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CULT CAPTURE: THE CREATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL KIDNAPPING

AN ANALYSIS OF BUILDING A CRIMINAL OFFENSE TO BE USED BY CULT SURVIVORS

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I. INTRODUCTION

Imagine feeling lost, alone, and isolated in the world, confused about your life's direction and purpose. Suddenly, you meet someone who promises to protect, love, and care for you; they welcome you into their life and beliefs, and before long, you find yourself surrounded by a group of people bonded over the sense of community and togetherness. However, once you show uniqueness, you are shamed, humiliated, and punished. You are no longer treated as an individual but as a number, part of a pack where any deviation results in physical punishments or mental abuse. To stay safe, you continue participation in the group and do what is

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expected. That is how easy it is to get trapped within a cult. Through manipulation and scare tactics, freedom is slowly stripped away. Yet, the law lacks proper criminal claims through which cult leaders can be prosecuted, leaving cult survivors without a meaningful remedy.

The goal of this Note is to propose suggestions for implementing a legal remedy that would allow cult survivors to recover while also enabling the criminal prosecution of individuals and organizations that employ coercion tactics to achieve what is, in essence, psychological kidnapping. To get there, this Note first uncovers the difficult and complex categorization of a cult, highlighting the differing perspectives that define "a cult." Then, this Note dives into the creation of cults, emphasizing the formation, techniques, and tactics used across various groups by taking a deeper look into three specific cults. To provide comprehensive suggestions, the spotlight is on cult members' experiences as methods of abuse are scrutinized and brought to light. The proposed legal remedy provided in this Note, prosecution of "Coercion Control," hinges on cult members' overall perspectives and lifestyles in response to the inhumane conditions within cults. Finally, this Note sets forth specific suggestions, such as statute of limitations, definitions, and levels of offense, by comparing state and international laws to show that the creation of this offense is not only a necessity but viable.

II. WHAT IS A CULT?

a. DEFINING "CULT"

There is not a "one size fits all" definition that embodies the definition of "cult." Often, it can depend on one's mindset and the context in which the term is used. For example, in a religious context, a cult is known as a small, non-mainstream religious group.[1] This definition can be scrutinized in many ways, such as the individual meanings of the terms small, non-mainstream, and "religious." Similarly, in a psychological context, a cult can be used to reference a group or movement that employs manipulative tactics to achieve control and abuse

[1] *See* Charles R. Davenport, *Understanding the Manipulative Tactics of Cults*, DAVENPORT PSYCH. (Feb. 12, 2024), https://davenportpsychology.com/2024/02/12/understanding-the-manipulative-tactics-of-cults/ [https://perma.cc/KQ85-RGXU].

its members.[2] In a legal context, neither statutes nor case law provide courts with a clear definition of "cult," although a Nebraska court relied on the testimony of a social worker to identify ten factors used to determine whether a group should be considered a cult.[3] In the social worker's opinion, a group that meets seven of the following factors is considered a cult:

> (1) 'a very strong and powerful leader that is charismatic,' (2) 'the group gives power to that leader and is submissive to that leader,' (3) 'a rigid ideology where there is a definitely right and a wrong or being of God or of Satan,' (4) 'physiologic deprivation in the form of either sleep deprivation… or food deprivation' or long hours listening to lectures or sermons, (5) isolation from family, (6) isolation or restrictions on communication from society via the media, (7) a 'fair amount' of the members' income being turned over to the group, (8) some form of communal living, (9) active recruiting a by group members using 'love bombing'…, and (10) hate and fear of outsiders or looking upon them as lost souls.[4]

The religious definition is simple and vague, while the psychological definition provides a narrower definition by including the manipulation and control that exists within a cult.[5] In contrast, the definition provided in *Peterson* supplies precise elements that may be applied to an organization or a group.[6] In all respects, each individual definition, although different, embody the same idea: a group controlled through physical abuse and psychological manipulation to achieve a desired outcome.

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[2] *See id*.
[3] *See* Peterson v. Peterson, 474 N.W.2d 862, 867 (Neb. 1991).
[4] *Id.*
[5] *See* Davenport, *supra* note 1.
[6] *Peterson*, 474 N.W.2 at 867.

b. THE FORMATION OF CULTS

The goal of a cult leader is to build a group that becomes dependent on that leader primarily and the group secondarily. A successful recruitment strategy will include attracting attention to a sense of community or belief and building trust between the prospect and group before gradually influencing the recruit to remain within the group. The populations most regularly targeted individuals are those in the midst of a vulnerable period in the life, such as an emotional instability or identity crisis, and those in isolation from the public, or "outcasts."[7] Common strategies include offering belonging and purpose, deceptive messaging, peer recruitment, manipulating emotions, and promising transformation.[8] During the recruitment process, cults are not sincere or forthright, and the targets are generally unaware that the methods used to bring them in have been perfected to gain control and lure in new members.[9] Many times, recruitment is embroidered into events or courses that will likely bring open-minded or curious people, such as "How to get in control of your life" or "How to reach perfect peace."[10] The use of love and validation, also known as "love-bombing," is a tactic used to draw in and create a false safe space for recruits during initial contact because the cult does not have control and therefore must create a false perception.[11] These methods have been perfected from organization to organization, so much so that now new recruits may not know that they are in a cult until it is too late.

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[7] *See Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and 'Organised Fringe Groups'*, LEGIS. ASSEMBLY LEGAL & SOC. ISSUES COMM. 3–4, https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/499649/contentassets/7ad8c176bf264aa2b07a82deab171b31/guidance-note---recruitment-methods-and-impacts-of-cults-and-organised-fringe-groups.pdf [https://perma.cc/D6XY-ZZ87] (last visited Feb. 27, 2026).

[8] *Id*.

[9] *See The Psychology of Cults*, THE UNIV. OF TEX. PERMIAN BASIN, https://online.utpb.edu/about-us/articles/psychology/the-psychology-of-cults/ [https://perma.cc/6P4D-ATB3] (last visited Feb. 27, 2026).

[10] *Why Do People Join Cults?*, BRIGHTON & HOVE PSYCHOTHERAPY (Feb. 24, 2025), https://www.brightonandhovepsychotherapy.com/blog/why_do_people_join_cults/ [https://perma.cc/8ZBJ-M3HZ].

[11] *The Psychology of Cults*, *supra* note 9.

c. CULTS AND THE FIRST AMENDMENT

Cults are no stranger to the First Amendment. The First Amendment's Establishment Clause prohibits the government, as well as government entities, from establishing religion.[12] The Free Exercise Clause within the First Amendment protects the right of citizens to practice their chosen religions, as long as the practice does not conflict with public morals or a compelling governmental interest.[13] To that end, the United States Supreme Court set precedent in 1940, stating the freedom to believe is absolute, but the freedom to act on those beliefs is limited.[14] Additionally, the Supreme Court has stated that the protection of free exercise of religious conduct is not absolute. Therefore, activities, even when religiously based, are subject to regulation by states to promote the health, safety, and general welfare of the public.[15] Often times, the difference between a successful and unsuccessful claim is taking religion out of the equation. The question of constitutionality within a cult is very fact specific and determined by the circumstances of the individual case. Courts have previously held that undue influence can be found through continued one-on-one personal threats made against a vulnerable person, and those interactions are not protected by the First Amendment.[16] The type of threat made, for example, threatening eternal damnation from the church or gods, is unimportant.[17] Tort liability, such as fraud or misrepresentation, are the most common successful claims to break through the First Amendment defense.

