

## Tattoos in DOC custody

# 71%

of people in DOC confinement had at least one tattoo at intake. That's 9,935 people!



Source:  
DOC  
Research &  
Data  
Analytics  
2/28/2026

## Tattoos and Trauma

# 47%



of human trafficking survivors have tattoos tied to their exploitation

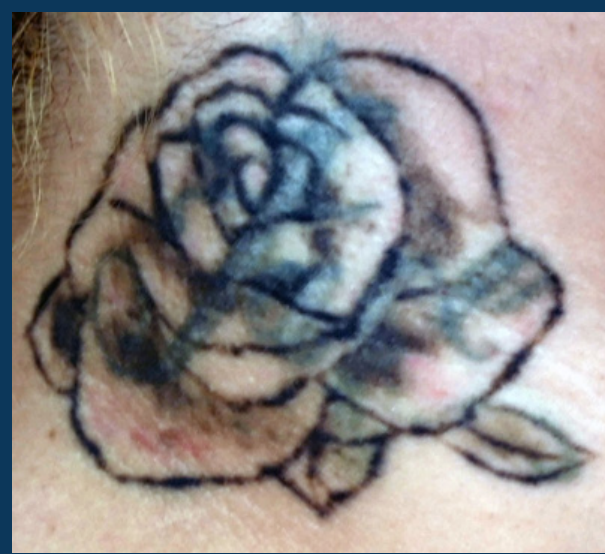
Source: 2022 National Institutes of Health Survey

### Types of trauma tattoos can be linked to

- Control or coercion
- Survival in unstable environment
- Gang affiliation or identity
- "Ownership" to a trafficker

## Not all tattoos are tied to trauma

People get tattoos for many reasons and often times the only way to determine which tattoos are tied to trauma is through personal disclosure.



## More than skin deep: Understanding tattoos in correctional settings

### A clear need



# 62

incarcerated women at the Washington Corrections Center for Women have expressed interest in getting tattoos removed since the tattoo removal pilot launched in late 2025.



### Why removal matters

Tattoos can be daily reminders of trauma. They can negatively impact a person's self-image and confidence.

They can also create additional barriers to employment after release.

