

Plain Transitions:
A Qualitative Evaluation of Transitional Support for Individuals
Who Leave Plain Communities

Addison Leavy
April 24, 2020

*Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of
Arts in Public Policy at The University of Chicago*

Preceptor: Rich Gauthier

Acknowledgements

The heart of this project would not have been possible without the courageous individuals who shared their transitional experiences. Thank you for your time, stories, and perspectives.

I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to my preceptor Rich Gauthier for his insights and guidance throughout this project. I would also like to thank my family and friends for providing support and an extra set of eyes.

Abstract

Plain communities value non-conformity with the modern world in order to uphold deep spiritual values. The insularity that results from this mode of life creates challenges for plain individuals seeking to leave their community and enter mainstream society. This research project seeks to identify the greatest challenges plain individuals face in transitioning to mainstream society, as well as types of interventions that would support plain individuals as they make this transition. Through a qualitative content analysis of in-depth interviews with formerly plain individuals, this paper identifies the emotional, spiritual, and practical challenges of transitioning from a plain community to mainstream society. Additionally, this paper considers aspects of the transitional experience such as the decision to leave a plain community as well as experiences with both effective and ineffective support systems that already exist. The transitional experiences analyzed in this paper reveal a need for both culturally specific non-residential community centers as well as a network of “safe people” who can provide temporary housing and support to transitioning individuals.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| INTRODUCTION | 5 |
| BACKGROUND | 7 |
| CHARACTERISTICS OF PLAIN SOCIETIES | 7 |
| DEFINING THE GROUPS OF STUDY | 8 |
| LITERATURE REVIEW | 9 |
| EDUCATION OF PLAIN CHILDREN | 9 |
| DIFFICULTY LEAVING THE COMMUNITY: RUMSPRINGA AND INSULARITY | 13 |
| THEORY OF EXIT RIGHTS AND ENTRANCE PATHS | 19 |
| METHODS | 26 |
| DATA COLLECTION | 26 |
| QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS..... | 31 |
| DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS | 33 |
| THE EXIT DILEMMA | 33 |
| EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL CHALLENGES | 39 |
| <i>Identity Conflicts and Fellowship</i> | 39 |
| <i>Undoing Indoctrination</i> | 42 |
| <i>Fitting In</i> | 46 |
| PRACTICAL CHALLENGES | 47 |
| <i>Living Situations</i> | 47 |
| <i>Education</i> | 48 |
| <i>Finances, Insurance, and Legal</i> | 51 |
| STRAIGHTFORWARD TRANSITIONS | 54 |
| EXPERIENCES WITH EXISTING SUPPORT | 56 |
| <i>Support from Affiliation with Organized Groups</i> | 57 |
| <i>Support from Non-Plain Social Networks</i> | 59 |
| <i>Publicly Available Support Services</i> | 62 |
| <i>Therapy</i> | 64 |
| SUMMARY OF FINDINGS..... | 65 |
| POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS | 66 |
| NON-RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY CENTERS..... | 70 |
| “SAFE PEOPLE” RESIDENTIAL NETWORK | 78 |
| CONCLUSION | 80 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 82 |
| APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT AND INTERVIEW MATERIALS | 84 |
| APPENDIX B: CODING FRAME | 90 |
| APPENDIX C: GEOGRAPHY OF US PLAIN POPULATION | 93 |

Introduction

The Anabaptist faith is based on Romans 12:2, “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” This passage frames plain Anabaptist values such as spirituality through material simplicity and deep religious involvement, separation from the secular world, humility, self-discipline, obedience, and extreme conformity to the established community standards (Foster 1997, 99). As a result of this nonconformity and simplicity, plain Anabaptist groups, such as the Amish and plain Mennonite groups, have extremely limited interaction with the outside world. These plain groups typically exacerbate this detachment from dominant society by prohibiting individuals from driving motor vehicles or engaging with TV and online media.

Although this lifestyle is fundamental to plain faiths, it implicates transitional challenges for individuals who leave their plain group, by force or by will, to pursue a new life in the secular world. For the purposes of this paper, the relevant Amish and plain Mennonite groups will be referred to as “plain groups” or “plain communities” made up of “plain individuals.”¹ The goal of this paper is to identify transitional support methods that will help formerly plain individuals overcome the emotional, spiritual, and practical challenges they encounter in mainstream society.

Through a series of 15 in-depth interviews, this paper will answer the research questions: ‘What are the greatest challenges plain individuals face in transitioning to mainstream society? What types of interventions would support plain individuals as they make this transition to the

¹See “Defining the Groups of Study” for details and rationale behind these selections. There are plain groups outside of the Amish and Mennonites, such as the Cooperites, Mormon Fundamentalists, and Old Order Brethren. The “plain group” term has broader implications outside of this paper.

mainstream society?’ By identifying themes from these interviews, this paper will consider policy recommendations within the theoretical framework of exit rights and entrance paths. While there are documentaries about the transitions of this population, such as National Geographic's “Amish: Out of Order,” as well as various literature about the implications of plain culture, there is no recent, comprehensive policy-driven analysis of specific challenges and corresponding forms of support for individuals transitioning out of the plain community. Many formerly plain interview respondents have indicated that there is a great need for society to understand how to support the unique needs of this unrecognized minority. This paper will attempt to address this gap in both literature and awareness.

This paper first consists of background information about the characteristics of plain societies and the specific group of study. The next section is a literature review that will present existing literature surrounding the education of plain children, pressure to stay in the plain community, and an overview of the theoretical framework of exit rights and entrance paths. The methodology of this research, which consists of qualitative interviews, will follow the literature review. The next section presents the findings, which are organized by theme with corresponding quotes from the interviews with formerly plain individuals. These themes include the exit dilemma, emotional and spiritual transitional challenges, practical transitional challenges, straightforward transitions, and experiences with existing forms of transitional support. Through an analysis of these themes, this paper will conclude with a policy recommendation regarding the most practical and beneficial way to support formerly plain individuals transitioning to mainstream society.

Background

Characteristics of Plain Societies

The Anabaptist descendent movements in the 21st century range from full integration into modern society to full retention of traditional practices. While this paper will only address certain plain groups within the Anabaptist descendent subset of the Mennonite family, all plain Anabaptist groups are defined by similar core principles, which will be introduced in this section. The 2010 United States Religion Census counted 241,356 “Amish Group” adults, the religious category which encompasses the plain individuals involved in the current research (“U.S. Religion Census | Religious Statistics & Demographics” 2010).² All plain Anabaptist groups are defined by being small, countercultural, communal, and separatist (Anderson 2013, 45-6). At the historical core of Anabaptism is the belief in one’s free will, which is represented in the Anabaptist practice of exclusively adult baptism, so as to ensure an “opt-in” agreement with the church (Anderson 2013, 27; Foster 1997, 94). However, this element of “free will” does not manifest itself in most plain Anabaptist groups, as is evident through their rigid lifestyle and low defection rate.

In addition to the non-conforming attributes mentioned above, another key attribute of plain Anabaptist communities is that they are patriarchal. The Mennonite church website states that in plain Mennonite and Amish groups, this patriarchy is based on an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:3: “But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God.” One example of this interpretation in practice is that plain women are considered keepers of the home and child bearers, and as a result

²Despite the name “Amish Groups,” this number captures many plain Mennonite populations in addition to Amish ones.

are “affirmed for the quality of her food, management ability, gardening skills, quilting and sewing gifts.” Furthermore, women are not granted church leadership responsibilities, and typically are not allowed to vote in church matters (Third Way n.d.). Many plain women are confined to working in the home through forms of domestic work, and it is uncommon for women to work outside of the home (Nyce 1989; McAvoy 2012, 546). The implications of these gender roles are relevant in evaluating the transitions of plain women leaving the community, as they have fewer lucrative skills in demand by mainstream society as well as a lack of preparation for decision making.

Defining the Groups of Study

This paper only involves Amish and plain Mennonite communities. While there are non-plain Mennonite denominations, they are excluded from this paper as they are not plain and former members would therefore not need the same types of transitional support upon exiting the church. Additionally, there is another plain group, the Hutterian Brethren, within the Mennonite family of religions that is excluded from this paper. While the Hutterian Brethren group is peaceful, patriarchal, and insular, approximately 75% of their population lives in Canada, and the remaining 25% lives in the United States, mostly in South Dakota and Montana (“Geographic Location” 2012). Discussing transitional support policies internationally involves complex evaluation which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, there is a need for further research about transitional support for the Hutterites, as there is a gap in the literature surrounding this issue and group. While the policies recommended in this paper could certainly inform policies for the Hutterian Brethren group, as well as separatist religious groups beyond the Amish and plain Mennonite realm, such policies cannot necessarily be generalized beyond the selected plain groups.

Literature Review

This literature review will discuss the education of plain children, difficulty leaving the community, and the theory of exit rights and entrance paths. The Amish and Mennonites share historic roots and live by similar plain principles, though the specific theology and traditions of plain subgroups vary. While a majority of the existing literature discusses the Amish, it provides insights into groups who live similarly, such as the plain Mennonite groups.

Education of Plain Children

The state has accommodated the non-conforming, separatist beliefs of plain societies through exemptions from laws such as compulsory education, furthering the plain group separation from the secular world. Due to the decision in the 1972 Supreme Court case *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, plain groups are not legally required to educate their children beyond 8th grade. The case for this exemption was presented by members of the Old Order Amish Church and Conservative Amish Mennonite Church, who argued that the First Amendment applied to Amish customs.³ Regarding the conflict between the free exercise of religion and compulsory secondary school attendance, the court came to the following conclusion:

The conclusion is inescapable that secondary schooling, by exposing Amish children to worldly influences in terms of attitudes, goals, and values contrary to beliefs, and by substantially interfering with the religious development of the Amish child and his integration into the way of life of the Amish faith community at the crucial adolescent stage of development, contravenes the basic religious tenets and practice of the Amish faith, both as to the parent and the child. (*Wisconsin v. Yoder* 1972, 1534)

³The discussion of *Wisconsin v. Yoder* uses the term “Amish,” but is always referencing both the Old Order Amish as well as the Conservative Amish Mennonite Church. Old Order communities are less open to change than their conservative counterparts. While conservative communities have undergone some change in evangelical views, they remain separatist and insular in many ways (Anderson 2013, 52).

Besides the fact that compulsory school attendance hinders the free exercise of Amish religion, the court also noted that the value of education is to prepare a child for life. However, there was the question of whether Amish children ought to be prepared for life in Amish society or for life in the secular world, should they choose to leave. The Supreme Court reasoned that while the completion of two years of high school is necessary if the goal is to prepare a child for participation in modern society, it is not necessary if the goal is to prepare a child for participation in “the separated agrarian community that is the keystone of the Amish faith” (Wisconsin v. Yoder 1972, 1536). As an ongoing result of this decision, many formerly plain individuals leave their communities with only an 8th grade education, which hinders their future ability to secure a well-paying job in mainstream society.⁴

Additionally, many Amish and Mennonite children attend parochial, church-run schools that do not have state-licensed, qualified teachers or classes such as science and health/sex education. The limitations of parochial schooling, combined with the lack of secondary education, pose challenges to a plain individual’s chances of success should they choose to enter the secular world. However, according to an anthropology study conducted by David McConnell and Charles Hurst in the Greater Holmes County Amish settlement, many parents prioritized alignment with plain values over secular world preparedness. Although this study only involved one settlement, it involved at least seven distinct Amish affiliations that vary in acceptance of secular practices, thus creating a sample more representative of the plain community at large (McConnell and Hurst 2006, 240). In this particular Amish settlement, approximately 71% of Amish parents with school-age children sent their children to parochial schools. Interviewees praised parochial schools for allowing children “to engage in activities more directly supportive

⁴This paragraph has been adapted from my prior paper, “Educating Amish Adolescents for Future Individual Autonomy,” written for a Spring 2019 course, “Women, Children, and Gender Human Rights.”

of the lives they will lead as Amish adults,” noting that public schools emphasize “things that really do not fit well with [the Amish] way of life” (McConnell and Hurst 2006, 241). The plain community’s support for both the compulsory education exemption granted in *Yoder* and for parochial schooling emphasizes an exclusive interest in preparing individuals for a plain life.

Although the plain children who attend public schools gain exposure to mainstream society as well as a more modern and comprehensive education than that of a plain parochial school, public schools are still limited in their ability to advance the autonomy of plain students. In McConnell and Hurst’s single settlement sample, 21% of parents chose to send their children exclusively to public schools (McConnell and Hurst 2006, 244). Despite the “potential clash with Amish sensibilities,” the parents who selected public schools for their children believed that public schools would have better teachers and would provide a more practical education for the 21st century (McConnell and Hurst 2006, 245). In Ryan Ozar’s unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, “Accommodating Amish Students in Public Schools: Teacher Perspectives on Educational Loss, Gain, and Compromise” (2018), public school teachers and staff commented on the limited futures of children from Amish families as well as on career-advancing pipelines that could originate in public schools. However, Ozar found that public entities face challenges in providing opportunities to plain children as they face pressure to align with the values of plain communities in order to keep the connection open with them (Ozar 2018, 105-7). While Ozar’s work involved only the Amish, it is clear from *Yoder* that similar principles and mindsets apply to conservative Mennonite groups.

The goals of many Amish parents for their children do not involve college degrees, but rather consist of being a good person and responsible adult, having a stable job and the ability to live independently, and supporting a family (Ozar 2018, 163). As a result, Amish adolescents

work at jobs that require only a basic education, that align with their beliefs, and that can support a family. Teachers and administrators understand these limited career paths. For instance, a school principal sarcastically stated that Amish women have “lots of choices: Waitressing, waitressing, maybe working in a store, waitressing, working in a store. I mean, what else is there? What else is there?” (Ozar 2018, 150). Another teacher noted that in 5th grade, Amish children were already saying “‘I’m a boy and I’m gonna help Dad in the lumber yard’ and ‘I happen to be a daughter and I’m gonna eventually help in the office’” (Ozar 2018, 155).

Teachers and administrators also spoke to the transitional support mechanisms that public schools can offer. One important aspect of being able to make an informed decision about staying in the Amish community is having a job that is marketable in both Amish and mainstream communities. Public schools can connect children to county career centers or training programs, creating a necessary pipeline for present and future needs (Ozar 2018, 157). For example, one school district developed a career center geared towards the unique needs of Amish 8th grade graduates, providing “business training (in computing and accounting) and carpentry to students who were ‘graduates’ of the school system” (Ozar 2018, 158). After conducting these interviews, Ozar concluded that even if further “metaphorical doors of opportunity and exit were introduced by teachers, the families would depart through the literal door of exit from the school, potentially permanently” (Ozar 2018, 168). This finding presents a challenge for transitional support stemming from both public schools as well as from other public resources. This discussion of the education of plain children not only shows how limited plain individuals are regarding their future, but it also provides a glimpse into how the state currently interacts with plain groups.

Difficulty Leaving the Community: Rumspringa and Insularity

Although restrictive educational practices show that plain parents make every effort to keep plain teenagers in their society, some plain children have the opportunity to embark on a Rumspringa period. During Rumspringa, which is Pennsylvania German for “running around,” teenagers are encouraged to explore the secular “outside” world before committing to the Amish or Mennonite lifestyle through baptism into the church. Rumspringa is not prevalent in every plain community; in fact, none of the respondents in the current study left their community during Rumspringa, and very few ever experienced a Rumspringa of any kind. However, the literature about Rumspringa as a rite of passage demonstrates some of the overarching difficulties of leaving these communities, which echo some of the findings of this paper.

Through a series of interviews with Amish community members, Tom Shachtman’s book *Rumspringa: To Be or Not to Be Amish* (2006) documents the activities and dynamics of the Rumspringa experience. The activities that occur during Rumspringa vary by location and community, but the most widely researched worldly activities are those portrayed in Shachtman’s book as well as in Lucy Walker’s documentary *Devil’s Playground* (2002), which presents the experiences of Old Order Amish teenagers in LaGrange County, Indiana. This documentary depicts Amish teenagers exploring alcohol, drugs, sex, parties, driving, and cable television during Rumspringa.⁵ Regarding the Amish community’s rationale behind Rumspringa, Shachtman found that:

The Amish count on the rumspringa process to inoculate youth against the strong pull of the forbidden by dosing them with the vaccine of a little worldly experience. Their gamble is also based on the notion that there is no firmer adhesive bond to a faith and

⁵Shachtman found that in addition to these activities, there are other Rumspringa situations in which Amish teenagers participate in more tame activities such as bowling, courting, and other structured activities supervised by Amish church elders (Shachtman 2006). In these situations, Amish teenagers are unable to explore any realistic aspects of the secular world.

way of life than a bond freely chosen, in this case chosen after rumspringa and having sampled some of the available alternative ways of living. (Shachtman 2006)

From the Amish perspective, Rumspringa is quite successful; Shachtman incorporated a study which found that 80-90% of Amish youth eventually become full members of the Amish church (Meyers 1992 in Shachtman 2006).

While Rumspringa is intended to provide Amish youth with a choice regarding their future, a closer analysis reveals that Amish children do not have a comprehensive experience of mainstream society during Rumspringa and are therefore unable to make a truly informed decision. In a *Perspectives on Politics* article entitled “Consenting Adults: Amish Rumspringa and the Quandary of Exit in Liberalism” (2005), political scientist Steven Mazie found that Rumspringa is not a meaningful right of exit. Amish teenagers who spent their Rumspringa engaging in party culture eventually realized that there is more required of life in the secular world than simply watching TV and having parties, and that the aspects of the secular world they engaged with are unsustainable and unhealthy (Mazie 2005, 752).