III. CULT ACTIVITY

a. THE CENTER OF CULTS

Cults, although different in their own ways, are nevertheless alike in that they share issues and employ the same techniques. At the core of every cult is a central process that defines their power: recruitment. A leader needs followers, so the recruitment process is full of methods and tactics used to

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[12] U.S. CONST. amend. I.
[13] U.S. CONST. amend. II.
[14] *See* Cantwell v. Conn., 310 U.S. 296, 303 (1940).
[15] *See* Wis. v. Yoder, 406 U.S. 205, 220 (1972).
[16] *See* Roberts-Douglas v. Meares, 624 A.2d 405, 424 (D.C. 1992).
[17] *Id*. at 424.

prey on the vulnerable populations. When members are acquired, public displays of authority and social isolation are implemented to retain control over the follower. With enough manipulation, coercion, and abuse, members will look to the leader for answers or a pathway, following their leader without question. Dr. Janja Lalich, a sociologist and cult survivor, and Karla McLaren, a social science researcher and cult survivor, inform that the success of a cult leader is acquired through "exhilarating utopian visions, constant displays of power, demands for commitment, demonization of outsiders (or less committed group members), and incessant emotional manipulation."[18] Because the ultimate goal of cult leaders is to obtain complete obedience, worship, and adoration from their followers, no command is too great; consequently, the ending is often violent and the leader's last act of manipulation and control. The three cults discussed below provide chilling examples.

i. PEOPLE'S TEMPLE

The expression "don't drink the Kool-Aid" was coined after more than 900 members of the People's Temple cult participated in a mass suicide by consuming a poisoned beverage.[19] To get to this outcome, cult leader Pastor Jim Jones built his own church community in 1954, using fake healing rituals and organized religious conventions to recruit members.[20] Jones was known to exhibit cancer healings, where a member would lie about having cancer and then credit Jones for abolishing the cancer.[21] Jones also leveraged both manipulation and coercive power to first convince people they were sick, and only afterward offer a remedy.[22] Former members would explain that attending the "'miracle healings'" and hearing of the promises of a community that operated

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[18] JANJA LALICH & KARLA MCLAREN, ESCAPING UTOPIA: GROWING UP IN A CULT, GETTING OUT, & STARTING OVER 42 (Routledge, 2018).

[19] *See* Mia Minichiello, *Peoples Temple (religious movement)*, EBSCO (2024), https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/peoples-temple-religious-movement [https://perma.cc/J62N-NR8V].

[20] *See id*.

[21] *See e.g.*, *Jonestown*, HISTORY (Feb. 27, 2025) https://www.history.com/articles/jonestown [https://perma.cc/RH5V-MCSE].

[22] Minichiello, *supra* note 20.

through tolerance and good deeds would entice membership.[23] Jones compared himself to Christ and asserted control over the members gradually.[24] The control began with Jones requiring that the community live together while he slowly forced members to terminate interactions with the outside world.[25] To remain in power, Jones implemented public physical beatings, other forms of punishments, and guarded water towers.[26] Jones moved the community to a jungle in Guyana, South America, to escape persecution in the United States.[27] Eventually, members idolized him and believed his preachings, even participating in mass suicide rehearsals. However, members who protested the suicide were forcefully injected with cyanide.[28] The actual mass suicide was initiated after members killed a Congressman who went to the compound to investigate claims of abuse.[29] Of the more than 900 members who died, 276 were children.[30]

ii. CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY

Scientology was established by L. Ron Hubbard in 1954 through the idea of dianetics, categorizing it as a religion.[31] Scientology publicly presents itself as "a religion that offers a precise path leading to a complete and certain understanding of one's true spiritual nature and one's relationship to self, family, groups. . . the material universe, the spiritual universe and the Supreme Being."[32] Claiming its goal to be "true spiritual

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[23] Glenda Anderson, *30 Years Later, Former Peoples Temple Followers in Ukiah Still Trying to Forget*, THE PRESS DEMOCRAT (Nov. 17, 2008), https://www.pressdemocrat.com/2008/11/17/30-years-later-former-peoples-temple-followers-in-ukiah-still-trying-to-forget/ [https://perma.cc/GR4Z-ACSQ].

[24] Minichiello, *supra* note 19.

[25] Minichiello, *supra* note 19.

[26] Minichiello, *supra* note 19.

[27] *See* Melissa Dittmann, *Lessons from Jonestown*, AM. PSYCH. ASS'N (Nov. 2003), https://www.apa.org/monitor/nov03/jonestown [https://perma.cc/R489-UXM9].

[28] Minichiello, *supra* note 19.

[29] *Jonestown*, *supra* note 21.

[30] Minichiello, *supra* note 19.

[31] *See generally What is Scientology?*, CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY, https://www.scientology.org/what-is-scientology/#slide3 [https://perma.cc/967G-86DR] (last visited Feb. 27, 2026).

[32] *Id.*

enlightenment and freedom for all,"[33] Scientology has had its fair share of the public spotlight, with big name celebrities being part of and also leaving the organization. Scientology is centered around a "Bridge to Total Freedom."[34] In short, to move along the bridge, participants must receive counseling and be part of other aspects of the organization.[35] Each move also requires readings, auditing, and videos, which the Church requires the participants to pay for.[36] As such, the organization is expensive in both time and money, as some have reported spending over $60,000.00 to reach level six of the bridge.[37]

The Church of Scientology utilizes expansive mind control and scare tactics to force people to stay in the organization, but the more severe punishments are exercised within the "Rehabilitation Project Force," a group within Scientology compiled of people who allegedly violate a rule set by the church.[38] This group receives forcible confinement, physical maltreatment, social maltreatment, forced intense study, and forced confessions.[39] In addition to the physical and mental abuse reported within the rehabilitation project force, former members have described being subjected to manipulative techniques aimed at disconnecting ties with

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[33] *Id.*

[34] *What Is The Bridge In Scientology?,* CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY: FAQ https://www.scientology.org/faq/background-and-basic-principles/what-is-the-bridge-in-scientology.html [https://perma.cc/S93G-5RBY] (last visited Feb. 27, 2026).

[35] *See* Joe Childs & Thomas C. Tobin, *Climbing The Bridge: A Journey to 'Operating Thetan'*, CULT EDUC. INST. (Dec. 30, 2009), https://culteducation.com/group/1284-scientology/25231-climbing-the-bridge-a-journey-to-operating-thetan.html [https://perma.cc/SY5K-WMRL].

[36] *See The Grade Chart*, FIRST INDEP. CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY https://firstindependentchurchofscientology.org/definitions/grade-chart/#:~:text=The%20Grade%20Chart%20(See%20the,result%2C%20called%20a%20Release%20State. [https://perma.cc/G9YH-PZT2] (last visited Feb. 27, 2026).

[37] Childs & Tobin, *supra* note 35.

[38] *See* STEPHAN A. KENT, MISUNDERSTANDING CULTS: SEARCHING FOR OBJECTIVITY IN A CONTROVERSIAL FIELD 351 (Benjamin Zablocki & Thomas Robbins eds., 2001).

