

Estimate: A new Amish community is founded every three and a half weeks in US

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A new census of the Amish population in the United States estimates that a new Amish community is founded, on average, about every 3 1/2 weeks, and shows that more than 60 percent of all existing Amish settlements have been founded since 1990.

This pattern suggests the Amish are growing more rapidly than most other religions in the United States, researchers say. Unlike other religious groups, however, the growth is not driven by converts joining the faith, but instead can be attributed to large families and high rates of baptism.

In all, the [census](#) counts almost 251,000 Amish in the United States and Ontario, Canada, dispersed among 456 settlements, the communities in which members live and worship. The 1990 census estimated that there were 179 settlements in the United States.

If the growth of the Amish population continues at its current rate, the Ohio State University researchers predict that the census could exceed 1 million Amish and 1,000 settlements shortly after 2050, and these numbers will bring economic, cultural, social and religious change to the rural areas that attract Amish settlement.

Among the changes the researchers predict: Amish will buy up land vacated by farmers in [rural areas](#) close to community services, but the availability of [farmland](#) might not keep pace with [population growth](#). This means many Amish men will likely look for nonfarm jobs such as

woodworking and construction trades, which could affect land prices and potentially enhance local economies through the establishment of business startups.

The census restricts the count to Amish among the "Old Orders," those who maintain a horse-and-buggy lifestyle and avoid or limit their use of most modern technologies.

The researchers who compiled the census used a variety of sources to produce this count, including current and archival settlement directories and statistics from publications that cover some of the largest Amish communities, as well as by calculating estimates based on research-based facts about Amish settlement characteristics.

It took about two years to develop the census, which was commissioned by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies for the recently released 2010 U.S. Religion Census.

"The Amish are one of the fastest-growing religious groups in North America," said Joseph Donnermeyer, professor of rural sociology in Ohio State's School of Environment and Natural Resources, who led the census project. "They're doubling their population about every 21 to 22 years, primarily because they produce large families and the vast majority of daughters and sons remain in the community as adults baptized into the faith, starting their own families and sustaining their religious beliefs and practices."

Donnermeyer compiled the count with Elizabeth Cooksey, professor of sociology, and Cory Anderson, a graduate student in rural sociology, both at Ohio State. Anderson presented a paper today (7/27) in Chicago at the annual meeting of the Rural Sociological Society.

The researchers describe the Amish as largely misunderstood based on

their limited depiction on television reality shows or in the news media. The Amish represent a branch of the Anabaptist (or rebaptized) movement dating to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Based on their interpretation of the Christian bible, the Amish settle where they can separate themselves from the world, minimize disturbance from others and use the land for farming or other livelihoods, Donnermeyer said.

The church is central to Amish life and is intentionally small-scale in its organization in keeping with their religious philosophy of separation, Donnermeyer said. Larger settlements are composed of multiple church districts, which typically consist of a few dozen families whose baptized members use a lottery system to select leaders. Worship services are held in members' homes.

The absence of a centralized church registry makes it complicated to produce an accurate estimate of the Amish population, Donnermeyer noted, but he said this census is likely the most comprehensive scholarly count of the Amish population to date.

He and his colleagues relied on more than 60 settlement directories they obtained from the Heritage Historical Library operated by the Mennonite Church and three publications that cover news about various Amish communities, both large and small. Those publications are *The Budget* in Sugarcreek, Ohio, *The Diary* in Bart, Pa., and *Die Botschaft* in Millersburg, Pa.

The researchers also used demographic data from established settlements to produce average household estimates for newer or similar communities that had not published directories. A settlement, by definition, must contain at least three households and include members who are able to hold a church service; these criteria were the basis for estimating the population of settlements that were less than a year old.

Baptism into the Amish church is offered only to adults – a fundamental tenet of the Anabaptist movement. Of the 250,784 Amish adherents identified in the census, 145,235 are considered nonmembers because they are children who have not yet been baptized.

The census provides Amish population figures for each state with at least one Amish community. The researchers included Ontario, Canada, home to 15 settlements and almost 4,400 Amish, in the census. The Amish live in 29 states, mostly in the Midwest and Great Lakes region but also as far south as Florida and Texas, into the northeast reaches of Maine and as far west as western Montana.

According to the research, Ohio is home to the most Amish community members – 60,233 – and Pennsylvania is a close second, with 59,078 Amish residents. Indiana has 44,831 Amish citizens. The 456 settlements contain a total of 1,868 Amish church districts of the "Old Orders."

No state has seen more recent growth in settlements than New York, where 15 new settlements have been established since 2010. But 34 of Ohio's 54 settlements have been founded since 1990, a trend that contributes to the state's large Amish population, Donnermeyer said. Ohio is also home to Holmes County, the U.S. county housing the highest percentage of Amish, with 42 percent. The Greater Holmes County settlement, which sprawls across six counties (Holmes, Wayne, Tuscarawas, Coshocton, Stark and Ashland), is the largest settlement, with nearly 30,000 Amish, followed by the Lancaster/Chester County settlement in southeastern Pennsylvania.

"My guess is that in 15 years, we'll witness a county whose population is majority Amish, and Holmes County is likely to gain that distinction first. Perhaps LaGrange County in Indiana will not be far behind," Donnermeyer said.

Provided by Ohio State University

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