



Tattooing of Human Trafficking Victims

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Traffickers and other abusers sometimes tattoo, burn, or scar their victims as a way of branding their property.¹ Local government staff who might see these tattoos are potentially in positions to offer interventions, to support healing and reintegration processes, and/or to gather information about how trafficking happens in their communities.

Tattoos might have one or more purposes for the trafficker. It is a strategy to dehumanize victims, demonstrating who controls their bodies and communicating "ownership" to other traffickers. It can also be demanded as proof of loyalty by the victim to the trafficker. The design of the tattoo can also communicate the sex acts for sale to buyers.

Right now, available information primarily relates to female sex trafficking victims, but the void of information about the tattooing of male sex trafficking victims or any labor trafficking victim is simply that: a void. Tattooing and branding could be happening to those victims as well, but we have not seen or documented it.

Which local government positions should be prioritized to receive basic information on tattoo recognition?

- Public health staff
- Any staff working with youth and young adults
- Law enforcement staff
- Corrections system staff

¹ Survivor's Ink is an organization that helps victims remove or transform the tattoos with which their traffickers branded them. See their website's FAQ page for more information. survivorsink.squarespace.com/faq

Since no one under age 18 can legally be tattooed in North Carolina, any professional who works with youth should be aware of the connection between trafficking and tattoos.²

Research has established that between 50% to 98% of trafficked persons see a healthcare provider during their time in captivity.³ Sex traffickers might bring female victims in for birth control, abortion, or treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, which is why public health clinic staff should receive training about the indicators of trafficking.

Documentation of tattoos can generate helpful intelligence for law enforcement or other investigators. Not only is it possible that tattoos can be linked back to specific traffickers and communities, but also connections can be made among the multiple victims of one trafficker.

There are significant challenges related to relying on tattoos for recognition of human trafficking.

- There is no database of tattoo designs that are confirmed to be related to traffickers.
- Tattoos are common now, with over 25% of all adults having at least one tattoo.
- Any tattoo may not indicate current victimization; the abusive dynamic might have dated from another time in a person's life.
- Finally, not all sex trafficking victims are subject to tattooing, and those individuals might have tattoos that they voluntarily chose for themselves.

For these reasons, the presence or absence of a tattoo is not conclusive in either direction. It is simply one more point of data that could potentially be useful when used with other evidence.

The presence of a tattoo, particularly one not professionally done or one on a minor, is worthy of an inquiry. Here are some other points of design or placement to consider

- Placement of the tattoos can be visible (neck, face, hand, eyelid, under the arm) or discreet (inner thigh, genital area, breasts, back, inner lip, gums, bottom of foot.)
- Tattoos might be symbols of wealth (gold bars, diamonds, money signs [\$\$], ATM, crowns, barcodes, or money bags)
- Tattoos might be direct indicators of ownership (trafficker's name, gang affiliation, 'Property of ...', 'X's girl', nicknames or initials, a name might have heart around it.)
- Tattoos might be profane words or expressions.

² North Carolina General Statutes Chapter 14. Criminal Law 14-400. Tattooing; body piercing prohibited. Last updated January 1, 2020.

³ Armstrong, Stephanie PhD, RN, CNS; Greenbaum, V. Jordan MD. Using Survivors' Voices to Guide the Identification and Care of Trafficked Persons by U.S. Health Care Professionals: A Systematic Review. *Advanced Emergency Nursing Journal*: July/September 2019 - Volume 41 - Issue 3 - p 244-260 doi: 10.1097/TME.0000000000000257

- Tattoos may be of poor quality, done with available resources. According to the Survivor's Ink website, "the large majority of branding tattoos are not professionally done; they are most often acquired on the street by homemade guns in a very unsanitary setting."

Investigator Rick Hoffman provides the following descriptions of tattoos he has seen on victims of sex trafficking here in North Carolina:

- Enumeration: A symbol (such as lips) plus a number (1, 2, 3, etc.) to indicate the order in which the victim was added to the group of victims controlled by a single trafficker.
- Dates: In gang vernacular, the date a person joined the gang is the date they were "brought home." These dates can be inside or next to another design the trafficker uses and can be misinterpreted as a birthdate or some other common life experience.
- Acronyms for philosophies or businesses: HUSH stands for "Hustle Until Sh*t Happens." GIGO stands for "Got It Going On" entertainment.

Anti-human trafficking advocates have identified these potential next steps in the field:

- Create a tattoo database and a system for communicating trends.
- Train tattoo artists and create protocols for reporting suspicious situations or relationships.
- Provide outreach materials from the National Human Trafficking Hotline or other resources in tattoo parlors.
- Train medical professionals.
- Provide opportunities for tattoo removal or transformation for victims who are rebuilding their lives.

Much of the information in this fact sheet was gained through this publication: Fang S, Coverdale J, Nguyen P, Gordon M. Tattoo Recognition in Screening for Victims of Human Trafficking. J Nerv Ment Dis. 2018 Oct;206(10):824-827. doi: 10.1097/NMD.0000000000000881. PMID: 30273279. Available at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30273279/>

For more resources about human trafficking written for local government audiences, go to [sog.unc.edu](https://cplg.sog.unc.edu/learn-now/human-trafficking) and search for "human trafficking" or click on this link: <https://cplg.sog.unc.edu/learn-now/human-trafficking>