[39] *See id.* at 350.

family and friends outside of Scientology.[40] Other countries, such as Germany, have attempted to ban Scientology, ultimately ruling it as a business scheme rather than a religion.[41] A 1981 survey of more than 400 former cult members from 48 different cults found that the members from Scientology fell within the top two cults whose former members showed the most severe and long term effects of physical, mental, and emotional harm.[42] Scientology is still very much an activity organization describing itself as a religious community.[43]

iii. THE MANSON FAMILY

Charles Manson's coercive power and manipulative ploys led a group of people to commit a series of mass murders on his behalf. Before these murders, Manson was in prison where he listened and observed the manipulation skills which he implemented when he was released in 1967.[44] Manson developed an identity of higher power and made his followers

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[40] *See* Lawrence Wright, *What Happens When You Try to Leave The Church of Scientology?*, THE GUARDIAN (Apr. 22, 2011, at 19:24 ET), https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/23/try-to-leave-church-scientology-lawrence-wright [https://perma.cc/ER8T-VL3D].

[41] *Germany Moves to Ban Scientology*, BBC NEWS (Dec. 8, 2007, at 01:39 GMT), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7133867.stm [https://perma.cc/Z3JZ-M6PV].

[42] *See* Flo Conway & Jim Siegelman, *Information Disease: Have Cults Created a New Mental Illness?*, SCI. DIGEST, 86, 89 (Jan. 1982), https://stillpointpress.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/InformationDiseaseConwaySiegelmanScienceDigestJanuary1982Article-1.pdf [https://perma.cc/Y65Q-D7J2].

[43] *See How Is The Church Of Scientology Structured?*, CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY: FAQ https://www.scientology.org/faq/the-organization-of-scientology/how-is-the-church-of-scientology-structured.html [https://perma.cc/8425-HTCK] (last visited Feb. 27, 2026).

[44] *See generally* Jill Sederstrom, *How Did the Manson Family Retain & Control Members? "A Spiritual Awakening"*, OXYGEN (Jan. 14, 2025, at 11:00 ET), https://www.oxygen.com/crime-news/how-did-manson-family-retain-control-members#:~:text=Did%20the%20Manson%20Family%20do,But%20I%20take%20control [https://perma.cc/Q57J-SVUC].

feel as if they were part of a superior elite group.[45] Manson acknowledged his act of holding himself out to be Christ as Manson stated "I may have implied on several different occasions to several different people that I may have been Jesus Christ, but I haven't decided yet what I am or who I am."[46] Eventually, Manson commanded a small group of mostly females. To gain full obedience and control, he would "love-bomb," which is defined as "an emotional manipulation technique that involves giving someone excessive compliments, attention, or affection to eventually control them."[47] This tactic was used to make the members feel accepted, loved, and appreciated before initiating an intimate relationship with each one, many of whom became pregnant.[48] Manson would frequently give his followers LSD and other hallucinogens to make manipulation an easier task.[49] Once enough control was reached, Manson used physical beatings and sexual assault to continue his authoritative position within the group.[50] In his most manipulative form, Manson coerced a group of followers to commit mass murders without incurring any blood on his own hands; participants believed the murders would lead to "Helter Skelter," a race war that would elevate Manson to world leadership.[51] After these horrific acts, followers still stood strong to the coercive bond Manson created by standing outside of the courthouse, even carving an "X" on

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[45] *See* Linda Dubrow-Marshal & Rod Dubrow-Marshall, *How Cult Leader Charles Manson Was Able to Manipulate His 'Family' to Commit Murder*, THE CONVERSATION (Nov. 20, 2017 at 12:04 ET), https://theconversation.com/how-cult-leader-charles-manson-was-able-to-manipulate-his-family-to-commit-murder-70961 [https://perma.cc/43FY-P56B].

[46] VINCENT BUGLIOSI & CURT GENTRY, HELTER SKELTER THE TRUE STORY OF THE MANSON MURDERS 507 (W.W. Norton & Company eds., 1974).

[47] Kristen Fischer, *Love Bombing*, WEBMD (June 9, 2024 at 9:57 AM), https://www.webmd.com/sex-relationships/what-is-love-bombing [https://perma.cc/HNK9-VWK7].

[48] *See* Sederstrom, *supra* note 44.

[49] Sederstrom, *supra* note 44.

[50] *See Woman Recalls Falling for Charles Manson at Age 14: 'He Made You Feel Really Special'*, ABC NEWS (Oct. 24, 2017, at 09:57), https://abcnews.go.com/US/woman-recalls-falling-charles-manson-age-14-made/story?id=50616002 [https://perma.cc/ZKR3-7YMS].

[51] *See* Dubrow-Marshall, *supra* note 45.

their forehead after he appeared in court with the same marking, and continuing to do his bidding while he and several members stood trial for murder.[52] Manson was ultimately convicted in California for conspiracy and first degree murder under an accomplice theory by Prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi, who presented Manson's guilt through a "brainwashing" theory that had many risks.[53]

IV. MEMBERS' EXPERIENCES

a. THE ROLES OF A MEMBER

From an outside perspective, in many ways, the idea of participating in a cult seems far-fetched. However, for countless members, the realization that the group they are part of is a cult never comes, or it comes too late. Members join under the falsified belief that the group will bring happiness, social change, fulfillment, or self-discovery. To intensify the sense of unity, members engage in vigorous group activities such as chanting and rituals that create a trance-like state.[54] Yet, there are hierarchies within cults, as some members work towards a certain position or role within the group. One such role that is available in many cults is that of a spiritual leader, which consists of spreading the ideas of the leader and cult within the community itself and to the outside world.[55] To obtain this role, the member acts in a role of servantry, as the leader has continued control and uses the member to employ the beliefs of the cult through the member's total commitment to those beliefs.[56] The role of recruitment is often given to members who

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[52] *See* Sederstrom, *supra* note 44.

[53] Carrie Leonetti, *Eye of the Beholder: The Wrongful Conviction of Charles Milles Manson*, 45 SW. L. REV. 257, 264–65, https://www.swlaw.edu/sites/default/files/2017-04/2%20Eye%20of%20the%20Beholder.pdf [https://perma.cc/V8XY-JTVL].

[54] *See generally* Davenport, *supra* note 1.

[55] *See* Shirly Bar-Lev & Michal Morag, *Birthing A Secret Creative Self in Suppressive Organizations*, 45 SYMBOLIC INTERACTION 356, 364–65 (May 17, 2022), https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/symb.596 [https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.596].

