

## **Education and Training**

### **Feasibility of Training/Education of Tattoo Artists in the Prevention of Sex Trafficking**

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## ABSTRACT

**Background.** Women who are sex trafficked within the U.S. are often forced to get tattoos such as bar codes, dollar signs, or the name of the trafficker – the person who is selling them for sex. Tattoo artists may routinely encounter a sex trafficking survivor while she is being trafficked. As frontline professionals, they are in a unique position to assist in the secondary prevention of sex trafficking.

**Objectives.** The main objective of this community-based participatory research (CBPR) project was to hold a tattoo-summit to: a) disseminate information on sex trafficking and the tattoo industry; b) assess the feasibility of training/education of tattoo artists on sex trafficking; c) determine areas of foci and best method(s) for a training/educational intervention; and d) recruit volunteers for a community advisory board to assist in the training/education of tattoo artists on the secondary prevention of sex trafficking.

**Methods.** The tattoo-summit included a presentation by a nationally known tattoo artist, a free educational luncheon-presentation on sex trafficking by a public health researcher and a law-enforcement sex trafficking expert, and a mediated discussion. Post-summit evaluation data included improvement in knowledge of sex trafficking and ability to respond to trafficking in their work, and participants' perspectives on future training approaches.

**Conclusion.** This study showed that CBPR is an effective way to partner with tattoo artists in raising awareness of sex trafficking. Hence, it is important that we reach out to non-traditional frontline partners such as tattoo artists to improve the health of all people.

**KEY WORDS:** Sex Trafficking, Prevention, Tattoo Artists, Women's Health, Education, Awareness, Community-Based Participatory Research, Public Health

Sex trafficking is a serious public health problem and annually affects an estimated 2 million people worldwide. In the U.S. it occurs in all states, within urban, suburban, and rural areas. It occurs when a person is induced by force, fraud, or coercion to commit a commercial or transactional sex act or where the person made to perform such an act is below 18 years of age (1). It has both short- and long-term physical, social, and mental consequences for survivors, their families, and communities. Women are disproportionately affected by this crime (2). The term “survivor” is used to refer to a person being trafficking or who is no longer being trafficked. In this manuscript, the term mainly refers to a person being trafficked.

Sex trafficking often goes undetected and survives in the “shadows.” Survivors who are being trafficked may not trust law enforcement or other authorities to reach out for help. They may fear retaliation from the trafficker against themselves or their loved ones. Additionally, frontline professionals such as healthcare and social service providers may lack the awareness and knowledge to identify survivors and connect them with support services (3, 4).

Women who are being sex trafficked within the U.S. are often forced by their trafficker -- the person selling them for sex -- to signify ownership. This is a way by which some traffickers maintain control and dominance over women and girls (5, 6). A research study of female survivors of sex trafficking described red-flags of sex trafficking, including tattoos of barcodes, men’s names, gang symbols, and tattoos that were sexually explicit or found on the neck, the inner thigh, or genital area (7).

Tattoo artists may routinely encounter a sex trafficking survivor while she is being trafficked. As frontline professionals, they are in a unique position to interact with survivors, spend time, and build a trust-relationship with them. Tattoo artists can help inform survivors of

appropriate support services in the community to meet their needs. This information can help empower survivors to seek help, and eventually get out of a trafficking situation. Through secondary prevention and the timely identification of survivors, they can help stem the violence and injury, so that survivors can build resiliency, start to heal from the emotional and physical trauma and rebuild their lives.

Despite the significant role that tattoo artists can play in the secondary prevention of trafficking, there are no public health initiatives at the local or national level that work collaboratively with tattoo artists in the secondary prevention of sex trafficking. This aim of this project is to determine the feasibility of developing, implementing, and evaluating a training/educational intervention for tattoo artists on the secondary prevention of sex trafficking.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this community-based participatory research (CBPR) (8, 9) was to engage tattoo artists and hold a summit to: a) disseminate information on sex trafficking and the tattoo industry; b) assess the feasibility of implementing a training/educational intervention of tattoo artists on sex trafficking through mediated discussion; c) determine areas of foci and best method(s) for a training/educational intervention; and d) recruit volunteers from the tattoo community to serve on an ad-hoc advisory board to assist in the training/education of tattoo artists on the secondary prevention of sex trafficking.

