

Religious Ritual Compliance with COVID-19 Mandates in Plain Communities: A Case Study of Amish Obituaries and Funeral Practices

KATIE E. CORCORAN 
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
West Virginia University

COREY J. COLYER
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
West Virginia University

ANNETTE M. MACKAY
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
West Virginia University

RACHEL E. STEIN
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
West Virginia University

Measures to limit COVID-19's spread were vital at the pandemic's onset. While some churches complied with public health mandates, others resisted them. Some religious ceremonies depend on third parties independent of the church. Funerals may require mortuary services overseen by funeral directors. Religious groups that may otherwise resist public health directives may comply when they depend on a third party. Extending street-level bureaucracy theory, we examine the role of service providers who function as street-level bureaucrats in shaping how religious groups respond to public policy mandates. Using the case of funeral rites in Old Order Amish churches, we content-analyzed Old Order Amish obituaries from an Amish correspondence newspaper and interviewed funeral directors that serve the Amish. We found that the content of obituaries changed to incorporate COVID-19 mitigation strategies due to requirements from some funeral homes. We also found that funeral directors used discretion to interpret health mandates.

Keywords: ritual, funeral, COVID-19, street-level bureaucracy, public policy.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 disrupted nearly all facets of daily life. Governments imposed severe restrictions on “nonnecessary” activities to limit contagion. Many states directed citizens to maintain “social distance” between people outside their household, cover their mouths and noses with masks, and limit gathering in large groups. However, many religious traditions depend on communal worship. Face-to-face communal rituals provide participants with fulfilling emotional experiences of the sacred and social support (Baker et al. 2020; Durkheim 1965). Therefore, state policies restricting in-person gatherings also limit access to beneficial communal experiences, creating tension for believers (Baker et al. 2020). Indeed, the pandemic precipitated an existential threat, reinforcing believers’ need to gather in their faith communities. Yet, the policies designed to protect people from this threat severely limited their access to these spiritual goods (Baker et al. 2020).

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Correspondence should be addressed to Katie E. Corcoran, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, West Virginia University, PO Box 6326, Morgantown, WV 26506-6326, USA. E-mail: kecorcoran@mail.wvu.edu

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Baker et al. (2020:358) note, “How religious institutions manage death and mourning—two of the social moments religious leaders and institutions are most central to during normal times—is a strategic location for viewing some of the ongoing changes to religion.”

People may resist mandates to increase social distance if they consider in-person rituals (i.e., collective worship) essential to their identity or spiritual practice (Baker et al. 2020). Members of high-tension religious groups/strict churches—communities that constrain interaction with outsiders—tend to rely on intra-community interaction to compensate for missed secular opportunities (Iannaccone 1994; Kanter 1972). The Center for Disease Control (CDC) encouraged churches to rely on the Internet or telephone services to facilitate remote worship. But some strict churches, such as the Amish and other plain Anabaptists, restrict technology on sacred grounds. We expect less compliance with government health mandates in these churches due to their increased burden (Ali et al. 2020; Corcoran et al. 2022; Duran et al. 2020; Stein 2021). Therefore, we must scrutinize those factors shaping churches’ compliance with government health mandates.

Religious rituals vary in the extent to which religious communities have control over them. Some rites depend partly on outside parties such as winemakers,¹ local health authorities,² local zoning authorities,³ and funeral directors.⁴ Many service providers function as “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 2010; Sudhipongpracha and Poocharoen 2021). Traditionally defined as discretionary agents that implement public policy, allocating benefits and imposing sanctions, street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) embody policy. We contend that this concept also encapsulates those who enforce public policy by delivering goods and rendering services. Thus, for example, a funeral director unwittingly becomes an SLB when implementing government-mandated social distancing guidelines at funeral home visitations. Regardless of the client’s position vis a vis the policy, they must comply to receive necessary services.

The interactive dynamics are far from clear. Scholars have not yet adequately studied the grounded negotiations emerging from the conflict between religious practice and public policy prescriptions. Our research questions are (1) how do religious groups/individuals otherwise resistant to public policy mandates come to comply with them for certain religious rituals and (2) what is the role of SLBs in that process? The COVID-19 pandemic provides an ideal context to examine this process as the government attempted to control collective religious rituals, and these service providers shaped the regulation’s deployment.

We investigate this with the case of funeral rituals among the Old Order Amish using obituaries published in *The Diary*, an Amish correspondence newspaper, and supplementing with key informant interviews. Obituaries provide information on the funeral ritual, including alterations due to the pandemic, which allows us to capture compliance with government health mandates. We content-analyzed all obituaries published in *The Diary* between January and October 2020, focusing on how the pandemic forced changes in funerary practices. Shortly after the pandemic’s onset, we find consistent references to COVID-19 mitigation strategies in funeral announcements. These references appear to be boilerplate obituary text provided by funeral directors to their clients. Evidence from key informant interviews suggests that funeral directors functioned as

¹Wine is an integral component of some religious services and generally is purchased from a third party. Congregations must comply with state law when buying and serving wine.

²Some states have policies regarding the serving of food including the need for food handlers permits. Food and drink are often served at weddings and holiday events. Some congregations have food pantries or ministries that distribute food to those in need.

³The size of congregations and parking lots and whether they can house a school, kitchen, and/or gymnasium are often regulated by local zoning laws.

⁴State and federal laws regulate funeral, cremation, and burial services (Slocum 2019; U.S. Federal Trade Commission 1994).

SLBs of government health mandates. They played a central role in whether and to what extent the funerals complied with the government health mandates.

