tattoo (the "posers") were no more deviant than their peers.

The study will be published in a national social science journal in March.

Get More: Read the study: "Body art, deviance and American college students"

Ellen Goldberg contributed to this report.

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