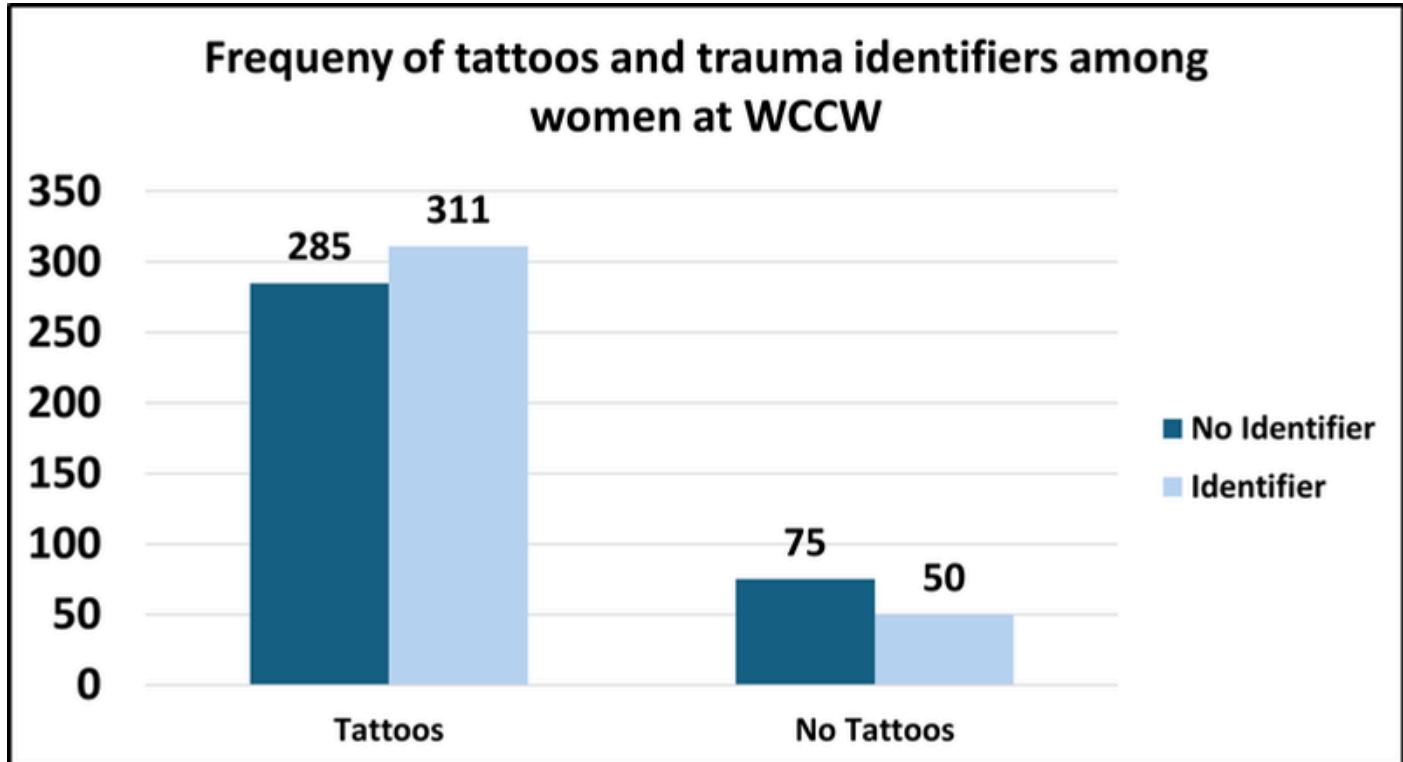
### Removal can support

- Healing and personal choice
- A sense of control and choice
- successful reentry

# Justice involved women and tattoos

## In Washington state....

## Not a clear picture



About 8 out of 10 women at WCCW had tattoos at intake. Of those with tattoos, about half--52%-- were also flagged as having a “trauma identifier,” compared to about a quarter of untattooed women.

While many women have an identifier for past traumas, it doesn’t necessarily mean their tattoos are related to trauma. Likewise, not having tattoos doesn’t mean someone hasn’t experienced trauma.

The only surefire way to know if someone’s tattoo is trauma related is self-disclosure. It’s not uncommon for survivors of trauma to be reluctant to disclose it, and experts say the frequency of trauma--and associated tattoos--is likely underreported.

Source: DOC Research & Data analytics 02/28/2026

\*“Trauma identifiers” include indicators related to sexual abuse, gang affiliation, safety concerns, or prior prostitution-related charges.

## Some common prison tattoos and their meanings

The following are some of the tattoos included in a list of tattoos and their meanings among incarcerated populations published on the [Corrections 1 blog](#). It’s important to note meanings vary widely by individual, culture, region and context.

**Cobwebs** - can represent a lengthy term in prison or general criminality. Symbolism is also associated with spiders “trapping pray,” akin to the feeling of being “trapped behind bars”

**Teardrop** - A filled teardrop can mean the person committed a murder. An outline may symbolize a memorial to a friend or loved one who was murdered. Can also signify lengthy prison sentence.

**Three dots** - shorthand for “mi vida loca,” or “my crazy life. Not affiliated with a specific gang, just with the gang lifestyle.

**Cross/cross on the chest** - common inside Russian prisons, cross on the chest can represent a “prince of thieves,” high-ranking criminal. Among incarcerated Hispanic people, who often come from Catholic homes, it can also signify devotion to religion

**Clock with no hands** - “doing time,” sense of time feeling endless in prison

**Broken hearts, roses** - Can be symbols of lost love or betrayals. Can be symbols of acceptance, i.e. “this too shall pass.”

## Human trafficking and tattoos

Human traffickers often use tattoo symbols like barcodes, dollar signs, crowns or their names to display ownership and control over victims.

Gang members may use faces or hearts combined with dates. They’re often in prominent areas like the face, neck, hands or private areas.

Tattoos may be of poor quality because they’re done by amateurs. The same tattoo may appear on many people in the same group.

Source: [Hope Against Trafficking](#)

## How to report human trafficking

If you or someone you know may be a victim, 24/7 confidential help is available:

**National Human Trafficking Hotline**  
1-888-373-7888 | Text: 233733

Live chat & resources  
<https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en>

Top tattoos among males in WA prisons	Top tattoos among females in WA prisons
cross	heart
skull	flower
tribal	rose
3 dots	cross
shapes	flowers
star	butterfly
letters	stars
dragon	one star
rose	3 dots
heart	skull

Source: DOC Research & Data analytics 02/28/2026