

Twelve charged in Amish beard-cutting attacks

by [Mark Gillispie](#) in the [January 25, 2012](#) issue

Federal prosecutors have expanded their case against members of a breakaway Amish sect for their roles in shaving the hair and beards of people considered to be their religious enemies.

An indictment

issued in December in U.S. District Court in Cleveland lists 12 suspects, including the sect's leader, Samuel Mullet, 66. The FBI originally arrested Mullet and six other men November 23 when authorities feared that more attacks were imminent.

Among the five

additional people implicated December 20 are two women: Linda Shrock, who is Mullet's daughter, and Anna Miller, who is married to one of Mullet's nephews. All but one of the 12 are related directly or through marriage to Mullet.

Federal authorities say the attacks were

motivated by revenge after a group of Amish bishops refused to accept Mullet's excommunication of eight families that had left his community in Bergholz, Ohio, because they disagreed with his authoritarian leadership.

The indictment accuses Mullet of forcing women to have

sex with him so they could learn to please their husbands better. It also accused Mullet of allowing "the community to engage in practices of self-deprivation and corporal punishment" to show their devotion to him.

Community members would sleep for days at a time in filthy

chicken coops and were supposed to obey not only his interpretation of

the Bible but also all of his orders and directives, the indictment said.

An expert on Amish culture said Mullet's community operated beyond what is considered the norm for Amish communities. "Given what we know, the technical definition of a cult would probably fit here," said Steven Nolt, a history professor at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana.

The 12 people were charged under the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which was approved by Congress in 2009 and carries a possible life prison term.

"For nearly 500 years, people have come to this land so that they could pray however and to whomever they wished," Steven Dettelbach, U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Ohio, said in a prepared statement. "Violent attempts to attack this most basic freedom have no place in our country."

According to the indictment, seven Amish men had their heads and beards shaved over two months beginning September 6. Two other people were hurt trying to stop the attacks.

In the Amish community, beards have a special significance and an Old Testament basis. Beards are grown only after a man has married or, in some communities, has been baptized as an adult. Amish men are forbidden from growing mustaches because those are viewed as having a military association.

Mullet is not accused of directly participating in any attack. Rather, he is charged with planning them and, in several instances, hiding evidence such as a camera that was used to photograph some of the victims and an over-the-counter medication that was slipped into the coffee of one of the victims in an attempt to poison him.

The incidents have garnered international publicity and have become a

source of embarrassment and consternation to the Amish community, which numbers about 260,000 in North America.

The victims of the attacks

included Amish bishops who decided that Mullet's excommunications were not justified by Amish teachings. In an interview with WKYC Channel 3 in October, Mullet said: "It's all religion. That's why we can't figure out why the sheriff has his nose in it."

Nolt said it would be

fair to say that while Mullet and his followers dressed and called themselves Amish, the actions they are accused of would prove otherwise. "They were really out there," Nolt said. "None of it makes sense in any kind of Amish frame." —RNS