[56] *See* Lita Linzer Schwartz, *The Historical Dimension of Cultic Techniques of Persuasion & Control,* 8 CULTIC STUD. J. 37, 38 (Nov. 1, 1991), https://articles2.icsahome.com/articles/the-historical-dimension-

are fully committed to the cult and from whom the leader does not question their obedience.[57] Gender roles also are prominent within cults. Leadership roles are almost uniformly assigned to men, while women within the cult community hold the role of upholding communal beliefs solely by sexual satiation, marriage, and childbirth, for which they believe to be their privilege.[58] The hierarchy and gender roles are systems of control that regulate not merely the cult as an organization but every aspect of a member's life, stretching to include all personal, financial, and social areas.[59]

b. ABUSE

A cult creates total obedience from members through a system of control designed to secure their submission to the leader's beliefs and worship.[60] Once the cult leader obtains the slightest amount of control, abuse is enacted to maintain that control. To keep the members controllable, leaders will enforce methods of dissociation such as repetitive prayer, extensive workshops, and sleep deprivation.[61] Mind control is achieved through a combination of techniques, one being exhaustion. A study conducted on former cult members found that 40 to 70 hours per week was spent participating in devotional activities.[62] Isolation is also a common tactic used to keep members vulnerable to maintained control; by eliminating all support systems outside of the cult, members are left to the cultic group and no longer exposed to outside perspectives.[63] Further, many members fall victim to peer pressure from other

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of-cultic-techniques-csj-8-1#h.p_ehRidWCg6zLX [https://perma.cc/8F5P-KGKC].

[57] *Id.*

[58] *See* Shirly Bar-Lev & Michal Morag, *Violence, Volition, & Volatility: The Embodied Subjectivity of Women in Cults*, 49 SYMBOLIC INTERACTION, 113, 117 (Nov. 27, 2024), https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/symb.1223 [https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.1223].

[59] *See Understanding Unhealthy Forms of Control*, KARLA MCLAREN https://karlamclaren.com/understanding-unhealthy-forms-of-control/ [https://perma.cc/5R96-9LLZ] (last visited Feb. 27, 2026).

[60] *Id*.

[61] *See* Davenport, *supra* note 1.

[62] *See* Conway & Siegelman, *supra* note 42.

[63] Davenport, *supra* note 1.

members, which primarily comes in the form of shaming and questioning loyalty of the unconvinced member.[64]

Control is further safeguarded by immersing members with an "us versus them" mindset.[65] This is achieved by maintaining a closed environment and placing fear into members about the outside world. Teaching members to fear the outside world is not where the placement of fear ends, however. Members are also taught to fear disobeying their leader.[66] Members must fully submerge and submit themselves to the authority of the leader and the beliefs of the group; the failure to do so is considered disobedience and punishments will follow.[67] Former cult members have reported experiencing physical punishments including beatings, starvation, physical bondage, cold water dousing, and degrading labor.[68] Reports also show that guilt, shame, and shunning would occur if members did not accept the leader or the decisions made by the leader.[69] Thus, crimes committed within cults are rarely reported to police because of this psychological conditioning created within members and the normalization of abuse.[70] In turn, cultic leaders and other members are allowed to commit crimes within the community, often including crimes of incest

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[64] *See* Davenport, *supra* note 1.

[65] Melissa Dittmann, *Cults of Hatred*, 33 AM. PSYCHOLOGICAL ASS'N 10, 30 (Nov. 2002), https://www.apa.org/monitor/nov02/cults#:~:text=Steve%20Hassan%2C%20a%20former%20cult,a%20key%20phrase%20they%20repeat.

[66] *See* Cynthia H. Matthews & Carmen F. Salazar, *Second-Generation Adult Former Cult Group Members' Recovery Experiences: Implications for Counseling*, 35 INT'L J. FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COUNSELING 1, 8 (June 2014), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261841921_Second-Generation_Adult_Former_Cult_Group_Members'_Recovery_Experiences_Implications_for_Counseling [https://perma.cc/ZA58-FHU2].

[67] *Id.*

[68] *See* Conway & Siegelman, *supra* note 42, at 88.

[69] Matthews & Salazar, *supra* note 66, at 9.

[70] *See* Cecilia Hadding et al., *Being In-Between; Exploring Former Cult Members' Experiences of an Acculturation Process Using the Cultural Formulation Interview (DSM-5)*, 14 FRONTIERS IN PSYCHIATRY 1, 4 (Sep. 15, 2023), https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychiatry/articles/10.3389/fpsyt.2023.1142189/full [https://perma.cc/JK25-6M23].

and sexual abuse, without internal reprimand or legal consequences from outside authorities.[71]

i. ABUSE IN PEOPLE'S TEMPLE

Jim Jones made the People's Temple a self-sufficient compound through punishments of physically-straining chores followed by other forms of discipline.[72] Punishments regularly occurred in a group setting to assert dominance, and Jones often carried out the public beatings himself.[73] There were also reports of Jones holding guns to members' heads and telling them that if they left, the bullets in the gun would be used on them.[74] When families would actively try to leave the compound to escape the cult, armed men would shoot at them as they tried to board planes.[75] A former member recounted first arriving at the campsite in Guyana, explaining that men with guns stood at the front gate, and detailing how he fell victim to a beating the next day after voicing his desire to return home.[76] Further, the Jonestown compound had an six-foot by four-foot underground isolation box that was used to punish members and heighten the terror, as Jones told people he would place snakes in the box with them.[77] Members would be placed in the box for days at a time; straitjackets were used as an alternative when new boxes were being built.[78]

ii. ABUSE IN THE CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY

Affidavits submitted by a former member described enduring physical and mental abuse for six months after being kidnapped by other members under the orders of Hubbard. The

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[71] *See id.*

[72] *See What Were the Disciplines & Punishments in Jonestown?*, JONESTOWN & PEOPLES TEMPLE (Nov. 3, 2022), https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=35333 [https://perma.cc/J6H9-7H77].

[73] *Id.*

[74] *See* Anderson, *supra* note 23.

[75] Anderson, *supra* note 23.

[76] Anderson, *supra* note 23.

[77] *Edith Roller Journals: March 1978*, JONESTOWN & PEOPLES TEMPLE, (Don Beck trans., Sept. 3, 2025) (Mar. 1978), https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=35694 [https://perma.cc/32DA-R4RE].

[78] *Id.*

affidavits recounted threats of damage to the member's character and reputation if acts of escaping were to occur.[79] The former member details being held captive and forced to run in the desert for twelve hours a day under the schemes of coercion and duress.[80] The physical abuse members encounter within Scientology is centered around physical labor, including manual labor, being thrown in a lake, or enduring running punishments.[81] Public humiliation, confessions, and shaming are followed by punishments, such as having to jump in pools fully clothed and being isolated as a titled "suppressive person,"[82] which is a reference used for a person that "'actively seeks to suppress or damage Scientology. . . ."[83] Abuse is present in all tiers of the hierarchy, as the "Sea Org" members are placed in a small building referred to as "the Hole," where they must sleep on the floor and attend meetings called at all hours of the day while only being able to leave the building once a day to shower.[84] An autopsy of a former member who died under the 24-hour supervision of the Church of Scientology revealed that the cause of death was due to a blood vessel blockage located in her left lung, resulting from "'bed rest'" and dehydration.[85] An investigation showed that a member drove the dying woman to a hospital where another member worked, by-passing the closest hospital, and records

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[79] David Mayo Aff. ¶ 1 (1994), https://www.cs.cmu.edu/~dst/Krasel/aff/aff_dm87.html [https://perma.cc/9UHJ-LMEG].

[80] *Id.* at ¶ 14.

[81] *Scientology's Ugly Truths Revealed*, TAMPA BAY TIMES (Aug. 4, 2009), https://www.tampabay.com/archive/2009/08/04/scientology-s-ugly-truths-revealed/ [https://perma.cc/3MHQ-ELC8].