## **Methods**

### Research Strategy

This project encompasses several principles of CBPR including that it addresses a topic that is important to the community (8, 10). This was a community-campus collaborative project

and involved an equitable partnership with a leader from the tattoo community (Mel Judkins, the second author of the paper), in all steps of the planning and implementation process. Mel Judkins is the owner of a local tattoo shop. She is also the current chair of the state Board of Cosmetology, serving as a representative of the Body Art community, which includes tattooing, body piercing and branding, and permanent cosmetics. She is the creator and moderator of a *Facebook* page that connects tattoo artists across Nebraska, and this is the primary method by which artists in the state communicate and share information with each other.

Per principles of CBPR, this project recognizes the community of tattoo artists as a unit of identity with unique strengths and perspectives. The research strategy fosters co-learning and capacity building and builds on the existing strengths of tattoo artists. The first author, Shireen Rajaram, was acquainted with Mel Judkins for about a year and she assisted her with a prior qualitative study (11) of the tattoo community on awareness of sex trafficking. This education strategy to hold a summit was an outgrowth of conversations from this earlier project.

We used several strategies to attract tattoo artists to the summit. On the suggestion of our tattoo partner, we held the summit the day before a national tattoo-convention in the area, close to the convention-site. Through the connections of Mel Judkins, we were able to secure the venue for free. Since tattoo artists were in the area for the national convention, they were able to attend the summit on sex trafficking. We opened the summit with a free one-hour presentation by a well-known and nationally acclaimed tattoo artist. Since he was in the area for the tattoo-convention, we were able to book him. His presentation was followed by a free one-hour, luncheon panel presentation on sex trafficking and tattoo artists by two professionals -- a public health professional Shireen Rajaram and a law-enforcement specialist -- both with expertise in sex trafficking, and experience in presenting to a lay-audience. Grant funding obtained by

Shireen Rajaram and Mel Judkins allowed us to provide a stipend for the tattoo artist guest-presenter and offer lunch.

The main topics included overview of human trafficking (sex trafficking and labor trafficking) in the U.S. and Midwest, sex trafficking and the tattoo industry, signs of trafficking, and local and national resources for trafficking survivors. The luncheon session was followed in the afternoon by two other fee-required workshops that were of interest to tattoo artists. These afternoon presentations were not part of the sex-trafficking summit but helped to attract tattoo artists to the venue on topics that were of interest to them. Lastly, since Mel Judkins is a leader in the tattoo-community, she was able to disseminate information on the summit to the tattoo community through her social media networks.

The CBPR process is cyclical and iterative, incorporating the voices of the tattoo artists. Following the presentation, to gather feedback from the tattoo community on their preferred content and mode of delivery of future training/education on sex trafficking prevention, we had a facilitated-discussion using ToP (Technology of Participation, an evidence-based method) (12). A facilitator certified in ToP used ORID (**O**bjective, **R**eflective, **I**nterpretative, **D**ecision) (13), or focused conversations that involved a number of simultaneous small-group table conversations, where each table discusses, takes notes, and then shares with the large group. The facilitator asked 3-4 focused questions to gain a deeper insight into participants' perspectives on the issue. Examples of questions at each level of ORID include: What stood out to you in those presentations? (Objective); Were there things that confirmed what you already knew? (Reflective); Why and how does this matter to you, individually and as a profession? (Interpretative); At your tables I want you to discuss what comes next (Decision).

In the first part of the discussion, participants had the opportunity to process the information shared by the panel-presentation and articulate the relevance of the issue to them. Participants were able to reflect on what they have learned from the presentation on sex trafficking, ask questions or voice concerns they may have, and weigh-in on preferred training/education strategies. Next, participants were able to identify possibilities for future training and education. This iterative and egalitarian process allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives and allowed them to take ownership of the issue.

At the end of the facilitated-discussion session, we gathered evaluation data using close- and open-ended questions. Close-ended questions used a Likert-scale response (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree) to assess if participants' knowledge of sex trafficking and ability to respond to a survivor had improved, as well as their satisfaction with the speakers and the venue of the summit. Open-ended questions elicited information on three things they learned from the event, two things they would like more information on, and one way they could potentially use the information in their work. Our team was expanded to include a graduate student to assist in data entry, and two biostatisticians to assist in analyzing the quantitative data.

At the end of the planning summit, to ensure sustained community participation, per principles of CBPR, we asked for volunteers to serve on an ad-hoc advisory board to guide us in developing, implementing, and evaluating a training/educational intervention of tattoo artists on sex trafficking prevention in Nebraska. The results of the planning summit were disseminated to all partners through the Nebraska Body Art License Info Facebook site.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the first author determined that this project did not constitute human subjects research and, therefore, no further action was needed to apply for IRB approval.