Rituals and COVID-19

Religion fosters community through collective emotional experiences anchored to shared beliefs and symbols (Durkheim 1965). Religious communities help people mourn death and cope with tragedy (Baker et al. 2020; Schnabel and Schieman 2021). The pandemic created a vicious cycle. COVID-19's contagion generated anxiety as well as sickness and death. At the same time, government-imposed restrictions increased social isolation. These social distancing mandates reduced the supply of religious services when demand was at its highest (Baker et al. 2020; Ecklund 2020). Higher tension religious groups sustain solidarity by providing numerous opportunities for members to create and maintain connections with other congregants (Iannaccone 1994). These tightly bound social networks foster intimacy, compensating for the church's high membership costs. Accordingly, "social distance" mandates contradict a sect's organizational mission.

Many churches transitioned to online services to maintain social distance between members (Baker et al. 2020). Some higher tension religious groups resisted these directives, claiming virtual options were insufficient and invoking their "right" to practice religion freely (Baker et al. 2020; Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2020). For many, the religious purpose of rituals cannot be satisfied without in-person gatherings (Baker et al. 2020; Kraybill 2001; Nolt 2016). And still, other strict religious groups, such as the Amish, could not move rituals online due to sacramental restrictions on technology use (Corcoran et al. 2022).

Numerous news stories document congregations disregarding state mandates to limit the size of their worship services (Green 2020; Luscombe 2020; Thompson 2020). Authorities unevenly enforced pandemic restrictions on large religious gatherings in the United States due to jurisdictional issues and a lack of resources or motivation (Geciawicz 2020; Hanau 2020). Thus, many congregations had the autonomy to decide whether to enforce the mandates. However, some religious rituals, such as funerals, depend on external parties. Federal and state laws regulate mortuary and burial services (Slocum 2019; U.S. Federal Trade Commission 1994). Anyone using their services is subject to the funeral home's interpretation and enforcement of these laws. Accordingly, funeral directors *function* as SLBs.

Street-Level Bureaucrats and COVID-19

SLBs interpret and enact government policies, dispensing sanctions and allocating benefits (Lipsky 2010). Traditionally, SLBs referred to government-employed agents. Under that framework, funeral directors act as street-level service providers rather than SLBs. However, both public and private organizations provide governance services (Sudhipongpracha and Poocharoen 2021). Therefore, agents need not be employed in the civil service to function as SLBs (Sudhipongpracha and Poocharoen 2021). An SLB "refers to an individual's *function* as an implementing agent of public policy" [emphasis ours], regardless of their formal status within the civil service (Sudhipongpracha and Poocharoen 2021:239). The public experiences governmental laws and policies through interaction with these agents. Policies are not static constructs imposed in a top-down manner. Instead, SLBs translate written ideals into practice (Brodin 2012). They rely on discretion to interpret and enact policy. Their decisions "*become* the public policies they carry out" (Lipsky 2010:xii). These are the only policies that individuals directly experience.

Governments implemented many public health strategies to limit COVID-19's spread, including social distancing, isolation, and limiting large gatherings (CDC 2020). Crises tax resources of essential services (Gofen and Lotta 2021). Policymakers issued many new directives in response to conditions created by COVID-19, forcing SLBs to adapt (Adler et al. 2021;

Davidovitz, Cohen, and Gofen 2021). This context increased the SLBs need for discretion in interpreting and implementing the directives (Adler et al. 2021; Davidovitz, Cohen, and Gofen 2021; Gofen and Lotta 2021). SLBs also had to evaluate the risks of implementing various directives, such as infection and resistance (Davidovitz, Cohen, and Gofen 2021; Gofen and Lotta 2021). People experience these mandates through the agents who interpret them.

Some religious rituals intersect with the domains of SLBs. This was particularly the case during the pandemic with expanded government regulations affecting how and whether religious communities could conduct rituals. Religious rituals that depend on SLBs may shape their compliance with government mandates. States control burial and other mortuary services. Policies dictate when a dead body must be refrigerated or buried, whether the body must be embalmed or washed before viewing, and who may prepare death certificates, burial permits, and other official paperwork (Slocum 2019). Funeral directors interpret and implement laws regulating the preparation of remains, internment, and recording of deaths. They also coordinate social and spiritual services, like memorial services, viewings, and grief counseling. A religious community can self-serve these latter functions, but it is difficult or, in some states, illegal to self-serve the former. Because most nonprofessionals cannot embalm, cremate, or legally prepare remains for internment, funeral professionals are necessary for death rituals in the United States. Since viewings, wakes, and funerals bring people together in one place, funeral directors became responsible for ensuring these rites comply with COVID-19 policies (National Funeral Directors Association 2021).

Like other SLBs, during the pandemic (Adler et al. 2021; Davidovitz, Cohen, and Gofen 2021; Gofen and Lotta 2021), funeral directors likely also used their discretion in interpreting and implementing these mandates. Although religious congregations and individuals may have been able to defy government mandates for worship services, which they had control over, this may be more difficult for death rituals in which they utilize the services of funeral homes. In these cases, funeral homes function as SLBs negotiating and enforcing their interpretation of government policies to religious individuals and congregations. Accordingly, religious groups that may not comply with health mandates for other religious rituals may adhere to the safety protocols set by these agents for funerals. We examine this by analyzing funeral practices among Old Order Amish churches in the United States.

