



# Inked into Crime? An Examination of the Causal Relationship between Tattoos and Life-Course Offending among Males from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** There have been a number of prior studies that have investigated the relationship between tattoos and crime with most documenting evidence of an association. Specifically, prior research often suggests that individuals with tattoos commit more crime, are disproportionately concentrated in offender and institutionalized populations, and often have personality disorders. Having said this, the bulk of the prior research on this topic has been correlational.

**Methods:** In the current study, we rely on data from a prospective longitudinal study of 411 British males from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development and employ propensity score matching to determine if the link between tattoos and crime may in fact be causal.

**Results:** Results suggest that having tattoos is better considered as a symptom of another set of developmental risk factors and personality traits that are both related to tattooing and being involved in crime rather than as a causal factor for predicting crime over the life-course.

**Conclusions:** Study limitations and directions for future research are discussed.

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## Introduction

While Grunet (1983) commented on the psychodynamic implications of tattoos where he suggested that tattooing itself may be regarded as an externalization of inner feelings and a mechanism of self-identification, the association between tattoos and criminality has been observed in academia and pop culture since the 1800s (Bales, Blomberg, & Waters, 2013). In fact, discussions on the relevance of tattoos can be traced back to Lombroso's early writings (Lombroso, 2006; see also Lombroso, 1911) which were compiled into five volumes of *Criminal Man* and were originally published between 1876 and 1897 (DeLisi, 2013a, b). In these early writings, Lombroso often described criminals as having a tendency to express themselves through tattooing. Furthermore, Lombroso believed that tattoos themselves were an indicator of criminality, and the art of tattooing was not

just something learned and practiced among prisoners. In this vein, Lombroso considered tattoos as "an expression of disrespect for authority, a desire for revenge, obscene words, obscene images, membership in secret criminal organizations, and cryptic indecipherable words", and he believed tattooed criminals to be individuals who had a propensity to "conform with wild and primitive behaviors" (Palermo, 2004, p. 10–11).

More recently, Byard (2013, p. 540) has indicated that there is a vast array of forensic information that can be gathered from examining an individual's tattoos such as "possible previous occupation and club/gang affiliations, previous military service, names of family members, medical conditions, previous travel destinations, drug taking habits, prison history, and religious and cultural background." Although estimates suggest that as many as 1 in 4 Americans have at least one tattoo (Laumann & Derick, 2006), the prevalence of tattoos is much higher among those in mental health institutions (Newman, 1982), the military (Armstrong, Pace-Murphy, Sallee, & Watson, 2000), and most notably, the prison population (DiFrancesco, 1990; Manuel & Retzlaff, 2002). Indeed, individuals with tattoos are more likely to have a criminal history than those without tattoos (Buhrich & Morris, 1982; Gittleston & Wallen, 1973), and studies have shown a positive relationship between tattooing and violence (Britt, Panepento, & Wilson, 1968; Butler & Trice,

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1968; Newman, 1982), deviant behavior (Braithwaite, Stephens, Bowman, Milton, & Braithwaite, 1998; Buhrich, 1983; Cenicerros, 1998; Drews, Allison, & Probst, 2000; Raspa & Cusack, 1990; Roe, Howell, & Payne, 1974), and crime in general (Fox, 1976; Mallon & Russell, 1999; Taylor, 1968, 1970; West & Farrington, 1977; Yamamoto, Seeman, & Boyd, 1963). However, additional research has also pointed toward the exact opposite conclusions for the relationship between tattooing and deviance (Harry, 1987; Howell, Payne, & Roe, 1971; Rozycki Lozano, Morgan, Murray, & Varghese, 2011). It therefore remains unclear, if, and why, tattoos are linked to criminal behavior. In recognition of this uncertainty, the current study seeks to explore the issue of causality by empirically evaluating the link between tattoos and crime over the life-course by taking into account an expansive list of associated risk factors using data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD), one of the longest running longitudinal studies in the field of criminology.

#### *Tattoos and Crime in the Prison Population*

Most studies on tattooing in criminology have examined the prevalence of tattoos among prison inmates, and these studies have generally reported a strong correlation between tattoos and inmates committing a greater frequency of offenses, more disciplinary infractions in prison, and evincing more risk of future recidivism after release (Bales et al., 2013; Birmingham, Mason, & Grubin, 1999; Gittleson & Wallen, 1973; Gittleson, Wallen, & Dawson-Butterworth, 1969; Haines & Huffman, 1958; Newman, 1982; Putnins, 2002; Roe et al., 1974; Yamamoto et al., 1963). As early as 1958, Haines and Huffman identified a positive relationship between tattoos and the number of prior commitments to penal and correctional institutions among inmates. In a more recent study of Florida prisoners, Bales et al. (2013) found that inmates with tattoos had a 24.5% greater odds of committing an infraction while incarcerated compared to inmates with no tattoos. Furthermore, parolees with tattoos were also more likely to engage in crime after release compared to those with no tattoos, and the risk of recidivating within three years after prison release was 42% greater for inmates with tattoos than for those who had none (Bales et al., 2013).