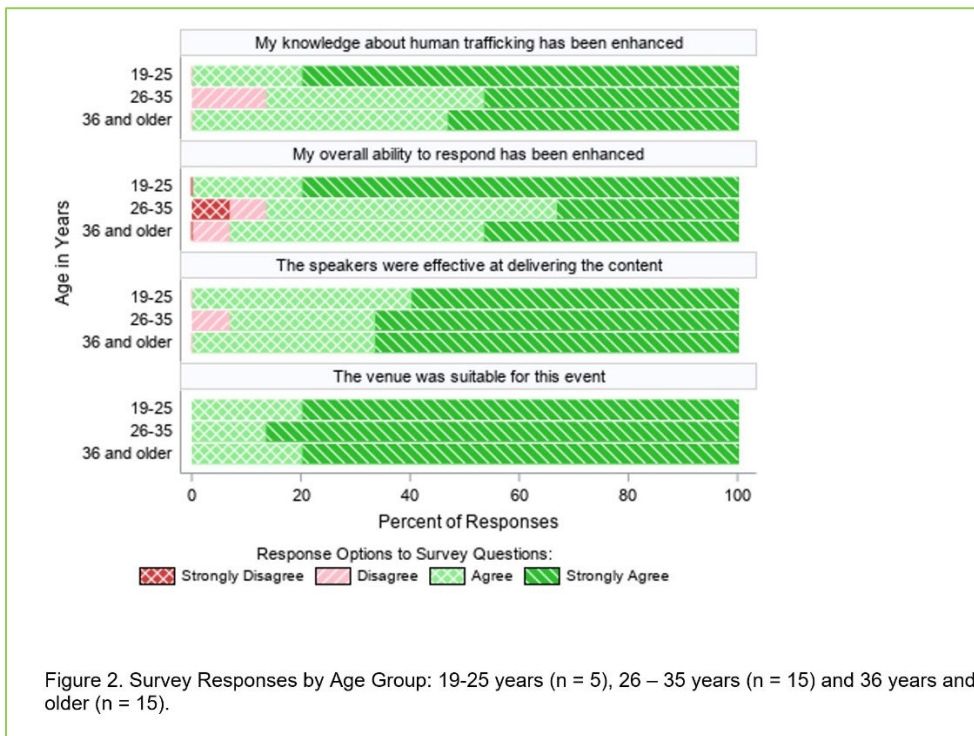
## **Analysis**

Counts and percentages were used to summarize the quantitative data, and associations between categorical variables were assessed using Fisher's exact tests (due to small expected cell sizes), which were performed using SAS software version 9.4 (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC). Qualitative responses were collated using Excel and data were analyzed for key content areas.

## **Results**

The tattoo summit was attended by 69 participants. Of the 37 participants who completed the evaluation survey, 64% were male, 78% were tattoo artists, and 17% were between 19-25 years, 42% were between 26-35, 36% were between 36-45 years, and 6% were between 46-55 years. All tattoo artists were from the Midwestern states of Nebraska, Iowa, Colorado, Kansas, and South Dakota and the majority were from Nebraska (71%). Most participants 'Agreed' or 'Strongly Agreed' that: by attending the summit, their knowledge of human trafficking was enhanced (94%); their overall ability to respond to a possible human trafficking survivor in their work has been enhanced (92%); the speakers were effective in delivering content (97%); and the venue was suitable for the event (100%). See figures 1 and 2.





There was a significant difference in the distribution of responses to the knowledge question based on gender ( $p=0.01$ ); the most common responses among males was ‘Agree’ (54.6%), while the most common response among females was ‘Strongly Agree’ (84.6%). Also, there was a significant difference in the distribution of responses to the knowledge question based on classification as a tattoo artist ( $p = 0.009$ ). All non-tattoo artists (e.g., body art professionals and estheticians) responded with ‘Strongly Agree’ (100%), while the most common response for artists was ‘Agree’ (51.9%).

When asked to list three things they learned about sex trafficking, the most common responses were: potential signs of trafficking, money involved, and ways by which a trafficker maintains control of a survivor. The most common responses for the two things participants need more information on included how to become an advocate for human trafficking survivors, and how to communicate with a potential survivor. One way they could use the information in their work is to help suspected survivors of abuse by providing options for help.