Amish teenagers are unable to explore the healthy and realistic aspects of the secular world because they typically lack sufficient social and cultural reference points. For instance, in their parochial schools, Amish teenagers “haven’t been tempted to explore the excitement of New York City through *Catcher in the Rye*; they have had no opportunity to develop curiosity about Buddhism from reading Hesse’s *Siddhartha*,” as their childhood is “carefully sheltered,” thus depriving them of reference points to explore during Rumspringa (Mazie 2005, 752). As a result, the vast majority (exact defection statistics are to be discussed later in this section) of Amish teenagers who are baptized into the Amish church after Rumspringa do so in order to access both a “secure and well-paying job in a factory or on a farm” as well as an established community (Shachtman 2006; Mazie 2005, 752). If Amish teenagers were educated beyond 8th

grade and possibly exposed to some aspects of the secular world, Rumspringa could be a deeper and more balanced exploration of the secular world, which would lead to a more meaningful decision about the future.⁶

Just how “carefully sheltered” are Amish youth? While there has yet to be a study concerning the insularity of Amish youth, a health literacy study conducted by health behavior and promotion researcher Mira Katz provides a sense of the insularity of Amish adults. In this study, health literacy is “conceptualized as an intersection of education, culture, health systems, and other diverse factors,” making it a fair assessment of the level of separation between the Amish and the secular world (Katz et al. 2013, 2). Researchers administered the rapid estimate of adult literacy in medicine (REALM) test to Amish and non-Amish participants in Appalachian Ohio, which consisted of participants reading and pronouncing a list of 66 health-related words. The words with the most significant differences in pronunciation between the two groups pertained to topics (e.g., sexual behaviors and substance abuse) that are not discussed in the Amish community. For instance, only 20.9% and 56.7% of Amish participants pronounced “syphilis” and “incest” correctly, compared to 93.5% and 90.3% of non-Amish participants (Katz et al. 2013, 4).⁷

If these disparities exist between Amish and non-Amish adults, it is likely that even larger disparities exist between Amish and non-Amish adolescents who have had even fewer opportunities to learn about topics outside of the plain community. One limitation of Katz’s study is that it only involved Amish individuals from Appalachian Ohio, as plain individuals living in relatively less rural areas or with less restrictive religious and cultural practices may

⁶This paragraph has been adapted from my prior paper, “Educating Amish Adolescents for Future Individual Autonomy,” written for a Spring 2019 course, “Women, Children, and Gender Human Rights.”

⁷Refer to Figure 1 below for a visual representation of this data.

have a smaller difference in REALM word pronunciation in comparison to non-plain individuals (Katz et al. 2013, 5). Still, the findings of this study provide concrete evidence of the gap in cultural knowledge that exists in plain communities, though the extent of the gap may vary by geography and traditions. Evidence of this cultural knowledge gap further reinforces Mazie’s idea that plain adolescents lack social and cultural touchpoints with the outside world during Rumspringa.

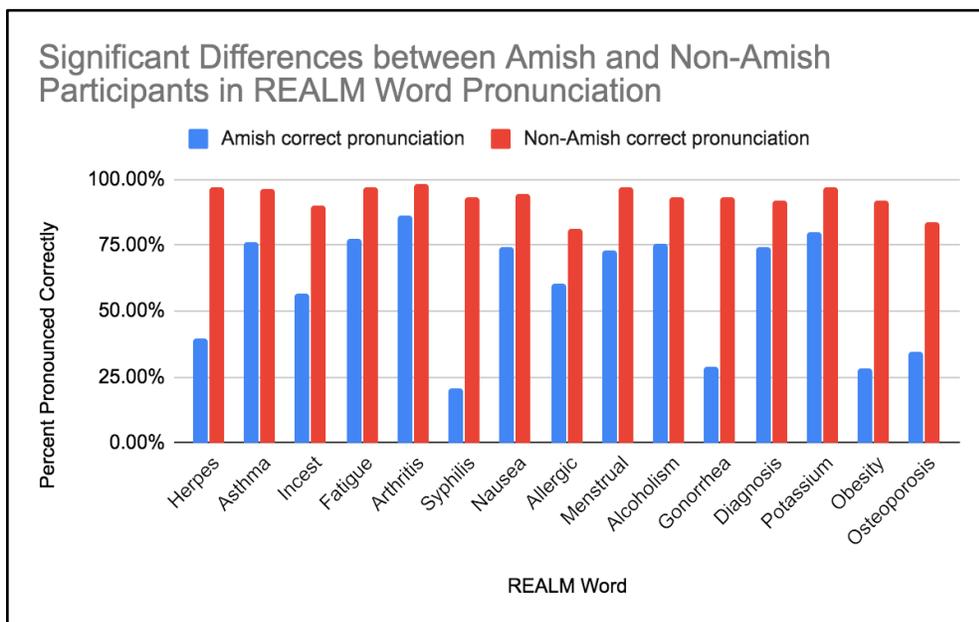


Figure 1: REALM Results between Amish and Non-Amish Participants
 Created using data from source: Katz, Mira L., Amy K. Ferketich, Electra D. Paskett, and Clara D. Bloomfield. “Health Literacy Among the Amish: Measuring a Complex Concept Among a Unique Population.” *Journal of Community Health* 38, no. 4 (2013): 753–58.
<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1007/s10900-013-9675-z>.

Medical sociologist Denise Reiling’s study “The “Simmie” Side of Life: Old Order Amish Youths' Affective Response to Culturally Prescribed Deviance” (2002) found that the religious training and emotional challenges of Amish teenagers during Rumspringa further undermine its purpose. Reiling found that Amish youth considered defection a very serious sin;

because their parents wanted them to join the Amish church, defection would violate the biblical 5th commandment to honor one's father and mother (Reiling 2002, 156). This spiritual and emotional challenge experienced during Rumspringa is particularly relevant to the transitional issues explored in this paper, as these same issues could manifest in similar ways during both a plain individual's evaluation of their future as well as during their transition into mainstream society.

The main finding of Reiling's study pertained to culturally prescribed deviance, which is brought about by the deviance of Rumspringa that forces Amish youth "to negotiate the dilemma of being damned if they do and damned if they don't." This dilemma stems from Amish youth being raised to believe that worldly activities lead to hell, yet it would be against the cultural sanctions to not participate in the worldly activities prescribed during Rumspringa (Reiling 2002, 148). As a result of this dilemma, many Amish youth report feelings of anxiety and depression during Rumspringa (Reiling 2002, 158). While this dilemma of culturally sanctioned deviance is particular to Rumspringa, and therefore does not apply to the sample in this paper, it is still important to recognize in evaluating the effectiveness of Rumspringa.

While it is difficult to identify how many individuals leave plain communities, sociologist TJ Meyers provided some numbers as of 1992 for "defectors" in a Northeastern Indiana Old Order Amish community. Meyers defined "defectors" as "children who have left their parental home and have been identified in the directory by their parents as having made the decision not to join the Amish church," making it likely that they left the community after the Rumspringa period (Meyers 1992, 3).⁸ These statistics, though possibly outdated and

⁸Meyers does not specify whether or not there was a Rumspringa period, but given the application of this study in Rumspringa texts, as well as the language "having made the decision not to join the Amish church," it is likely that defection was related to Rumspringa.

unrepresentative of plain Amish and Mennonite communities at large, provide important insights into factors that influence the defection rate.⁹ Meyers showed that older generations had more defectors than younger generations, as those born in 1920-9 had an 18% defect rate while those born in 1960-9 had only a 5% defect rate (Meyers 1992, 3). These statistics also indicate that most recently, 92% of Amish youth are baptized into the Amish church after a likely Rumspringa (Meyers 1992, 3).¹⁰

Gender played an increasingly influential role in one's decision or ability to leave the Amish, as the 1920-9 defect cohort was 51% male, while the 1960-9 cohort was 70% male (Meyers 1992, 9). According to Meyers, this uneven gender ratio reflects the norm that men receive earlier access to buggies, are more likely to have work off the farm (such as in a factory), and have more cash to buy a car. However, as will be discussed later, the cultural treatment of women also plays a role in this imbalance. Other factors that influence defection rates are proximity to a town and public school attendance, which increased rates by 6% and 9%, respectively (Meyers 1992, 11, 16). Not only does this study show that there is defection from even the most restrictive plain groups, but it also points to factors that increase an individual's propensity and ability to leave, such as gender and exposure to mainstream society (Meyers 1992, 20).

Although Rumspringa is not explicitly involved in the current research, it is a relatively well-researched phenomenon that is tangential to research questions surrounding challenges individuals face upon leaving the plain community. While none of the literature discusses the experiences or outcomes of individuals who ultimately decide to leave the plain community, the

⁹Meyers 1992 contains the most recent and comprehensive defection statistics available. Due to the specificity of Meyers 1992, these defection estimates should be considered a conceptual guide.

¹⁰The remaining 3% of Amish youth migrated to a different Amish settlement.

literature does indicate that many individuals come to recognize the vast transitional challenges they would face upon leaving.

Theory of Exit Rights and Entrance Paths

The low defection rate combined with the limitations of Rumspringa suggest that some individuals feel they would be unable to successfully participate in the modern world and therefore have no other option but to stay in the plain community. This concept relates to the theoretical framework of exit rights, which ensure an individual's complete freedom of choice to leave their group. Due to the complications involved with granting exit rights, this paper will instead focus on granting entrance paths to the secular community. However, exit rights provide not only a theoretical glimpse into the challenges plain individuals face as they leave their communities, but also a necessary basis for understanding entrance paths. The literature presented in this section will weigh the advantages and disadvantages of exit rights and entrance paths in a liberal democracy, comprising a theoretical framework for the questions of this paper.

In *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (2002), William Galston presents the conditions for securing rights of exit.¹¹ Galston recognizes that in a liberal pluralist concept of the freedom to belong to a civil association, associations “may order their internal affairs as they see fit,” which can “significantly abridge individual freedom and autonomy without legitimating external state interference.” However, Galston specifies conditions surrounding how associations can exercise their freedom, as associations “may not coerce individuals to remain as members against their will, or create conditions that in practical terms make departure impossible.” Therefore, Galston believes that

¹¹More generally, Galston's work strives for a liberal pluralist state, which is one that “insists on the importance of allowing human beings to live their lives in ways congruent with their varying conceptions of what gives life meaning and purpose” (Galston 2002, 121).

individual freedom should be “protected by secure rights of exit, coupled with the existence of a wider society open to individuals wishing to leave their groups of origin” (Galston 2002, 122). While groups are free to have restrictive practices, these practices cannot be so restrictive that they make leaving the group infeasible.

Galston defines meaningful rights of exit as having four conditions: knowledge conditions, capacity conditions, psychological conditions, and fitness conditions. In order to satisfy knowledge conditions, an individual must possess “the awareness of alternatives to the life one is in fact living,” while the capacity conditions require “the ability to assess these alternatives if it comes to seem desirable to do so.” The psychological conditions require both freedom from brainwashing as well as from “any forms of coercion other than the purely physical that may give rise to warranted state interference on behalf of affected individuals.” Finally, the fitness condition requires “the ability of exit-desiring individuals to participate effectively in at least some ways of life other than the ones they wish to leave” (Galston 2002, 123).

Interestingly, Galston concluded that Amish communities satisfy his meaningful exit conditions, as “the Amish community is not a prison,” citing Rumspringa as an opportunity for Amish youth to “explicitly choose to become full members” in which “substantial numbers decide not to join at that threshold, and others leave later.”¹² On the contrary, the section of this literature review concerning Rumspringa identifies its shortcomings as a meaningful assessment of options. Furthermore, Galston writes, “While there are transitional difficulties for some, there is no evidence that many former members find themselves unable to cope with the demands of a

¹²Galston did not cite the source of defection numbers behind his claim that “substantial numbers” of Amish youth choose not to join the church. Meyers 1992, which has been utilized by many researchers, cites defection rates of less than 10%. Whether Galston used a different data source or believes a defection rate of less than 10% is substantial, remains unclear.

modern economy and society” (Galston 2002, 106). However, as will be discussed throughout this paper, these transitional difficulties are quite widespread and significant, and can have short- and long-term effects.

Paula McAvoy contradicts Galston’s assessment of plain exit rights in an *Educational Theory* article entitled, “‘There Are No Housewives on *Star Trek*’: A Reexamination of Exit Rights for the Children of Insular Fundamentalist Parents” (2012). McAvoy interviews an ex-Mennonite (referred to by pseudonym Emily) to support various pieces of social scientific evidence, the combination of which prove that all four conditions to secure exit rights of plain individuals are violated by the very nature of plain groups. Because the state allows many of these exit rights criteria to be infringed upon through their accommodations for plain groups, McAvoy believes that in order to grant exit rights, “officials must consider the foreseeable costs to children resulting from the accommodation and institute policies that mitigate those costs for those who may later decide to exit” (McAvoy 2012, 552).

In evaluating the first and second conditions of Galston’s exit rights criteria, McAvoy cites the limited education and limited mainstream exposure of plain children, as discussed previously with regard to Rumspringa (McAvoy 2012, 541). On Galston’s third condition, McAvoy discusses the concept of the “us and them” boundary that pervades insular fundamentalist groups, as well as the brainwashing and coercion which create the sense that “leaving is equated with damnation” (McAvoy 2012, 542-3). Lastly, on Galston’s fourth condition, McAvoy points to challenges plain individuals face in finding meaningful entry-level work at a non-plain run business that does not require secondary education, which has only become more challenging in the post-*Yoder* world. Furthermore, McAvoy points to challenges plain individuals face understanding rights and norms of mainstream society, as Emily reports

being taught to reject the idea of citizens having rights in addition to not knowing about financial aid programs. Other issues surrounding rights and norms relate to the plain community's rejection of critical thinking and questioning, both of which are necessary skills for navigating a new world of choice in mainstream society (McAvoy 2012, 546-7). While McAvoy framed these challenges as infringements on exit rights, these types of challenges also inform the types of transitional support this population needs. The research involved in this paper aims to understand these challenges in greater detail as well as other challenges in order to recommend transitional support policies.

In patriarchal comprehensive cultural societies, which describes the majority of Amish and Mennonite groups, women face greater infringements of exit rights than their male counterparts. In “‘Mistresses of Their Own Destiny’: Group Rights, Gender, and Realistic Rights of Exit” (2002), Susan Okin discusses the role of gender in exit rights, recognizing that the unequal treatment of women within cultural or religious groups can disproportionately hinder their realistic exit rights. In addition to practical barriers, such as only knowing how to do domestic work—as opposed to men who are trained in construction and related fields—plain women are socialized to be subordinate to men, thus undermining their own self-esteem. This self-esteem and sense of personal worth and dignity are essential characteristics for individuals who wish to pursue a different mode of life (Okin 2002, 219). Another aspect of this socialized subordination relates to not understanding rights and norms in mainstream society, as plain women are “sheltered and taught not to speak up for themselves,” which makes those who leave “easy prey for sexual predators” (McAvoy 2012, 548). In evaluating the predicaments of transitioning plain women, it is important to consider this additional barrier.

While McAvoy argues that plain individuals have their exit rights infringed, she also explains how Emily was able to leave her Mennonite community, as Emily's story has some "culturally unusual" circumstances and experiences. Not only are these culturally unusual exceptions important to consider in evaluating others' transition situations, but they also hint at potential solutions to exit right infringement in the form of entrance paths. McAvoy's summary of the important factors that allowed Emily to leave her plain community are as follows:

1. She was exposed to other ways of living through family members.
2. She had exposure to the world of ideas through access to the public library.
3. She had not lived her entire life in the church community and had some memory of life before joining the group.
4. She had a place to go and a relative who could facilitate her transition into "the world."
5. She had earned enough money to own her own car, which gave her some of the freedoms that boys in her community had.
6. She got married soon after leaving. This helped her resolve not to return and gave her another source of support. (McAvoy 2012, 548-9)

All of these factors mitigated Emily's exit costs, making it possible for her to successfully leave. However, many plain children have very different situations, and it can be challenging to make changes within the plain community to enable full exit rights. While Galston's conditions for securing exit rights are a helpful guide in evaluating transitional challenges, the enforceability of these conditions is quite difficult, especially given precedents such as *Yoder*. As a result, the policy lens of this paper involves entrance paths rather than exit rights.

In political philosopher Sigal Ben-Porath's "Exit Rights and Entrance Paths: Accommodating Cultural Diversity in a Liberal Democracy" (2010), Ben-Porath compares the feasibility of guaranteeing exit rights to the feasibility of creating entrance paths. Ben-Porath's analysis pertains to comprehensive cultural communities, which are defined as "communities whose laws, institutions, and practices regulate the full range of their members' activities" (Ben-

Porath 2010, 1023). The plain groups discussed in this paper certainly qualify as comprehensive cultural communities per Ben-Porath's definition. With regard to comprehensive cultural communities, Ben-Porath argues that exit rights should be "narrowly maintained" so as not to violate any fundamental human rights, but a greater emphasis should be placed on entrance paths as they are less intrusive to comprehensive cultural communities and more feasible for dominant society (Ben-Porath 2010, 1021).

Preserving exit rights can be rather unrealistic, as they are both difficult to enforce upon comprehensive cultural communities as well as detrimental to cultural traditions (Ben-Porath 2010, 1023-24). Entrance paths, on the other hand, are easier to enforce as they are a duty of dominant society, are used with adults, and preserve cultural autonomy. Entrance paths can help individuals leaving comprehensive cultural communities benefit from and navigate their newly found freedom (Ben-Porath 2010, 1025). In fact, the entrance path concept builds upon Galston's fitness condition, as entrance paths help individuals "participate effectively" in an alternative lifestyle (Galston 2002, 123).