[82] Joe Childs & Thomas C. Tobin, *The Truth Rundown: High-Ranking Defectors Say Scientology's Leader Enforces Loyalty with Beatings and Bullying*, INSIDE SCIENTOLOGY, June 2009, at 31, https://rjionline.org/rji/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/tbt_inside_scientology.pdf [https://perma.cc/J2ZZ-4MXJ].

[83] Massimo Introvigne, *Scientology, Secular Courts, & Disconnection/Fair Game Policies*, BITTER WINTER (Nov. 11, 2022), https://bitterwinter.org/scientology-2-suppressive-persons-and-fair-game/ [https://perma.cc/AHM8-RCE M].

[84] Childs & Tobin, *supra* note 82, at 11.

[85] *Scientology Blamed in Death*, CBS NEWS (Dec. 1, 1998, at 08:07 ET), https://www.cbsnews.com/news/scientology-blamed-in-death/ [https://perma.cc/YS6E-HT5N].

showed that on the day of her death, the deceased member was on day 17 of isolation.[86] Reports from a former member, who was fifteen years old, described being placed in "the Hole" for a year and being berated with verbal abuse and sexually explicit language.[87] Additionally, a former member who took legal action described her personality switch after being "'sucked into the grasp" of the beliefs of the Church of Scientology and falling victim to mind control techniques.[88]

iii. ABUSE IN THE MANSON FAMILY

Patricia Krenwinkel, a former member of the Manson Family, described meeting Manson for the first time while in a drug and alcohol environment, where Manson's immediate display of affection and intimacy, followed by "love bombing," led her to move in with him.[89] Hallucinogens and alcohol were normalized within the environment and used to Manson's advantage to make the members more vulnerable to his control.[90] Manson's thinking and actions followed a psychologically abusive trajectory: he initially presented himself as an authoritarian figure, declaring, "you're always going to do what I say," then slowly transitioned to more a manipulative appeal such as, "would you do this for me?"[91] Manson gradually inserted violence and weapons into his associations with the members, eventually escalating to asking whether they would kill for him.[92] The members experienced isolation within Manson's command as he would control whatever crowd his followers were around, never including

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[86] *Id*.

[87] *See* EJ Dickson, *Church of Scientology Lawsuit Alleges Abuse & Human Trafficking*, ROLLING STONE (June 21, 2019), https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/scientology-lawsuit-abuse-human-trafficking-david-miscavige-851047/ [https://perma.cc/NK7A-V4XB].

[88] Mary Carolan, *Scientology Case Settled out of Court*, THE IRISH TIMES (Mar. 13, 2003), https://www.irishtimes.com/news/scientology-case-settled-out-of-court-1.466418 [https://perma.cc/3ZAJ-F4CJ].

[89] *See In the Matter of the Life Term Parole Consideration Hearing of: Patricia Krenwinkel, Board of Parole Hearings*, CIELODRIVE.COM (May 26, 2022), https://cielodrive.com/patricia-krenwinkel-parole-hearing-2022.php [https://perma.cc/THS6-65SJ].

[90] *See id*.

[91] *Id*.

[92] *Id*.

people who would speak about things contrary to his philosophy, and he would not allow members to go anywhere alone.[93] Members stayed within the group because they believed Manson was committed to them and would maintain their romantic relationship.[94] Manson would physically beat and sexually abuse members, while mentally abusing them through humiliation and degradation that a former member described as feeling "worthless."[95] During a parole hearing, Krenwinkel stated that the murders were committed to be seen as a "good soldier" and Manson's "girlfriend."[96]

V. THE WORLD AFTER ESCAPING

a. ADJUSTMENTS TO THE REAL WORLD

Escaping a cult is not easy. From the beginning, cults will implement dissociative techniques to erase pre-cult memories and change the members' perspectives of the outside world.[97] For members to escape the lifestyle in which they have been indoctrinated, the work of thought deconstruction often starts from the first moment of interaction with the cult. A recent study of former cult members found that the time period between first contact with the cult and commitment mirrored the time period between the members' first desire to leave and actual departure: between 16 and 22 months.[98] The decision to leave is not easy, as many experience obstacles such as romantic relationships, parental relationships with other members or leaders, family members being active members in the cult, and the personal battle of departing from the foundational creeds of the cult.[99] Former cult members have described the beginning

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[93] *Id*.
[94] *Id*.
[95] *Id*.
[96] *Id*.
[97] *See* Sylwia Prendable, *Former Cult Members: Background & Treatment Implications*, 9 J. OF FORENSIC PSYCH. 1, 2 (July 29, 2024), https://www.walshmedicalmedia.com/open-access/former-cult-members-background-and-treatment-implications.pdf [https://perma.cc/Q8FV-SUFT].
[98] M. Rousselet et. al., *Cult Membership: What Factors Contribute to Joining or Leaving?*, 257 PSYCHIATRY RSCH. 27, 29 (Nov. 2017), https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0165178116319941?via%3Dihub [https://perma.cc/3DP7-NGMZ].
[99] *See id*.

stage of rehabilitation outside of the cult communities as a time of crisis: They understand that they are no longer physically within the cult, but psychologically, they are still in the "mindset" of the cult.[100] Former members report that they are vulnerable during this time and experience suicide attempts, self-harm, or substance abuse.[101] The effects of a cult do not dwindle quickly, as one study reported that one in seven of the former cult members surveyed suffered from delusions or hallucinations for up to eight years after leaving the cult.[102]

Recruited members, who often enter a cult in their teenage or adult years, have the privilege of having pre-cult memories, families, and an identity to eventually return to. Second-generation cult members, however, have no perspective of the world outside of their cult other than the perspectives embedded in them through the cult itself. Children born into cults learn quickly that the cult and cultic values come before oneself. Second-generation cult members often skip normal stages of development because there is no choice given to the children; instead, they must conform to the leader's demands.[103] To successfully conform, the children must override natural developmental needs.[104] The exit of a second-generation cult member comes at heightened risks, especially when they leave behind family. Second-generation cult members who leave without another family member uniformly find the transition to be extremely emotionally straining, while those who leave with other family members have experienced a smoother transition.[105] Further, understanding and getting acclimated to a brand-new community and lifestyle is difficult. A study of fifteen second-generation cult members reported

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[100] Hadding et al., *supra* note 70 at 5.
[101] Hadding et al., *supra* note 70 at 5.
[102] Conway & Siegelman, *supra* note 42, at 89.
[103] *See generally What Do We Need to Know About Being Born or Raised in a Cultic Environment?*, INT'L CULTIC STUD. ASS'N, https://www.icsahome.com/elibrary/topics/articles/what-impact-do-cults-have-on-children [https://perma.cc/9YGH-DGK8] (last visited Mar. 2, 2026).
[104] Sam Jahara, *The Psychological Impact on Children Who Grow up in Cults*, BRIGHTON & HOVE PSYCHOTHERAPY (Aug. 6, 2023), https://www.brightonandhovepsychotherapy.com/blog/the-psychological-impact-on-children-who-grow-up-in-cults/ [https://perma.cc/ADD6-7AJX].
[105] *See* Matthews & Salazar, *supra* note 66 at 10.