As estimates from California to Florida suggest that more than half of the U.S. male prison population is tattooed (Bales et al., 2013; DeMello, 1993), there are clear implications and importance for findings suggesting such a strong correlation between tattoos and criminal behavior. Nevertheless, as these findings were all acquired using cross-sectional research conducted with prison population samples, in addition to the fact that inmates are two to three times more likely to have tattoos than the general U.S. population (Bales et al., 2013), it is not clear to what extent these results may be generalized to a non-prison population. Also, only a few studies to date have utilized a follow-up of released prisoners to assess the effect of tattooing on recidivism (Bales et al., 2013; Rozycki Lozano et al., 2011), and virtually no research to date has used a prospective longitudinal design to evaluate the causal relationship between tattoos and crime (with Silver, VanEseltine, & Silver, 2009 being one important exception).

There are various possible explanations for the link between tattooing and imprisonment. It could be that those with tattoos are perceived as more threatening or irresponsible by society because of their tattoos, and consequently they could be more likely to be arrested, charged, and remanded into custody than those without tattoos (Link, Cullen, Shrout, & Dohrenwend, 1989). It is also possible that, once in prison or labeled as a criminal, these individuals may be more prone to get tattoos to reinforce their deviant lifestyle and criminal behavior (Khosia, Joseph, & Gordon, 2010; Manuel & Retzlaff, 2002). In other words, using available information from the previously published cross-sectional studies of prison inmates we cannot make a determination as to whether tattoos cause imprisonment, imprisonment causes tattoos, or if tattoos and crime co-occur due to other issues such as psychological disorders, personality traits, and risky behaviors, or

whether tattoos are an additional symptom of an underlying developmental syndrome of problem behavior.

#### *Tattoos and Psychological Disorders, Personality Traits, and Behaviors*

While there is a clear association between tattooing and criminal behavior for those in prison, less research is available on the tattoo-crime relationship outside of a prison setting, and more importantly, if a causal relationship exists between the two. Despite this gap in the literature, there is a large body of extant research previously conducted in the past 40 years on the relationship between tattoos and various psychological issues including mental disorders, personality traits, and risky behaviors.

Tattoos have repeatedly been shown to relate to mental disorders among psychiatric patients (Lander & Kohn, 1943; Measey, 1972), with the most common disorders of a tattooed individual being schizophrenia (Birmingham et al., 1999; Ferguson-Rayport, Griffith, & Strauss, 1955), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Atkinson, 2002; Manuel & Retzlaff, 2002), or an eating disorder (bulimic type) (Preti et al., 2006). However, having or not having a history of a mental disorder at some point in life was not found to be significantly associated with tattoos (Birmingham et al., 1999).

That being said, the relationship between tattooing and personality disorders is one of the strongest empirical associations seen in the literature to date (Armstrong, 1991; Caplan, Komaromi, & Rhodes, 1996; Cenicerros, 1998; Ferguson-Rayport et al., 1955; McKerracher & Waterson, 1969; Measey, 1972; Post, 1968; Yamamoto et al., 1963). While only 10% of all tattooed individuals in a psychiatric setting were found to be schizophrenic, up to 57% were found to have a personality disorder of some kind (Ferguson-Rayport et al., 1955; Gittleson et al., 1969). Several studies have also shown that those diagnosed with Psychopathic or Sadistic personalities, or with Borderline or Antisocial Personality Disorders were more likely to be tattooed than not (Farrington, 2001; Manuel & Retzlaff, 2002; McKerracher & Waterson, 1969; Yamamoto et al., 1963). Furthermore, Raspa and Cusack (1990) found that the association between personality disorders and tattoos was so clear that they unequivocally stated that "finding a tattoo on physical examination should alert the physician to the possibility of an underlying psychiatric condition" (p. 1481).

Along with these personality disorders, there are also several personality traits and behaviors that are strongly related to tattooing. For instance, tattooed people are found to have higher rates of alcoholism, drug use, impulsivity, and risk-taking behavior than non-tattooed people (Buhrich & Morris, 1982; Farrington, 2001; Inch & Huws, 1993; Lander & Kohn, 1943; Measey, 1972; Post, 1968; Raspa & Cusack, 1990; Silver et al., 2009). More specifically, in a UK prison setting, there was a significant association between the presence of tattoos and a history of substance abuse or dependence on alcohol or drugs (Birmingham et al., 1999). Similarly, among non-incarcerated adolescents, there was a strong association found between tattoos, impulsivity, and risky behavior (Brooks, Woods, Knight, & Shrier, 2003; Carroll, Riffenburgh, Roberts, & Myhre, 2002; Roberts & Ryan, 2002; Silver et al., 2009). In fact, one cross-sectional study of college-aged students from 18 U.S. universities found that 24% of students with tattoos had 6 to 10 sexual partners, and an additional 26% of students with tattoos had more than 11 partners to date (Greif, Hewitt, & Armstrong, 1999).

In addition, Birmingham et al. (1999) noted that tattooed people are more likely to be smokers, and smoke more than those who do not have tattoos, while Cenicerros (1998) demonstrated a correlation between playing Russian roulette and tattoos. Subsequent research has linked tattooing to other high-risk behaviors such as having unprotected sex (Burger & Finkel, 2002; Drews et al., 2000), using alcohol, cigarettes, and other drugs (Drews et al., 2000; Greif et al., 1999; Silver et al., 2009), and high rates of suicidal tendencies, suicide, or accidental death (Carroll et al., 2002; Dhossche, Snell, & Larder, 2000; Silver et al.,

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