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**Tattoos in Law Enforcement**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

In the last 25 years, tattoos have become increasingly popular for more reasons than one; they can display self-expression, rebellion, or for some, are just a result of getting in on the latest fashion fad. Within the professional realm, the appropriateness of tattoos being displayed in the workplace has caused some controversy. There are many professional institutions that have modified their policies to reflect the acceptance of the growing popularity of tattoos, by now allowing visible body art in the workplace. There are others, who based on the industry, have upheld their decision to restrict tattoos. Particularly in law enforcement, there is a higher standard associated with the field, making it harder for agencies to modify their rules to adapt to the latest tattoo fad (Roufa, 2018). Consequently, tattoos should not be visible while in uniform.

Company dress codes are normally derived from the type, and frequency, of interactions between the employee and the customer/client (Heathfield, 2018). In a field where individuals are public servants, and building relationships with citizens is of utmost importance, there is a need to maintain a particular image. Since first impressions are made based on physical appearance and have a lasting impact, a proactive approach is establishing a dress code that governs appropriate attire, (Johnson, 2017). Policing is a people based business, which requires appearance policies to be strictly enforced. Officers are role models within communities and must positively portray the part. Officers are authority figures held to higher ethical standards than any other profession, and this must be reflected in their appearance. To maintain the public's confidence, and in the best interest of the department image, visible tattoos in law enforcement should be outlawed.

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## INTRODUCTION

In a battle between old school beliefs versus new school beliefs, the topic of tattoos always sparks debate as people either are firmly in support of or strongly opposed to tattoos. Typically, older generations frown on tattoos as they tend to associate tattoos with criminal activity and as a sign of disrespect. On the contrary, the newer generations support inking. In today's society, tattoos are more prevalent now as younger individuals regard body art as a form of self-expression (Siebenaler, 2016). New school mentality disbands the notion that tattoos are synonymous for bad news, and instead, transforms the perception of people with tattoos from jailbirds to walking canvases (Lavoie, 2016).

Counter arguments can be given on both sides of the tattoo debate, in which people weigh in with their personal opinions. However, when tattoos in the workplace are debated, personal viewpoints must be muted and the focus must be strictly professional. To ensure professionalism is upheld, most companies enforce a dress code which outlines the expectations for what is appropriate to wear to work, as well as the expectations for the employee's overall physical presentation in relation to grooming, tattoos, piercings, etc. The company's dress code is derived from the type of interaction between the employee and the customer/client, and the frequency of the interactions (Heathfield, 2018). Those organizations with the strictest of dress codes have the most interactions, and as a result, often adopt a uniform for uniformity and identifiability, like that of police officers (Heathfield, 2018). The distinctive look of a police officer in uniform conveys power and authority, and is easily identifiable by those that the officer serves and protects (Johnson, 2017).

In an industry where perception is everything, and building relationships with citizens is of utmost importance, there is a need for a strict dress code in law enforcement. Studies have revealed that physical appearance is a leading factor frequently used in developing a first impression of someone (Johnson, 2017). The police department's leadership recognizes the importance of enforcing a dress code policy to maintain the professionalism of their public servants who interact with many people while on duty.

The standard look of a law enforcement officer entails a starched uniformed, well-groomed appearance, with no visible tattoos/piercings. The uniform represents uniformity within agencies, trust from the public and professionalism in the industry.

Anything deviating from the standard look of an officer would draw distrust. Over the years, the look of the polyester uniform has changed with the fashion, but the professional standard has maintained. One change to the law enforcement dress code is bringing about mixed reactions. The policy that is currently changing with the "fashion" in some departments is that which allows tattooed officers to roll up their sleeves, exposing their tattoos, as long as they are not on the officers' hands, neck or face, and they are not racially discriminatory or otherwise offensive (Barned-Smith, 2017). Although some are glad the agencies are modernizing their policies, others are left questioning if the credibility of the united front loses its significance when officers are no longer portraying a unified image.

Law enforcement agencies will have to decide if keeping up with the fashion and allowing officers to expose themselves as a walking canvas is worth jeopardizing the perception of the badge. Officers who display their tattoos are then subject even more

to the personal beliefs of the citizens they protect, in a time where law enforcement already faces scrutiny (in large part to the media) just for wearing a badge. To protect the integrity of the profession, law enforcement agencies should restrict personnel from displaying tattoos while in uniform.

## **POSITION**

There is no other profession that demands a higher ethical standard than that of law enforcement, as officers' actions on duty and off duty, are subject to public scrutiny (Roufa, 2018). Additionally, law enforcement is one of the only professions where an individual act impacts the entire group. With heightened media coverage, one cop's misjudgment/actions suddenly represent those of all cops. Roufa (2018) stated, "Unfortunate though it may be, a single uncouth act committed by a single unprofessional officer can impact the entire law enforcement profession" (para.7). When officers put on their uniform, they are no longer a single entity, but instead, representative of the entire profession. In the eyes of citizens, there is no distinction from one officer to another. In the public eye, all officers in uniform look the same, "that's why it is so vitally important that each and every officer does her utmost best to maintain and build on the trust that the public has given her" (Roufa, 2018, para. 7).