One example of a potential entrance path is to implement readily available adult education programs for individuals who leave plain communities.¹³ Not only would this type of policy enable the formerly plain start new careers, but knowledge of this support would help those considering leaving the Amish to envision a feasible and successful exit (Ben-Porath 2010, 1026). This policy would be relatively easy to implement and enforce, while also avoiding issues of cultural autonomy. In evaluating support systems for those leaving plain communities, the idea of establishing entrance paths is essential.

¹³This is merely an example of an entrance path and did not exist as of April 2020.

McAvoy also advocates for entrance paths and believes that the “state needs to provide services that facilitate entrance,” providing examples that include promoting awareness of the option to enroll in high school, providing vouchers for degrees and vocational programs, and encouraging the creation of continuing education programs. In addition, McAvoy thinks that social workers and police are obliged to conduct outreach among young plain individuals, such as social workers promoting awareness of local opportunities in plain-run workplaces or police officers promoting awareness of similar opportunities during already existing interventions with disruptive plain adolescents (McAvoy 2012, 550). While it would be ideal for the state to facilitate entrance paths for those leaving the plain community, it is more feasible to create non-governmental organizations that both provide services specific to the formerly plain as well as partner with more general public support agencies to ensure these individuals receive all available support.

The literature presented discusses barriers to exit that some plain individuals face, including educational, cultural, and spiritual challenges, as well as situational factors that allow plain individuals to leave their communities. However, there is no literature that closely examines what formerly plain individuals believe to be the greatest transitional challenges, and how these individuals work to overcome them. There is an additional gap in the literature regarding the experience of formerly plain individuals with existing forms of support, such as GED programs and career centers. The research involved in this paper seeks to fill these two gaps in order to develop a feasible entrance path system for those transitioning out of plain communities.

Methods

Data Collection

My methodology consists of 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with adults over age 18 who left their plain community to pursue a new life in mainstream society. Interviews were conducted by telephone and lasted between 40 and 80 minutes, with a mean interview length of 55 minutes. Any adult who was raised Amish or Mennonite and left their original community was eligible to participate. All respondents were from plain backgrounds, and the Amish and Mennonite backgrounds of respondents varied in how conservative they were.¹⁴ I considered using more specific group names in my recruitment materials, but wanted to ensure that I didn't turn away any potential respondents due to their specific former community not being mentioned. Because of the subgroup diversity, I obtained details during the interview about a respondent's specific upbringing in terms of exposure to mainstream society and adherence to strict rules, in addition to specifics regarding education and work experience.

I recruited respondents by posting a flyer image (see Appendix A) in two Facebook groups: "Life Outside the Amish" and "Ex-Amish and Ex-Mennonites," which respectively contained 1,458 and 1,239 users at the time of recruitment. In addition, a life coach who runs "The Plain Peoples Podcast" saw my post in these groups and created a short video discussing my study and shared it (along with the flyer I posted in the other Facebook groups) on her personal Facebook page. As a result, many of the respondents have a relationship with this life coach as she guides formerly plain individuals through their transition. The life coach was an

¹⁴While there are some mainstream Mennonite groups, the Facebook groups from which I recruited consisted of plain Mennonites, so the broad Mennonite term did not cause confusion.

asset to recruitment because her endorsement helped respondents feel that they could trust me and my cause.

In order to pre-screen respondents, my flyer contained a link to a pre-interview form (see Appendix A) that served as a method for respondents to indicate interest and share some demographic information. Many respondents provided comments about their general upbringing or about their particular perspective on the topic of transitions. Knowing this information in advance of the interview also provided me with a preliminary framework of the respondent's perspective.

I used opportunity sampling as well as snowball sampling to determine my sample. Because the population I am studying is small and many individuals are hesitant to share their story due to skepticism towards researchers and/or trouble discussing past trauma, I interviewed any individual who was raised Amish or Mennonite, signed up to participate, and followed through with the interview. I also asked respondents to share the study with other individuals who might be interested, which some respondents did. My sample ended up being balanced, although there are more Mennonite respondents than there are Amish respondents (see Table 1 for respondent information details).¹⁵ I believe this imbalance is merely the result of convenience sampling, and is mitigated by the study's concern with the experience of plain individuals, rather than the distinct experiences of the Amish and of Mennonites. The sample also involves varying levels of conservatism and post-transition outcomes, which will be discussed in the discussion of findings.

¹⁵The 2010 US Religion Census data for "Amish Groups" does not include distinct numbers for the Amish and for the plain Mennonites, so it is difficult to determine if this imbalance in the sample is representative of the plain population.

Table 1: Respondent Information

| Pseudonym | Gender | Religion of Upbringing | Age at Exit | Birth Decade ¹⁶ |
|-----------|--------|--|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Jonah | Male | Amish | 30s | 1950s/1960s |
| Patrick | Male | Mennonite | Late teens (18 or over) | 1970s/1980s |
| Ally | Female | Amish | 20s | 1950s/1960s |
| Ashley | Female | Mennonite | 20s | 1990s |
| Alice | Female | Mennonite | 20s | 1970s/1980s |
| Margie | Female | Mennonite | 20s | 1950s/1960s |
| Caitlin | Female | Mennonite | 20s | 1990s |
| Ronald | Male | Mennonite | 20s | 1990s |
| Carol | Female | Mennonite | Late teens (18 or over) | 1950s/1960s |
| Grace | Female | Mennonite and Charity Churches ¹⁷ | Late teens (under 18) | 1990s |
| Julia | Female | Amish | 30s | 1970s/1980s |
| Cole | Male | Mennonite | 20s | 1950s/1960s |
| Tim | Male | Amish | Late teens (18 or over) | 1970s/1980s |
| Emmett | Male | Mennonite | 20s | 1990s |
| James | Male | Mennonite | 20s | 1990s |

Before the interview phone call, I reminded respondents both via email and in the consent form that the call would be recorded. Additionally, at the beginning of the interview I would start the recording on Google Voice, which automatically reminded the respondent that the call was

¹⁶Birth decades have been grouped to the following categories: 1950s/1960s, 1970s/1980s, and 1990s. This grouping is to maintain anonymity.

¹⁷Charity Churches closely resemble the Conservative Mennonites (Steiner 2018).

being recorded. The interviews were semi-structured and ranged from minimal prompting to a direct question and answer format depending on the respondent (see Appendix A for the full interview guide). I began by asking respondents to describe their upbringing in order to get a sense of how isolated they were from the secular world as well as of their education, family life, and work experience. I also wanted to learn about how they viewed the outside world during their upbringing. Some respondents seemed eager to tell their story and even provided anecdotes beyond the scope of my questions. Other respondents seemed unsure of what I wanted to hear about and wanted more structured questions.

Typically, respondents would naturally start describing when they first considered leaving the community and how they ultimately left. I asked respondents how they remember feeling about leaving, as well as about their plan for leaving and how the plan was executed. A good portion of the interview was spent on how their upbringing impacted their ability to create a new life in the modern world, which involved a wide range of topics such as educational access, mental health, dating, careers, finances, identity, and fellowship. The types of challenges respondents faced varied by the age they were during the transition, the level of isolation of their upbringing, the types of careers they wished to pursue, among other factors. I ended interviews by asking respondents what advice they would give to current youth in their former community about the decision to exit, as well as what their opinions are regarding their former lifestyle. I also asked respondents if they had any policy ideas or general thoughts on how to support individuals transitioning out of plain communities.

I chose the semi-structured qualitative interview method because this population is quite small, with an even smaller number of defectors. I also wanted to learn about the complexity and nuances of the barriers this population faces, and found that most respondents were eager to

share their stories and thoughts on the matter. In order to obtain the best understanding of a respondent's experience, I kept the interviews open-ended, but made sure to obtain similar categories of information from each respondent.

The primary strength of my methodology is that I obtained in-depth perspectives on the transition from a plain lifestyle to a modern mainstream lifestyle. Through this qualitative interviewing, I was able to learn not just about the outcomes, but also about the hidden emotional, spiritual, and practical barriers these individuals faced as well as the aspects of their upbringing that contributed to these barriers.

While the themes emerging from these interviews can inform policies that could be beneficial to the broad plain group population, a limitation of this study is that there are likely other types of barriers associated with other unique plain upbringings, especially given that each respondent had such a distinctive experience. For instance, none of the 15 respondents made the decision to leave their plain community during Rumspringa, and very few respondents experienced Rumspringa during their plain upbringing. However, it would be difficult to ascertain all the possible barriers these individuals face, and even more difficult to enact a policy or program that would address every possible barrier. The findings of this research can certainly inform policies for excluded plain groups, however, the findings are not generalizable given my focus on a select subset of plain groups.

Selection bias is also a limitation of this study, as I mostly interviewed individuals who saw my posts on Facebook and signed up to participate. Although Facebook is commonly used by individuals who are integrated with mainstream society, formerly plain individuals who use Facebook have likely had a relatively smooth transitional experience or are far removed from their transitional challenges, given that Facebook use is a radical departure from their former

community's beliefs. Those who have yet to use Facebook may have had a harder transition or are still acclimating to mainstream society. Therefore, using Facebook as a recruitment platform likely excludes formerly plain individuals who still struggle to integrate into mainstream society.

In addition to having a relatively successful transition, the respondents in this sample also were likely to feel strongly about how their upbringing affected their life trajectory.¹⁸ This selection bias excludes those who had an easy transition and those who had an extremely traumatizing transition. The individuals who had a seamless transition may therefore have no interest in the cause of this project, or believe their experience is not “worthy” of being researched. On the other extreme, individuals who had a traumatizing transition may not feel safe or comfortable discussing it with a stranger on the phone.

Finally, there may be individuals who were not able to fully transition to mainstream society and returned to their plain community. These individuals would therefore be difficult to contact and interview. Despite these selection biases, however, the interviews successfully highlighted some common themes and provided an overview of the challenges plain individuals face as well as their experiences with existing informal and formal support systems.

Qualitative Content Analysis

I used qualitative content analysis to categorize and reduce the interview material. After generating and cleaning interview transcripts in Otter.ai, I reviewed each transcript through the lens of my research questions. From this review, I created a coding frame in order to organize the

¹⁸This particular selection bias could be compounded by the fact that many respondents had a relationship with the life coach who aided in recruitment for this study. These respondents likely had greater support in navigating mainstream society than those without a relationship with a life coach.

relevant interview quotes. The coding frame underwent many renditions, and the final coding frame can be found in Appendix B.

The main themes involved in the coding frame are the exit dilemma, emotional and spiritual challenges, practical challenges, straightforward transitions, experiences with existing support, and policy recommendations. The exit dilemma pertained to quotes about the considerations involved in the decision to leave the plain community. Emotional and spiritual challenges pertained to “soft” transitional challenges involving identity, loneliness, fitting in, and undoing plain church indoctrination, whereas practical challenges involved living situations, education, finances, insurance, and knowledge of the legal system. Straightforward transitions was used for examples in which the respondent did not believe their plain upbringing presented transitional challenges, which only applied to a few respondents. Experiences with existing support involved both positive and negative experiences with forms of support such as churches, schools, non-plain networks, publicly available support, and therapy. Finally, the policy recommendation code was assigned to suggestions from respondents on how to ease the transition to the secular world.

I selected qualitative content analysis as my data analysis method because of its focus on description, which is essential for identifying nuances in transitional experiences and the resulting challenges (Flick 2013, 181). While qualitative content analysis leaves room for error and misinterpretation, I believe that this likelihood is reduced because I both created the coding frame and conducted this analysis in its entirety. In addition, I kept the context of the respondent’s situation in mind when incorporating their quotes, which entailed rereading and sometimes incorporating other parts of their interview transcript.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, I will first discuss themes surrounding the exit dilemma before addressing the emotional, spiritual, and practical challenges surrounding the transition. I will then discuss examples of straightforward transitions, as experienced by a few respondents, in order to provide a variety of perspectives on these issues. Finally, I will discuss the experiences respondents have had with existing support in order to evaluate its effectiveness.

The Exit Dilemma

Before discussing the actual exit and transition out of plain communities, it is first important to consider why individuals decide to leave plain communities, especially given the hardships associated with this endeavor. One central purpose of developing transitional support (which are entrance paths in theoretical framework terms) is to lower the opportunity costs of leaving the plain community. What are the circumstances that lead plain individuals to undertake the challenges of leaving? Respondents cited freedom to think, a desire to expand their horizons, and disbelief in and dissatisfaction with the church and/or lifestyle as primary reasons for leaving their plain community. In addition, two respondents were excommunicated against their will. All of these reasons indicate significant internal motives for pursuing a new life, which speak to the nature of the transitional challenge: if anyone could leave the community for the mildest of reasons, chances are that the transitional challenges would be minimal.¹⁹ The nature of the exit circumstances also provides context for the challenges respondents faced.

Given the hardships involved in leaving, many individuals cite the importance of having a good reason for leaving the community. For example, Emmett believes that:

¹⁹Some respondents did find the transitional challenges to be minimal, but these individuals had rather unique circumstances. This is discussed in the “Straightforward Transitions” section.

If [Amish youth] just want to leave the Amish church just because they don't like being told what they can do and what they can't do, they just want to go out and, and enjoy themselves and have fast cars and like cruisers and whatever, it's not worth it. But if they want to be able to follow the Lord and not be held down with all that religion and rules and having to treat other people according to what the church tells them, and if they want to go out and and follow the Lord and find the church that teaches the Bible and allows them to follow the Lord and treat other people the way God wants us to treat other people, then, you know, they should definitely leave.

Emmett's comment highlights the fact that some of the more superficial reasons young plain individuals may want to leave are not worthwhile given the transitional burdens he has now experienced. However, Emmett stressed that strong internal motives make these burdens worthwhile. Ashley feels similarly, saying that if a plain individual wants to leave, "you really have to have a reason. If you don't have a reason to go off of, you're going to go back, because one day, they're going to realize this is way too hard. And it's easier if you, you have to have a damn good reason to leave." Some examples of "damn good reason[s] to leave," including Ashley's, are discussed in detail throughout this section.

One internal motive respondents cited is the desire to explore opportunities beyond the plain world. For some respondents, such as Patrick, the plain community never felt quite right for them: "For me personally, I just never felt like I quite fit in. I always felt just a little bit different than most of the other kids. I wanted something different out of my life," he said. Although Patrick acknowledged that "there was a potential that maybe I wouldn't be able to see my family anymore," he concluded that this "was not enough that it would stop me from doing what I wanted to do," as this internal desire was quite strong. Similarly, Cole did not feel that the plain community was a good fit for him, especially when he realized he was not satisfied with his predetermined life as a farmer:

I'm just not cut out for [farming]. I have allergies that, you know, that are compounded by that. And I thought there had to be something that I could do that was more cerebral in

nature and less muscular in nature. And I just really hated being [on] the farm. So, my whole point in moving forward was to look for a life that did not include farming, and that was more urban and more civilized in nature where I could wear nice clothes every day and go to an office or do something that was not farming.

Cole realized that he could not pursue the lifestyle he wanted by remaining in the plain community, which became his motivation to leave.

While Cole was more concerned with his job function in his plain community, Alice was concerned with her ability to advance herself in the Mennonite community. Alice had the culturally uncommon opportunity to go on road trips by herself, which enabled her to have some time away from her community while seeing more of the world, both of which prompted her decision to leave:

I went on another road trip, and that was when I really was able to get away. And I was thinking to myself like I am, I was 22, almost 22 at the time, and I was thinking that I still have the rest of my life to live and I'm not doing anything with it. I don't have any degrees. I don't have, I don't have anything to show from my life so far. So then I went back and decided that I was actually going to go to nursing school [...] and just started making plans for completely leaving the Mennonites.

Julia was similarly concerned with her advancement opportunities if she were to stay in her plain community. Julia had the realization, "I'm a single woman and I have capped out in doing everything I can, and there's like so much more [...] Like there's no future, I guess is what I was saying. Like, I could marry a minister and then I would have influence. Well, that's not that easy." As a result of this realization, Julia said the reason she ultimately left her community was because she "wanted freedom to think. I wanted freedom to go places and explore things." While Patrick, Alice, and Julia did not have as specific of a motivation as Cole, all four of these respondents followed their interior motives out of their plain communities.

Freedom to think is a consistent interior motive respondents cited, which is somewhat intertwined with the freedom to explore opportunities outside of the plain world. Similar to

Alice's experiences away from her plain community, both Jonah and Carol had experiences with the outside world that sparked a desire to think freely. Jonah had an experience in which he and his wife at the time chose a mainstream birthing program, which inspired "this model of engagement that I could not shake, but I couldn't implement in any other way in my life. And that concept of being you know, being an active participant in your own life [...] that's why I left." This experience of making a choice against the plain status quo combined with the resulting exposure to the outside world motivated Jonah to leave his Amish community so that he could exercise greater agency in various aspects of his life.

Carol came to a similar conclusion as Jonah, but had a different process of self-discovery. Despite their Mennonite beliefs, Carol's family pushed Carol and her siblings to go to college: "It was just kind of understood in the family that we were going to go to college," she said, noting that this is rather uncommon. Although she attended a religious college, it was still a non-plain, mainstream institution, and Carol found herself "dreading going back to the control of the having to dress a certain way, act a certain way. Hanging out with just small-minded people who did not understand why I was going to college," all of which were things she dreaded even more as she got older. One day, Carol was confronted by three Mennonite ministers, and was "feeling like I had to defend everything about who I was at that point." This confrontation was Carol's last visit to the Mennonite church, as she firmly realized, "I have to get out. You know, in my head, I'm going, I cannot live like this. And I knew after that, like, I wasn't coming back." By getting a glimpse of what freedom of agency and thought looked like through exposure to mainstream society, Jonah and Carol came to the conclusion that they could not live without that freedom.