In the facilitated discussion session, participants provided feedback on preferred training approaches including scenario-based training; one-on-one role play to practice how to listen, have conversations, and offer advice; full day summit; and seminar training. About ten participants stated that their clients often revealed interpersonal abuse they have experienced in the past, including rape. They stated that clients had not shared this information with anyone else. Therefore, in addition to sex trafficking, participants requested information on how to recognize and respond to the spectrum of abuse that their clients might divulge to them. Participants suggested that researchers conduct a hands-on study of the tattoo-shop environment to tailor training to the industry. Also, seven people stated they would be willing to work in an ad-hoc committee to guide the development of a training for tattoo artists.

The information about the summit was widely disseminated. The story about the summit was covered by at least 11 print, TV, and radio media outlets locally, regionally, and nationally; it was picked up by yahoo.com and had over 64 million hits.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Despite evidence that some women who are sex trafficked are forced to have tattoos by their trafficker, there are no known studies that document partnering with the tattoo artist community to raise awareness about sex trafficking (7). This study showed that using CBPR is an effective way to partner with the tattoo artist community in health promotion. We were able to reach out to this community and hold a human trafficking tattoo summit by acknowledging the unique strengths of the tattoo artist community.

Participants indicated that their knowledge and ability to respond to human trafficking had been enhanced as a result of the summit. Interestingly, participants at the summit revealed that they not only would like to learn more about sex trafficking, but also broader issues of communicating with their clients when they share their trauma experiences with them. Previous research has shown that tattoo artists have the trust of their clients. They sometimes spend hours at a time doing a tattoo, and clients often open-up and share their personal lives, including the trauma they might have experienced (11).

Indeed, tattoo artists are in a unique position to identify and reach out to survivors of sex trafficking, while they are being trafficked. Clients might reveal intimate trauma experiences with tattoo artists, and this presents an opportunity for timely secondary prevention of sex trafficking and possibly other interpersonal abuse. This will help stem the violence and contribute to the recovery of survivors of sex trafficking.

The limitations of the study are that the sample size was small, only 54% of participants responded to the evaluation, the majority of tattoo artists were in the urban areas of Nebraska, and the summit was only in-person, and for 2 hours. Data were only gathered after the summit and we lack baseline information on knowledge of human trafficking prior to the summit. No survivors of sex trafficking or community-based organization (CBO) serving sex trafficking survivors were directly involved in planning the summit. However, a CBO serving survivors was indirectly involved and had a booth at the tattoo-convention to engage tattoo-artists and raise awareness of sex trafficking. Also, given the goodwill generated at the summit, the tattoo-community voluntarily held a fund-raiser during their evening “happy-hour” social gathering that generated over \$1,000; at the recommendation of the first author, the money was donated to the CBO and set-aside for tattoo-removal of survivors of sex trafficking. Future studies would do well to include a diverse group of tattoo artist across the Midwest and nationally, include pre-post evaluation data, and the voices of survivors of sex trafficking.

Per principles of CBPR, the partners in the project have a long-term commitment to increasing awareness of the issue of sex trafficking in the tattoo community. There is local interest in future training/education on the topic of sex trafficking in particular, and interpersonal abuse in general, not only in the tattoo community, but among other professions represented on the Board of Cosmetology such as estheticians, cosmetologists, electrologists, and nail technicians. There is potential to deliver online training on sex trafficking prevention and have it linked to state licensure and continuing education requirements in the state of Nebraska.

The recommendations for future educational activities on the topic of sex trafficking with tattoo artists include: a) invest time in community engagement and develop a participatory relationship with the tattoo community; b) collaboratively determine level of awareness and

interest in future education/awareness on sex trafficking in the tattoo community; c) integrate educational sessions into activities that might be of interest to the tattoo community; d) provide incentives to enhance recruitment of participants to educational sessions; e) share evaluation information with the community; f) gather pre-and post-evaluation data on human trafficking educational sessions; and g) engage the community in next steps of the planning process.

Following the summit, the partnership has been expanded to include a CBO serving survivors of sex trafficking, a sex trafficking survivor, and other cosmetology professions such as estheticians. The team obtained grant-funding and is working on developing online training on sex trafficking for tattoo artists and other cosmetologists, and engaging cosmetology professionals across the state to increase awareness of sex trafficking.

In conclusion, it is important that we reach out to non-traditional partners such as tattoo artist in our public health practice and research to improve the health of all people.

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