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**Recognizing Tattoos as a Cultural Demographic
Within Law Enforcement**

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ABSTRACT

Law enforcement agencies throughout the United States are continually searching for qualified applicants to fill their shrinking ranks, as the Baby Boomer generation progresses in life and retire from the workforce. These agencies continue to shrink the applicant pool by implementing policies against body art, such as tattoos, under the guise of professionalism. Within the United States, 24% of Americans ages 18 to 50 have at least one tattoo (Eastland, 2011). That number will only increase as the military begins gearing down from its overseas conflicts and the millennial generation begins to choose a career in law enforcement. If agencies continue to base their out dated hiring practices on physical appearance, they will be leaving out a large portion of the cultural demographic that they serve.

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INTRODUCTION

Police departments seek to employ officers who represent their community that they serve. A few of the traits that they look for in a good candidate are a good moral character, physical fitness, honesty, ethics, and leadership. The agency wants to obtain the very best candidate it can to have a positive impact on the department as well as the citizens under their jurisdiction. Agencies want to be thought of as progressive and diverse, without being predigest against a group of people. This is why agencies need to start seeing the cultural trend and commonplace appearance of tattoos on qualified applicants.

In the mid 1960s, law enforcement agencies began hiring officers with various ethnic backgrounds to better reflect the community, predominantly in minority neighborhoods. As these officers interacted with the citizens, an open dialog was formed breaking down the previously present “us vs. them” perception. Citizens were more likely speak with an officer if they perceived that the officer came from the same cultural background as they did. The same can be said in a correctional facility where, more often than not, inmates refuse to communicate with the correctional officers because they felt there was no common ground. Seeing an officer with a visible tattoo often opened a dialog on the inmate’s perception that the officer and he might have a commonality between them.

A person’s visible tattoo cannot hinder the mental or physical capabilities to do one’s assigned duties. Tattoos are merely a decoration on a person’s body. They can, at times, tell a story of one’s personal experiences and sometimes credentials. Most prior military members have a tattoo showing a branch of service or unit designation

that they display with pride. After receiving a tattoo, the man or woman does not forget anything they were taught, experience a sudden muscle loss, or change what their own personal beliefs and ethics are. The only thing that a tattoo can affect is the owner's checkbook. Just because a person has a tattoo, this does not make that person any less qualified to fill a position within a law enforcement agency's ranks; it shows that the agency is progressive in its hiring practices while recognizing the changing of a culture demographic. Law enforcement agencies should recognize the tattooed candidate as a representative of a cultural demographic and that it should not be an automatic disqualifier.

POSITION

Tattoos are a modern form of communication, history and culture among the Millennials or Generation Y. By the year 2020, most law enforcement officers will be members of the Millennials generation (Henchey, 2005). Millennials do not fit the traditional mold of the law enforcement officer of the 1990s. They see themselves as individuals who want to experience life prior to settling down and beginning a career. In doing so, they tend to have more interaction with cultural trends, like body art and tattooing.

Law enforcement agencies need to recognize that the new pool of recruits they have to choose from no longer view tattoos as a negative. Tattoos in the modern culture are no longer restricted to spiritual symbols and cartoons. The incoming generations of applicants proudly display their art on nearly every body part. Tattoos cross geographic boundaries, ethnic groups, classes and genders. With the popularity

and frequency of tattooed applicants, law enforcement agencies need to rethink their prejudices about tattoos and those who display them (Benton, 2002).

The 1964 Civil Rights Act assisted in removing the practice of discrimination, due to one's color of skin, by giving them access into law enforcement jobs. The Law Enforcement Assistance Act helped agencies recruit, train and retain minorities in the policing profession (Margolis, 1971). Today, Millennials feel that they are being discriminated against because of the colors on their skin. They feel that they are not being properly represented by the agencies that serve them, much how the black and Hispanic communities felt in the 1960s and 1970s.