Relating to the point above about exposure to mainstream society, some respondents felt more confident about leaving if they knew someone who had successfully left, which is especially interesting as this is in many ways an entrance path.²⁰ Grace only left her plain community because her “chances of life being better were higher,” and because she vaguely knew of two individuals who had left the Mennonite community and knew that they “weren’t on drugs and they’re over 16 and not they’re not all having children.”²¹ As a result, Grace figured that the outside world is “not *that* terrible” and decided to take the risk of leaving to see the world for herself. Upon making this choice, these same formerly Mennonite individuals were able to pick her up from her home.²² Emmett had a similar experience, as a letter from his uncle who had left the community “kind of got me thinking,” he said. After getting ahold of his uncle who lived out of state, Emmett decided to leave his community as well and go live with his uncle. Emmett pointed out that before this letter, he had considered leaving the community, but “didn’t really have any good examples of people that left,” as those he knew of “didn’t end up in a very good place after they left. Like, got into drinking and all kinds of trouble.” Both Grace and Emmett used their outside connections not only to get over the fear of leaving, but also as entrance paths as they acclimated to mainstream society.

Disagreements with the ways of the church also prompted thoughts of leaving, even without a transformative experience with the outside world. Ashley’s national church conference was sued because they permitted continuous instances of sexual abuse of children. As part of the

²⁰A discussion of how interpersonal relationships can be effective transitional support will be discussed in “Experiences with Existing Support.”

²¹Grace’s situation is unique as her family was about to make an international move to another plain community. She knew that if she made this move, she would never be able to return to America, as her controlling father would have sieged her passport.

²²While these formerly Mennonite girls inspired Grace to run away, this incident was not Grace’s true exit, as she had to run away from home several times. However, the incidents were all similar in nature, as she used her limited outside world network to find a place to stay.

settlement, her church leadership was required to lay out the policies of reporting sexual abuse. It was immediately clear to Ashley that the church would not actually protect her children from sexual abuse; she said, “I could not knowingly be a part of a movement that would not protect my children. And would keep me from protecting my children because if you went to the police you would be excommunicated.” From this point on, Ashley knew she had no future in her church and decided that the most effective way to leave was to intentionally get excommunicated, so she registered to vote, which is grounds for excommunication.²³ The nature of Ashley’s disagreement with the church was not as much about the teachings of the church, but rather about the policies enacted by the church.

Ronald and James, on the other hand, developed points of disagreement with the spiritual teachings of their churches. Ronald remembered thinking, “It didn't seem like fair, like I would somehow, you know, have this privilege to go to heaven that, you know, most other people didn't have,” and came to the realization, “I guess I hate all the hypocrisy in the church.” Like Ronald, James also “didn't feel like we were the only ones going to heaven.” In addition, James did not like “the way the structure was in the home as far as the man being very superior over the woman,” as he believes “it's a teamwork effort.” These disagreements with the plain church teachings and values prompted Ronald and James to think about, and eventually pursue, other philosophies of life.

One additional exit situation to note is that of excommunication. While Ashley intentionally got excommunicated from her church, other instances of excommunication were unintentional and were against the will of the church member in question. Excommunication

²³Excommunication procedures vary by group. However, the chief grounds for excommunication generally involve heresy, which is “deviation from the dogma of the church, and any persistent defiance of the authority of the church or disobedience of its regulations” (Bender 1955). The respondents in this paper who were excommunicated were all forced to move out of the community.

“was devastating” for Ally, and as a result she admitted herself to a local behavioral health unit due to severe mental health concerns. Margie was also excommunicated against her will. The details surrounding Ally and Margie’s experiences with excommunication have been excluded from this paper due to the sensitivity of their situations. However, it is still important to keep in mind that transitional support must also be directed towards excommunicated individuals, as not every individual leaves the plain community by choice.

Emotional and Spiritual Challenges

Some of the most challenging aspects of transitioning from a plain community to the outside world are emotional and spiritual. While personality and circumstance affect which emotional and spiritual challenges are most prevalent for an individual, some common challenges relate to identity, loneliness, fear, and undoing decades of extreme indoctrination.

Identity Conflicts and Fellowship

Several respondents cited identity struggles after exiting. Jonah said, “I don't even have language for it, but you're sort of like a refugee, but you don't really know it. Or you're not recognized as a minority. But you really don't fit in.” Although Jonah has created a life in the outside world, he believes in the importance of keeping sight of his Amish identity, saying, “If you walk away from your heritage, you, it cripples you. You can even be a part of the outside world but, but if, if your story never gets told, you're sort of a shadow of a person.” Jonah believes that “the word ex-Amish is a problem. It's actually violent, it takes you away from your identity,” and instead he identifies as a non-compliant Amish person.

Ronald was concerned about his new identity after leaving the Mennonites, and still retains many of his Mennonite values as they are central to the identity he is afraid of losing,

which would be “a loss of identity so deep within you. It’s like, if I’m not Mennonite, who am I?” he said. The tension between establishing a new life in mainstream society versus retaining a deeply rooted plain identity can result both in fear, evinced in Ronald’s comment, as well as in frustration. Jonah, in expressing his frustration about society’s tendency to sever his plain identity upon leaving the plain community, remarked, “They don't pull this shit with Jewish people. Jewish people, they can be non-practicing and nobody dares to suggest that they shouldn't be, you know, the identity anyway.” Jonah believes that society should recognize that a formerly plain individual can still retain their plain identity, even if they no longer engage with the plain lifestyle.

On the contrary, some individuals have the opposite challenge regarding identity. Unlike Jonah, Alice wanted to completely remove herself from her former Mennonite identity: “One time, actually I did have an employer telling me the only reason he hired me was because I was a Mennonite. Because they're known as good workers. And I just, I wanted to be, I wanted to be myself. I didn't want to be described as or labeled by that anymore.” The challenge between remembering one’s heritage versus wanting to assimilate and neglect a painful past varies among respondents; nonetheless, individuals face emotional hardships surrounding identity upon leaving the plain community.

The sentiment of conflicted identity upon leaving a plain group results not only in internal turmoil as previously discussed, but also in feeling like an outsider. Ally experienced similar feelings regarding her past and present identity, which contributed to the loneliness she experienced upon leaving:

It was very difficult for me to completely be separated from my people, the Amish and Mennonite. I mean, how can I explain this? Well think about being in a culture. Suppose you grew up a certain race. Say, African American, and you were in that culture your

whole life and all of a sudden you're only with people who are different, who are not like you were... I didn't trust the outsider... I felt I couldn't relate to them.

Ally spoke of the sense of limbo after leaving a plain group, where she lost her plain identity but had not yet established a new mainstream one. This limbo resulted in loneliness, as Ally lost her Mennonite fellowship but was still in the process of building trust with outsiders.²⁴ Ronald also experienced this stage of limbo, saying, "I'm not sure what my tribe is, like who are my people? Who am I? Who am I going to find to be friends with?" Thus, the challenges of identity struggle and of loneliness are intertwined.

Because plain communities have such a strong fellowship, several other respondents also experienced loneliness throughout their transition, as leaving the plain community frequently resulted in losing friends, the church support network, and family.²⁵ Upon leaving her Mennonite community, Margie missed the friendships she had developed, remembering that "it almost felt like death, and that's how much I missed the Mennonites and ladies of the church." Carol sometimes still misses the support network she had through the Mennonite church, saying, "I do miss the being able to depend on people to be there for you, like being out here non-Mennonite, I feel very alone," as she has not yet found a fellowship that fills this void. Ashley said that the transition was "really hard on me and my husband, mostly because in this process, we lost all of our family. We lost our friends. We had no one at all." Ally echoed this hardship of being distanced from family, as she knew her father would not approve of her new lifestyle,

²⁴Subsequent sections discuss issues of trusting outsiders, as the plain church teaches that outsiders are untrustworthy and evil.

²⁵The fellowship in plain communities is quite strong, as illustrated through a recent story from Patrick's former community. Patrick said: "If you're a member of the [Mennonite] church, you always have that community, so you always have people there when you need something. [A family member] passed away six weeks ago from cancer [...] they have a 13 year old girl that's special needs. And of course with [the family member] in the hospital all the time, put a major burden on [the spouse] who's also battling cancer at the moment. And friends, family, neighbors all stepped in to, you know, help make sure that their home is taken care of and that the special needs girl is getting everything that she needs."

particularly the fact that when she first visited her family after exiting, she arrived by car: “I get out of a car and he goes into the house and didn't talk to me the whole time. It was really, really hard. Because yeah, you love your family.” This sense of loneliness after leaving such a tight-knit community creates significant emotional challenges.

Undoing Indoctrination

Undoing the teachings of plain churches creates challenges for individuals transitioning to mainstream society. Respondents spoke about how the teachings of the church led to a cult-like mindset that affected their perceptions of the outside world, outsiders, and normal relationship, family, and community structure.²⁶ In broad terms, Ashley remembered the process of undoing indoctrination upon leaving the Mennonites, as she and her husband “were having to peel back all of the years of manipulation and like okay, the church is gone now, we're kicked out. So are we really going to hell? What do we think about this?” Similarly, Ally remembered having to change her “cultish mindset” that was created by the church, which was “very hard to get rid of” upon leaving. Not only is it a challenge to undo this indoctrination, but some of these beliefs can hinder other aspects of the transition, as seen with Ally’s limbo situation discussed in the previous subsection.

The plain church teaches that the outside world is a dangerous place, since people in the world (outside of the plain church) are considered sinful and as a result, go to hell. Emmett believes that this doctrine is “one of the hardest things that kind of like keeps people from leaving,” as plain individuals are all “taught as they're growing up that the rest of the world is just so bad.” Grace remembered how her community depicted the outside world, and said that

²⁶While this section focuses on the experience of undoing these beliefs, the very fact that these beliefs exist relates to the idea of infringed exit rights, as people who believe these teachings are often terrified of leaving.

“the picture I always got painted to me was that it was a bad scary place, kind of like, if you have ever seen the Disney movie *Tangled*, with like the men with pointy teeth and like, how she villainized everybody, that’s how it felt.” Ally similarly reflected on her upbringing and believes the teachings of her church were “kind of like mind control in a way maybe. It’s put into your head as a child. And so you look at the outside world as a dangerous place.” Ronald recounted similar beliefs as a child, saying, “Growing up, inside the church was safe and outside the church was terrible, like people just you know, they were just terrible sinners and you know, drunk, like they would tell stories about people that had left the Mennonite culture and went on to, you know, get divorced and be on drugs,” all of which are sinful activities according to the plain church. While growing up in her plain community, Julia remembered having very little access to outside people: “Like, those are strangers, like what kind of people are they like? We’re the normal people. Like that’s the real thing. We’re the normal people. Everybody else is weird.” Early in her transition, Julia was not only fearful of the outside world, but also felt that the outside world was not as good of a place as her plain community.

Several respondents mentioned that during their transition, they were able to overcome this fear of the outside world and build relationships with outsiders. Ally said that “the outside world was not what I thought it was, sort of, you know. And, I liked it,” and that when she “started talking to people, a lot of them were English, and I came to understand they’re good people. They’re not what I thought they were.” Ashley had a similar experience, saying that “the biggest eye opener was seeing that people outside the church was still good people. They weren’t out to hurt you. They weren’t out to attack you.”²⁷ As a result of realizations during her transition, Carol advises current plain individuals who consider leaving that “the outside is not as

²⁷“English” refers to the non-plain.

scary as you think. It is not as scary as you have been told. There is a good, safe community that cares. And leaving the Mennonite Church does not mean going to hell. Leaving the Amish does not mean you're going to hell. It is freedom in more ways than one.” Overcoming the plain church’s teachings about mainstream society is a noteworthy obstacle given its frightening and mentally challenging dynamics.

Other plain church teachings that individuals struggle to undo while transitioning pertain to family, relationships, and community structures as the models for these structures in the plain church are not necessarily healthy or sustainable in mainstream society. As mentioned in the background section of this paper, plain communities are extremely patriarchal. Ashley experienced the effects of this while in her Mennonite community and had to adjust to the more balanced gender roles of mainstream society. She explained that this is an ongoing struggle for her:

In the church, the abuse is placed on the woman, like it had been drilled into my head at the age of seven, that it was my fault. Absolutely 100% my fault only, I had done something. So having to go in and tear all of that down and tear down the belief system that has been put into the church, like I still struggle with stuff. I sometimes have a very hard time looking men in the eyes. It's a conscious effort to have to remember that it's okay if you do that. And it's okay to wear blue jeans outside of your house.

Alice also specifically mentioned having to train herself to “even look a man in the eyes” after she left her plain community. Unlike Ashley, however, who was married for years before leaving the community, Alice left her community as a single young woman, and said that she also had to ask herself carefully, “Is this a good person or not?” when she began dating in mainstream society.

Beyond strictly romantic relationships, Julia said that one interesting challenge is “finding healthy relationships after you leave, because you have, I had a very specific idea, I was born Mennonite, so I had a very specific idea of what community should look like and some

things are good and some are not.” This challenge is an important one, as developing an unhealthy relationship can derail other aspects of the transition to mainstream society. James experienced the result of not understanding mainstream social dynamics, and he ended up homeless:

You don't know who to trust. You don't know what type of person not to trust. You don't have any 'file folders,' so to speak, of someone that may look shady or something that maybe you shouldn't go over in that area, that's kind of what we call it dark alleyway, or whatever, you don't recognize something that maybe you shouldn't go down. Or look, there's bars on the windows now starting to look like maybe not a good place to just go hang out on a Friday night. And so because there's no file folders that have been instilled in you, you end up trusting and putting your confidence in the wrong people. And they can see that and they take advantage of it and it leads to some pretty dark, dark alleyways themselves. And that's kind of what happened to me. That's how I became a homeless person.

Because James had only been exposed to his small church, he did not have the proper instincts, or “street smarts,” to keep him safe.

An additional challenge for formerly plain individuals is identifying healthy social structures in various contexts. Carol, who left her plain community decades ago, only recently came to the realization that she “had these unrealistic expectations of what a church should look like and what close family relationships should look like. You know, stuff like that. So being able to step back now and go, oh, so that was unrealistic. So I need to kind of work on changing that thought process around it.” For many years after leaving, Carol “struggled with feeling really drawn to these churches that feel very tight-knit and close. And when in reality they're enmeshed and controlling,” which speaks to the difficulty of breaking away from the norms of the plain community. After being surrounded by only unrealistic social structures as determined by the plain church, the challenge of learning what a realistic and healthy social structure entails is a learning process that improves with time, but can linger for a lifetime.

Fitting In

The greatest challenges surrounding efforts to “fit in” with mainstream society pertain to developing an understanding of mainstream clothing and culture. While some aspects of these challenges are related to loss of identity and undoing the teachings of the plain church, they have more direct implications for one’s ability to integrate into mainstream society.

For women in particular, the drastic difference between plain modes of dress and mainstream modes of dress presents hardships when acclimating to mainstream life. While men in plain communities also have some specific styles of dress, women have to wear cape dresses and head coverings and do not wear makeup or jewelry, whereas men wear pants, shirts, and maybe suspenders or a particular hat. Carol remembered the confusion in “figuring out makeup and jewelry and clothing, like what's okay for me to wear and what's not okay for me to wear.” Similarly, Ashley remembered having to ask herself about simple aspects of everyday life, such as, “Am I going to wear pants? How am I going to do my hair?” While these might seem like trivial matters, they are not only difficult to get used to after decades of extreme indoctrination and patriarchal control, but they also play a significant role in feeling a sense of belonging within the dominant culture.

New modes of dress are only one part of assimilating to mainstream culture. While Julia also struggled to figure out how to dress, she further commented on how virtually everything about her everyday life was different, as she had to learn “how to do my clothes different, and this different and that different and the other thing different. I just felt like a teenager. It was horrible.” Carol also spoke to how she broadly did not understand many elements of mainstream culture, which was especially challenging because “everybody else understood the culture, just kind of because that's how they'd always been and that's what they were raised with. And I didn't, and so then I leave the church and I don't understand outside culture.” James remembered

struggling to understand mainstream social skills, as “in a church environment with a close connection like that, you don’t really get to have the uh, the social skills,” and as a result, “kind of cuts all communication off right there with people in general.” Without these social skills, it was difficult for James to forge his own path in the outside world.

Practical Challenges

In addition to emotional and spiritual challenges, most respondents experienced significant practical challenges. These practical challenges are a result of the vast differences between plain and mainstream society, and include finding a stable living situation, accessing secondary and post-secondary education, and understanding mainstream matters such as finances, insurance, and the legal system.

Living Situations

While some respondents were able to stay with outside family members or afford a living space of their own, those who did not have a safe place to go upon leaving the plain community faced significant complications.²⁸ Caitlin, for example, could not afford her own living space and as a result spent several years “elusive couch hopping, living with different people just doing really stupid stuff, getting myself in trouble,” she said, noting she was sometimes homeless and “lived in [her] car for a while.” Even when Caitlin found a stable and nurturing place to live, such as with a former coworker, she would get kicked out when she got herself into trouble, such as when her abusive boyfriend would stay the night. Caitlin’s situation was like a downward chain reaction, as one bad decision would lead to another, and not having a place to live

²⁸Many respondents were able to find a steady place to live, as discussed in “Experiences with Existing Support.” However, I believe that individuals who cannot find a place to live are likely to return to their communities, and as a result, return to their original plain communities. Therefore, there are likely difficulties with finding stable living situations that are not reflected in this study’s sample.

compounded her troubles. James also struggled with homelessness. In order to get away from his former community, he moved to a different state where he “was a homeless man for a year” and weighed nearly 90 pounds below what he considered his healthy weight. As will be discussed later in this paper, after a year of homelessness James eventually reached out to his non-plain family, who provided him a place to live and other forms of support.

