THE AMISH KEEP TO THEMSELVES. AND THEY’RE HIDING A HORRIFYING SECRET.

A year of reporting reveals a culture of incest, rape, and abuse.

By SARAH McCLURE

This story is an exclusive partnership between Cosmo and Type Investigations, an award-winning nonprofit newsroom that works with independent reporters to investigate topics ranging from gender issues to criminal justice to human rights.
As a child, Sadie* was carefully shielded from outside influences, never allowed to watch TV or listen to pop music or get her learner’s permit. Instead, she attended a one-room Amish schoolhouse and rode a horse and buggy to church—a life designed to be humble and disciplined and godly.

By age 9, she says, she’d been raped by one of her older brothers. By 12, she’d been abused by her father, Abner*, a chiropractor who penetrated her with his fingers on the same table where he saw patients. Telling her he was “flipping her uterus” to ensure her fertility. By 14, she says, there were other attackers; her brothers and raped on the sink, and then felt a gush and saw blood running down her leg, and cleaned up alone while he walked away, and gingerly placed her underwear in a bucket of cold water before going back to her chores. A friend helped her realize years later: While being raped, she had probably suffered a miscarriage. It wasn’t until now that Sadie decided to speak up, to reveal the darkness beneath the bucolic surface of her childhood. She’s tired of keeping quiet.

OVER THE PAST YEAR, I’VE INTERVIEWED NEARLY three dozen Amish people, in addition to law enforcement, judges, attorneys, outreach workers, and scholars. I’ve learned that sexual abuse in their communities is an open secret spanning generations. Victims told me stories of inappropriate touching, groping, fondling, exposure to genitals, digital penetration, coerced oral sex, anal sex, and rape, all at the hands of their own family members, neighbors, and church leaders.

The Amish, who number roughly 342,000 in North America, are dispersed across rural areas of states like Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, New York, Michigan, and Wisconsin, according to the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown College, a leading authority on Amish life. Because of their high birth rate—and because few members ever leave—they’re one of the fastest-growing religious groups in America. Lacking one centralized leader, they live in local congregations or “church districts,” each made up of 20 to 40 families. But the stories I heard were not confined to any one place.

So she didn’t. Even on the day the police showed up on her doorstep to question then-12-year-old Sadie’s father about his alleged abuse of his daughters. Even on the day when, almost two years later, Abner was sentenced by a circuit court judge to just five years’ probation. And even on the day when, at 14, she says she was cornered in the pantry by one of her brothers and raped on the sink, and then felt a gush and saw blood running down her leg, and cleaned up alone while he walked away, and gingerly placed her underwear in a bucket of cold water before going back to her chores. A friend helped her realize years later: While being raped, she had probably suffered a miscarriage. It wasn’t until now that Sadie decided to speak up, to reveal the darkness beneath the bucolic surface of her childhood. She’s tired of keeping quiet.

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“IT FELT BROKEN AND USED AND DIRTY. I WAS ALREADY BLAMING MYSELF.”

In my reporting, I identified 52 official cases of Amish child sexual assault in seven states over the past two decades. Chillingly, this number doesn’t begin to capture the full picture. Virtually every Amish victim I spoke to—mostly women but also several men—told me they were dissuaded by their family or church leaders from reporting their abuse to police or had been conditioned not to seek outside help (as Sadie put it, she knew she’d just be “mocked or blamed”). Some victims said they were intimidated and threatened with excommunication. Their stories describe a widespread, decentralized cover-up of child sexual abuse by Amish clergy.

“We’re told that it’s not Christlike to report,” explains Esther*, an Amish woman who says she was abused by her brother and a neighbor boy at age 9. “It’s so ingrained. There are so many people who go to church and just endure.”

And yet, as #MeToo has rocked mainstream culture, Amish women have instigated their own female-driven movement. “It’s much slower and less highly visible,” says Linda Crockett, founder and director of Safe Communities, an organization that works to prevent child sexual abuse. “But I have seen a real uptick over the past 10 years in Amish women coming forward. They hear about each other—not on Twitter or Facebook, but there’s a strong communication system within these communities. They draw courage and strength from each other.”

“I get phone calls now... There’s a bunch of Amish who have my cell phone number, and they use it. The men call on behalf of the women,” says Judge Craig Stedman, former district attorney of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania—home to nearly 40,000 Amish—who has served on a task force that connects the Amish to law enforcement and social services. (Although most don’t have cell phones, the Amish might use pay phones or call from “English” neighbors’ homes.)

Some victims, like Sadie, have long since left the church and the Amish way of life, but others, including Esther, are still on the inside, sending out an alarm to the world they’ve been taught to reject. “They want to talk,” explains Crockett, “so they’re turning outside.”

