

## **Binge Drinking and Tattoos: Introduction and Annotated Bibliography**

Basic Research Question: What is the relationship between Religion and Deviance?

Independent variable: Type of tattoo (Religious or Secular).

Dependent variable: Frequency of underage binge drinking.

### **Why this is important.**

Entering the college culture at age 18 often involves less adult supervision, and a shift in what activities are conventional and “within bounds” so to speak (Koch et al, 2021). The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (2019) reports binge drinking among American college students is annually associated with over 1,500 deaths, nearly 700,000 assaults, and nearly 100,000 incidences of sexual assault and date rape. Concurrently, we also know that tattoos and religion form complex interrelationship with young adults and their drinking behavior and sex lives (Koch et al, 2010; 2015; Koch & Dougherty, in press 2022).

While we commonly teach adolescents in the U.S. to safely operate cars and trucks through Driver’s Education, and have Hunter Safety classes regarding firearms, it is legally impossible to teach 18-20 year olds to safely use alcohol. Lots of them dangerously binge drink, with little guidance except from their peers (Roberts et al, 2001). However, being strongly religious seems to lessen the level of dangerous drinking among adolescents (Brown et al, 2001), while having tattoos seems to elevate it (Burger & Finkel, 2000).

I have been teaching college students for thirty years and I love to watch them learn new ideas and ways of thinking. It grieves me that such common drinking behavior can be so socially, emotionally, physically damaging. This investigation is a way for me to examine the

behavioral associations between binge drinking, reckless sex, and having/acquiring a tattoo. Specifically, are these associations any different for those with religious tattoos versus those with secular tattoos? Perhaps getting a religious tattoo might actually help strengthen faith such that dangerous behavior becomes less likely.

### **Previous research.**

Four bodies of research guide this investigation. They are: (1) The growing incidence, prevalence, and normalization of tattoos; (2) The positive association between tattoos, substance abuse, and sex; (3) The negative association between religious belief and practice, and substance abuse and sex; (4) Emerging information about the association between religion and tattoos.

### ***Tattoos.***

Tattoos have become a common expression of identity, and there has been a dramatic increase in tattoo prevalence among U.S. adults. Today nearly a third (29%) have at least one tattoo. This is double the prevalence ten years prior. For those “Millennials” born after 1985, nearly half have at least one tattoo (Harris Poll 2016). Thus, for those entering college since the early 2000s, tattoos are a common adornment. This certainly challenges previous assumptions that tattoo wearers are rebellious non-conformists.

### ***Tattoos, substance abuse, and sex.***

Tattoo displays have long been associated with stigmatized groups, and to a lesser extent, individuals who push limits and social boundaries (Atkinson, 2003). Some statistical research suggests a direct association between having a tattoo and being prone to substance use and reckless sex (Burger & Finkel, 2002; Drews et al, 2000). However, more recent research suggests in takes more than one tattoo – four or more in fact – before statistical associations appear for binge drinking, illegal drug use, or a significant arrest history (Koch et al, 2010).

### ***Religion, substance abuse, and sex.***

Previous research shows consistently negative associations between religion, substance use and premarital sex (Regnerus 2003; Welch et al. 2006). Moreover, it is well worth noting that claiming a religious tradition or believing in God is rarely enough to alter a person's behavior. It is the involvement with religious groups that strengthens faith, and changes behavior. Involvement with a religious group also reinforces religious convictions. This emphasis on religious groups as a deterrent to drinking and sex is the basis of a popular theory known as the Moral Communities Hypothesis. The basic argument of this theory is that people surrounded by a majority of others who are actively religious will be less likely to participate in underage drinking or premarital sex (Stark 1996).

### ***Religion and tattoos.***

The perception that religion prohibits tattoos is a lingering stereotype. Some people point to a divine prohibition against tattoos recorded in sacred scriptures, such as the following verse from the Jewish Torah and Christian Old Testament: "Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD." (Leviticus 19:28)

While the religiously based stigma associated with tattoos persists, an interesting change is now in progress. For some, a tattoo is an expression of religious faith. Pop singer Justin Bieber has over 50 tattoos, including a full Bible verse on his left shoulder:

Your word is a lamp for my feet,

a light on my path

Psalms 119:105

This is one of many tattoos with religious significance for Bieber. Other celebrities with religious tattoos are singer Mary J. Blige (cross on her upper left arm), actor and rapper Nick Cannon (a

massive crucifixion scene across his entire back), actress Angelina Jolie (text of a Buddhist prayer over her left shoulder blade), and English soccer star David Beckham (multiple depictions of Jesus and angels).

