

Are college students with religious tattoos more religious? Yes and no

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For most of U.S. history, tattoos have been associated with sailors and bikers, but not church-going people. As tattoos have become more popular, with nearly one-third of U.S. adults sporting at least one tattoo,

religious-themed tattoos have also increased. A recent study examined the behaviors of college students with tattoos, including religious tattoos.

Jerome R. Koch, Ph.D., professor of sociology at Texas Tech University, and Kevin D. Dougherty, Ph.D., professor of sociology at Baylor, investigated the relationship between tattoos, religiosity and assumed behaviors. Koch and Dougherty published their research, "Tattoos, Religiosity, and Deviance Among College Students," in the journal *Sociological Focus*.

The researchers used [survey data](#) from 3,525 students at 12 American colleges and universities to determine whether there is a negative association between [tattoo](#) adornment and religiosity, and whether the type of tattoo (religious or secular) is related to deviant behaviors such as drinking, drug use and sexual activity.

Results demonstrate [college students](#) with tattoos are similar to their untattooed classmates in regard to their [religious faith](#) and frequency of prayer. However, students with religious tattoos have a stronger faith, pray more and attend [religious services](#) more often than students with no tattoos or secular tattoos.

"Religious tattoos tend to be a vivid expression of strong faith and regular religious practice," Koch said.

In contrast, findings also show students with religious or secular tattoos are similar in other surprising ways such as marijuana use and sexual activity.

"Students with religious tattoos are highly religious in some ways but strikingly secular in others," Dougherty said.

A potential explanation for this irony may be that tattooed individuals

are sensation-seekers. The emotional content and practices associated with tattoos and religion may parallel each other in specific ways. Both tattoos and religion can signify belonging, identity, restoration, celebration and a commemoration of birth and death. These kinds of incidents and emotions are especially evident in the lives of those who hold strong religious beliefs and engage in religious experiences. In short, tattoos and religion are sensational.

"The religiously tattooed are more likely to use marijuana and be sexually active than those with no tattoos. Thus, the behavior of those with religious tattoos is more similar to those with secular tattoos and distinct from those with no tattoos. Tattoos, religious or otherwise, seem to be associated with a more sensory way of life," Koch said.

This research adds to the scholarly understanding of how aspects of identity are connected to tattoos and religion. Koch and Dougherty began collaborating on religious tattoos in 2018. Their collaborations have produced two journal articles and a book chapter. They have plans for more research together.

"Religious tattoos are a fascinating example of how people connect with and communicate their faith," Dougherty said. "Social scientists have largely ignored religious tattoos. Our research brings attention to these marks of faith."

Tattoos are popular, especially among Millennials and Gen Z. Religious [tattoos](#) reveal that religion still matters to younger generations of Americans, but the influence of religion may be different than it was for previous generations.

More information: Jerome R. Koch et al, Tattoos, Religiosity, and Deviance Among College Students, *Sociological Focus* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/00380237.2023.2199167](https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.2023.2199167)

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