The Amish and Funeral Rituals

Amish groups emerged out of the Anabaptist movement in 16th-century Europe. Anabaptists sought religious freedom through the separation of church and state. Religious persecution led Amish congregations to emigrate from Europe to North America in the 18th and 19th centuries, where they prospered (Nolt 2016). Amish today live a simple lifestyle, focusing on their family and community. Rhythms of contemporary Amish life revolve around deeply ingrained rituals, including weddings, funerals, baptisms, and ordinations (Kraybill 2001).

Amish funeral services emphasize gratitude to God for granting life. Death reminds the living that their time on earth must, too, end. Amish people accept death as part of God's plan and believe that the deceased is with God (Bryer 1979; Hurst and McConnell 2010; Kraybill 2001; Nolt 2016). Funeral rituals allow families time to grieve. When an Amish person dies, the church assigns funeral planning responsibilities to other community members, including food preparation, seating, caring for horses, and managing buggy parking (Bryer 1979; Kraybill 2001; Purnell 2021). These are not small tasks, as between 300 and 600 people generally attend Amish funerals (Hurst and McConnell 2010; Kraybill 2001; Nolt 2016). In addition, community members dig the grave and help with household chores when a family member dies. Many Amish churches hire licensed funeral directors to complete death certificates and prepare (embalm) bodies for viewing. In the United States, embalming became standard in the 19th century, and Amish people adapted to the trend (Brown 2010; Bryer 1979). Embalming prepares the remains for safe viewing, an

essential part of Amish funeral tradition. Ordinarily, the viewing takes place in a family home. Although many other death rituals are left to funeral directors by non-Amish, Amish people still dress their dead. They bury the remains in plain wooden caskets made by an Amish carpenter (Bryer 1979; Hurst and McConnell 2010; Kraybill 2001; Nolt 2016; Scott 1988).

Visiting is a core element of the Amish funeral ritual. News of a death travels quickly. Connections within the Amish community transmit information via word of mouth. Limited telephone use (Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt 2013) allows for death notification across large distances. Funeral directors also submit obituaries to local newspapers that serve Amish communities. Typically, 3 days elapse between death and the funeral service. Hundreds of visitors visit the home to view the body and sympathize with the family. Up to 100 people may gather in a single room during the viewing (Hurst and McConnell 2010; Kraybill 2001; Nolt 2016; Purnell 2021). Funeral services, including prayer, Bible reading, and a sermon, usually last one to two hours and occur at home. Sometimes the church hosts simultaneous services in adjacent homes to accommodate huge gatherings. Burial at an Amish cemetery or the family burial site follows the service (Hurst and McConnell 2010; Nolt 2016; Purnell 2021; Scott 1988). A meal provided by community members follows burial (Kraybill 2001). The surviving family can expect visitors on Saturdays and Sundays for months following the death (Kraybill 2001; Nolt 2016).

Recent scholarship suggests the pandemic churned through Amish communities (Ali et al. 2020; Duran et al. 2020; Stein et al. 2021). Despite substantial outreach efforts with leaders in the Amish community (DeJesus 2020; Stoltzfus 2021), the Amish resisted pandemic mitigation mandates (Ali et al. 2020; Duran et al. 2020; Stoltzfus 2021). They understand that public health and government officials recommend people establish social distance, cover their faces, and accept inoculation by a vaccine. But they generally do not comply. However, the Amish were more willing to listen to health recommendations from trusted sources (DeJesus 2020; Duran et al. 2020; Stoltzfus 2021). In this context, we examine how the Amish community complied with health mandates in funeral settings.

METHODS AND DATA

We use a mixed methods case study research design to examine the compliance of Old Order Amish funerals with government health mandates and the role of funeral directors in this process. Our primary unit of analysis is Old Order Amish funerals. We use published obituaries in one Old Order Amish correspondence newspaper to collect data on these funerals. Obituaries publish key funeral details, including schedules, locations, and expectations for visiting the family. Pandemic policies affect all of these elements.

Data

The Diary is an Old Order Amish correspondence newspaper, published monthly and distributed broadly among Old Order Amish communities, circulating approximately 6000 copies monthly.⁵ The periodical was launched in 1969, focusing on preserving the history of Old Order Amish churches and serving as a vector of community news (Hostetler 1993). As the Amish restrict communication technologies (e.g., computers, telephones, and smartphones), correspondence newspapers are ideal and vital for distributing information across Amish communities, including obituaries. Previous studies have estimated mortality and excess death rates in Anabaptist communities from obituaries published in correspondence newspapers, including *The Diary* (Dewalt 2022; Stein et al. 2021). We content analyzed all obituaries from January 2020

⁵Personal communication with the Publisher of *The Diary*.

to October 2020⁶ editions of *The Diary* for reference to COVID-19-related changes. Obituaries for deaths in January and February 2020 provided a baseline of standard Amish obituaries before government officials implemented COVID-19 restrictions. After excluding four obituaries that did not provide death dates, we coded 543 obituaries from 23 states. Eleven obituaries did not include state information.

Coding

We coded the obituaries for themes differentiating those that were stable over time from those that emerged after the pandemic began. Drawing on the extant literature, we deductively looked for elements traditionally published in Old Order Amish obituaries. These include the name of the deceased, death date, location, genealogy, and some information regarding the funeral. We also identified thematic elements of the obituaries directly related to the pandemic, such as reminders to practice social distancing or references to similar policies. We noted instances where the obituary explicitly referenced COVID-19, the pandemic, state or national policies related to the pandemic, and strategies to reduce the total number of people attending the funeral or increase the distance between them. Two prominent subthemes emerged—(1) the use of the word “private” to indicate that the funeral was for invited family and/or close friends and (2) outside of the use of the word “private,” other references to formal COVID-19 policies, such as social distancing, prohibiting handshaking, limiting attendance size or encouraging nonattendance (e.g., “in lieu of attending”), either explicitly or implicitly (e.g., indicating the funeral is private due to COVID-19). For the latter, we also identified boilerplate segments (i.e., the same statement used in more than one obituary within the same state). Other themes emerged inductively, such as reserving specific time windows for private “visiting, visitation, or calling hours” and identifying the funeral homes. Obituaries published before COVID-19 rarely mentioned these themes.

