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## Amish Experience of COVID-19: Patterns and Responses to Inform Public Health Efforts

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# Amish Experience of COVID-19: Patterns and Responses to Inform Public Health Efforts

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## Background Information:

The Amish are a religious group that focus on living a simple life, marked by things such as plain dress and the use of horse-drawn buggies, as well as other lifestyle distinctives.

The Amish stem from the Anabaptist movement within the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s. Church life is "focused on people and not property." For example, they meet for worship in members' homes instead of in designated church buildings. The Amish currently reside in 31 U.S. states and four Canadian provinces. In 2020 the Amish population was estimated to be 344,670 in the U.S. and 5,995 in Canada (Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, Elizabethtown College).

*Die Botschaft* is a newspaper published in Millersburg, PA, but with a national scope and readership. Its masthead describes it as "a weekly newspaper serving Old Order Amish communities everywhere." The paper publishes letters from Plain communities across the US, Canada, and Mexico. Issues of the paper run up to 100 pages and may contain 800 or more letters. Most Amish settlements have at least one scribe who reports news from their community.

The data gathered from *Die Botschaft* letters represents Amish in 29 of the 31 U.S. states, as well as Canada. A total of 8,281 letters were coded from ten issues.

## Research Question:

How did the Amish use their understanding of faith and religious coping in dealing with the restrictive and unprecedented situation during the COVID 19 pandemic?

## Methods:

To code the information, we read letters in the *Die Botschaft* and then place them into categories based on themes related to COVID-19 as reported in the letters. These categories were behaviors, reactions, concerns, illness, and sources of information about the virus. Each category had several subcategories that specified certain behaviors, reactions, concerns, illness, and sources of information. After reading and coding the letters, the data was transferred to SPSS (a statistics software package) to analysis the data via tables

## Results:

A majority of the letters read come from March and April 2020 newsletters.

References to Covid-19 are significantly higher during the late March and April 2020 newsletters than any other date (Figure 1).

We read 8,281 letters, of which 3,006 contained specific reference to Covid-19. (Figure1)

### Behaviors (Figure 2)

Most Referenced: Modification in how they held or hosted church (59.28%)

Least Referenced: Meeting with civic officials or medical officials (1.76%)

### Reactions (Figure 3)

Most Referenced: Religious interpretation of events (25.35%)

Least Referenced: Political interpretation (0.93%)

### Concerns (Figure 4)

Most Referenced: Travel concerns / difficulties (5.49%)

Least Referenced: Masking as a health concern (0.10%)

### Illness

Most Referenced: Naming illness as "the flu" (8.10%)

Least Referenced: Immunity (.03%)

### Source of Information

Most Referenced: Personal Observations (25.7%)

Least Referenced: Agriculture Extension Agent (0.07%)

