

The Challenges of a Cultural Right of Passage: Law Enforcement and Amish Youth (Part II)

by Tom Fitch, Shipshewana Police Department - 12/11/07

This is the second part of a two-part article on law enforcement procedures when dealing with the Amish. Tom Fitch of the Shipshewana Police Department wrote this article for the Master Instructor program. Part one dealt with law enforcement contacts with Amish juveniles. Part two deals with law enforcement contacts with adult Amish church members

Another challenge law enforcement faces is dealing with parents of the problematic Amish youth. Upon encountering the parents for the first time, officers may find that many Amish parents will be angry or offended by their presence. These parents adhere to the belief that the church is the supreme authority and that law enforcement is intrusive. Often, parents will argue the facts with the officer, and occasionally, they will accuse the officer of picking on the Amish youth. Parents will argue in front of the younger siblings of the juvenile in question. This reinforces and supports the behavior.

Well known is the fact that Amish use horse and buggies as a means of transportation and have no telephones. Many of the young Amish individuals stopped are too young to be taken to jail. Officers will need to contact the parents, in person, and most likely take the juveniles home, since many live miles from the police station or jail, and their only mode of travel is horse and buggy.

The Shipshewana Police Department has found several effective strategies of working with the Amish Community. First and foremost, all agencies sharing jurisdiction should act consistently. It requires a joint effort to help change attitudes and years of tradition.

Police agencies in LaGrange County have begun to coordinate officers from all agencies to raid and apprehend the large drinking parties. This coordination makes for a safer and more effective raid. Another change is to start holding parents, who are condoning these large parties, accountable by charging adults with maintaining a common nuisance and contributing.

LaGrange County Probation has contributed to the effort by starting a home-arrest program. This program is enforced by the local law enforcement agencies who then conduct surprise visits to make sure they are in compliance with their probation.

Law enforcement in the past may have taken the same stance as the Amish community on Rumspringa by considering this a harmless tradition. Our agency has changed our attitudes and policies on this practice. In the past, officers would conduct what was known as "pour and goes" by allowing offenders to dump their alcohol and be on their way. It is standard policy to now arrest or detain on the spot the young offenders.

It was common knowledge that in the past officers would not pursue juveniles who ran from law enforcement, thus encouraging the practice. LaGrange County now has several canines, which are called to the large parties that are raided.

As a more proactive approach, the law enforcement agencies are having meetings to share information and coordinate efforts. The Shipshewana Police Department held a meeting in September 2002 with the Amish community to discuss the release of the movie *The Devil's Playground*. This meeting brought over 400 bishops, deacons, and members of the Amish community from seven different states together.

The Shipshewana Police Department has joined with the Town of Shipshewana in starting the Youth Vision Project that is working with the Amish community to provide drug and alcohol counseling. The project also provides the mental health and law enforcement fields with education on the Amish culture and issues in their Amish community.

The Shipshewana Police Department is attending Amish schools and giving lectures on all safety issues, including drug and alcohol abuse.

Another issue which affects law enforcement is how to respond to and investigate calls in which Amish are victims. Without an understanding of the Amish culture, officers cannot and will not effectively service their Amish communities. The Amish are a very closely-knit community. It is for this reason they are often victims of crimes that go unreported. The Amish believe in non-resistance and pacifism. This is demonstrated in a popular movie *Witness* starring Harrison Ford. Many Amish are taught and expected to "turn the other cheek." This leads to the Amish being victimized by the same perpetrators, as they will not call the police. Sexual crimes, domestic violence, and property crimes often go unreported in the Amish community. When crimes such as domestic violence and sexual crimes are committed, they are generally reported to church officials who then attempt to handle these situations on their own. It is not until the crime is so severe or has occurred on multiple occasions that eventually law enforcement becomes involved. Neighbors, friends, or witnesses to the crime who are not of the Amish culture, are often the source by which these crimes are reported. Local law enforcement is currently working on more effective strategies to encourage the Amish community to report crimes.

It is critical for law enforcement agencies that have an Amish community in their jurisdiction to train their officers in the Amish culture. Without this critical training, officers will not have an understanding of why certain situations occur.

In light of the recent school shooting incident in Pennsylvania, a need for training in the area of school safety and security has arisen. The Shipshewana Police Department is working to provide resources to Amish Schools and Churches, without interfering with religious beliefs. This is just one example of how police agencies should strive to continue training in the area of cultural diversity.