that each participant felt behind in education, financial understanding, and employment after escaping the cult.[106]

b. TAKING LEGAL ACTION

Former cult members have reported that it is difficult to discuss their background after leaving the cult due in large part to shameful feelings about their cult history and other emotional barriers.[107] Many former members have described their experience with a cult as a "spiritual rape."[108] This unique feeling can lead former members to feel alone and unseen. The lingering stages of physical problems, psychological problems, and self-esteem can trigger denial or confusion. On top of that, seeking recovery through legal action is not usually at the top of former cult members' priority lists and often acts as a barrier in bringing legal claims against the cult.

i. SUCCESSFUL CLAIM

On October 27, 2020, Keith Rainere was sentenced to 120 years in prison after being convicted of racketeering, racketeering conspiracy, sex trafficking, attempted sex trafficking, sex trafficking conspiracy, force labor conspiracy, and wire fraud conspiracy.[109] Rainere was the founder of the cultic NXIVM group, which was essentially a marketing scheme.[110] Rainere created an inner circle within NXIVM, where he had the women participate in a branding ceremony, sexual

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[106] Matthews & Salazar, *supra* note 66 at 13.

[107] Hadding et al., *supra* note 70.

[108] Herbert L. Rosedale, *Women and Cults: A Lawyer's Perspective*, 12 CULTIC STUD. J. 187, 187 (1995), https://articles2.icsahome.com/articles/women-and-cults-a-lawyers-perspective-rosedale-csj-12-2 [https://perma.cc/S5LL-FWZV].

[109] Press Release, *NXIVM Leader Keith Raniere Sentenced to 120 Years in Prison for Racketeering & Sex Trafficking Offenses*, U.S. ATT'Y'S OFF. E.D. OF N.Y. (Oct. 27, 2020), https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/nxivm-leader-keith-raniere-sentenced-120-years-prison-racketeering-and-sex-trafficking [https://perma.cc/RL5H-6N7M].

[110] *See* Carole M. Cusack, *NXIVM, Religion, & "Cults": Keith Raniere as Charismatic Leader & Transgressive Criminal*, 2 WUHAN J. OF CULTIC STUD. 35, 38 (Sep. 30, 2022), https://www.academicpublishing.org/uploads/1/3/5/3/135306095/wjcs_2_1.pdf#page=42 [https://perma.cc/RTN8-MQ8R].

acts, and slavery dynamics.[111] Rainere was known to initiate sex with underage girls and openly questioned the United States' consent laws.[112] Investigations of this cult began after a former member shared her experience during a media interview.[113]

ii. UNSUCCESSFUL CLAIM

In *Headley v. Church of Scientology International*, Marc and Claire Headley brought claims against the Church of Scientology under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA).[114] The Headleys were part of the Church's Sea Organization ("Sea Org"), which included strict policies, prohibitions on having children, manual labor, participation in religious training and practices, and other demanding tasks.[115] The TVPA prohibits knowingly obtaining labor through force, threats of force, physical restraint, serious harm, or schemes causing a person to believe they would suffer serious harm if they did not perform the labor.[116] The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals held that the Headleys voluntarily joined and worked for Sea Org, and the adverse consequences from threats of being "declared suppressive persons" and losing contact with family were not proper threats under TVPA.[117]

iii. LIMITATIONS TO LEGAL ACTION

Former members live in fear after exiting a cult. Cults are financially capable and have already instilled fear of what the cult can do when seeking revenge against the members. Through time and therapy, former members are able to successfully break through the cultic influence, but this event is

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[111] *See id.* at 43.
[112] *Id.* at 44.
[113] *See* Kelly McLaughlin & Nicole Einbinder, *How NXIVM, a So-Called Self-Help Company, Crumbled After Former Members Exposed It as a Cult That Abused Sex Slaves*, BUS. INSIDER (Sep. 8, 2021, at 15:24 ET), https://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-nxivm-keith-raniere-explainer-2019-4#october-17-2017-the-new-york-times-published-an-expos-about-nxivms-branding-ritual-and-sex-slave-allegations-5 [https://perma.cc/7EF4].
[114] *See* Headley v. Church of Scientology Int'l, 687 F.3d 1173 (9th Cir. 2012).
[115] *See id.* at 1175.
[116] 18 U.S.C. § 1589(a).
[117] *Headley*, 687 F.3d at 1180.

not immediate. Therefore, statutes of limitations work against former cult members as they require time to emotionally process the harm and potential claims, possibly making it too late to seek remedies when they are finally ready. Oftentimes, cult-related lawsuits fall within the scope of personal injury,[118] which can be an obstacle when looking at the potential statutes of limitations. The statute of limitations to file an intentional tort claim often ranges from one to six years throughout United States jurisdictions.[119] The one-year deadline does not give former cult members time to mentally digest their experiences. Further, this short limitation period could make the possible financial commitment and disparity that comes with legal action to outweigh justice. Some states, however, have acknowledged the victim recovery aspect of crimes, which can be shown through the extension, or in some states, the elimination of the statute of limitations in civil or criminal sexual assault claims.[120]

The showing of voluntariness, coercion, and fear during their association with cults has been a difficult barrier for survivors to jump. In *Christofferson v. Church of Scientology*, the court found a lack of evidence of showing fear during association with Scientology, even after the plaintiff testified to be fearful of severe punishments if she sued, voiced disapproval, testified against, demanded return of money, or committed acts against the interest of Scientology.[121] Most cases

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[118] *See* Bautista Leroy, *Injury Lawsuits Against Cult Leaders: Legal & Ethical Implications*, BAUTISTA LEROY BLOG (Nov. 25, 2018), https://www.bautistaleroy.com/injury-lawsuits-against-cult-leaders.

[119] *Personal Injury Statute of Limitations by State*, ROSENFELD INJURY LAWS. (June 12, 2025), https://news.rosenfeldinjurylaw.com/updates/personal-injury-statute-of-limitations-by-state/#:~:text=As%20you%20navigate%20through%20these,claim%20you%20intend%20to%20file [https://perma.cc/5HYJ-JLM8].

[120] *See generally Civil & Criminal Statutes of Limitations for Sex Crimes: A State By State Guide*, HERMAN LAW https://hermanlaw.com/state-by-state-statute-of-limitations-guide/#:~:text=Maryland,-The%20statutes%20of&text=For%20Incidents%20Occurring%20After%20October,of%20when%20the%20abuse%20occurred [https://perma.cc/64WU-W7JZ] (last visited Mar. 2, 2026).