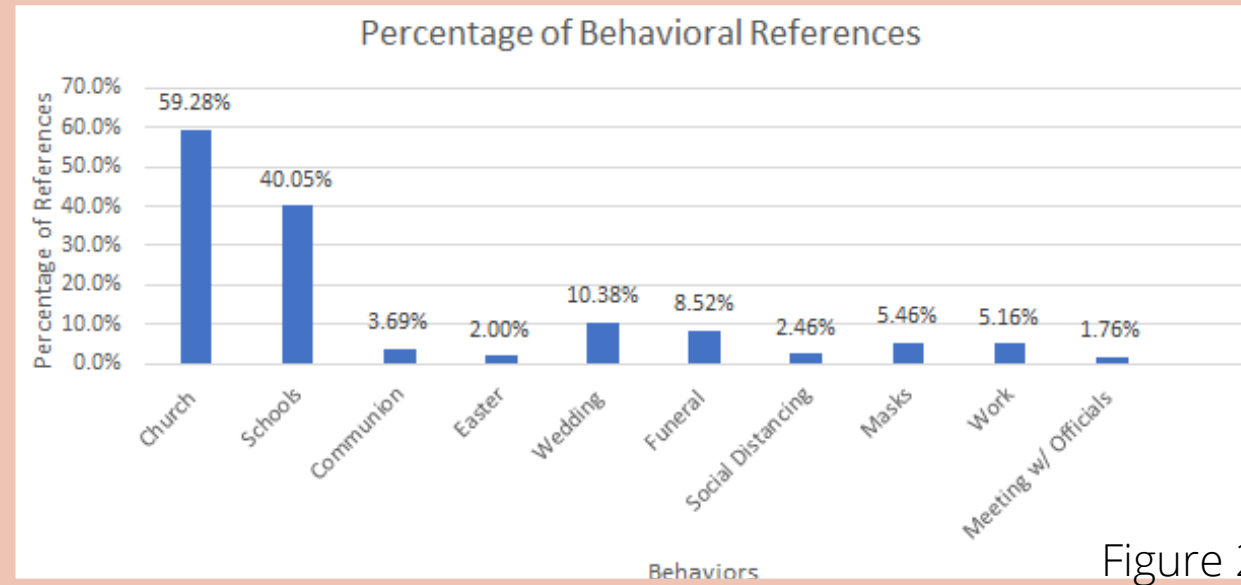


Figure 2

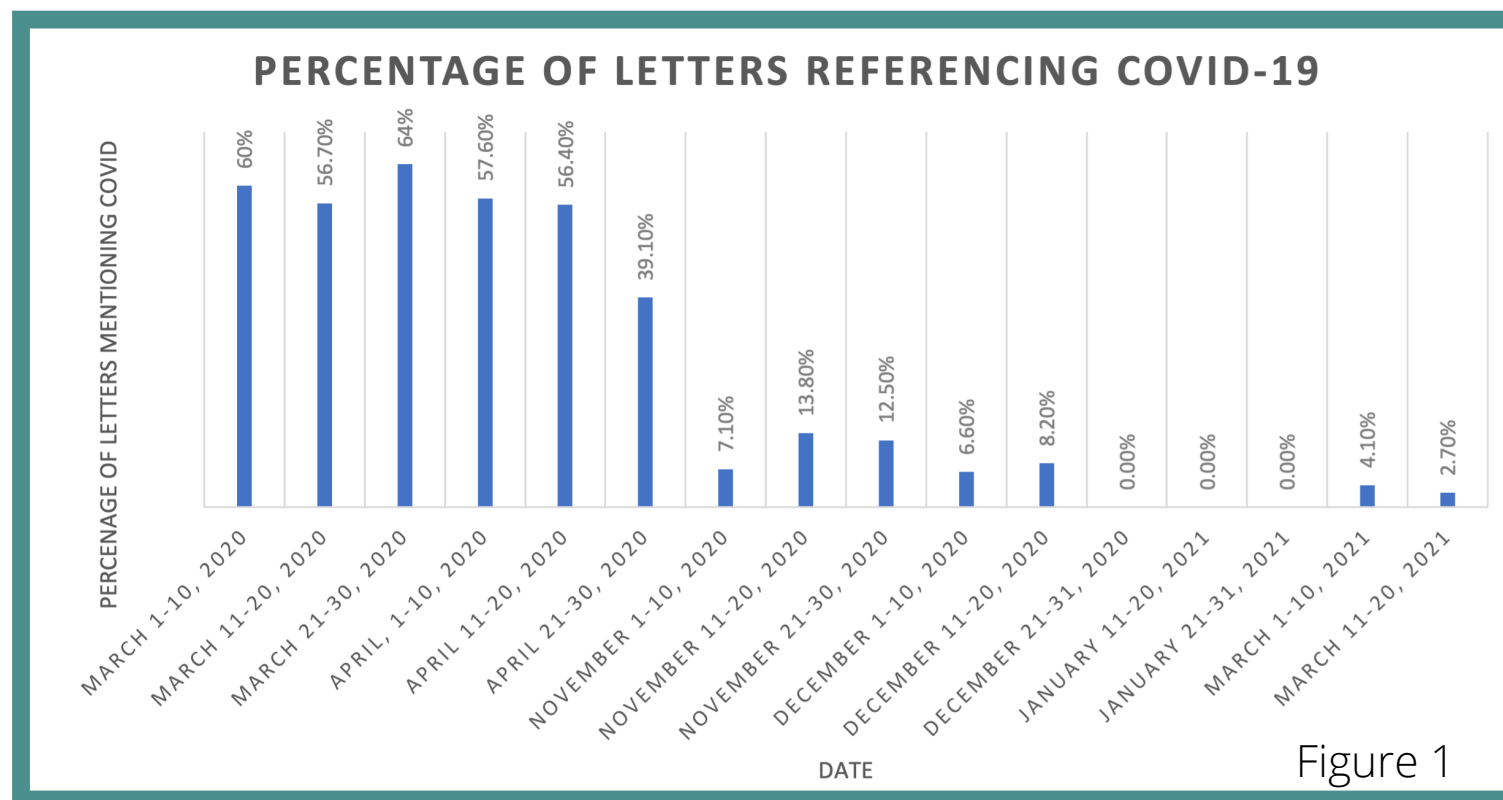


Figure 1

## Discussion

- In a study of wellbeing during the current pandemic, VanderWeele (2020), cites the tension of balancing love for neighbors and commitment to faith. This data demonstrates the various ways that the Amish continued to connect with their faith even in the midst of the pandemic.
- Religious coping was prominent in the data, as scribes cited faith as a motivation and justification for measures taken, referring both to God's control and a desire to love others, as well.
- Blanchet Garneau et al. (2018) talks about the marginalization of social groups such as the Amish. Being marginalized, the Amish may turn less often to the healthcare system for answers because it seems alien to their own society. Transportation was a problem in some cases and they lacked access to telemedicine, given the technological limitations with which they choose to live.
- Blanchet Garneau et al. (2018) discusses how inequities in healthcare can impact a community. There are key factors that must be considered to provide care to marginalized communities. Communication with key members of the community is crucial, as well as building rapport over time, in order to provide the best care possible. The Amish did communicate with some officials as seen in references in the letters; however, most of these were government officials. References to medical professionals as a source of information were low.
- According to Rivi Frei-Landau (2020) religion helps create a sense of belonging, as well as providing meaning and significance. Multiple Amish communities have found ways to continue practicing their religion, even during the pandemic. However, these practices can create tension with public health protocols. Some Amish communities cancelled church in March and April 2020, and families prayed and sang in their own homes on Sundays. However, Amish churches could not gather via live-streaming and they began regathering in person well before most other churches.
- "[I]ndividuals are more likely to receive benefit in the form of life satisfaction from private religious coping activities (e.g., prayer, scripture reading, and other contemplative practices) when they are less acculturated to norms and practices of the United States. Yet, because both private and religious coping were found to directly increase life satisfaction, scholars/practitioners might recommend one form of religious coping when the other is not available" (Monreno, et al., 2021).