An individual’s age can also have a significant impact on their ability to find somewhere to live. Grace, who left her community as a minor, said her problem was finding somewhere that was willing to take her in, as “nobody wanted to take the chance [...] and I completely understand that” because they would be “harboring a fugitive.” Grace knew a few people who had previously left her community, and was eventually able to go live with them. However, the process of trying to live with these people was difficult, as the parents of this particular household wanted to get an emergency medical release form signed by her father, but her father said, “No, I can't do that. Because that will be like signing over my rights to my daughter and [I] refuse.” Recognizing her dire situation, the family decided to take Grace in and hope for the best, even though “everybody was kinda all walking on eggshells at that point. Because, you know, like they were taking me across state lines and they did not have written permission to do that at all. Like they were essentially kidnapping me.” Grace was fortunate, but this situation certainly raises questions about the legal implications of minors leaving the plain community. More research and legal expertise is needed to evaluate what states should do in these situations, as this study only involved one individual who left the community as a minor.

Education

Many of the practical barriers formerly plain individuals face pertain to educational limitations, as education in plain groups tends to be cut short at 8th grade and/or excludes STEM

subjects. This creates challenges in pursuing higher education after leaving the plain group, whether that means pursuing a GED or a post-secondary degree. Grace took GED classes after leaving, as her homeschool education through 8th grade “was not a well-rounded education.” Grace only remembered one year of science education: “I think it was 4th grade. We had a science book. And that was the only science book I ever saw.” She felt confident about her writing skills, but worried about her basic algebra skills, such as order of operations, in preparation for the GED. Upon leaving the plain church, James also only had an 8th grade education, which led to challenges in passing the Armed Forces Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) which is required to join the United States Marine Corps (USMC). James particularly struggled with the mathematical sections of the ASVAB, as he “didn’t know any math” at age 23. As a result, James had to spend many of his afternoons and evenings for 6-12 months with a math tutor in order to pass Marines ASVAB.²⁹ Similarly, Jonah remembered a young man in his former Amish community who attended a state university, and “was a really brilliant kid. He read the whole Encyclopedia Britannica front to back. But you know what? He wants to do engineering. And you've got to have, you know, you can't fake the math and engineering and he struggled and struggled and struggled and struggled.” Struggling with math is not unique to this particular case, as Jonah noted that there is “enough of a track record here from some of the connections and awareness has been created that math is a big one. Every 8th grade educated person that tries to go to higher education was just like wow.” The gap in mathematical education proves difficult for both GED preparation as well as college-level studies, both of which are prerequisites for many well-paying jobs in modern society.

²⁹James’s relative helped him access this math tutor, as will be discussed in “Experiences with Existing Support”

While some plain individuals face academic challenges due to their limited schooling in the plain community, limited life exposure additionally results in a lack of awareness about opportunities to advance one's education. James said that it was "kind of hard to grasp or understand" the mainstream educational path from middle school to high school to college, as it is "not commonly understood in the plain churches that you can learn at any age" since their schooling typically ends at 8th grade. When Ally was evaluating her future options, she was "seriously thinking about, you know, I'd like to go to college and, and at least become an LPN (licensed practical nurse) so I could maybe work in a nursing home or something. But, you know, it took money and I didn't have any and had nobody to, uh, I just didn't know how to go about it, so I never pursued it any further." With guidance on financial aid and the application process, Ally would have been able to pursue a high paying career in a field that mattered to her. More generally, Patrick believes that many formerly plain individuals "would possibly look into things like, you know, being a doctor or a veterinarian, or getting a law degree or different things like that if they had someone to help guide them through what they need to do to do that." Because plain individuals are not exposed to a diversity of careers, those who leave can have a hard time knowing how to start a career with which they are unfamiliar.

Grace's experience with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) requirements reinforces how challenging it is for plain individuals to advance their education, especially if they are under age 24, as FAFSA requires parental tax information if the applicant is classified as a dependent student.³⁰ Grace thought she was classified as a dependent student due

³⁰According to the FAFSA website, a dependent student is a student who does not meet the criteria for an independent student. "An independent student is one of the following: at least 24 years old, married, a graduate or professional student, a veteran, a member of the armed forces, an orphan, a ward of the court, someone with legal dependents other than a spouse, an emancipated minor or someone who is homeless or at risk of becoming homeless." Source: <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/fafsa/filling-out/parent-info>.

to her age, marital status, and not having children, and knew she would be unable to obtain parental tax information as her parents “were so against me going to college, like they did not want me to go. They were not going to help me in any way. They were not going to help me even by providing information so that I could go.” When she called college financial aid offices and explained that she could not provide parental tax information, she was told the financial aid office “can’t do anything about it,” which was “literally the answer [she] got every time.” After getting immediately turned away several times, a college financial aid representative eventually asked why she could not obtain parental tax information. When Grace was asked to explain her circumstances in greater detail, the representative said that “if it's because of religious reasons that your parents will not do this, we can work around that. You will qualify for a special circumstance for FAFSA.” It turns out that Grace did qualify for a special circumstance, and with guidance from this financial aid office, was able to get her cosmetology certificate. However, Grace noted that if the financial aid situation had been resolved sooner, she “probably would not have just settled for a certificate” and would have pursued a four-year teaching degree. Although Grace wanted to be an elementary school teacher, she “didn't want to do something that was like a four-year commitment” by the time she was in her 20s. This lack of both awareness and specific guidance regarding the circumstances of formerly plain individuals presented life-altering challenges to Grace’s pursuit of a post-secondary education.

Finances, Insurance, and Legal

Some non-educational challenges in establishing a new life in the outside world pertain to finances, insurance, and legal matters. Plain individuals typically do not have any form of insurance, as Ashley said, “the [Mennonites] have an entire system of insurance for your house, your car, your health, everything,” which creates confusion as well as financial hardship after

leaving the church.³¹ Caitlin struggled to figure out health insurance, which resulted in a financial whirlwind. After leaving her community, Caitlin was admitted to the hospital multiple times for various medical needs, and owed thousands of dollars in medical bills and had no health insurance or knowledge of how health insurance works, as “this world works differently than the Mennonite world does.”

Not only are plain individuals unfamiliar with mainstream insurance, but they also rarely interact with the legal system given their self-governing insular nature, which creates challenges for those who are forced to interact with the legal system upon leaving the community. Tim had to appear in court for a small matter just a few months after leaving the Amish. When he couldn't make it to his court date due to a lack of transportation, he was unable to figure out how to request a continuance, especially because it required a fax machine. The combination of a lack of transportation, confusion regarding technology, and lack of knowledge surrounding the court system made this situation very difficult and costly for Tim. Ashley also pointed to a lack of understanding of the legal system, as she initially did not know that she could file “anti-harassment” orders against former plain church leaders, who were harassing her and her family after they left the community. After Ashley left, she became friends with a paralegal. When she described the harassment issues she had been experiencing, the paralegal informed her that this was illegal and therefore could be resolved using the law. Without the advice of the paralegal Ashley happened to befriend, she said she “wouldn't have had the knowledge that [...] it's actually illegal what they're doing,” and “would have suffered through [the harassment].” As a result, Ashley was able to file restraining orders against church leaders, which greatly improved her emotional state.

³¹ Ashley and her husband faced financial hardship after leaving as they lost most of their clientele (as it was mostly people from their church) and had the additional burden of finding and paying for their own insurance.

Financial hardship can also be devastating upon leaving the plain community, as Caitlin said she “felt like [she] was screwed” and experienced enormous financial pressure given she could not get a higher paying job due to her 8th grade education. In addition, Caitlin had no idea how to manage her finances: “I didn't know how to use a checkbook. I didn't know that the debit card was connected to my checking account. I didn't know how to add up savings, like literally nothing.” Caitlin was unsure of whether her lack of financial management skills was the result of her Mennonite upbringing, given many young adults struggle with financial management as they establish their independence. However, when she first left the Mennonites, Caitlin did not have anyone to show her how to manage her finances, which was exacerbated by her lower-paying job and hospital bills. Overall, Caitlin said she “literally hit rock bottom” due to her financial situation.

In addition to financial illiteracy, low-paying jobs also lead to financial insecurity for the formerly plain, which disproportionately affects women. While men in the plain community typically work in trades such as farming, manufacturing, and construction, women have very little formal training and typically have jobs involving cleaning, retail, or cooking. After seeing men transition out of the community, Alice noticed that:

Boys are better equipped, because they are taught, like [her brother] knew how to lay bricks. He knew basic electrician skills. He knew how to do construction, things like that. We know how to clean and cook. And that's pretty much it. And the amount of money that you can make off of, you know, construction versus cleaning. That's a big difference.

Ronald noticed a similar trend: “I mean it's a lot harder for women to leave, like a lot of men they know trades and whatnot that they can earn decent money.” While Alice was able to get an education and enter a high paying trade herself, not all female respondents were as fortunate. The sample in this study is far too small to confirm a larger trend. Examples of gender inequity were notable in this study, however; for instance, Ally worked at a restaurant, while Patrick is an

electronics technician, and Margie worked in retail and cleaning, while Emmett works in construction management.³²

Straightforward Transitions

While this study focused on the challenges formerly plain individuals face while establishing a new life in the outside world, some respondents said that they did not feel particularly held back by their plain upbringing. Interestingly, the individuals who felt the least “held back” as a result of their plain upbringing were all male. This could just be a coincidence given the small sample size, or it could relate to the fact that these men were already trained in high-earning trades. Also, there were certainly respondents who were able to work through the initial limitations presented by their plain upbringing; the individuals discussed in this section simply did not feel that their different upbringing created barriers.

Patrick attended parochial school through 8th grade, and received his GED many years later “just to keep in his back pocket” in case he “needed a better diploma than the one I had from the Mennonite school.”³³ From a personal standpoint, Patrick said he never felt limited by his educational background and is currently (at the time of his interview) an electronics technician, saying he has “taken advantage of opportunities and learned skills [...] I’ve been willing to go work hard and always learning new skills. So, I feel like that’s one of the most important things.” While in the Mennonite community, Patrick helped his father with his construction business. He attributes his work ethic to his father, who taught him that:

No matter what job you get, you give it 100% even if you’re looking to do better for yourself. If this isn’t what your dream job is, you give it 100% because people that you

³²Ally, Patrick, Margie, and Emmett all have similar educational backgrounds.

³³Patrick received his GED after deciding not to be baptized into the Mennonite church, but was still able to live with his family.

work with may open doors for you in the future. So, you want to have, you know, good work ethic and have that reputation.

While Patrick's current job "doesn't make sense given [his] background," his ability to develop transferable life skills while in the Mennonite community set him up for future success.

Like Patrick, Emmett developed similar skills as a result of his upbringing. Emmett has an 8th grade education and helped his family with their farm while in the Mennonite community. When Emmett left the Mennonites, he held various jobs building decks and driving trucks. He currently manages construction projects, and—like Patrick—credits his Mennonite lifestyle for his work ethic:

I was brought up on a farm and working hard and stuff. It makes it easy for me to get work, even though I don't have any diplomas or degrees or anything. I don't even have a high school diploma. But still it's easy for me to find work. Usually people that grew up on a farm or conservative or whatever they were, they usually work harder and have more of a work ethic and people notice that pretty quickly, so that's one thing.

While Emmett specifically credited farm work for instilling his strong work ethic, it speaks to the broader point that many plain individuals work in jobs such as farming, construction, or manufacturing, all of which reward hard work. For those who choose to pursue different careers after leaving the plain community, the lessons and skills they acquired continue to benefit them.

Though Ronald is in school and has not yet embarked on his career path, he has already noticed that formerly plain individuals possess the skills that Patrick and Emmett highlighted: "I think most ex-Mennonite people, I feel most of them do have a good work ethic. And I think that goes a long way." Ronald is currently enrolled in college as his Mennonite school encouraged students to get a GED, which is "a little bit unusual for some conservative Mennonites." Because of his work ethic and educational access, Ronald felt that "the biggest challenges for me are emotional and spiritual," as opposed to the practical barriers previously discussed. Ronald's story

demonstrates how even in plain communities that prioritize education, the strong work ethic he gained from his plain upbringing further contributes to his success in mainstream society.

Cole experienced challenges after leaving his Mennonite community even with a high school diploma, though he does not believe they were necessarily a result of his plain upbringing. He reflected, “I mean, I think the challenges I faced were just normal challenges that a young person would face going out into the world and trying to survive.” Shortly after leaving the Mennonites, Cole found a job in electronic sales, met his wife, and “never looked back.” While Cole recognized that some individuals leaving plain communities may need transitional support, he admitted he is “really a pretty strong-willed person so I was going to do what I was going to do” and therefore is “not one that goes out looking for advice and help. That’s just not my style.” Another interesting aspect of Cole’s story is that while he was growing up, he had a “pretty substantial knowledge of what was going on in the world because I went to school, and I was inquisitive, and there was no internet, but there were libraries, and I had a voracious appetite for reading,” which could have given him the resources to act upon his strong wills. Cole’s story demonstrates that some individuals do not experience much hardship while transitioning out of a plain community, which could be the result of both circumstance and personality.

Experiences with Existing Support

There are four main sources of effective transitional support: affiliation with non-plain organized groups; building relationships independently with non-plain family members or friends; engaging with publicly available resources; and going to therapy. This section will discuss successful and unsuccessful interactions respondents had with these four sources of support.

Support from Affiliation with Organized Groups

Many respondents found support through organized opportunities for mainstream fellowship and mentorship, such as attending church or school. Ally said that “a friend of mine introduced me to the church he goes to, and these were mainly ex-Amish people who were not any certain denomination at all. They just got together. And they accepted me. And they loved me. They helped me.” This support allowed her to handle the emotional difficulties she faced upon leaving the Amish. Because many of these people were also ex-Amish, they were especially helpful in undoing the teachings of the Amish church, telling Ally, “you’re not going to hell for being divorced. And God’s not mad at you,” and that it is okay to get a haircut or wear makeup “because we’re all individuals.” Caitlin found necessary encouragement through an overseas mission trip sponsored by a non-plain church, where there were “people always like, encouraging you [...] there was struggle, but it was never negative, it was like you’re going to make it like, you just have to think about the positive, like you have to keep pushing through, like you can do this. If this is something that you want, you’re going to have to want to take all the steps necessary to get to the point that you want to be at, you know, so it really just kept me motivated.” When Caitlin returned from this mission trip, she was motivated and able to overcome some of the transitional challenges she had been grappling with before.

It is clear that church involvement was key for Ally and Caitlin. For individuals like Jonah who do not want any form of church affiliation, however, the options for fellowship and support are far more limited.³⁴ Jonah pointed out that many of the existing support mechanisms he encountered require involvement with the evangelical Christian church: “There’s a sort of very natural path. If you want to leave the Amish, you become evangelical Christian. And there’s

³⁴While Caitlin and Ally were not necessarily part of evangelical Christian churches, they did find much of their transitional support through religious institutions, which was part of Jonah’s point.

a lot of infrastructure and a lot of people there to welcome you and help you assimilate into the dominant culture.” Ronald similarly mentioned that he could join “a more mainstream church that would give me a lot of stability,” but does not wish to do so. He believes that “we don’t all have to agree to support each other.” Some of the transitional support options Ronald has encountered come with “this pressure to buy into their worldview or whatever,” referring specifically to an organization run by evangelical Christians, and as a result has forgone support opportunities.

Another source of fellowship and mentorship is educational opportunities. Ronald believes that his experience in college, specifically being surrounded by mainstream people, will “be a stabilizing influence on [his] life” that will help him fully acclimate to mainstream society. Alice found Ronald’s belief about college to be true, as she found a meaningful friendship with her now best friend Jessica through her school. Alice said that Jessica “definitely kicked my butt and pulled me along quite a few times,” and was the person who “insisted I try on clothes that were yellow or things that were tight, or were actually my size instead of you know, outrageously oversized.” Additionally, Jessica helped her be comfortable “working out in front of people, even. Just obviously, I had no idea how to work out. No lifting weights, no sports, no nothing in the world, and so just even being in a gym working out, especially in front of men, was a huge deal.” In these ways, Jessica is a source of both fellowship and informal mentorship for Alice.

Educational institutions also provide opportunities for formal mentorship. For instance, Alice built a relationship with an instructor in her college’s writing center who not only provided guidance on navigating college, but also encouragement and meaningful connection:

And honestly that helps so much just connecting with one person who could encourage you, who could kind of help guide you in you know, what the etiquette really was

honestly. And just having that connection was really helpful because I remember that was when I kind of realized like, as a Mennonite it's drilled into you that, they call them "people in the world." So, worldly people, you know, are just basically out to harm you, have no good intentions. You can't trust anybody if they're not a Mennonite. And realizing that that is actually a load of shit. And really, you know, there's good people, there's good in people. And making that connection I think was like the biggest thing and realizing that this is an awesome world out here, and I'm gonna have a lot of fun living my life.

Alice's relationships with both the writing instructor and Jessica demonstrate the nature of effective relationships as they pertain to transitional support.

Without church affiliation or school enrollment, individuals have limited opportunities to find support in the form of fellowship and especially in the form of mentorship. Given the spiritual dilemmas barring individuals from church affiliation and the educational access issues barring individuals from higher educational institutions, it is entirely possible that there are plain individuals who are not able to get support from these resources. Thus, although several respondents benefitted from churches and schools, these resources certainly are not relevant or available to all plain individuals and do not represent a universal source of support.