[121] Christofferson v. Church of Scientology, 644 P.2d 577, 584 (Or. Ct. App. 1982).

require psychology experts to explain the effects of coercion and manipulation. Referring specifically to the Church of Scientology, social psychologist Dr. Richard Ofshe has testified that the controlling social influence established within the group "can induce a person to believe that he or she has acquired and can currently utilize superhuman powers."[122] A New York Judge emphasized that "'mind control'" and "'brainwashing'" do not constitute unlawful restraint in the eyes of the law after mentioning the "devastating" concept of mind control and brainwashing, causing an inability to be reasonable or logical.[123]

VI. THE NEW CRIMINAL OFFENSE

a. THE FOUNDATION AND INSPIRATION

The Federal Kidnapping Statute makes it a punishable offense to unlawfully seize, confine, inveigle, decoy, kidnap, abduct, or carry away and hold for ransom any person.[124] Federal jurisdiction is obtained through travel in interstate or foreign commerce, special maritime, or territorial jurisdiction.[125] The statute calls for punishment to be for any term of life or for life, but if the death of any person occurs, the penalty may be life imprisonment or death.[126] Conspiracy to kidnap and an overt act subjects the conspirators to imprisonment for any term of years or for life.[127] Importantly, the Federal Kidnapping Statute does not include a statute of limitations. However, under 18 U.S.C. § 3281, any offense punishable by death may be brought at any time without limitation,[128] and 18 U.S.C. § 3282 provides a five-year limitation for any offense other than a capital offense.[129]

b. COERCION CONTROLS USE TODAY

England and Wales adopted the offense of "controlling or coercive behavior" introduced through Section 76 of the

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[122] United States v. Fishman, 743 F. Supp. 713, 715 (N.D. Cal. 1990).
[123] People v. Murphy, 98 Misc. 2d 235, 243 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. 1977).
[124] 18 U.S.C. § 1201(a).
[125] § 1201(a)(1)–(5).
[126] *Id*.
[127] § 1201(c).
[128] 18 U.S.C. § 3281.
[129] 18 U.S.C. § 3282(a).

Serious Crime Act 2015.[130] At this stage, the controlling or coercive behavior becomes an offense when the act occurs in an intimate or family relationship.[131] Section 68 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 was amended to eliminate the previous requirement of cohabitation, effective April 2023.[132] Within the United States, the term "coercive control" has been included in definitions of abuse and domestic violence laws. Most states involving the term and idea of coercive control in laws are within the domestic violence definition, which urges judges to consider coercive patterns when making decisions about protective orders and child custody.[133] For example, Vermont abuse law defines coercive controlling behavior as "a pattern of behavior that in purpose of effect unreasonably interferes with a person's free will and personal liberty" and goes far enough to provide examples such as isolating from friends, relatives, or other sources of support, depriving of basic necessities, and controlling, regulating, or monitoring movements, communications, behavior, finances, or more.[134] Similarly, Washington has added coercive control as a form of domestic violence, and further defined coercive control as "a pattern of behavior that is used to cause another to suffer physical, emotional, or psychological harm, and in purpose or effect unreasonably interferes with a person's free will and personal liberty."[135]

As of 2025, Hawaii is the only state to criminalize coercive control, and it is labeled as a petty misdemeanor.[136] South Carolina, as of April 22, 2025, has a bill in the hands of its legislature that will criminalize coercive control when it occurs in a personal relationship and defines "coercive behavior" as an "act or pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation, manipulation, intimidation, or other abuse, including emotional abuse, that is used to harm, punish, or frighten

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130 Serious Crime Act 2015, c.4 § 76 (UK).

131 *Id*.

132 Domestic Abuse Act 2021, c.17 § 68 (UK).

133 *See* Alysia Santo, *How 'Coercive Control' Is Expanding Domestic Abuse Laws in Several States*, THE MARSHALL PROJECT (June 28, 2025, at 12:00 ET), https://www.themarshallproject.org/2025/06/28/women-south-carolina-domestic-violence-coercive-control [https://perma.cc/5LXM-9JQF].

134 15 V.S.A. § 1101(2)(A-C).

135 REV. CODE WASH. (ARCW) § 7.105.010(4)(a).

136 HAW. REV. STAT. § 709-906(6).

another person by fraudulent representations."[137] This proposed bill purports this offense to be a felony, with a fine of $10,000.00 or imprisonment for up to ten years.[138] South Carolina has rejected 3 bills similar to this coercive control version.[139] New York likewise has a proposed bill sitting in committee to present coercive control as a felony offense, defining guilt of this crime "when such person engages in a course of conduct against a member of such person's same family or household, without the victim's consent, which results in limiting or restricting. . . the victim's behavior, movement, association or access to or use of such victim's own finances or financial information."[140] Since coercion has a prominent space in domestic violence laws, restricting coercive control to cases involving cohabitation or intimate relationships creates barriers for victims seeking legal remedies against abusers who fall outside these relationship-based criteria.

c. COERCION CONTROL

This Note suggests the development and adoption by all states of a new criminal offense that can be used by former cult members. Through the inspiration of the Federal Kidnapping Statute, the new claim, entitled "Coercion Control," acts as a means to prosecute and punish psychological kidnappings. Mirroring the kidnapping statute, Coercion Control will encompass the acts and manipulations that allow for the physical taking to appear nonexistent and rather voluntary. The idea is that the act of kidnapping occurs through other methods, such as manipulation and brainwashing. Coercion Control simply defines a method or form of kidnapping. The kidnapping could also evolve or start as imprisonment. The imprisonment argument exists when the member voluntarily joined the cult but was not able to escape. When the member starts distancing and questioning the cult, but the leaders use

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[137] 0588, Senate, 126th Gen. Assemb., Reg. Sess. (S.C. 2025), BILL TRACK 50, https://www.billtrack50.com/billdetail/1887694#:~:text=The%20bill%20establishes%20that%20when,effect%20upon%20the%20Governor's%20approval [https://perma.cc/3VVB-5W7E] (last visited Nov. 22, 2025).

[138] *Id.*

[139] *See* Santo, *supra* note 133.

[140] S.B. S4079 (N.Y. 2025).

manipulation or shame to extend the member's participation or interfere with attempts to escape, coercive techniques can be shackles keeping them in the cult. The following passages provide illustrations of coercive control tactics.

i. COERCION FOUND IN PEOPLE'S TEMPLE

To demonstrate the transition period from voluntary to imprisonment, former members shared the cognitive thoughts of realizing that Jones was no longer providing a safe and religious environment and shifted to thoughts of assassinating Jones, knowing they would die as well.[141] For many, the cognitive separation between the cult's activity and the personal thoughts was not as apparent; members were found hidden in a ditch during the mass suicide ritual, suggesting their commitment to the cult was not unconditional and their questioning of authority occurred.[142] Coercion control can make an individualized act by members appear voluntary, but behind the act is coercion, making it involuntary. For example, the mass suicide appeared orderly and voluntary to the world.[143] However, this mass suicide included 276 children, whose voluntary actions were not truly voluntary, as the adults fed the drink to the children before ingesting the poison themselves.[144] Within this specific cult, Coercion Control was found in the daily acts, such as servantry and community meetings filled with public beatings.[145] Through punishments, victims were coerced into acting in conjunction with the cult's beliefs while also intimidating observing members, who were coerced through fear of receiving the punishment

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[141] *See The Trauma of Marriage to a Temple Survivor*, JONESTOWN & PEOPLES TEMPLE (Mar. 14, 2014), https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=16972 [https://perma.cc/Z8QS-3VH5].

[142] DAVID CHIDESTER, SALVATION & SUICIDE: JIM JONES, THE PEOPLES TEMPLE, & JONESTOWN 154 (2003), https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Salvation-and-Suicide.pdf [https://perma.cc/8WVS-S65K].

[143] *Id.* at 148.

[144] Minichiello, *supra* note 19.