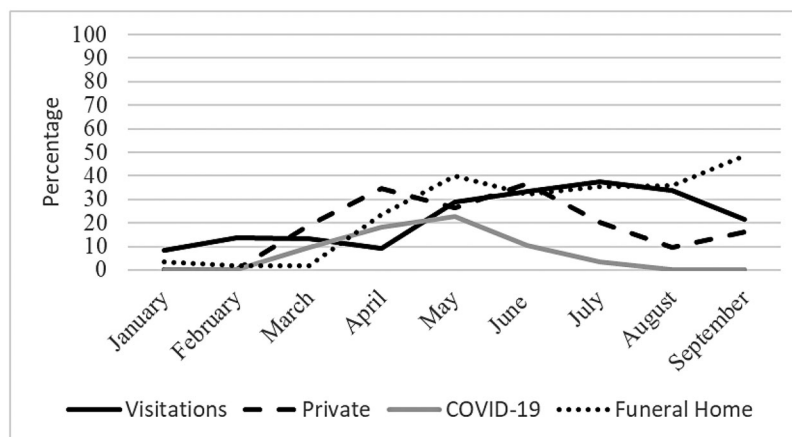
We examined the prevalence of these themes over time for the entire sample and separately for Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana. These states contain the seven largest Amish settlements in the United States (Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies 2020), so it is not surprising that nearly three-quarters of the obituaries originated in them, with Indiana having 122, Ohio 148, and Pennsylvania 141 obituaries. Since we use the obituaries as proxies for funeral practices and compliance with state policy, we expect that the funeral practices described in the obituaries will change over time as state policy changes. Thus, we situate the state analyses within their state COVID-19 policy context. As we discuss in the results, the differences in the prevalence of the themes closely mirror changes in state COVID-19 policy, which suggests support for the impact of policy on funeral practices and the use of the obituaries to capture such practices. Boilerplate COVID-19 language and increasing identification of funeral homes during the pandemic indicates a more significant role for funeral directors. To further support this, we draw on key informant interviews.

Interviews

To further understand the quantitative obituary findings, in October and November 2020, we interviewed four funeral directors known for serving the Amish population. Specifically, we used the internet to identify funeral homes in Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania (i.e., the states in which most of our obituaries originated from) that resided in large Amish populations and indicated on their website that they served the Amish with particular attention to those explicitly mentioned in the obituaries. Four funeral directors agreed to be interviewed—one from Indiana,

⁶We stopped in October 2020 as by then many states had lifted their mandates and our key informant funeral directors indicated that the context surrounding enforcing COVID-19 health guidelines had changed. We discuss this in the results.

Figure 1
All Old Order Amish Obituary Information, January–September 2020



one from Ohio, and two from Pennsylvania. All four verified that they serve the Amish population in their area. We asked them to describe Amish funeral practices and obituaries before and after the pandemic and their role in them. We analyzed these interviews with particular attention to the funeral directors' role in whether the Amish funerals complied with public health mandates. We coded whether they attempted to enforce the policies, how and why they did so, and the response of their Amish clients. Although not generalizable to the population of funeral directors serving Amish communities, these interviews augment and support the conclusions we draw from analyses of the obituaries. The librarians at the Ohio Amish Library in the Amish & Mennonite Heritage Center in Holmes County, Ohio, also provided information on Amish funeral practices during the pandemic. They serve as resources for people interested in learning about the Amish or other Anabaptist groups' genealogy, history, or cultural traditions (Ohio Amish Library 2021). The librarians helped vet our interpretation of the themes emergent from obituaries.

RESULTS

Before March 2020, Amish obituaries in *The Diary* followed a standard format that included the decedent's name, age, address, vital dates, biographical and kinship details (marital status, occupation, and church affiliation), the date and time of services, the officiant, pallbearers, place of interment, and the location of funeral services. Obituary drafting practices, however, vary across communities. In some communities, the decedent's family prepares the obituary and provides it to the funeral home. In others, funeral directors prepare obituaries from information supplied by families. According to a funeral director in Indiana, families typically prepare the obituary before the funeral home arrives to transport the body. In contrast, Ohio funeral directors feed family-supplied information into a software package that generates an obituary.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, some obituaries in *The Diary* included new information: delimited visitation times, private services, mentioning "COVID-19" policies, or the name of the funeral home that provided embalming and burial services. Figure 1 presents the percentage of obituaries, including these themes over time.

Before the pandemic, few obituaries mentioned visitation times. Those that did typically printed a date when the family would receive guests without delineating concrete visitation times. Traditionally, Amish families receive visitors any time during the 2 days preceding a funeral. These visiting events can be immense (1000–1500 people). Everyone in the community is welcome; thus, there is generally no reason to list visitation times. Funeral directors across states

confirmed that funerals have fewer people in attendance, typically a few hundred people, ranging between 100 and 500, often just family and close friends.

Some obituaries began declaring specific visiting times or restrictions on visitations at the end of March 2020. These declarations increased in the months that followed. An informant from the Amish & Mennonite Heritage Center in Holmes County, Ohio, explained, “Listing more specific visiting hours is a polite way of letting people know they are trying to limit the amount of visitors. It is a way of saying, ‘if you are not close, maybe you shouldn’t come’.” Thus, this change in practice is an overt attempt to constrain or limit mass gatherings.