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SOME VICTIMS AIN’T JUST SILENCED—THEY SUFFER SOMETHING WORSE, Lizzie Hersheberger was 14 when she went to work as a “maude,” or hired girl, for a 27-year-old Amish man named Chris Stutzman and his wife, taking care of their four children and helping Stutzman in the barn. One night after they had milked the cows, he pinned her against a wall and kissed her, then pushed her onto the feed bags. Because it was a frigid winter in Minnesota, Lizzie wore pants under her dress, which Stutzman removed while she tried in vain to fight him off. “Relax,” he whispered into her ear as he raped her. (To this day, that word remains the trigger for Lizzie.)

She didn’t know why she felt pain and blood between her legs. Her parents had never talked to her about sex or her period. (When Sadie got her period at age 10, her father had thrown her out of the house, most likely after being tipped off by a local non-Amish person. Abner told authorities that “things which we were speaking about had been brought up and dealt with in the church.”) According to a police detective’s notes, he also silenced his daughters. “You say nothing,” Sadie and another relative remember him demanding.

Authorities returned a second time, asking him “specific questions about having sexual intercourse with his daughters,” according to the case file. Now Abner confessed to having “sex with two of them,” insisting he didn’t work as hard as you could possibly, you were considered lazy,” she says. She never turned on a light switch or shopped for clothes in a store. She didn’t speak English at home—just Pennsylvania Dutch, the only language she knew until first grade. And she never revealed her abuse to anyone, except a cousin and her father himself, when he asked her, point-blank, if her brothers were touching her. (The next time he asked, she lied, fearful he would beat the boys, as he often did.)

But what was happening in her house was a poorly kept secret, according to several of Sadie’s relatives. One of them reported Abner, who has since died, to local church leaders—Sadie remembers her father being “shunned” for six weeks, a common form of discipline in which the accused is socialized and forbidden from eating at the same table as church members. After a shunning, the person confesses in church and the community is strongly compelled to forgive and forget that the “sin” ever happened. In Sadie’s house, she recalls, everything went back to normal—or at least, to how it had been before.

When the police and social workers later showed up on her doorstep, most likely after being tipped off by a local non-Amish person, Abner told authorities that “things which we were speaking about had been brought up and dealt with in the church.” According to a police detective’s notes, he also silenced his daughters. “You say nothing,” Sadie and another relative remember him demanding.

Authorities returned a second time, asking him “specific questions about having sexual intercourse with his daughters,” according to the case file. Now Abner confessed to having “sex with two of them,” insisting “he made love to them at least three times each but didn’t hurt them.” Sadie, who had heard from a cousin that her dad was also abusing her sisters, didn’t dare breathe a word in their defense.

A relative recalls that Sadie’s mother told social workers “to do whatever they could to keep him from going to jail.” It worked. A grainy VHS recording from 2001 shows a gray-bearded Abner standing with his hat hanging between his hands before a judge, as an attorney explains that he is pleading guilty to a reduced charge of sexual abuse in the first degree, and not incest, because “the family is not desiring that he be incarcerated.” Instead of serving a sentence that might have been five years or more, Abner got probation.

Sadie says her father abused her for five more years. When I reached out to her brothers, two confirmed that Abner had touched Sadie; one of them also said he himself “messed around” with her when they were young but that he did not rape her; the other denied raping her. A third brother did not respond to a request for comment.

Instead, Stutzman himself, perhaps sensing he’d been caught, confessed.

Like Abner, he was shunned for six weeks. And again, no one reported him to outside authorities, especially since the church had already disciplined and forgiven him. Instead, the community turned on Lizzie for what they saw as a consensual “affair.” She was bullied and mocked, spit on and called a “slut” and “hoohah” (Pennsylvania Dutch for “slut” and “whore”). “They didn’t ask me how I felt or my side of the story,” she says. Instead, the community gossiped that she had “mental issues.”

It’s common for Amish victims to be viewed by the community as just as guilty as the abuser—as consenting partners committing adultery, even if they’re children. Victims are expected to share responsibility and, after the church has punished the abuser, to quickly forgive. If they fail to do so, they’re the problem.

When the rare case does end up in court, the Amish overwhelmingly support the abusers, who tend to appear with nearly their entire congregations behind them. Survivors and law enforcement sources say this can compound the trauma of speaking out. “We’ve had cases where there’ll be 50 Amish people standing up for the offender and no one speaks for the victim,” says Stedman.

In one 2010 case, young female victims were pressured to forgive their father and brother for abusing them, with one writing a pleading letter to the court (“Hello Sir, I’m Melvin’s sister. Please have mercy. Melvin has made a big change to let go of his committed crime in the last year. I’d like to have our family together.”), recalls former President Judge Dennis Reinker, who has presided over 30-plus Amish sexual assault cases in Lancaster County. In this case, the victims agreed to cooperate only in exchange for their abusers receiving no jail time. The deal likely helped save the defendents from what could have been 25- to 30-year prison sentences, says Reinker.

THINGS GOT STRANGER FOR LIZZIE. SHE REMEMBERS her mother telling her that she was being taken to a chiropractic clinic in neighboring South Dakota, and then boarding a bus full of Amish adults for the 300-mile drive to a facility where, for a week, “they watched me all the time,” she says. She received daily deep-tissue massages to “work through my emotional stuff,” she was told.