Younger generations of religious conservatives have been finding their way to tattoo parlors for some time. Jensen et al, (2000) documented the popularity of religious tattoos among Gen X evangelicals. They described religious tattooing as “an extreme expression of an extreme faith.” Similar findings have been noted much later (Koch & Dougherty, 2019; Maloney & Koch, 2020). Memorably, Koch & Roberts (2012, p. 213) reported one respondent stating how his faith was strengthened and his behavior changed after acquiring a religious tattoo. “I got this (Christian fish symbol) tattoo after I lost my virginity, to commit myself again to purity.”

These inked expressions of faith are championed by Christian tattoo parlors and professional organizations such as the Christian Tattoo Association and Alliance of Christian Tattooers. Finally, and though it seems intuitively obvious, Dougherty and Koch (in press 2022) note that those with religious tattoos are the most demonstrably religious of all their survey respondents.

### **What I think I'd find.**

The research shows that:

1. Being strongly religious seems to associate with less binge drinking and,
2. Having a religious tattoo is associated with strong religious beliefs and practices. Therefore,
3. Those with religious tattoos will report less drinking than those with secular tattoos.

## Sources.

Atkinson, M. (2003). *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Michael Atkinson is a storyteller. His book delves deeply into the manner and motivation for tattoo enthusiasts to collect and display body art. The book appears in the early stages of documentation that tattoos are much more a part of mainstream culture than characteristic of society's outcasts. Atkinson regards tattooing as an art form and tattoo wearers as a kind of living canvas, whose bodies tell the stories of who they are what matters to them everywhere they go.

Brown, T.L., Parks, G.S., Zimmerman, R.S., & Phillips, C.M. (2001). The role of religion in predicting adolescent alcohol use and problem drinking. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 62, 696-705.

These researchers spent three years surveying and interviewing over 1000 9<sup>th</sup> grade adolescents on a variety of matters concerning their religious beliefs and practices, and their use of alcohol. They found that Black respondents were the most religious and White respondents drank the most. However, Black respondents had more problems associated with their drinking, such as sleeplessness and stress. White adolescents tended to use alcohol as a means of coping.

Burger, T.D., & Finkel, D. (2002). Relationships Between Body Modifications and Very High-Risk Behaviors in a College Population. *College Student Journal*, 36, 203-13.

Dougherty, K.D. & Koch, J.R., (2019). Religious Tattoos at One Christian University. *Visual Studies*. DOI: [10.1080/1472586X.2019.1687331](https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2019.1687331)

Drews, D.R., Allison, C.K., & Probst, J.R. (2000). Behavioral and Self-Concept Differences in Tattooed and Nontattooed College Students. *Psychological Reports*, 86, 475-481.

Harris Poll. (2016). Tattoo Takeover: Three in Ten Americans Have Tattoos, and Most Don't Stop at Just One. Retrieved from: <http://www.theharrispoll.com/health-and-life/Tattoo>. Accessed 19 July 2019.

Jensen, L., Flory, R.W., & Miller, D.E. (2000). Marked for Jesus: Sacred Tattooing Among Evangelical GenXers. in *GenX Religion*, ed. Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller, 15- 30. New York: Routledge.

Koch, J.R., & Dougherty, K.D. (In press, 2022). "Tattoos, Religiosity and Deviance among College Students." *Sociological Focus*.

Koch, J.R., Roberts, A.E., Armstrong, M.L., & Owen, D.L. (2010). Body Art, Deviance, and American College Students. *Social Science Journal*, 47, 151-161.

Koch, J.R. & Roberts, A.E.. (2012). The Protestant Ethic and the Religious Tattoo. *The Social Science Journal* 49, 210-213.

Koch, J.R., Wagner, B.W., & Roberts, A.E.. (2021). Christian Universities as Moral Communities: Drinking, Sex, and Drug Use among University Students in the United States. *The Social Science Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03623319.2021.1963108>

Maloney, P.A., & Koch, J.R. (2020). The College Student's Religious Tattoo: Respect, Reverence, Remembrance. *Sociological Focus* 53(1): 53-66.

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. (2019). Fall Semester—A Time for Parents to Discuss the Risks of College Drinking. [https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/NIAAA\\_BacktoCollege\\_Fact\\_sheet.pdf](https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/NIAAA_BacktoCollege_Fact_sheet.pdf). Accessed June 8, 2020.

Regnerus, M.D. (2003). Moral Communities and Adolescent Delinquency: Religious Contexts and Community Social Control. *The Sociological Quarterly* 44, 523-54.

Roberts, A.E., Koch, J.R., & Johnson, D.P. (2001). Religious reference groups and the persistence of normative behavior: an empirical test. *Sociological Spectrum*, 21, 81-97.

Stark, R. (1996). Religion as Context: Hellfire and Delinquency One More Time. *Sociology of Religion* 57, 163-73.

Welch, M.R., Tittle, C.R., & Grasmick, H.G. (2006). Christian Religiosity, Self Control and Social Conformity. *Social Forces* 84, 1605-23.