Today's men and women exiting the military under honorable conditions find the draw of serving one's community appealing and naturally gravitate towards a career in law enforcement. They enjoy the paramilitary structure and often thrive under a stated policy and chain of command. Their past success in the armed forces better prepares them for the rigid environment of modern police work. Yet they find themselves categorized as unqualified because of their physical appearance.

After World War II, members of the military were returning to the workforce in the 1950s by the thousands. With them they brought their newly found love of body art. Most Marines and Sailors who were deployed in the South Pacific Theater of Operations were exposed to the art of tattooing. Sailors would tattoo themselves at each port they were docked at, like post cards and pictures in a scrap book. Soldiers who found themselves aboard ship were introduced to this art form by the crew of the Navy vessels they found themselves on.

No longer were tattoos associated with criminals and juvenile delinquents. Tattoos were now being introduced into mainstream culture by the men and women of the armed services. During the 70's and 80's tattoos were just as prevalent among teen idols, such as The Rolling Stones and Motley Crew, as they were with the military. Because of the influence from the returning military service members, tattoos are beginning to, "appeal to an affluent, well educated clientele" (Berendt, 1989, p. 32).

The recent withdrawal of U.S. troops overseas, previously in armed conflicts, will impact the current trends in police recruiting. Agencies will see an influx of potential recruits coming from all branches of the military. Unfortunately, many of these former service members will find themselves left out of the applicant pool but not because of their lack of education or physical fitness. They will be prematurely disqualified by outdated policies because they have visible tattoos.

What was once considered a rite of passage for a young service member is now being used against them in a discriminatory fashion under the guise of professionalism. Now these men and women who swore an oath to protect this country from enemies both foreign and domestic are finding that they are now the ones being discriminated against, because of the outer markings on their skin. Fortunately for them, there are still progressive law enforcement agencies that are searching for qualified applicants to serve as police officers in their communities.

For persons who choose to be tattooed, the tattoo may enhance their interpersonal relationships by opening a line of communication with other persons who have body art, such as tattoos (Lin, 2002). This perception is an intricate part of a police officer's duties as they interact with citizens in their assigned work area. In police

work, officers often try to relate to a complainant's situation. At times there appears to be a disconnect as the complainant often feels like the officer does not understand their circumstances because the culture the officer was raised in does not reflect their own. Having never been exposed to the culture they are assigned to serve may present a challenge to an officer who is expected to empathize while meeting with a complainant.

In a correctional facility, correctional officers are in constant contact with inmates and convicts with minimal open lines of communication. The convicts feel there is the "us vs. them" mentality when it comes to communication. This makes it difficult for the correctional officer to carry out his or her assigned duties. Correctional officers with visible body art, such as tattoos, could be more successful in opening lines of communication with inmates, due to their perception of a common bond. Inmates often take pride in showing off their tattoos. They view them as a roadmap of their accomplishments, family structure and religious belief system (Cooke, 2002).

As an investigator in police work, at times a connection must be made between the investigator and the suspect. This is a technique that is used to relax the suspect, during the interviewing process, to assist the investigator with obtaining a confession. If the suspect feels that there is a barrier with the person involved in the interviewing process, then they will be less likely to open up emotionally to the investigator. This will in turn construct an emotional wall keeping the suspect continuously on guard throughout the interview process. If the investigator observes a tattoo on the suspect, it can be used as a starting point for the needed perception of a common bond among them. Once the bond and trust is formed between the investigator and suspect, the time it takes for the interviewing process will be greatly reduced.

COUNTER POSITION

Opposition to this progressive way of thinking will attempt to avoid the issue altogether by changing their policy guidelines under the heading of professionalism. Merriam-Webster (2012) defines professionalism as, “the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize that mark a profession or professional person”. The City of Frisco Texas’s webpage recently added to their current policy in handling applicants with tattoos by stating that the Frisco Police Department, “prohibits any visible tattoos while in short sleeve police uniform. Applicants cannot use bandages or other products to conceal tattoos that would normally be visible” (City of Frisco, 2012, para.1).