Support from Non-Plain Social Networks

Alice, James, Emmett, and Tim all had non-plain family members who were able to provide various forms of transitional support. Other respondents, such as Grace, did not have non-plain family but were still able to utilize their limited non-plain social networks to find acquaintances who were willing to help them. Regardless of the specific relationships, all of the respondents cited in this section were able to find support outside of a formal organization.

Alice felt fortunate to have supportive, non-Mennonite grandparents who welcomed her into their home and helped fund her bachelor's degree.³⁵ James was in a similar situation as Alice; he also lived with a non-plain relative after spending a tough year on his own. He said that this relative helped him acclimate to mainstream society in a variety of ways: "One of the things that [the relative] helped me with was finding a tutor," James said, which was critical to his ability to join the USMC. Further, this relative helped him develop social skills. In noting the many other ways this family member helped him get back on track, James mentioned that he "learned how to use a TV at her house, I didn't have a clue how to use one. So, of course she says you know you should probably grab the remote and put batteries in it first," emphasizing how his relative helped him adjust to many different aspects of mainstream society.

Emmett also had non-plain family members; his uncle left the community many years before he did. When he left the plain community, Emmett was able to move in with his uncle for a few months and help with his furniture building business. This allowed Emmett to learn about the outside world, including everything from learning how to take a real shower to getting a driver's license and car. Emmett said that having someone like his uncle "is probably the best thing that like, helps the most if somebody wants to leave [the plain community]," just as James and Alice said. Tim similarly had a brother who left the plain community over a decade before he left. Like Emmett's uncle, Tim's brother provided a place to live and temporary work, which enabled Tim to eventually gain independence and move elsewhere.

Grace found a formerly plain family "who is not biologically family to me, but I claim them as my family," due to their unwavering support throughout her transition. This family was

³⁵Alice's parents converted to the plain Mennonite community, so her non-immediate family members are all non-plain. A relative left her a "small trust fund for each grandchild because he was terrified that my mom's side children wouldn't have a proper education"

involved with Grace's former church, and when Grace was looking for somewhere to go, she reconnected with them on Facebook.³⁶ Though Grace only lived with this family for a few months, they continued to support her from afar after she moved elsewhere. The mother was particularly influential by pushing her to study for the GED: "She was like, you need to study and when you turn 18, [...] get your GED, because that's important. And so I did. I studied a lot." Even after Grace moved out of this family's home, this type of encouragement continued with frequent phone check-ins consisting of questions such as "How are you? What are you doing to get your GED? And I would be like, Well, you know, I'm working on this and she'd be like, but what are you doing to further your education? Like you studied for this when you were at the house, like don't let this go away." Because educational advancement is not typical of plain communities, Grace said that "if you have [this] encouragement from even just one or two people, it makes a huge difference" in handling the normal challenges that come along with getting a GED.³⁷ After getting her GED, Grace felt empowered to pursue post-secondary studies.

One of Caitlin's friends who also left a plain community referred her to a formerly plain couple, Martin and Susan, who help individuals navigate mainstream society. After Caitlin returned from her mission trip, she connected with Martin and Susan on Facebook and called them whenever she got overwhelmed trying to establish a new, stable life. Caitlin said that Martin and Susan helped with "finding housing that you can afford, helping you find a job, or like, just things like that, you know." Caitlin never lived with Martin and Susan, but she said they would let individuals stay with them until they could find housing, and helped many others

³⁶Grace had a flip phone with prepaid internet, and was able to access Facebook

³⁷Not only do many plain churches discourage the value of an education, but they also sometimes tell their people that they cannot achieve their educational goals. For instance, Alice said that "one of the reasons I went back to graduate school, and one of the reasons that kept me in grad school, was remembering the faces of the ministry when they told me that basically I would amount to a limelight. That was one of the big reasons I got my doctorate."

by “just making sure that they're stable enough to do what they need to do finding jobs, making sure if they need therapy or whatever, just helping you find a therapist and stuff like that.”

Martin and Susan have not only supported Caitlin, but they have also positively impacted many other formerly plain individuals who live nearby.

Publicly Available Support Services

Some respondents benefited a great deal from publicly available support services. Julia, for example, found a career center which “helped me quite a bit [...] It did testing for what my aptitudes are. They helped me discover what my Myers Briggs personality traits are, that was really significant.” These tests revealed her innate strengths and, based on this information, pointed her toward jobs where she would naturally excel. Caitlin, who struggled with finances, eventually found a local public agency that taught her how to create a budget and do her taxes on her own as well as providing GED preparation. Fortunately, the GED preparation staff had someone who “sat down with me like one on one and like, helped me get through like, algebra and like all those things, and she really helped me a lot,” Caitlin said in recognition of her positive experience. Similarly, Grace was able to find a public GED class through a distant friend who had also left her church, and was fortunate to have an extremely dedicated GED teacher who “was so helpful, that went above and beyond” by taking extra time to help her with algebra. Beyond these three experiences with publicly available support, however, no other respondents found help through a publicly available means.

Knowledge of cultural context is essential for many forms of transitional support, but what is reasonable to expect public service agencies to know about the plain community, especially given how relatively small it is? It would be unrealistic to expect every public agency in every part of the United States to have an in-depth understanding of the plain community, but

it is reasonable to expect at least *some* awareness of the issues that affect the plain—particularly formerly plain—individuals in areas with a relatively large plain population. Jonah, however, found that this was not the case when he contacted a call center that “runs a gamut of public services” located in an Amish-heavy area. Jonah asked, ““Do you have any programming that educates your, you know, your people receiving calls about Amish issues?” And they didn't. And I was on the phone with her for probably about 45 minutes and trying to go, would you be interested?” He suggested ideas for potential training and offered to give advice as a former-Amish, but the call center “didn't even consider having [him] come in.” This anecdote underscores the disconnect between public services and an understanding of the unique nature of plain life.

A recurring issue with mainstream transitional support is that many entities are not aware of plain lifestyles, the effects of which can permeate various facets of life. For example, when Caitlin was in a physically abusive relationship, she worked with the police and a local women’s shelter to petition for a Protection From Abuse Order, which is a civil court action. While the women’s shelter was very helpful in the process of petitioning, Caitlin had to go to court by herself; she was “freaking out” as she “didn’t know anything about the court system.” If the women’s shelter understood the extent of the culture shock Caitlin experienced from attending court, perhaps they would have provided additional support.

Another challenge with accessing public services is that plain communities often frown upon the use of public support. As discussed with regard to church-sponsored insurance, plain communities are often able to provide for their people through church funding and support, which no longer exists for individuals who leave. Caitlin said that “in the Mennonite communities it’s like, ‘oh my goodness, if you have, like, medical assistance or food stamps for a

while, like, that's like terrible.” As a result, it can take time to realize that it is acceptable to use public support, which Caitlin experienced: “If you're homeless and living on the street somewhere and you desperately need food or something, like just do it until you know that you're stable enough to take care of yourself. Like those things are there for a reason.” Carol similarly discussed the plain community’s attitude not only toward public services, but also toward receiving help in general: “There's a lot of fear. And a lot of ‘nobody's going to believe me. Nobody's going to be willing to help me. Nobody's going to care.’” This mindset is important to consider as it informs a transitioning individual’s view of available resources and the likelihood that they will utilize them. The combination of public services overlooking the needs of this population, compounded by the tendency of formerly plain to disregard the services that are available, diminishes the efficacy of these services altogether.

Therapy

Some individuals seek therapy after leaving their plain community to navigate these complex challenges. While respondents found therapy itself effective, they had trouble finding a therapist, especially one who had some plain church background without a particular agenda. When reflecting on his transition, James said, “I realized that if I had at least gotten some counseling when I first got out of the church, that that would have been really good,” and he could have been “leaps and bounds” from where he is now. However, James did not even know that this was an option when he needed it the most, saying that the only way he could imagine someone in this position going to counseling is if they happened to “find that one person that kind of has an insight and kind of can look at you and go, you know, have you ever tried to go to a counselor? And go from there. Because, I mean, you're not gonna go on a computer and start looking it up. You don’t even know how to use a computer.” Individuals leaving the church are

certainly in need of therapy, but it is unlikely that these same individuals would recognize this need *and* find an appropriate therapist.

Even for someone who has to access therapy, there is still the question of its effectiveness. Ashley said that it is important to see a therapist who has an understanding of the plain community, otherwise much of the time in therapy is spent providing context. Once Ashley started “going to a therapist who has a knowledge of the ins and outs of the churches and the belief system and how it works, [it] was a game changer,” as she “never had to give context at all,” which was vastly different from her initial experience with therapy. Where does one find a therapist with this highly specific knowledge? For Ashley, it was “out of the blue,” as she was not specifically looking for a new therapist. She and her husband frequently interact with their Natural Resources Conservation Service (NCRS) agent, who mentioned that he knew a therapist whose father was Mennonite and could really help their entire family. Without a serendipitous referral, however, it is hard to know where to look for a therapist that understands this relatively uncommon situation. Ronald said that another factor that influenced the efficacy of therapy was going to “mental health professionals that were neutral like that aren’t trying to push people in any certain way [...] without an agenda.” He wanted to objectively weigh all of his options regarding his future and the plain church, but his therapist seemed to have an agenda of urging him to leave the plain community.

Summary of Findings

My findings ultimately reveal a wide range of transitional challenges, which vary in nature and severity depending on the situation and individual. Given all of the challenges involved in transitioning from the plain world to the secular world, respondents emphasized the importance of having significant internal motives for leaving the plain community. Upon leaving

the plain community, respondents experienced emotional challenges involving identity conflicts, loneliness, and trouble fitting in socially and culturally with mainstream society. In addition to these emotional challenges, respondents experienced spiritual challenges as a result of undoing a lifetime of intense plain church indoctrination and “mind control,” as Ally described it. These emotional and spiritual challenges compound each other; for example, respondents had trouble fitting in with mainstream society due to concerns about going to hell for changing their lifestyle.

Respondents also faced challenges finding a stable place to live, advancing their education, and understanding mainstream finances, insurance, and legal matters. The mainstream world operates very differently than the plain world, and the mainstream world fails to provide guidance and support that specifically targets the needs of plain groups. While some respondents were able to find effective support through secondary and post-secondary educational institutions and non-plain family or friend networks, not every respondent had access to these resources. Non-plain churches were another source of effective transitional support; however, some respondents, though aware of the support a church could provide, avoided joining one as it did not align with their new worldview. A few respondents benefitted from publicly available support such as GED programs and career centers, but there remains a great need for culturally competent public services, especially those near plain communities. Every respondent who went to therapy greatly benefitted from it, especially if the therapist was familiar with plain circumstances. However, other respondents who would have benefitted from therapy were either unaware of therapy as a concept, unable to access therapy, or both.

Policy Recommendations

Given the discussion of the emotional, spiritual, and practical challenges that formerly plain individuals face as they transition to mainstream society, as well as the discussion of

effective and ineffective support systems that already exist, there is a clear need for entrance paths. Although there are potential policies that could enhance exit rights for plain individuals, creating entrance paths is an approach that is more feasible and holistic (Ben-Porath 2011, 1021). Policies aimed towards exit rights, such as overturning *Yoder*, for instance, involve complicated legal questions regarding the boundaries of religious freedom and parental rights.³⁸ Furthermore, even if plain individuals were held to the same educational requirements as everyone else, they would still face emotional and spiritual challenges upon leaving, as demonstrated by the experiences of several respondents.³⁹ Therefore, even if *Yoder* were overturned, there would still be a need for entrance paths to facilitate the many other aspects of transitioning out of a plain community.

One theme that emerged is that plain individuals tend to rely on their limited outside world network as they make their transition. Several respondents lived with family members or acquaintances who were already integrated into mainstream society and could provide guidance and encouragement. What if a plain individual does not have any contacts outside of their community? Given the separatist nature of plain communities, this is entirely possible and probable for many plain individuals. Therefore, I propose a system consisting of non-residential community centers combined with a residential network of pre-screened, trained, safe people designed to address the specific needs of this population. The proposed system would not only

³⁸Currently, The Amish Heritage Foundation (AHF), founded by a formerly plain individual, is leading an effort to overturn *Yoder*. AHF is doing a 30-state tour in order to find an Amish plaintiff who can help overturn *Yoder*. While these efforts are admirable and worthwhile, I do not think that *Yoder* will be overturned anytime soon, especially given the current conservative Supreme Court.

³⁹In fact, Ashley, Alice, Margie, and Julia all had their GED before leaving their plain communities. Ronald had plans in place to attend college upon leaving, and Carol was in the middle of college when she decided to leave her plain community. All six of these individuals faced significant challenges in transitioning to mainstream society, even though they were unaffected by the implications of the *Yoder* decision.

provide a physical place for individuals to go upon leaving their plain community, but it would also be a centralized way to provide many of the necessary resources discussed in this paper.

Several respondents indicated that there is a great need for safe houses and were inspired by seeing how useful this type of system is for other vulnerable populations. Jonah specifically referenced how “the LGBTQ community has you know, [...] if somebody needs to get out of trouble, you know, with their parents or whatever family don't support them, they have safe houses, they really stick together and make it happen,” and believes that a similar model could be beneficial for individuals leaving plain communities. Formerly plain individuals share many similarities with members of the LGBTQ community in that they experience a shift in identity and often lose the support of their family, and possibly their entire social ecosystem, upon leaving the plain community. Ashley had an idea similar to Jonah’s proposed concept: “Best case scenario, in my mind, would be similar to a foster care situation for adults [...] Someone who has a stable house, who can help guide while they're processing everything and just letting them be for a little bit,” recognizing that these individuals also face significant emotional and spiritual challenges upon leaving.

While Jonah and Ashley were thinking of a more formal safe house facility, Carol and Emmett had a more informal safe house concept in mind. Carol’s concept had historical roots:

I'm thinking about how it would be helpful, potentially to have safe houses. Safe people. That would be kind of, and I'm thinking along the lines of like Harriet Tubman during the slave trade, she was a safe person, she helps get people out, having those safe people that understand the community and understand the difficulty of getting out and kind of have a network of, of people available. So, if there's, you know, a way to get the word to the young people, or even older people that are trying to get out and don't feel like they have anybody that they can turn to to have those people available to them.

Carol’s concept would provide individuals with the support that many respondents were able to receive from outside friends and family members, or through a series of connections and word of

mouth. Emmett believes that this would be the best resource for transitioning individuals, and said that if he knew someone who wanted to leave their plain community, he “would give them all the support as far as if they need a place to go and find jobs and stuff like that. I would do the same for anybody else that my uncle did for me.” Individuals like Emmett could certainly serve as the “safe people” Carol mentioned, as they wish to pay it forward. In addition, some safe people already exist, such as Martin and Susan.

Regarding the current implementation of safe houses, Jonah, who remains very up to date on Amish issues, said that as of Fall 2019, “unless you want to go to some evangelical Christian place, there's nothing that is really up and running that I know of.” The evangelical Christian place Jonah was referring to is run by Mission to Amish People (MAP), a Christian ministry in Ohio.⁴⁰ I interviewed a representative from MAP via email in order to learn more about the ministry.⁴¹ According to this representative, MAP’s primary goal is to spread the truth of the gospel, though they also offer various forms of transitional support—from temporary apartments to help managing finances—making them a model for the formal safe house concept. According to their website, MAP currently runs New Beginnings Homestead, which is essentially a formal safe house for “young, vulnerable women who leave the Amish culture” with the goal of providing “a place they can land, feel safe, and get the help they need to succeed on their own.” However, MAP says that their homestead apartments are currently full, and “there is a growing

⁴⁰MAP said that their “ultimate goal is to bring the truth of the gospel to the Amish and former Amish alike,” which is a great challenge as “the Amish religion is very tradition-based and is all about doing good works and hoping that when they die one day their good works will outweigh their bad works, so they can gain access to Heaven.” MAP teaches that “all of our works are like dirty rags compared to God’s righteousness, so even though we will never be able to be good enough to gain access into Heaven, we don’t have to; we want to show them that Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was sufficient and all that is needed to join His family,” which they say is very challenging as the Amish are “very tied to their religions and traditions.”

⁴¹Unless otherwise specified, all quotes from MAP come from this interview.

need for housing.”⁴² MAP also provides guidance to ex-Amish individuals beyond the Homestead by helping individuals get their GEDs through a partnership with local education groups, get social security numbers and birth certificates, manage finances, and learn about mainstream culture. MAP says that a lot of their work pertains to helping the former Amish tear down their cultural and spiritual wall, as simple aspects of mainstream life such as ordering fast food or showing affection “can be really difficult for the former Amish.”

The safe house-inspired proposal presented in this section would involve non-residential community centers that would provide both direct services to transitioning individuals as well as indirect administrative support in order to facilitate a network of safe people who could provide housing and informal support. This incorporates some aspects of MAP’s ministry but adds more housing options with lower overhead costs and expands the geographical reach of support services. Unlike MAP, however, this concept would not have a religious affiliation.

Non-Residential Community Centers

Non-residential community centers would serve as a centralized base for all issues pertaining to the transition out of a plain community, providing both direct transitional support services as well as administrative support for safe people hosting those in transition. These community centers would be located near the largest plain communities, such as Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Holmes County, Ohio, and LaGrange County, Indiana, serving as regional “bases” to support and monitor the safe person network in that region.⁴³ For instance, the LaGrange base would oversee the informal safe person network in Illinois and Iowa. The

⁴²In MAP’s experience, “most [Amish who leave] only have the clothes on their back and a few dollars in their pockets,” which makes accessible housing a very important form of transitional support.