The word “private” also began appearing in Amish obituaries in March, noting private funerals or family services. This suggests that some Amish funerals complied with public health mandates to limit funeral size. The role of funeral directors in the process is indicated by how obituaries that mentioned particular funeral homes consistently used specific phrases. Often “COVID-19” prefaced these restrictions. Some funeral directors explicitly referenced state policy to justify these inclusions. For example, an Indiana funeral home routinely inserted “Due to COVID-19 restrictions, a private family visitation...” into death notices. Other phrases and statements commonly added to obituaries included: “Due to current gathering restrictions, private [family] funeral,” “Private family services officiated by,” and “Funeral services were private.” Repetition of exact phrases linked to funeral homes in the same localities provides evidence of the funeral director’s role as an SLB. If clients wrote their obituaries entirely independently, we would not expect such consistency across obituaries. A funeral director in Pennsylvania confirmed that they required Amish to include language regarding private services in obituaries.

The increased incidence of boilerplate text in obituaries after COVID-19’s onset testifies to the funeral director’s expanded role. Indiana obituaries, for example, often invoked explicit references to state policy, such as, “In accordance with the State of Indiana Back on Track Plan.” That many obituaries specifically invoked COVID-19 related policies to justify restrictions suggests that funeral homes played a role in communicating and implementing state laws. Likewise, the increasing tendency to identify funeral homes by name in the obituaries suggests their more prominent role. Historically, Amish obituaries in *The Diary* did not typically identify funeral homes. Therefore, the increased occurrence of funeral home naming in obituaries during this time frame suggests greater use of funeral home boilerplate language.

Variation in Obituary Language by State

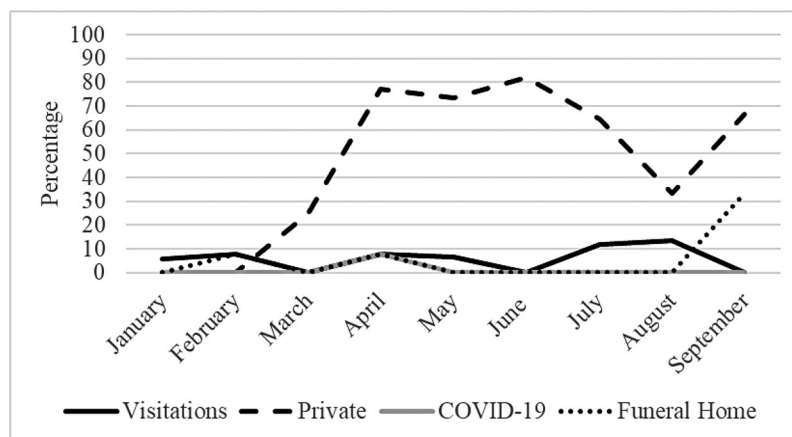
In examining Amish funerary compliance with COVID-19 public health mandates, it is important to situate the obituaries within state and temporal policy contexts. If changes to Amish funeral practices (as reported in obituaries) are due to policy, we should see variation across states and time.

Pennsylvania

In mid-March, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf encouraged suspending events of more than 10 people. On March 23, he issued stay-at-home orders for multiple counties, adding additional counties daily until April 1, when the directive applied to the entire state. The orders required that residents only leave their houses for life-sustaining business activities. The order states that “individuals should not gather in religious buildings or homes for services or celebrations until the stay-at-home order is lifted” (State of Pennsylvania 2020). At the end of April, Governor Wolf implemented a phased plan to reopen the state. The stay-at-home order ended on June 4.

Figure 2 demonstrates that the insertion of the word “private” is the only noticeable change in Pennsylvania obituary language throughout the analysis. The term began to appear in March and remained high from April to June, consistent with the Governor’s stay-at-home directive. Obituaries declaring services “private” typically did not print dates, times, or locations, elements ordinarily included in Amish obituaries. Asked to comment on this pattern, a Pennsylvania funeral

Figure 2
Pennsylvania Old Order Amish Obituary Information, January–September 2020



director noted that enforcing such orders was not their (the funeral home's) responsibility. In contrast, another Pennsylvania funeral director admitted requiring the inclusion of "private" in obituaries; however, their facility did not host the visitation or funeral service. According to this director, clients initially did not object or dispute the insertion. After August 2020, however, clients increasingly opposed this inclusion. Indeed, we see a decline in the incidence of "private" occurring in Pennsylvania obituaries between July and August.

