



Tracing tattoos' appeal: Experts say study underestimates popularity of body art in region.

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Jun. 14--Here's something to ponder on the brink of beach season: Nearly one in four Americans ages 18 to 50 has a tattoo, a new study says.

Think about that this summer as you watch the parade of tribal armbands, ankle flowers, shoulder portraits and so-called "tramp stamps" -- the lower-back tattoos favored by young women in crop tops and hip-slung jeans. And then think about this: Tattoo artists and fans in the Inland Northwest insist that, in our area, the numbers are probably higher. Figures from a pending study in the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* offer a fine snapshot of the nation, but ink experts here said they believe we're even more adorned. "I'd say it's two-thirds of the people, at least," said Dianne Landreth, owner of Dianne's Electrolysis, the only tattoo removal business listed in the Spokane telephone book. "People are getting them every day, more and more and more." There are no local details in the results of the national survey of 500 men and women conducted in 2004 by Dr. Anne E. Laumann of Northwestern University and Dr. Amy J. Derick of the University of Chicago. Their work, expected to be posted this week on the dermatology association's Web site, suggests that almost a quarter of Americans between 18 and 50 are tattooed. That's up from previous studies that estimated about 15 percent to 16 percent of U.S. adults sported the body art. Among people ages 18 to 29, the new study showed more than a third -- 36 percent -- were tattooed. That's not news to David Ohler, a tattooist who faced a full day of needlework Monday at the Altered Skin Tattoos and Body Piercing shop in Spokane.

"I'd say that's a little low," said Ohler, who can turn out a half-dozen tattoos a day, depending on size. "We're usually booked out a week or two in advance." Sales figures support his hunch. Retail sales in Spokane County tattoo parlors grew by nearly 550 percent between 1995 and 2005 -- to a high of more than \$1.3 million -- according to figures from the Washington Department of Revenue. During the same period, the number of tattoo parlors climbed from 22 to 39, or 77 percent.

Statewide, retail sales grew by more than 300 percent during that time. In 2005 in Washington, 469 parlors posted \$21.3 million in sales, figures showed. "The most surprising thing is Spokane outstripped the state," said Mark Gowrylow, a spokesman for the revenue department. "I didn't expect you guys to be so tattoo-crazy." Tattoos have grown more popular in Idaho, too, workers said, but the growth is hard to measure. The state Tax Commission uses a revenue reporting system that doesn't assign tattoo parlors a single code, and there's no universal licensing requirement. The state business registry lists 73 entries with the word "tattoo" in the name, but there could be many more, said Mark Stephensen, a supervisor in the state corporations division.

At the Blue Rose Tattoo studio in Coeur d'Alene, owner Robert McNeill said there's no question that interest has exploded. "You see a lot more people," said McNeill, who's been tattooing for 28 years. "People who would never have gotten them 20 years ago will get them now." Clients range from barely-legal 18-year-olds to grandmothers and their grandchildren. "An average client for us is a female in her mid-40s," said Kristi Kilbourne, owner of Lady Luck Tattoo and Piercing in Spokane. "We're not very hip at all." The range of clients comes for a range of reasons, tattoo artists said. What are the most common tattoos for first-timers? "It's usually just tribal armbands and flowers on the lower back," said Audra Armiger, a body piercer who works at AAA Ink World Tattoo and Body Modification in Coeur d'Alene. Armiger herself is a more adventurous tattoo consumer. She sports a multihued witch on her right forearm, just under a full-color portrait of TV icon Lily Munster. "My boyfriend has Herman," said Armiger, 24. In the dermatology survey, there were 340 tattoos among 120 respondents, including some who had up to 60 tattoos. Devotees like Armiger said there's something addictive about body art, which can include her branch of the business, body piercing. About one in seven people surveyed reported having a piercing someplace other than in the soft lobe of the ear, the study showed. Among the 18- to 29-year-olds, that number rose to one in three. "I just like the artwork," explained Armiger. "I've never been in the norm." The norm may be shifting, however, when guys like Ken Rachels sit down in a tattoo chair. On Monday, the 56-year-old Post Falls machinist was indelibly marked with an emblem he designed. Somehow, it managed to incorporate his children's names, his 1955 Chevy truck and flames in a single image. "It's my Father's Day present," Rachels said. "What took me so long? My mom. She always had this thing about marking your body." Today, however, even Rachels' wife, Carol, sports a tattoo. The 42-year-old homemaker lifted a pant leg to reveal the name of the couple's son, Jared, along with two tiny feet and the date of his birth. "I could never think of anything I would want on my body forever until I thought of this," said Carol Rachels, who received her tattoo for Mother's Day. The Rachels were happy to find a clean, well-kept tattoo parlor. The profession isn't regulated in Washington or Idaho, so consumers must insist on practitioners who employ single-use needles and ink and who practice safe hygiene, health officials cautioned.

For Candi Frank, 35, of Spokane, a new tattoo was both artistic and practical. On Monday, she hired Ohler to tattoo a lotus flower and a small frog over an image etched a dozen years ago. "I had a heart with one wing," recalled Frank. "An ex-boyfriend had the other half. I've been married for eight years, and it wasn't to him." Frank, who works as a cook, said she was embarrassed to explain the old tattoo, which peeked from beneath her T-shirt sleeves. Now, she can be proud of her body art, she said. "I like it. I think it's a personal choice," she said. "I think they're beautiful." For some, however, beauty is fleeting. Dianne Landreth reminds people that she removes two to three tattoos a week from people who regret the notion. Typical tattoos start at about \$50 and can rise to several hundred dollars or more. Removing them costs \$125 an hour, said Landreth, who offers a general caution. "Never put a name on your body," she said. "You know darn well you're going to break up with that person. People tell me all the time that it was a dumb thing to do. They all tell me, 'I was just

young and stupid and foolish.' "

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