Many tattooed applicants are already aware that there will be certain steps they will be asked to undertake, upon hiring into the police agency they have applied for. Some agencies have their tattooed officer wear long sleeved shirts, year round. Others require that the cover them with either make up, bandages or other on the market items that conceal body art. There are agencies that recognize the individual and their qualifications rather than their tattoos. These are the agencies that have a much larger applicant pool to select new officers from.

Law enforcement agencies who continue to discriminate against officers with tattoos often misinterpret what the tattoo symbolizes or the meaning behind the tattoo. Recruiting agencies should compile a review board to view and question the applicant, about his tattoo. A well rounded review board should be comprised of several sworn officers with a background in tattoo identification and recognition. Because the agency’s concern about an applicant’s ethics is paramount, there should be restrictions on what tattoos are acceptable. Tattoos on the hands, face, neck, and head should

continue to be disqualifiers for agencies because these are areas of the body that cannot be covered during the officer's workday assignments.

If an applicant is found to have a racially motivated tattoo, such as Nazi lightning bolts, street gang identifiers or pornographic body art, then the agency should retain the right to disqualify the applicant from its hiring review. If the applicant received the tattoos as a juvenile, and has not performed a cover-up of the tattoo, further questioning by the review board could determine the reason for the continued display of the tattoo. This will assist the review board in its decision as to whether or not the applicant should continue in the hiring process.

During a tattoo review, if the applicant has a large cover-up tattoo on an area of their body, the review board should investigate as to why the tattoo was covered. The review board may find that while the applicant was a juvenile, their supplanted parent figure was a criminal street gang. But during the course of the applicant's life, this harmful belief system was rooted out and replaced with the calling to help others trapped within the culture of the gang lifestyle. This may show that the applicant chose to cover his former gang affiliation tattoo because, over time, his ethics have changed. This officer may represent hope of a better life for the juvenile who feels that they cannot leave their current surrogate family.

An educated and progressive tattoo review board should be able to distinguish the difference between tattoos of gang affiliation from a tattoo of military unit pride. Because military units often use the likeness of a skull in their unit designation, they often at times misinterpreted as non-conformists. These are the applicants an agency should recruit because of the likeness between law enforcement and the military. Rank

and guidelines are not an issue for these applicants who appear to flourish within the law enforcement community.

CONCLUSION

Law enforcement agencies who continue to disqualify applicants based solely on the physical appearance of an applicant that has a visible tattoo are not only at risk of losing qualified applicants, but are practicing a form of cultural discrimination. This type of regressive practice limits an agency's ability to interact and connect to a large portion of a growing demographic, within the United States. This practice will further enhance communication challenges where the public feels as if they are not represented by the agency that serves them.

As law enforcement has in the past made changes within their own ranks to reflect the changing demographics of their communities, a change in policy is needed to allow visible tattoos on qualified police applicants. The tattoo does not hinder an applicant's ability to perform police work. It is not a physical disability, mental disorder or an ethical disqualifier. The tattoo is a visible roadmap showing the path one has taken to become the person that has led them to the calling of police work and service to others.

The implementation of a review board would increase the applicant pool with qualified individuals and better serve the agency currently struggling with an applicant shortage. The review board can identify, interpret and interview applicants as a policy included step of the agency's application and background process. The integrity of the law enforcement agency will be upheld as applicants with ethical challenges are disqualified as the review board conducts its investigation.

It is unfortunate that in the year 2012 law enforcement agencies continue to discriminate against police applicants for the color of their skin. On August 28, 1963, in his "I Have a Dream" speech Dr. King said, "I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" (King, 1963). This statement continues to hold meaning for the current and future police officers with tattoos. These officers and applicants know and understand that the tattoos they have chosen to adorn their body with does not change their mental or physical abilities to conduct themselves with honor, in modern day police work.

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