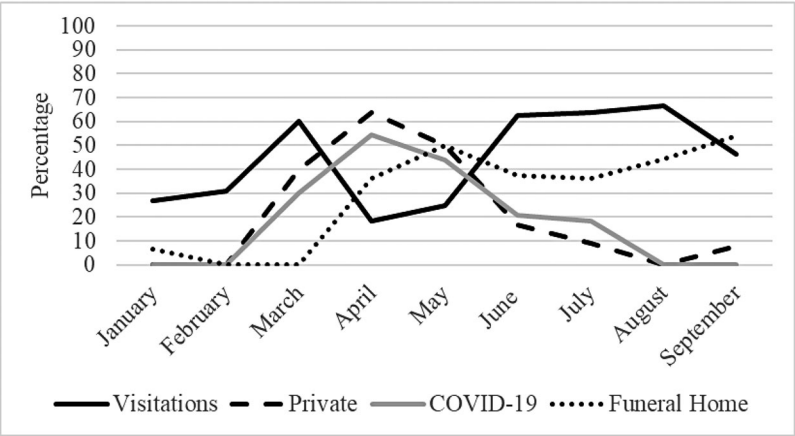
Indiana

Indiana had a different pattern entirely, likely reflecting a different policy environment. On March 16, Indiana began adhering to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations to restrict in-person events to no more than 50 people, which further reduced to 10 people on March 23, 2020 (State of Indiana 2020). Since the state classified funeral homes as an "essential business," they were not subject to the latter order. However, the state did require religious services, including funerals, to comply with CDC recommendations on social gatherings. On May 1, 2020, Indiana's Governor signed an executive order limiting all communal activities (including religious services) to ten or fewer people. One week later, the Governor amended the order exempting religious services from the limits (State of Indiana 2020). However, group size restrictions remained in effect for visitations before or after funeral services. These guidelines changed again on May 21, increasing the maximum group size to 100 socially distanced people and again to 250 on June 11.

Figure 3 indicates that the word private in Indiana Amish obituaries rose in March, with peak mentions in April. Occurrences of "private" funerals remained high in May, followed by a drastic decline. Some Indiana obituaries referred to "private visitation" in addition to private funeral services. This pattern reflects the changes in the executive orders from allowing up to 50 socially distanced people for religious funeral services in March and April to being exempt from attendee restrictions from May 8 and on. By August, there were no mentions of private services. Reports of restricted visiting hours in Indiana obituaries spiked in March, with a subsequent drop in April and May likely due to the executive order limiting gatherings, making any visitation difficult. Visitation notations resumed high levels in June to September following the change in executive orders that drastically increased the number of people allowed to gather to 250.

Mentions of "COVID-19" or pandemic policy began appearing in the obituaries in March, peaking in April and then steadily declining to zero by September. Multiple obituaries used the same boilerplate language about policy and named the funeral home. Funeral home names spiked

Figure 3
Indiana Old Order Amish Obituary Information, January–September 2020



in April and remained relatively consistent through September, likely due to the standard language implemented by funeral directors.

Ohio

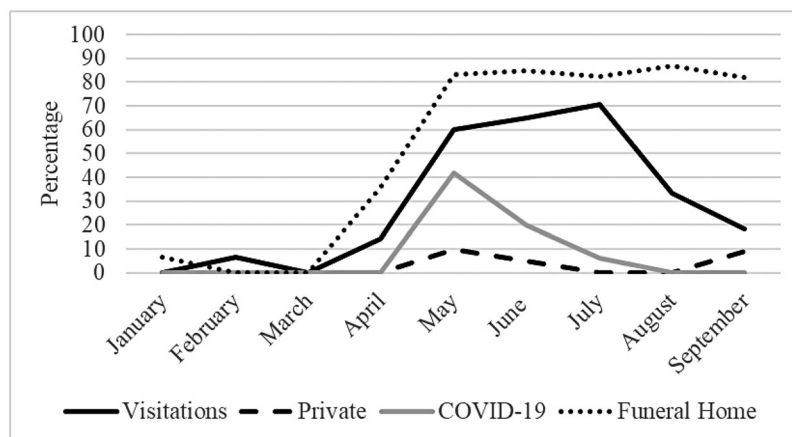
On March 22, Governor Mike DeWine instituted a stay-at-home order for the State of Ohio, which prohibited people from gathering outside a single household except for essential business. As essential businesses, the order exempted religious ceremonies, including weddings and funerals. Since the executive order explicitly excluded funerals, Ohio obituaries do not invoke the word private. Although funerals were not legally required to limit their size, they were required to enact social distancing measures.

However, the executive order restricted the number of people allowed during visiting hours. Figure 4 shows that Ohio obituaries rarely mentioned visitation before mid-April. The few that did reference visiting merely noted that visitors were welcome at any time before the funeral or that people visited the deceased’s family. References to visitation and funeral homes increased in April. From mid-April to September, 82 percent of obituaries included the name of the funeral home and 52 percent noted visitation. Two obituaries from the same funeral home said social distancing would be observed during the visitations. References to “COVID-19” policies peaked in May. A funeral director in Ohio notes, “We’ll take care of the obituary for the newspaper. We take care of all the legal documentation, filing the death certificate, obtain [the] burial permit. But then we’re done.” These increased references to visiting, funeral homes, and COVID-19 in obituaries suggest that funeral homes include or provide families with boilerplate language, demonstrating their role in pandemic adjustments to funerals.

Ohio obituaries varied in their articulation of visiting expectations. Some specified particular times and expectations for social distancing, but most declared that visiting occurred as usual. According to one funeral director, the Ohio Amish Safety Committee⁷ played a prominent role in this process. The Safety Committee communicated directly with Ohio’s health department, concluding that the social distancing regulations did not apply to funerals. They shared this opinion broadly throughout Amish churches. The Safety Committee’s intervention may explain why most mentions of visiting referenced no restrictions. Indeed, the safety committee threatened the

⁷The Safety Committee operates under the purview of the Ohio Steering Committee, a group that serves as a liaison between Amish groups and government agencies (Anon 2021).

Figure 4
Ohio Old Order Amish Obituary Information, January–September 2020



funeral director's authority as an SLB, as they provided information about the guidelines directly to the Amish community.

State Comparisons

Figures 2–4 show that the themes varied across states. Mentions of private funerals differed by state. In Pennsylvania, Governor Wolf's stay-at-home order required that individuals not gather for services. Designation of "private" funerals skyrocketed after the state enacted the stay-at-home order and dropped off once it ended. Similarly, the pattern of mentioning private funerals in Indiana followed the enactment of the Governor's executive order restricting gathering sizes. The practice in Ohio differs, where funerals were exempt from the executive order, and thus, there is little increase in mentions of private funerals.