[145] *See generally Jonestown,* FED. BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/jonestown (last visited Mar. 2, 2026).

themselves.[146] In this way, Jones was able to normalize obedience within the group.[147]

ii. COERCION FOUND IN THE CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY

As the decision to join the Church of Scientology is often voluntary, many people must sign a release form that clarifies their voluntary participation to protect the organization.[148] However, when looking at the Rehabilitation Project Force program, numerous members have indicated that joining this more niche program within Scientology was forced and they joined against their will.[149] Along with the physical maltreatment, social maltreatment is present as one of the simplest forms of control found within Scientology, as communication is restricted to prohibit "inmates" in the RPF operation from talking to other members who are not part of the RPF program.[150] When a member begins to disconnect from and question the beliefs of the cult, the vigorous and abusive RPF program is used to reinforce the belief that the member has fallen off the "'bridge to total freedom,'" and save them from their disconnect through cruel physical and social abuse.[151] Claims of Coercion Control would be an avenue for former members of Scientology who experienced physical and social maltreatment for the purpose of extending their participation and to reinvent their belief in the cult.

iii. COERCION FOUND IN THE MANSON FAMILY

Charles Manson's preferred method of coercion was through "love bombing." The California Appellate Court describes the scope of Manson's control and influence from the most simple forms, such as where the family would sleep, what the family would wear, and where they would move, to the most complex forms involving sexual favors, abolishing children, and crime.[152] Members understood they were never to

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146 *Id.*
147 *Id.*
148 KENT, *supra* note 38, at 355.
149 KENT, *supra* note 38, at 356.
150 KENT, *supra* note 38, at 361.
151 KENT, *supra* note 38, at 364 (citing interview with Pat (Mar. 1997)).
152 *See* People v. Manson, 61 Cal. App. 3d 102, 127 (Cal. App. 2d Dist.1976).

disobey Manson and must fully submit to him to be compliant.[153] Manson's most coercive tactic consisted of utilizing his authoritarian position to convince members that a race war, "Helter Skelter," would begin when the serial murders were committed, which would allow him to protect the members during the apocalyptic event, and in the end, he and the members would take control of the world.[154] Further, during Manson's trial, members of the cult held tight to the god-complex Manson created as "'the second crucifixion of Christ.'"[155] The success of a Coercion Control claim is found in every aspect of this cult and on many different levels. Most prominent, the serial murders committed by members were in response to the psychological control exercised by Manson through abuse, but mostly love bombing. Love bombing techniques allowed Manson to grasp onto the young, primarily female members' emotions and create a connection that would ultimately lead to total obedience and the power to induce murders. Coercion Control is found within the Manson Family, as Manson's own ideas, actions, and desires were played out through members by Manson utilizing the control retained by the members.

d. LEGISLATIVE SUGGESTIONS

For Coercion Control to be resourceful for former cult members, the offense must be written in a way that allows for enforcement rather than limitation. There are potential arguments to be made for the existing definitions of coercive control that include, as a requirement, the existence of a familial or intimate relationship, as there are patterns of intimate relationships between members and cult leaders. In addition, many cults consider the group to be a family or community; however, opposing arguments could quickly strike this. The potential argument to overcome the cohabitation requirement could be available to many cult members, but not all, as communal living is often found within cultic organizations, although opposition arguments are too easy to overcome to make this requirement part of the criminal offense. To start, Coercion Control should be offered at both misdemeanor and

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[153] *Id.* at 128.
[154] *Id.* at 129.
[155] BUGLIOSI & GENTRY, *supra* note 46, at 166.

felony criminal levels. The respective level of the crime will be determined by multiple factors including the duration of time that coercion tactics were used on the victim, the type of abuse imposed, the range and severity of abuse used, actions taken by the victim through coercion, the age of the victim when the abuse started, and traumatic events experienced by the victim while under coercion control. Also, there should be no statute of limitations attached to this offense at either level. Former cult members must be provided time to confront the experiences and recovery that come with escaping a cult.

The suggested definition for Coercion Control is as follows: A pattern of behavior, acts, or words that purposefully, intentionally, or knowingly interferes with another person by limiting, restricting, or pursuing acts or thoughts against another person. Breaking down this definition, including "behavior, acts, or words" encompasses many coercive techniques used within cults. Behavior encompasses the conduct of the cult leader, and other subordinate leaders or members as the perception of authority often used is a god complex to achieve obedience. Acts include the physical punishments and acts of intimacy designed to manipulate that many members fall victim to experiencing. Words include the threats of shame, fear, flattery, expressions of love, and violence that many leaders of cults use to continue participation and commitment to the cult. Federal law generally employs a specific mens rea to each element of the crime, as language may vary for the requisite mens rea, the federal law concept of "intention" and the Model Penal Code concept of "purpose" are applied to Coercion Control.[156] "Intentionally" is severed and requires the actor to "'consciously desire'" a result or they be aware that it "' is practically certain'" to acquire the desire.[157] "Knowingly" requires a defendant to have "'realized what he was doing and [be] aware of the nature of his conduct.'"[158]

Including the range of "limiting, restricting, or pursuing" is necessary as limiting and restricting are actions

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[156] Michael A. Foster, *Mens Rea: An Overview of State-of-Mind Requirements for Federal Criminal Offenses*, CONGRESS.GOV (July 7, 2021), https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R46836#fn51.

[157] *Id.* (citing United States v. U.S. Gypsum Co., 438 U.S. 422, 445 (1978)) (quoting Wayne R. LaFave & Austin W. Scott, Jr., Criminal Law 196 (1972)).

[158] *Id.* (citing United States v. Salinas, 763 F.3d 869, 880 (7th Cir. 2014)).

taken to keep cult members within the control of cult leaders and beliefs, while on the other hand, leaders often use members to perform acts, as seen within the Manson Family. To elaborate more on the offense, examples may be provided, such as limiting or restricting communications or visits, interference with desired daily actions, and limiting or restricting access to financial information or use. There cannot be an exhaustive list as the manipulative coercion techniques are ever-changing. Examples include using acts or words to retain a person's thoughts or physical presence, as well as the outset behaviors of a person that intimidate or coerce another's participation.

VII. CONCLUSION

Through an investigation and analysis of cults, it is obvious that the most prominent cults are infiltrated with extreme abuse. This Note has exposed not only the formation and dynamics found in cults, but also the abusive behavior that fills most cultic groups. The most frightening lesson is that the abuse is normalized as outside perspectives are blocked, and cults are left to build their own communities without fear. Specific cults have been discussed to illustrate the wide range of how abuse, coercion, and manipulation can be enacted within cults between the leaders and members. Recognizing the abuse that occurs within cults as criminal is necessary for the evolution of the law in response to the gripping physical, mental, and emotional abuse endured by the survivors. In a more general perspective, by including a criminal charge of Coercion Control, the law can acknowledge and punish the manipulation, brainwashing, and coercive fear techniques used by cult leaders and its members to control other individuals. With the legislative suggestions, cult survivors would be provided with opportunities to expose and confront the person who once had a hold on their lives and provide a warning for other potential victims. Making strides to develop the suggested criminal offense of Coercion Control would not only help cult survivors find some sort of peace and closure but could also prevent others from following behind the survivors. By allotting these criminal offenses, the criminal justice system can provide an opportunity to separate an abusive leader from the followers who have yet to see their own victimization.