Lizzie’s is not the only account of an Amish victim being taken to an alleged “mental health” facility staffed by Amish or Mennonites (a similar, although typically less strict, group) that provides Bible-based counseling—and, in many cases
cases, is not state licensed. Several years ago, Esther was sent to a facility for “counseling” after she tried to seek help for another Amish woman who was being sexually assaulted. When she protested, church leaders threatened to excommunicate her permanently.

No one would tell her why she was there. Instead, she was pressured to sign papers that would allow staff to communicate directly with her ministers, she says (she eventually gave in and signed). “From the first evening, they wanted to put me on medication,” she recalls. She said no, since “a lot of these people who get stuck in these facilities come home drugged and no longer have a life. They’re zombies.” (She’s aware of about 30 other Amish sexual assault victims, including two of her sisters, who have been sent away to such facilities.)

Eventually, Esther says she was told that refusing “sleep medication” would only prolong her stay. When she asked about side effects, a house parent told her, “It doesn’t matter—you have to take it.”

So she did. Except the drugs weren’t for sleep at all: According to her medical records, she was prescribed olanzapine, an antipsychotic medication that treats mental illnesses like schizophrenia. Every morning and night, she and other Amish patients lined up to receive their drugs. “We’d have to go and fill a small container with water and then go up to this pedestal; we’d all take turns,” she says. “It was gut-wrenching.”

Esther started having blurry vision and hallucinations. She wanted to escape—but she knew that defying her ministers would get her kicked out of the church. She was ultimately on the drug for two weeks of her five-week stay. Her discharge notes recommended she “be submissive” and that she “challenge unhealthy thoughts toward ministers and others using positive/good thought.”

Esther now says Amish leaders use lockup stays to silence women who are increasingly eager to go public with abuse allegations. “When a victim speaks out,” Esther explains, “they get sent to a facility and drugged so that they shut up.”

**Still, as more and more** women start to come forward, an ecosystem has also risen up to help them. Two years ago, Lizzie, who has long since left the Amish, and another former Amish woman named Dena Schrock launched Voices of Hope, a group for abused women. Lizzie met Sadie at one such gathering, and they’re now friends.

Others find solidarity in *The Plain People’s Podcast*, a show launched in 2018 that features stories of Amish and Mennonite sexual abuse. Jasper Hoffman, a former Mennonite and the podcast’s cohost, says she receives “hundreds of messages” from people wanting to share stories or get help reporting an abuser.

And especially in Pennsylvania, efforts are being made to reform Amish culture itself. In Lancaster County, the task force Steedman serves on, comprised of police, attorneys, and social service agencies, has been meeting with Amish leaders a few times a year, trying to build trust and communication. (It’s worth noting, however, that not a single woman has been included among the group’s Amish representatives.)

Some Amish have started their own initiatives too. In multiple states, their Conservative Crisis Intervention committees liaise with local authorities on reporting and prosecuting sexual assault cases. One Lancaster County member, Amos Stoltzfus, told me that “a lot of things have changed and forced us to comply and not allow things to be swept under the rug, like they had at one point.” (Stricter mandatory reporting requirements were implemented in Pennsylvania in 2014 in the aftermath of the high-profile Jerry Sandusky child abuse case, for one.)

Now, Stoltzfus says, the Lancaster County Amish, at least, “aren’t interested in hiding things” and have “adapted and recognized that we need to change with some of the education that we give to the parents and the children.” He says they’ve also tried to understand the lasting trauma that can make quick forgiveness difficult for victims: “Our community does really care....It just takes time.”

In the summer of 2018, Lizzie sought her own justice by reporting her rapes to police, something she never felt she could do before. To her surprise, charges were brought against Stutzman, who was by then a deacon in the church. He pleaded guilty to third degree criminal sexual conduct, and at his sentencing hearing, the room was filled with his Amish supporters. But Lizzie was also surrounded by supporters, including Sadie, who had driven two hours to be there. Stutzman was ultimately sentenced to 45 days in jail and 10 years’ probation, based on guidelines in place in 1988, the year before the assaults.

As for Sadie, she’s now a 32-year-old mother of five living in the Midwest. In 2013, she and her husband finally left the Amish church. For now, she’s focused on healing, not pressing charges. She still speaks with her brothers, one of whom has apologized “many times,” she says. She knows it sounds “weird,” but she even visits them occasionally.

Sadie has tried to work through her trauma in couples therapy with her husband. And she’d still like to get her own Christian therapist. She’s pretty sure she’ll never completely trust any man around her kids.

There’s been plenty of anger to deal with. She used to “fly off the handle,” she says. But now, it feels good to finally be letting it all out.

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*Additional research by Darya Marchenkova and Hannah Beckler.*

*Additional support provided by Investigative Reporters and Editors.*