Mentions of visitations, however, did increase in Ohio obituaries following Governor DeWine's order that restricted gathering sizes for visitations. The obituaries responded either by noting delimited visiting times, consistent with the order, or indicating, in contrast, that visiting was happening per usual. This language is a response to the policy; during pre-COVID-19 times, visiting was an expected, taken for granted, part of the funeral process. In Indiana, mentions of visitation paralleled the institution and revocation of the executive order. In Pennsylvania, we do not see similar rates of delimited visiting hours. The increased prevalence of private funerals may have implied a universal cancelation of visiting due to the strict stay-at-home directive. Ohio also differed from Pennsylvania and Indiana in that it had an organized Amish third-party mediator of policy, the Ohio Amish Safety Committee. The committee's interference may have reduced compliance with state mandates due to interpreting the policies as not applying to funerals *and* visitations.

Regarding mentions of COVID-19 policy and funeral homes, we do not see much of this in Pennsylvania; the use of the word private may have substituted for the need to mention COVID-19 policy or funeral homes further. One of the Pennsylvania funeral directors noted requiring the addition of the word private but did not mention requiring anything else. In contrast, the boilerplate language provided by Indiana funeral homes often included the funeral home name. It specified that the modified funeral practices were due to the pandemic or in accordance with the current policies (e.g., "due to COVID-19 restrictions..."). Since funerals were exempt from gathering restrictions in Ohio, it is consistent that there are fewer mentions of COVID-19 policy compared to Indiana. When Ohio obituaries mentioned such a policy, they

generally emphasized an expectation for social distancing during the services rather than explicitly restricting the number of people who could attend. Like Indiana, Ohio obituaries mentioning COVID-19 policy or indicating visiting times typically stated the name of the funeral home.

The theme variation across the three states reflects distinct state laws and safety guidelines concerning large gatherings. Funeral directors played a role in Amish funeral compliance through the language they required or provided for obituaries. However, the funeral directors' interpretations of their roles varied, which may have affected compliance rates.

Differing Interpretations of the Roles of Funeral Directors in COVID-19 Policy Implementation

Since Amish funerals do not occur in funeral homes, the funeral directors interpreted their responsibility to enforce COVID-19 government health mandates differently at the onset of the pandemic. The funeral director in Indiana did not report efforts to ensure compliance with the limitations on gathering. Presumably, they did not see it as their responsibility. Similarly, while adhering to the letter of the law/guidelines, a funeral director in Pennsylvania did not enforce the restrictive COVID-19 policies as they did not think it was their responsibility to do so.

In contrast, a different funeral director in Pennsylvania viewed it as their responsibility to communicate the mandates and guidelines to the Amish and, in some ways, to enforce them. The director created a flyer with information on the mandates and recommendations and told the Amish families they needed to provide outside bathroom facilities, including a hand washing station. The director also instructed anyone who was sick to stay home. The director required the Amish to stop shaking hands, and they complied, but the director did not insist on social distancing after they refused to do it. When the Amish community noticed the accommodations resulting from the guidelines implemented by this funeral director, they began instituting similar practices at funerals without necessarily being told.

A director in Pennsylvania successfully implemented some restrictions; in Ohio, the Amish Safety Committee constrained funeral director authority. An Ohio funeral director indicated that their responsibility was to take care of the embalming, the obituary for the newspaper, and legal documentation and that everything else was outside of their purview. The hands-off approach may have been, in part, a response to the involvement of the Safety Committee. These interviews provide illustrative examples of the funeral directors functioning as SLBs, and their varying roles in attempting to enforce COVID-19 mandates with their Amish clients.

DISCUSSION

Many congregations in the United States resisted COVID-19-related mandates that interfered with their worship rituals (Green 2020; Luscombe 2020; Thompson 2020). Jurisdictional questions, limited staffing, and little appetite to enforce these mandates made their large-scale implementation impractical (Arthur 2020). Given the utility of these strategies for protecting public health, we should try to understand those factors that both facilitate and impede compliance with COVID-19 mitigation strategies and the broader policy implications of our findings.

In this study, we examined funeral rituals. Amish funerals link the church and outside funeral service providers (funeral directors). In addition to the existential and spiritual mourning, death carries certain technical, logistical, and administrative burdens. Funeral director services relieve these burdens. The Amish resisted many imposed pandemic policies. Numerous reports

documented the incidence of Amish churches failing to (or refusing to) comply with COVID-19-related mandates (Ali et al. 2020; Corcoran et al. 2022; Duran et al. 2020; Stein 2021). So then, why did some comply for funerals? We suggest that the difference is due to their dependence on service providers who function as SLBs. During the pandemic's peak, funeral directors used discretion to interpret and implement state COVID-19 policies. We found that the content of Amish obituaries after the start of the pandemic differed from those published before 2020. Specifically, obituaries incorporated language reflecting COVID-19 mitigation policy, which varied by state. Using specific boilerplate language provided by the funeral home was a means to enact policy. The standard language illuminates funeral directors' role as SLBs facilitating COVID-19 mitigation strategies within Amish funerary rituals.