The eyes of the average citizen carry great weight; thus it is the department's responsibility to portray the best image. By enforcing department uniform restrictions, the organization aims to protect the professional image of the group. Standardizing the look helps eliminate personal affiliations, and streamlines the profession, in which the focus is on officers serving and protecting the lives and property of all citizens.

Allowing tattoos to be visible while on duty could negatively impact the image presented by officers. The disclaimer is made that tattoos should not be racially discriminatory or otherwise offensive, but the interpretation of the tattoo is left to the observer. What might be considered offensive to some, might not be offensive to others.

This then poses the problem of police officials having to police their officers' tattoos to ensure the department is not misrepresented by any offensive designs. For example, an officer displays a tattoo of a Confederate flag. To the officer, the flag symbolizes honor, but in the eyes of an administrator, the flag could represent inequality. If a superior sees the tattoo and deems it offensive, will the officer feel as if he or she is a victim of discrimination? Will action be taken by the officer as a result of being unable to freely express themselves? If administration took offense to the tattoo, will community members? Is it worth subjecting the department to controversy and potentially losing the support of the community, all so an officer can showcase their ink? Allowing police officers to display their tattoos presents a liability within the department and within the community. Administrators should not be burdened by deciding the appropriateness of tattoos, especially since tattoos meaning can be easily misinterpreted. For administrators, "the regulation of tattoos by their content would be unworkable and ineffective" as the message conveyed by the tattoo is in the eyes of the beholder (Gorner, 2015, para.12). Instead, administrators' focus should be on monitoring if officers are effectively doing their jobs. Again, in law enforcement, officers are judged as a whole, and not on an individual basis, so the stigma perceived by just one person can alter the entire perception of all law enforcement. Dress code policies

enforced by the department are targeted at protecting all of those in law enforcement, ensuring a positive image is displayed in the community.

## **COUNTER ARGUMENTS**

Whereas some feel banning tattoos while on duty is needed to maintain professionalism, others feel that society has evolved and is more open to diversity. As a result, the definition of professionalism could be modernized to fit today's needs. With nearly 40% of adults 18 to 29 having at least one tattoo, officers with ink is more common than ever (Greenblatt, 2014). Some departments have acknowledged this, and in doing so, have made revisions to the department's appearance policies to shift from the standard look of an officer, to a more relaxed approach in which personnel reflect the community that it's policing ("Police ease rules...", 2017). Officers are humans too, and having their tattoos exposed, can humanize them in the public eye, and this is definitely needed in a time where the police are portrayed as the bad guys. Whereas it is important for officers to represent a united front, it is not always a good thing when an officer does not conduct themselves with integrity. It is at that time that the defensive goes up that just because one officer did something, it does not mean all would.

This problem stems greatly from the impact of the media and social media, as whatever message is translated plays a powerful role in how law enforcement officers are perceived. The backlash against the badge weighs heavily and causes a division between officers and civilians. More and more, various agencies are working to bridge the gap by adopting a policy of community policing and attempting to make law enforcement more accepted. Having officers be relatable to the clientele they protect is



imperative if we wish to lessen the bad guy image. Arriving on the scene of an incident, depending on the location, officers need to be approachable. Even though there is a need to provide a united front, there is also a need to recognize officers as human beings. The past concerns of tattoos raising questions about an officer's objectivity have shifted as the stigma associated with tattoos has lessened (Thompson, 2013).

Humanizing an officer can be beneficial for establishing a rapport, all while maintain the most important aspect of the officer being viewed as a person of authority, there to enforce the law. Recently, with this understanding, Houston Police Chief Art Acevedo modified the department's appearance policy in an effort to keep up with the times. The policy allows tattoos to be visible, as long as they are not on the officer's hands, neck or face, and they are not racially discriminatory or otherwise offensive (Barned-Smith, 2017). Opposition of the policy change arose among veteran officers, arguing that the changes impact the professionalism of the profession. In response, Chief Acevedo stated, "Professionalism is about conduct, professionalism is about service, professionalism is about results, not a tattoo on an arm or a leg" (Barned-Smith, 2017, para.10).

The change to allow tattoos has also proved beneficial during recruiting. Previously, visible tattoos were a disqualifying factor and lessened the applicant pool. Similar to the armed forces, most law enforcement agencies, have tattoos as a disqualifying factor in the recruiting process. Those who wish to enter law enforcement are encouraged to think before they ink. Although a great piece of advice, consideration has to be given to the fact that most tattoos are done in adolescent years without the thought of the future playing a deciding factor. A simple decision made when someone

is younger should not prohibit them from pursuing a career in law enforcement. The focus should not be on the body art, but instead on their ability to effectively do their job. Tattoos should not equate an officer not being highly trained or highly regarding. Their actions when on duty should. Other agencies have yet to follow suit with the change due to the challenge this poses when regulating the content of tattoos that might be offensive ("Police ease rules...", 2017). In January 2017, Kansas State Police surveyed their staff to garner feedback about their tattoo restriction, after having difficulty filling 100 trooper jobs. The results revealed that nearly 20,000 respondents had a tattoo ("Police ease rules...", 2017). If the department was to overturn the prohibition on tattoos, administrators would be having to police 20,000 employees' tattoos. This then would subject administration to a liability of them deem something as offensive, and the ink holder disagrees.