⁴³See Appendix C for maps and statistics on “Amish Group” populations in the United States, according to the US Religion Census in 2010.

community centers themselves can be quite small as they only need to have a few office spaces as well as a “living room” type of gathering area. This approach would be cost-effective while also maximizing geographic reach both to those in need of transitional support and those willing to host a transitioning individual. The alternative would be to have more community centers near more plain communities, which would be expensive due to start-up and operating costs. Building a network from just three community center bases, however, reaches the same amount of plain communities (if not more) while minimizing costs.

The personnel involved in these community centers would consist of a full-time director, state Department of Human Services (DHS) caseworkers, two full-time administrators, and volunteers. The director would oversee all operations of the community center, including fundraising and volunteer efforts, communicating with the state DHS, hiring, programming, and coordinating the residential network. The caseworkers would be state social workers from the DHS who would partner with these community centers in order to gain cultural competence and provide support to this population. Caseworkers would be essential in connecting individuals with publicly available services and in helping ensure publicly available services are aware of the individual’s situation.

The number of caseworkers would depend on the number of individuals utilizing these community centers, so it would be best to begin with just one caseworker and expand as needed. It is important to note that depending on state licensing requirements, caseworkers from the Pennsylvania DHS, for instance, may not be able to provide services to individuals from other states. Because the three community centers serve as regional bases, it is likely that some individuals seeking support will reside in other states, in which case the full-time administrators and director would serve as caseworkers and connect individuals with services in their respective

state.⁴⁴ The full-time administrators would aid the director with operations, particularly with outreach efforts to fundraise, recruit volunteers and safe people, and reach formerly plain individuals. The administrators would also assist in operating the residential network of safe people, and in building familiarity with the DHS in surrounding states. Finally, volunteers would help both operationally and in providing direct services to formerly plain individuals. Volunteers would have the opportunity to use their area of expertise to run workshops or provide mentorship. Involving volunteers would also help the program gain community awareness and support.

When a transitioning individual first contacts or visits one of these community centers, they would be assigned to a caseworker, who would help the individual develop a transitional plan tailored to their situation which maximizes the available resources. For instance, if a homeless individual who just left a plain community in Illinois contacts the center in LaGrange County, an administrator (serving as a caseworker due to the out-of-state individual) would first connect the individual with a safe person nearby. As the individual settles into the safe person's residence, the administrator would work with the safe person as well as the individual in order to evaluate the next steps, such as getting a GED, vocational, or post-secondary degree, finding a job, and/or scheduling therapy sessions. Throughout the process, the administrator would evaluate the individual's changing needs and suggest solutions. While the amount of time it takes to fully transition to mainstream society varies from person to person, MAP has found that "most are on their feet and ready to stand in the English culture after 1-2 years of being out. It seems like many adapt once they get a job and driver's license and can stand on their own a little bit more. They gain a lot more confidence and feel a part of the world they are surrounded by when

⁴⁴Ideally, over time, this community center initiative can expand to other states with plain populations, streamlining their relationship with the state's DHS.

they can actually be a part of it.”⁴⁵ Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that each individual would spend roughly 2 years working with the caseworker. During the first few months of the transition, caseworkers would check in with formerly plain individuals on a weekly basis, with additional meetings as needed. As individuals engage with resources and establish more stability, caseworkers would check in on a monthly basis instead.

In addition to matching individuals with a caseworker and (if needed) safe person, the community centers would provide direct services such as career and educational advancement guidance, financial advising, and therapy all under one roof. In response to the need for fellowship cited by respondents, the community centers would also help facilitate such opportunities through social events with other community center visitors, joining a church or a local adult sports league, and more. The community center director would be in charge of these in-house efforts as they are rather specific to the plain population. The community center staff, such as caseworkers and administrators, could also serve as mentors to provide everything from fashion advice to music and movie recommendations.

Regarding therapy, the community centers could find therapists who are either already informed of the specifics of plain culture or who are willing to learn. Looking back, James wished that he had access to a counselor during his transition, but said that people in his position “have a really hard time finding a counselor just on intuition,” as the concept of counseling itself is foreign to many plain churches. Ronald and Ashley both had experiences with therapy upon leaving their plain communities, but pointed to the importance of having a counselor who is informed yet neutral. Therefore, it is important that community centers provide therapists who

⁴⁵MAP said that it is “really hard to put an exact timeline on how long it takes for former Amish to transition into mainstream society since everyone is different. Some transition quickly, and some can take years and years to transition and still feel out of place.” As a result, MAP has worked with individuals who take a few months to transition as well as individuals who have been out of the Amish culture for 30 years and still feel out of place.

have knowledge of the plain community before providing therapy to transitioning individuals. As for neutrality, the community center would need to further ensure that the therapists do not have an agenda. In order to save costs, community centers could try to find therapists who are either willing to work pro bono or who are still in school, but are about to graduate.

Guidance on professional and academic advancement was another challenge that respondents identified, and community centers could certainly provide this guidance. To this end, community centers would have career coaches to help individuals evaluate their strengths and professional goals, such as the aptitude test that Julia mentioned, and then help them apply to the appropriate schools or jobs. When possible, caseworkers could connect individuals with public career centers. Volunteers would also have the chance to run career workshops, ranging from how to succeed in a particular industry to general interview advice. Tim pointed out that many of these individuals are “trying to find out what they want to do with their life;” therefore, this career coaching would help maximize their potential. For instance, after her issues with filling out the FAFSA, Grace believes that specific guidance on how to go back to school is critical information to provide. Grace said that she wished she had been told to “go talk to a specific person, and they will help you figure [FAFSA] out. Instead of just being like floundering,” which would have allowed her to attend college sooner.

As for financial and insurance-related advice, community center administrators and volunteers could develop a curriculum for individuals about budgeting, taxes, savings, and choosing insurance. While there are already mainstream resources available in this area, this proposed curriculum would start from the absolute basics and provide additional coaching as individuals begin to establish themselves financially. For individuals in or near the centers, this curriculum would be presented in person, whereas there would be a virtual version for those who

reside far away from the centers. More involved safe people could also become familiar with this curriculum and impart it to those who stay with them.

Respondents had positive experiences with mainstream GED programs, suggesting there is no additional need for the community centers to develop an entire “plain specific” GED curriculum. However, community centers could still help by promoting the importance of getting a GED and connecting transitioning individuals with local public GED programs. Once an individual joins a GED program, volunteers and staff could provide encouragement as well as extra academic support, such as math tutoring, when needed.

As with the inception of any nonprofit organization, there are some implementation challenges in establishing these community centers, such as raising money and facilitating outreach within plain communities. MAP, for instance, is a nonprofit organization that relies on volunteerism and financial donations, and is likely able to fundraise within the larger Christian community and missionary networks. The proposed system would also be a nonprofit, but would not have an official religious affiliation because respondents noted the need for a secular support system, which would preclude fundraising opportunities in the Christian network.⁴⁶

There is, however, a network of ex-Amish and ex-Mennonite individuals who are interested in supporting people like themselves, and this system provides an opportunity to do so. Through volunteering as well as financial and material donations, the ex-Amish and ex-Mennonite community could contribute to both the startup costs and ongoing operation of a community center, along with opening their homes as temporary residences. Finally, other

⁴⁶Some respondents benefited from joining a new, non-plain church, while other respondents wanted nothing to do with any kind of church. For the sake of allowing individuals to figure out what they want after leaving, community centers will not be affiliated with any particular religion or church. However, if an individual wishes to join a new church, this system can support them in doing so by pointing them to different churches, finding them someone at that church to talk to, etc.

organizations have been successful in raising money to support this population, such as the Amish Descendant Scholarship Fund (ADS fund). Since its inception in 2010, the ADS fund facilitates donations to provide college scholarships for those who grew up Amish and whose families are still Amish (the recipient can be Amish or formerly Amish, as long as the criteria applies to them). For the 2019 scholarship cycle, the ADS fund raised \$20,000 to distribute among scholarship applicants, thus demonstrating that fundraising for the formerly plain population is possible.⁴⁷

Spreading the word about this system to individuals who have left or are considering leaving plain communities is also a challenge, as these individuals have varying accessibility to phones, the internet, and the outside world in general. Websites and a social media presence are useful for the plain or formerly plain who have access to the internet. MAP has found that their website has been their most effective form of outreach, claiming that “you would be surprised how many adults and young people alike have cell phones and internet access in today’s Amish society. They have an easy time finding us and reading all about our ministry through our website.”⁴⁸ Flyers would be effective outreach for those who have access to mainstream stores, libraries, schools, transportation hubs, and the like. James suggested that employees at stores where plain people frequent, such as Walmart, hunting stores, and Bass Pro Shops, be made aware of resources that are available for people leaving plain communities, as he had considered asking questions of staff at these stores. As for plain individuals whose access to the internet and public spaces is more limited, word of mouth could also be a powerful tool, especially if safe

⁴⁷The proposed program would have more community visibility than the ADS fund, as the latter only exists as a website. As a result, the proposed program will likely have greater fundraising power.

⁴⁸The question arises as to whether the website is an effective outreach tool, or if the only individuals who are able to find MAP are the ones who found their website. There is no way to know the number of individuals who wanted to engage with an organization like MAP, but because the individual had no internet access, they had no way of finding the organization.

people make a concerted effort to reach out to young people from their prior communities. MAP says many individuals do in fact hear about their organization through word of mouth: “When a young Amish boy or girl is looking to leave and needs a place to go, though, they know we are here and that there is someone to help, and a lot of times, that’s all they need to know to reach out and make a connection with us.”⁴⁹ MAP’s positive experience with word of mouth outreach suggests that information about this support system would similarly permeate through other plain communities.

Outreach is an important aspect of making this system effective, and as McAvoy states, “each policy carries with it the obligation to conduct outreach to young people within Anabaptist communities” in order to “inform young people of available options” (McAvoy 2012, 550).

McAvoy examines ways that states can engage in outreach with insular fundamentalist youth, and suggests that:

A social worker might make an effort to visit workplaces to make sure that young people are aware of the local opportunities. The local police, who often deal with the more disruptive youth in large communities like LaGrange, Indiana, could also disseminate options to young people with whom they come into contact. Such outreach would need to be carefully executed so that the state does not proselytize an antireligious message, but simply informs young people of available options. (McAvoy 2012, 550)

While I envision this system as a privately-run nonprofit that partners with DHS, any state personnel, from police officers to NCRS agents, who come into contact with plain or formerly plain individuals could also pass on this information.

⁴⁹While word of mouth is a powerful outreach tool for MAP, the ministry said that “we get a lot of bad “press” in the Amish. Parents warn their children about our ministry and tell them that we have odd beliefs, try to tear families apart, etc.” However, when an Amish individual wants to leave, they are aware MAP exists and typically reach out “no matter how much they are warned against us previously,” MAP said.

“Safe People” Residential Network

Because there cannot be a community center near every United States plain community, it is necessary to have a nationwide network of safe people to provide housing and informal guidance for individuals transitioning out of plain communities. As discussed in the previous section, the community centers, located near the three largest plain communities, would serve as administrative bases for regional safe people networks. Not only would these regional networks expand the reach of these community centers, but they would also provide a low-cost temporary residence for those who need it. Even individuals near a community center would have to stay in a safe person’s residence if they are in need of a place to stay, as the community centers would not have apartments. As for the duration of stay with safe people, MAP has found with their apartments for ex-Amish girls: “We try to help them get on their feet enough to move on within a year or shortly thereafter, so the apartments can open up to allow room for more,” which would also be the goal for this particular program.

The community center staff (i.e. director and administrators) would be responsible for recruiting safe people who reside throughout the region. Much of this recruiting would take place online through Facebook groups such as those used to recruit participants for this study. Ideally, the recruitment efforts would have a snowball effect, as interested safe people will refer others. Interested safe people could fill out an interest form with information about themselves, and then the community center team would conduct a background check, a video or in-person interview (depending on proximity to the center), and a virtual or in-person tour of the home. If the safe person proves capable of providing a safe and nurturing environment for transitioning individuals, they would be required to undergo a virtual orientation of the resources the community center can provide. This orientation would also provide an overview of the

transitional challenges these individuals face and advice on how to help individuals acclimate to mainstream culture.⁵⁰ Upon completion of the virtual orientation, safe people would be added to the safe person directory. Once there is an individual in need nearby, a caseworker would match the safe person with the individual.⁵¹

While the safe people orientation would provide all the basic information necessary to host an individual transitioning out of a plain community, safe people would have the option to further their involvement with the community center's transitional support efforts. For instance, experienced safe people could become local ambassadors who help recruit, screen, and train safe people. These ambassadors would also help facilitate a local network of transitioning individuals in order to provide fellowship opportunities. In addition, if a safe person is a professional in any of the transitional support categories, they could become the local expert and provide their specialized service to others nearby. For example, if one of the safe people is a math teacher, that person could help tutor nearby individuals who need extra math help for the GED.

When hosting a transitioning individual, safe people would work with the caseworker and/or administrators to provide all necessary support. For instance, if an individual wishes to get a GED but is residing with a safe person far away from the community center, the caseworker would find a nearby GED program and help both the safe person and the individual put together a transportation and/or study plan. If the individual finds that the math section is especially difficult, they could contact the caseworker and receive virtual tutoring. Virtual support would

⁵⁰ Although many formerly plain individuals seem to be willing to help the next generation of defectors, this training would allow anyone, regardless of prior affiliation with the plain community, to become safe people.

⁵¹ If necessary, safe people could apply for a food stipend from the community center to offset the cost (food, utilities, etc.) of hosting someone. These costs would likely decrease as the individual finds a job and starts contributing to household costs, which would be worked out between the individual, safe person, and community center.

also exist for other services that are highly specific to plain individuals, including career support and financial advising, over the phone.⁵²

If a transitioning individual is staying with a family member or friend (who is not affiliated with this system) who lives far away from a community center, the individual could still receive support from this system. As previously mentioned, any transitioning individual who contacts the community center would be assigned to a caseworker or equivalent. While much of the support would be virtual, these individuals would have the opportunity to connect with any local ambassadors or experts, as well as the local network of transitioning individuals.⁵³

Conclusion

Upon leaving a plain community, individuals grapple with emotional challenges pertaining to identity, loneliness, indoctrination, and integration while also facing a world that operates radically differently from the plain world. While some respondents found formal and informal support through churches, higher education, social networks, publicly available support, and therapy, respondents cited shortcomings in both access to existing support as well as the nature of this support.

Given these emotional, spiritual, and practical challenges formerly plain individuals face as they transition to mainstream society, the community center-based system provides a holistic entrance path that is feasible in the short term. This system responds not only to the overall challenges respondents described, but also to the specific experiences they had with the existing support infrastructure. While some respondents were fortunate to have a mainstream social

⁵²Although using technology may be a foreign concept to some transitioning individuals, the safe people could introduce them to the technology involved in accessing these resources.

⁵³The nature of the support provided in these situations would be similar to the support Caitlin and Grace received over the phone, as discussed in the effective support section.

network established before leaving the plain community, not all respondents, and certainly not all plain individuals, have this privilege. Therefore, there is a need for an all-encompassing entrance path that is accessible to *any* individual leaving a plain community.

The question of whether the limiting practices that define plain communities should be allowed to continue is beyond the scope of this paper and is a question of United States and state-specific jurisprudence rather than one of public policy. As long as these limitations are imposed on individuals by plain communities, however, the theory of entrance paths implicates the dominant society to aid the transitions of the formerly plain. Furthermore, even if plain communities become less restrictive, there will still be a need for some forms of transitional support. While existing public aid can help with some needs of some plain individuals, this paper has shown that there is still a gap in both connecting individuals to already existing resources as well as in the availability of resources specific to plain transitions.⁵⁴

⁵⁴Although this paper fills a gap in research regarding the experiences of the formerly plain, this paper presents other opportunities for research as well. Given that those who reported a rather straightforward transition were all male, more research is necessary to investigate how gender impacts the transitional experience. Another gap in research pertains to the transitional experiences of minors who leave plain communities independently, as they face unique legal challenges. Through Grace's story, this paper provides a glimpse of these issues, but does not involve enough data to generalize to a policy intervention. With more research on the transitional needs of minors, transitional support will certainly improve.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Cory. 2013. "Who Are the Plain Anabaptists? What Are the Plain Anabaptists?" *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 1 (1): 26–71.
<https://doi.org/10.18061/1811/54897>.
- Bender, Harold. 1955. "Excommunication." Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. 1955. <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Excommunication>.
- Ben-Porath, Sigal. 2010. "Exit Rights and Entrance Paths: Accommodating Cultural Diversity in a Liberal Democracy." *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (4): 1021–33.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592710003166>.
- Flick, Uwe. 2013. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*. London: SAGE Publications. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/10109280>.
- Foster, Thomas W. 1997. "American Culture Through Amish Eyes: Perspectives of an Anarchist Protest Movement." *Social Thought & Research* 20 (1/2): 89–108.
- Galston, William A. 2002. *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
<http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=78356&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- "Geographic Location." 2012. Hutterian Brethren. February 29, 2012.
<http://www.hutterites.org/the-leut/distribution/>.
- Katz, Mira L., Amy K. Ferketich, Electra D. Paskett, and Clara D. Bloomfield. 2013. "Health Literacy Among the Amish: Measuring a Complex Concept Among a Unique Population." *Journal of Community Health* 38 (4): 753–58.
<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1007/s10900-013-9675-z>.
- Mazie, Steven V. 2005. "Consenting Adults? Amish Rumspringa and the Quandary of Exit in Liberalism." *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (4): 745–59.
- McAvoy, Paula. 2012. "'There Are No Housewives on Star Trek ": A Reexamination of Exit Rights for the Children of Insular Fundamentalist Parents." *Educational Theory* 62 (5): 535–52. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2012.00461.x>.
- McConnell, David L., and Charles E. Hurst. 2006. "No 'Rip van Winkles' Here: Amish Education since 'Wisconsin v. Yoder.'" *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 37 (3): 236–54.
- Meyers, Thomas J. n.d. "The Old Order Amish: To Remain in the Faith or to Leave." *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 21.