## Percentage of Concern References

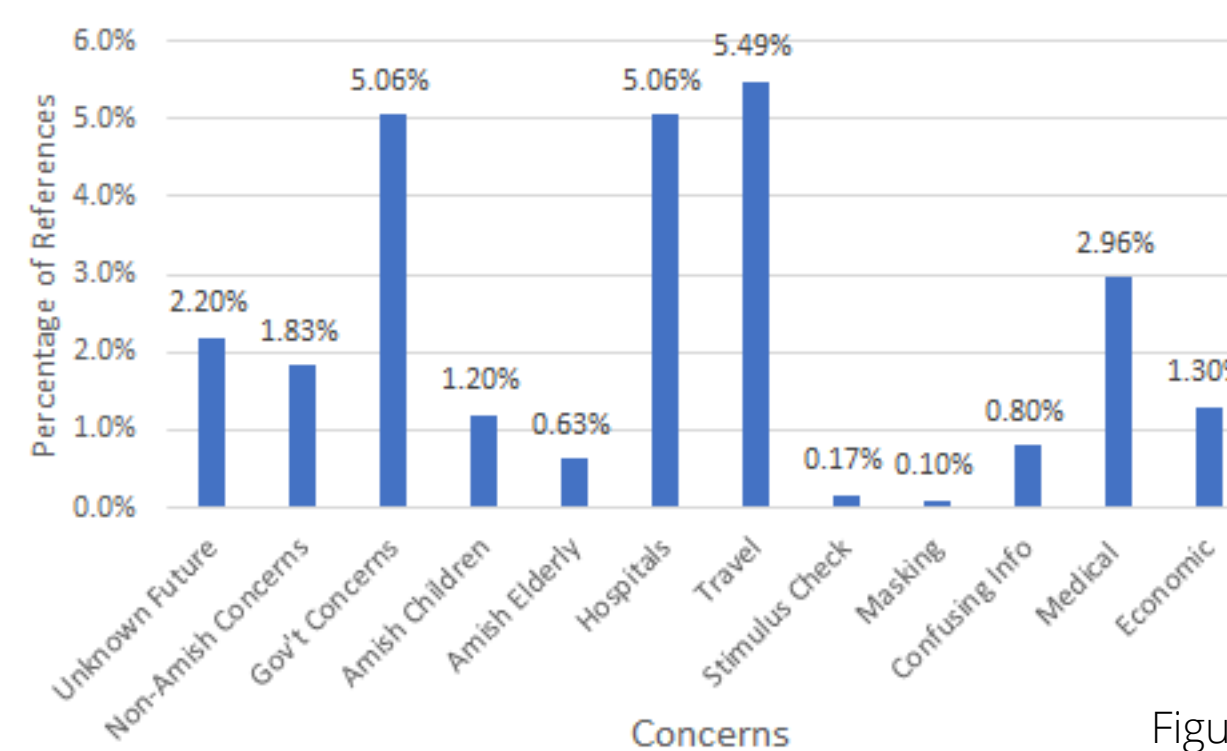


Figure 5

## Percentage of Reaction References

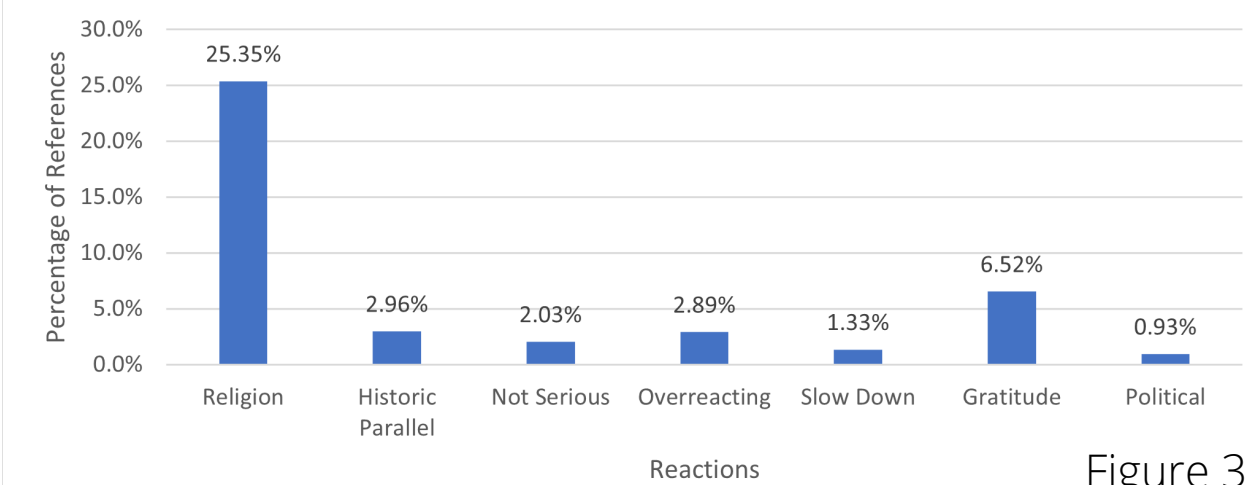


Figure 3

## References:

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- Frei-Landau, R. (2020). "When the going gets tough, the tough get -creative:" Israeli Jewish religious leaders find religiously innovative ways to preserve community members' sense of belonging and resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychological Trauma Theory Research Practice and Policy*. 10.1037/tra0000822".
- VanderWeele T. J. (2020). Love of Neighbor During a Pandemic: Navigating the Competing Goods of Religious Gatherings and Physical Health. *Journal of religion and health*, 59(5), 2196-2202. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01031-6>

## Types of Religious Reactions

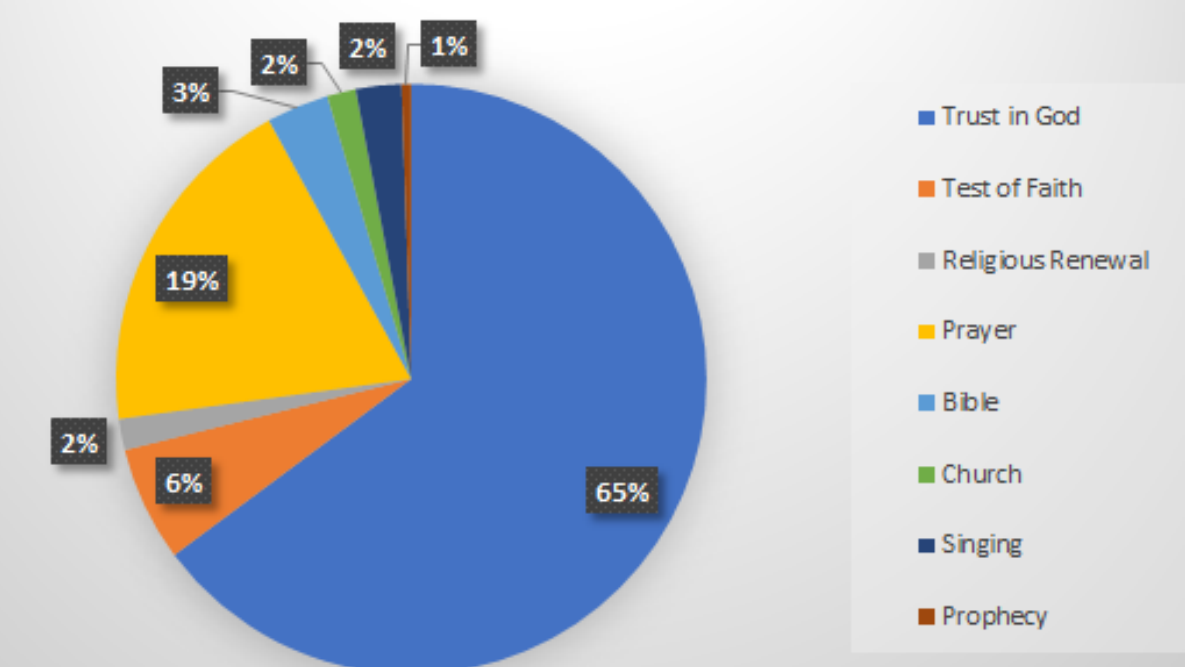


Figure 4