In 2015, the Chicago Police Department implemented a policy requiring officers to cover their tattoos. It was noted by the agency that the change was needed to streamline the look of officers to promote uniformity and professionalism since there were too many uniform variations, "making Chicago police officers less immediately identifiable to the public" (Gorner, 2015, para.13). In response, a few officers filed a lawsuit against the city, citing the policy violated their First Amendment rights of freedom of speech and expression (Gorner, 2015). Officers attribute their ink as part of their identity, and being unable to showcase their body art, raised opposition. In uniform, officers are not just representing themselves. They are representing the entire department. In a profession which requires you to interact routinely with clients, in this case the general public, tattoos "are very likely to have a huge impact," and

consequently, have to be addressed (Timming, 2016, para. 8). By implementing a policy restricting personnel from displaying tattoos while in uniform, the purpose would not be to take away personal identity (as officers are allowed to have tattoos), but it would protect the image of department by requiring the tattoos to be covered up while on duty.

It is continually noted the impact tattoos will have on the community's perception of law enforcement, but it has rarely been addressed with the community. Recently, a girlfriend of a Longview officer initiated a petition to raise awareness regarding the department's appearance policy (Hix, 2017). The petition provided a platform to garner feedback from the community, much in support of police being able to have tattoos and beards in the workplace. It was argued that it was not worth losing "a well-qualified person due to an antiquated policy" (Hix, 2017, para. 5). Knowing that society has adapted to this new view, policies should be reflective of this acceptance.

Does a tattoo really determine an individual's professional ability? Those advocating self-expression and discomfort over having to cover their tattoos, have put the pressure on to make changes which focus on the performance of an officer, rather than the appearance. However, what is problematic and what they fail to realize is appearance impacts performance. If officers are not portraying the picture of an authority figure held to higher ethical standards than any other profession, then the public will lose confidence in their ability. In the best interest of the department, visible tattoos in law enforcement should be outlawed.

## RECOMMENDATION

Anyone entering law enforcement, knows it is a profession like no other. The risks and sacrifices associated with the career are bar none. In stances where others run away from danger, officers run towards it, in an effort to uphold their oath of serving and protecting. Part of the job is putting on the uniform every day, pinning on the badge and representing the department as an honorable public servant in the community. When the uniform is on, there are no personal affiliations, no I, me or my, and instead, officers, and their brothers and sisters in blue, are united as one.

The uniform is symbolic of power, authority, uniformity and identifiably (Johnson, 2017). To maintain the professional image associated with the profession, and to keep intact the sense of safety that the uniform incites, law enforcement agencies should evaluate their appearance policy to reflect officers being unable to display their tattoos while in uniform.

At the present, all agencies have a dress code that governs professional attire, but across departments, there are discrepancies in relation to the tattoo policy. Due to the frequency of interactions with the public, it is essential to establish a strict dress code to maintain professional standards (Heathfield, 2018). Agencies should ban tattoos being displayed while in uniform. There is no room to police the appropriateness of the tattoo or to evaluate the offensiveness, as the matter is subjective (Gorner, 2015). Officers have the right tattooing their bodies if they wish to do so, but it is a privilege to wear the uniform. When given the privilege to wear the uniform, officers assume all responsibilities associated with it. It has been noted that tattoos have a great impact on

public perception (Timming, 2016). If it is known that tattoos can be perceived as negative, why would officials adopt a policy that can tarnish the image of the badge?

Some may not view tattoos as tarnishing the badge, but rather as an empowering factor as the need to humanize officers is growing based on recent media coverage. Standards should be maintained, but must be realistic. Tattoos are more prominent than ever and have a greater acceptance. The negative connotation previously tied to tattoos has diminished and there is a new appreciation for body art.

Officers should not be discriminated against for the ink that they have. The focus instead should be on the officer's ability to uphold the law and conduct himself with integrity. Those aspiring to join the force should not be disqualified based on their ink. In instances like this, potential candidates are overlooked without even taking into consideration what they can attribute to the force.

Again, in a battle between old school beliefs versus new school beliefs, the topic of tattoos always sparks debate as people either are firmly in support of, or strongly opposed to, tattoos. However, going forward, it is important to note that there is no "best" practice or policy to implement to satisfy this debate. Instead, it is essential that appearance policies are reviewed and the department ensures that a policy is established that is fair, concise and consistently enforced. Clearly defined regulations will allow professionalism to be maintained in law enforcement.

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