- Nyce, Dorothy Y. 1989. "Gender Roles." Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. 1989. https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Gender_Roles.
- Okin, Susan Moller. 2002. "'Mistresses of Their Own Destiny': Group Rights, Gender, and Realistic Rights of Exit." *Ethics* 112 (2): 205–30. <https://doi.org/10.1086/324645>.
- Ozar, Ryan H. 2018. "Accommodating Amish Students in Public Schools: Teacher Perspectives on Educational Loss, Gain, and Compromise." Ph.D., United States -- Ohio: Kent State University.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/2124408090/abstract/6464C4159B7042A2PQ/1>.
- Preheim, Rich. 2018. "History: An Evolution from Amish." *Mennonite World Review* (blog). September 9, 2018. <http://mennoworld.org/2018/09/08/columns/history-an-evolution-from-amish/>.
- Reiling, Denise M. 2002. "The 'Simmie' Side of Life: Old Order Amish Youths' Affective Response to Culturally Prescribed Deviance." *Youth & Society* 34 (2): 146–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004411802237861>.
- Shachtman, Tom. 2006. "Rumspringa: Amish Teens Venture into Modern Vices." NPR.Org. June 7, 2006. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5455572>.
- Steiner, Samuel. 2018. "Charity Ministries." Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. August 2018. https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Charity_Ministries&oldid=164996.
- Third Way. n.d. "Women's Roles." *Third Way: Simply Following Jesus* (blog). Accessed October 28, 2019. <http://thirdway.com/glossary/womens-roles/>.
- "U.S. Religion Census | Religious Statistics & Demographics." 2010. 2010. <http://www.usreligioncensus.org/>.
- Walker, Lucy. 2002. *Devil's Playground*. Stick Figure Productions. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0h4nRYZ8d0>.
- Wisconsin v. Yoder. 1972, 92 Supreme Court Reporter 1526. United States Supreme Court.

Appendix A: Recruitment and Interview Materials

Recruitment Flyer:

Research Study about Ex-Amish and Ex-Mennonite transitions to the Outside World

Research Purpose: A University of Chicago Public Policy student is studying the transition experiences of Ex-Amish and Ex-Mennonite individuals in order to identify best practices and potential policies for easing this transition. **This research study is for individuals who were raised Amish or Mennonite, but who left these communities for the outside world.** Participation in this study is voluntary and will involve a phone interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes.



THE UNIVERSITY OF
CHICAGO

Would this study be a good fit for me? This study may be a good fit for you if you were raised Amish or Mennonite but left the religion/community.

What would happen if I took part in the study? If you decide to participate in the study, you would first fill out a brief demographic survey, linked on this flyer. If you fit the criteria, you will receive an email to schedule a phone interview. Phone interviews will take place at a mutually agreed upon time, and can take place during evenings or weekends.

Location of Research: There research activities will be conducted virtually using an online form and the phone, so there is no need for participants to travel.

Contact Information: To take part in this Ex-Amish and Ex-Mennonite transition experience research study, please fill out the following form:
<https://forms.gle/61kAqzn6g1aw7TRa8>.

Contact Addison Leavy
(agleavy@uchicago.edu) with any questions or concerns.

Study IRB#: IRB19-1635

Pre-Interview Form:

Pre-Interview Form: Ex-Amish/Mennonite Transition Study

Thank you for your interest in the study! Please fill out the following form, and I will contact you if I am still recruiting participants.

Some additional background: This study is for a college senior thesis about the experience of Ex-Amish/Mennonite individuals integrating into the English world. I am looking for Ex-Amish/Mennonite individuals who would be interested in sharing their story with me in the form of a phone interview lasting between 60-90 minutes. I would have some questions to guide the conversation, and we will arrange a mutually convenient time for the phone call. Please email me at agleavy@uchicago.edu with any questions or concerns.

* Required

Name *

Your answer

Email address *

Your answer

Gender *

Your answer

Birth year *

Your answer

Current occupation *

Your answer _____

Religion of upbringing *

Amish

Mennonite

Other: _____

In what year did you leave the community in which you were raised? (For example, if you were raised in an Amish community, in what year did you leave the Amish community?) *

Your answer _____

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? If currently enrolled, highest degree received. *

- No schooling completed
- Nursery school to 8th grade
- Some high school, no diploma
- High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)
- Some college credit, no degree
- Trade/technical/vocational training
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Professional degree
- Doctorate degree
- Other: _____

(optional) Comments/notes:

Your answer _____

Thank you! I will email you with next steps shortly.

Submit

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

This form was created inside of The University of Chicago. [Report Abuse](#)

Interview Guide:

- **First, some background so that I can understand the specifics of the environment you are coming from. Tell me about your upbringing.**
 - What was your schooling like while in your former community?
 - What was your work experience like while in your former community?
 - Did you ever try to go to a public school/activities outside the Amish community? Why or why not? If so, tell me about how your family and community responded. How did this make you feel?
 - Was this what you expected? Why or why not?
 - What did you know about the modern/English world, and how did you know it?
- **Now I am interested in hearing more about your decision to exit, as well as about the start of your transition. Up first...**
 - When did you first consider leaving the community? What prompted these considerations?
 - What were the circumstances that led you to leave the community?
 - Do you feel that the decision was informed? How do you now feel about this decision?
 - Did you tell anyone in the Amish community that you were thinking about/were leaving? If so, how did people respond? Are these responses what you expected?
 - Where did you first go upon leaving?
 - Did you have a plan on where to go/what to do, and if so, what was it? How did you develop this plan?
- **Now for life after the exit- the transition process**
 - After the exit, where were you, where did you go, did anyone help you (if so, how?)
 - Who or what was your greatest resource in making this transition?
 - Looking back, what do you think would have been useful to know about the English world before you left?
 - What were the greatest benefits of an Amish/Mennonite upbringing?
 - How did these benefits influence your life post-exit?
 - What has been the short and long term outcomes of these benefits?
 - What were the greatest challenges you faced upon establishing this new life for yourself, and how did you work with them?
 - How long did these challenges persist?
 - How did these challenges affect your life?
 - How did you overcome them? Do any challenges stemming from your upbringing still persist?
 - Were there gaps in your education (schooling)?
 - How long did these gaps persist?
 - What were the effects of these gaps?

- Did you attempt to fill these gaps? If so, how, and what was the result?
 - If respondent had additional schooling after exit: tell me about your experience accessing this education, and about your experience in this school.
 - Describe other gaps you experienced (social, cultural, etc.)
 - How long did these gaps persist? How did the gaps change over time?
 - What were the effects of these gaps?
 - Did you attempt to fill these gaps? If so, how, and what was the result?
 - Were you able to find mentorship in the outside community? If so, please describe
- **To wrap up, I am now interested in hearing your policy ideas and general thoughts about the transition.**
 - If you could give any advice to Amish/Mennonite youth, what would you tell them? Why?
 - Would the advice be different based on gender, age, desire to leave the community, etc? Why?
 - Based on your experiences and opinions, what policies/programs/networks would be most helpful for Amish/Mennonite individuals looking to leave their communities for the English World? What do you wish you had access to during this transition?
 - What kinds of policies/programs, if any, do you believe could help Amish/Mennonite children make an informed decision about their future, and what policies/programs would help them make the change from Amish/Mennonite to English?

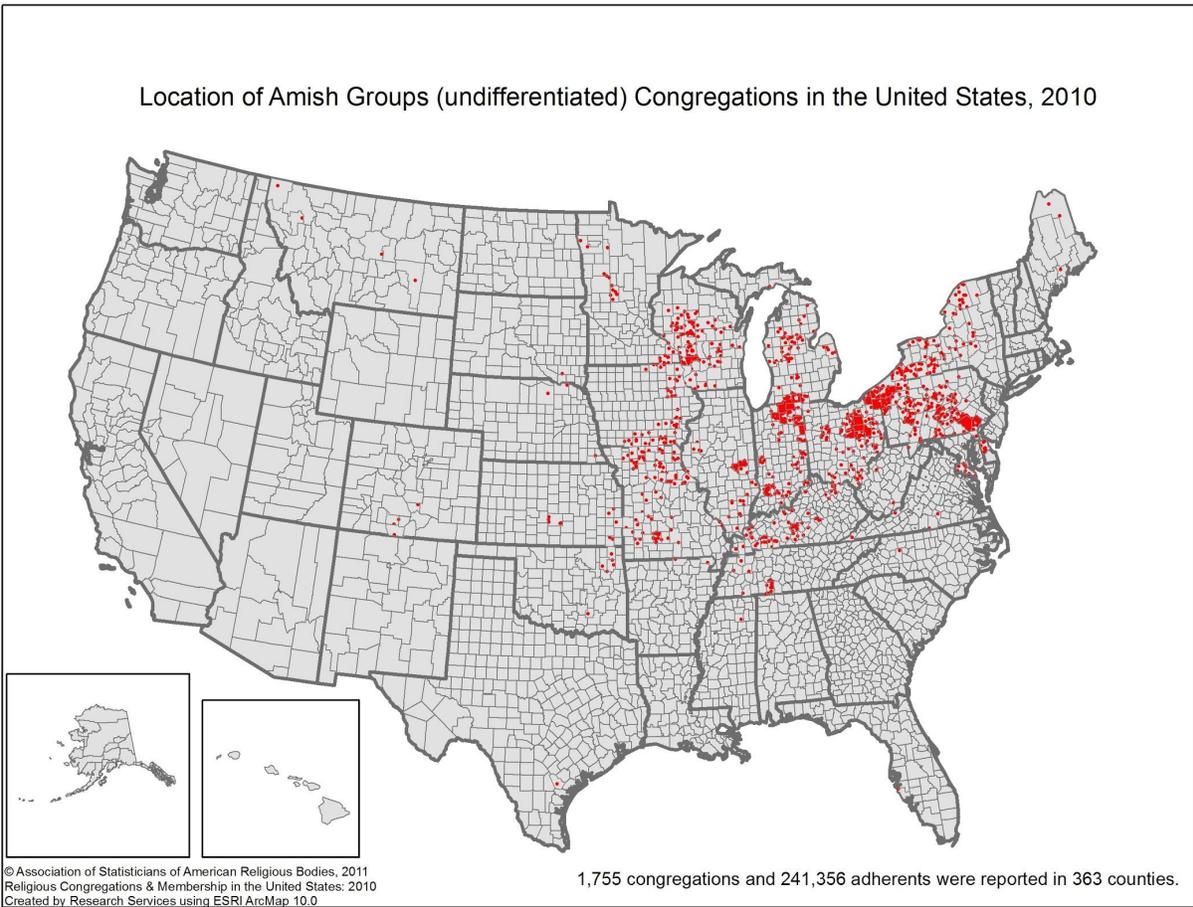
Appendix B: Coding Frame

| Category | Definition |
|--|--|
| 1. The Exit Dilemma | Direct experiences with as well as general thoughts and stories about others regarding reasons for leaving, considerations and realizations surrounding leaving, pivotal experiences, circumstances surrounding exit |
| 2. Emotional and Spiritual Challenges | Direct experiences with as well as thoughts and stories about emotional and spiritual challenges. These challenges may have had tangible effects, but the nature of the challenge itself is internal and intangible. Another way to conceptualize this section is “soft challenges.” |
| <i>2a. Loss of Identity and Fellowship</i> | Aspects of category 2 that pertain to feeling a loss or change regarding former identity, in addition to feelings of loneliness, trouble finding friends, missing former friends and family, and alienation from family (family who remained plain). |
| <i>2b. Undoing Indoctrination</i> | Aspects of category 2 that pertain to challenges with removing oneself from the teachings of the plain church. Examples include undoing the fear of hell and outsiders, as well as undoing aspects of family and social structure that are taught by the plain church. |
| <i>2c. Fitting In</i> | Aspects of category 2 that pertain to cultural challenges when adapting to mainstream society. Includes experiences of feeling like an outsider because of looks or lack of knowledge, as well as the challenges faced in trying to figure out how to “catch up” in terms of looks and cultural knowledge. |
| 3. Practical Challenges | Direct experiences with as well as thoughts and stories regarding challenges that are tangible in nature. These challenges have practical implications, as overcoming them is necessary to function in mainstream society. Another way to conceptualize this section is “hard” challenges. |
| <i>3a. Living Situations</i> | Aspects of category 3 that pertain to challenges in finding a safe and predictable place to live after leaving the plain community. Also includes the effects of living situation hardships. |
| <i>3b. Education</i> | Aspects of category 3 that pertain to educational matters, including educational advancement such as applying to post- |

| | |
|---|---|
| | secondary institutions and obtaining financial aid. This subcategory also explores the specific shortcomings of plain education, in order to explain the educational challenges faced upon leaving the plain community. |
| <i>3c. Finances, Insurance, and Legal</i> | Aspects of category 3 that pertain to challenges in understanding and managing finances, insurance (of any kind), and legal matters, as well as the effects of misunderstanding and/or mismanaging these. This subcategory includes a discussion of reasons for financial insecurity, inability to obtain insurance, and/or inability to properly handle legal matters. |
| 4. Straightforward Transitions | Experiences of individuals who did not feel held back by their plain upbringing, and therefore have not faced transitional challenges. This category documents these experiences as well as the reasons behind them. |
| 5. Experiences with Existing Support | Direct experiences as well as thoughts and stories about support that already exists for this population. This includes positive experiences with existing support as well as negative experiences with it, in addition to general comments and critiques of existing support. In discussions of effectiveness, this code will encompass how the respondent found this form of support as well as what made it effective. |
| <i>5a. Support from Affiliation with Organized Groups</i> | Aspects of category 5 that pertain to forms of support found through organized opportunities for fellowship and mentorship. These support systems can be found in churches, schools, and other similar organizations. Excludes support that originates from social networks that were not affiliated with a non-plain organization. |
| <i>5b. Support from Non-Plain Social Network</i> | Aspects of category 5 that pertain to support obtained through non-plain social networks, including both family members and non-familial individuals. The support provided by these individuals can be of any variety, as long as the relationship began through a social network as opposed to an organization. |
| <i>5c. Publicly Available Support Services</i> | Aspects of category 5 that pertain to support obtained through public resources, which are defined as resources anyone can reasonably access and are not necessarily specific to the formerly plain. |
| <i>5d. Therapy</i> | Aspects of category 5 that pertain to therapy-based support, including the process of finding a therapist as well as that of |

| | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| | finding the right therapist |
| 6. Policy Recommendations | Suggestions for transitional support that would be effective based on the individual's transition experience. These findings will not be discussed in the findings section, as they fit more appropriately into the policy recommendations section of the paper. |

Appendix C: Geography of US Plain Population



⁵⁵Map of Amish Group congregations in the US, per the 2010 US Religion Census (“U.S. Religion Census | Religious Statistics & Demographics” n.d.).

| State | County | Amish Group Adherents ▼ |
|--------------|--------------|-------------------------|
| Pennsylvania | Lancaster | 26270 |
| Ohio | Holmes | 17654 |
| Indiana | Lagrange | 14011 |
| Ohio | Wayne | 9283 |
| Ohio | Geauga | 8537 |
| Indiana | Adams | 6343 |
| Indiana | Elkhart | 6244 |
| Ohio | Trumbull | 3864 |
| Indiana | Daviess | 3708 |
| Pennsylvania | Crawford | 3506 |
| Indiana | Allen | 3466 |
| Pennsylvania | Mifflin | 2899 |
| Wisconsin | Vernon | 2786 |
| Pennsylvania | Mercer | 2602 |
| Pennsylvania | Chester | 2580 |
| Pennsylvania | Indiana | 2525 |
| Ohio | Tuscarawas | 2370 |
| Illinois | Douglas | 2361 |
| Indiana | Kosciusko | 2277 |
| Missouri | Webster | 2252 |
| Ohio | Ashtabula | 2203 |
| Ohio | Knox | 2111 |
| Wisconsin | Clark | 1986 |
| New York | St. Lawrence | 1840 |
| Michigan | Branch | 1784 |
| Pennsylvania | Centre | 1764 |
| Ohio | Coshocton | 1760 |
| New York | Chautauqua | 1672 |
| Ohio | Ashland | 1661 |
| Kentucky | Hart | 1646 |
| Wisconsin | Monroe | 1627 |
| Michigan | St. Joseph | 1533 |
| Tennessee | Lawrence | 1482 |
| Pennsylvania | Lawrence | 1447 |
| New York | Cattaraugus | 1437 |
| Delaware | Kent | 1424 |
| Indiana | Marshall | 1413 |
| Iowa | Davis | 1355 |
| New York | Steuben | 1317 |
| Pennsylvania | Clinton | 1315 |
| Illinois | Moultrie | 1260 |
| Iowa | Buchanan | 1241 |
| New York | Monroe | 1183 |
| Pennsylvania | Somerset | 1161 |
| Pennsylvania | Jefferson | 1129 |
| Indiana | Parke | 1105 |
| Pennsylvania | Franklin | 1073 |
| Indiana | Jay | 1024 |
| Kentucky | Christian | 1019 |
| Indiana | Noble | 1006 |

⁵⁶Top 50 United States counties with the largest number of “Amish Group” adherents, per the 2010 US Religion Census. “Amish Groups” include most of the plain Mennonite groups discussed in this paper. There are 363 counties represented in total. (“U.S. Religion Census | Religious Statistics & Demographics” n.d.)