Religious resistance to public health recommendations and policies did not commence with COVID-19. There was such resistance during the 1918 influenza pandemic (Marisam 2007) and historically and currently with regard to vaccines (Callaghan et al. 2019; Corcoran, Scheitle, and DiGregorio 2021; Fullenkamp 2021; Whitehead and Perry 2020) and reproductive care (e.g., sex education, birth control, and access to abortion) (di Mauro and Joffe 2007; Emerson 1996; Hoffmann and Johnson 2005). The results of this study suggest that SLBs may facilitate compliance with public health guidelines or policies in situations where a religious person may otherwise resist due to dependence. For example, numerous services have mandated immunization with only medical exceptions, such as receiving welfare (Besharoy, White, and Coggeshall 1996), residing in long-term care facilities (Stewart, Cox, and Rosenbaum 2005), attending public school (Orenstein and Hinman 1999), and fostering children (Szilagyi et al. 2015). However, this varies by state and country. Although the Amish are underimmunized and generally skeptical of vaccines (Scott et al. 2021; Stein et al. 2022; Wenger et al. 2011), their culture values large families (Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt 2013). Some confronted with infertility and similar problems volunteer to be foster parents. These families generally comply with state immunization requirements along with household safety requirements and prohibitions on corporal punishment (Harder 2019; Harder, Bharwani, and Gabel 2022). Infertility or a desire for large families may also motivate other anti-vaccine religious conservative families to foster, which, may in turn, facilitate their compliance with immunization requirements. Examining how SLBs may facilitate compliance with public health policies and guidelines among the otherwise religiously resistant is an important area for future research.

Beyond funeral directors, other types/elements of religious rituals may also create dependence on SLBs, which could facilitate compliance with health or other government policies. Religious individuals choosing to hold weddings or receptions in nonreligious locations may have been forced to abide by COVID-19 restrictions. Congregations that serve food for events, ministries, and food pantries, may, depending on their site, be required to obtain permits/licenses and abide by state or county laws regarding serving food. For example, Montgomery County, Maryland, requires churches to get a food service facility license if they will serve or provide food or drink to the public (Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services 2023). If congregations purchase catered food from third parties, SLBs may require or enforce the legal requirements for serving, storing, and handling food. Likewise, congregations must consider zoning and land use regulations when expanding or renovating their property (Miller 2020). Construction companies may function as SLBs of such policies for congregations that utilize their services. These and other SLBs represent fruitful avenues for future research on congregational compliance with policy.

However, SLBs may not be equally successful at facilitating compliance among religiously resistant populations. We found that the funeral director's interpretation of ambiguous policy mandates shaped how Amish clients complied with the mandates. One funeral director insisted that Amish obituaries included the word "private" and that the funeral ritual itself followed numerous COVID-19 mitigation strategies. This funeral director successfully encouraged compliance with a resistant population. Other funeral directors limited their enforcement of mandates to activities

occurring at their funeral homes. Unsurprisingly, their clients did not follow the mandates outside the funeral home. These results demonstrate that SLBs can play an essential role in public health policy when providers consider policy enforcement their responsibility. Emphasizing this role is an optimal strategy for facilitating policy compliance among religious groups that consider their rituals outside the domain of government interference.

The findings also highlight how religious groups are not just receivers of policy but can actively participate in its implementation. According to our informants, Amish compliance with COVID-19 mitigation strategies waned. Perhaps these clients became more generally aware that the funeral directors were imposing their own interpretations of the health mandates, encouraging them to push back on the funeral director's interpretation. In Ohio, the Amish Safety Committee communicated directly with public health departments. It broadly distributed countering interpretations concerning the rights and responsibilities of Amish people under the law and regulatory environment. Some Amish clients drew upon this guidance to dispute the funeral director's authority. Thus, a competing religious organization serving the religious group's interests distributed its interpretation of the public health mandates in communication with the health department. Similarly, outside of health policy, the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), a Christian organization, directly interprets homeschooling laws for its members and will legally intercede on their behalf (Home School Legal Defense Association 2023). Future research would benefit from further examining how street-level bureaucracies and other intermediary organizations facilitate or impede compliance with public policies among resistant religious groups.

This study has some limitations. First, we collected obituary data from one Old Order Amish correspondence newspaper. As such, we cannot say whether the findings are generalizable to all Amish obituaries. However, *The Diary* is a widely popular newspaper among the Old Order Amish, so we expect it may at least represent Old Order Amish obituaries in the United States. Second, we only interviewed four funeral directors in three states. We selected those states because they have the largest Amish populations in the United States and contacted funeral directors working with Amish people. We used these interviews to explore how funeral directors function as SLBs regulating Amish people. Although we do not claim our informants represent all funeral directors in the United States, their accounts offer insight into how SLBs play a role in the thorny conflicts over COVID-19 mitigation policy. Our findings suggest that discretionary action on the part of SLBs seems to shape behavior. Future research should explore this observation's generalizability more fully.

Although much of religion and law/policy literature focuses on the conflicts between religious groups and government, this study extends the theory of street-level bureaucracy to examine how service providers may function as SLBs and facilitate compliance from religious groups that would otherwise resist. SLBs are a crucial intermediary between people and their government (Lipsky 2010; Sudhipongpracha and Poocharoen 2021). As people, individually and collectively, decide whether to comply with public health directives and policies more generally, SLBs shape these decisions. This study suggests that when religious groups/people, who would normally not comply with public policies, are dependent on services rendered by SLBs, they face a greater incentive to comply. However, SLBs are less effective in securing compliance when alternative intermediary authorities share the same policy space. The findings of this study direct attention to the potential role of SLBs in current and future health interventions and legal conflicts, particularly among populations such as high-tension religious communities, for which there is resistance.

STATEMENT OF REPLICATION

Newspaper data are publicly available.

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