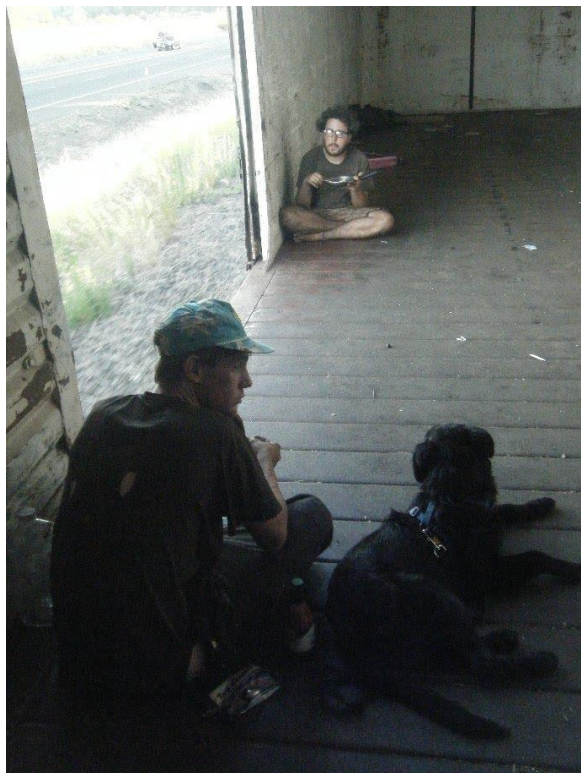


Travel Kid Final Project

Nowadays, most children in middle class households have their life plan fairly well laid out for them. It has become expected that they will graduate high school and go on to attend college. However, there are a small number of teenagers who decide to take their future into their own hands and revolt against this expected norm. I will be



referring to them as “travel kids,” though they go by many names including “transients,” “street kids” and even “crust-punks” or “gutter-punks.” Though they primarily reside on the streets and ask strangers for money and food, they are not typical “homeless people.” Another apt name that some of them use to identify themselves is “houseless,” which emphasizes the fact that they don’t usually live in houses, but that doesn’t mean that they don’t have a home to go back to, as the majority of them chose to live this nontraditional lifestyle despite the fact that they have families with houses and middle class incomes. Clearly, this is different from most “homeless” people who are living on the street because they have no other option. Travel kids, however, have elected to live off of the

Photo 1 generosity of others despite the fact that they are capable of having a job to support themselves. But what are they actually doing instead of working or going to college? Well, the travel kids travel. Whether by converted school bus, illegally hopping freight trains, or hitchhiking to get rides with strangers, these kids are crisscrossing and exploring America, often for years on end. Photo 1 is a photograph of one of my interviewees, Chase traveling via train with his dog and his friend Vinny from many years ago. I thought it was a good visual representation of how many travel kids actually traveled. However, travel kids, as a group, have far more in common with each other than one major life decision.

Travel kids also share a culture. I would personally describe them as modern-day punk-rock hobos. They share tastes in music, views on politics, rituals, and even clothing. Photo 2 provides a good visual summation of the travel kid culture: there is a lot of drunken shenanigans, dogs, and dark colored clothing involved. One thing holds true for the majority



Photo 2

of the elements of the travel kid lifestyle: they are all deviant. The sociological definition of deviance is rejection of social norms and behaviors, which is something that can apply to almost every aspect of their culture and lifestyle. Deviance is the uniting theme of my research that I will be analyzing from a number of different angles, as it was clearly something that travel kids not only achieved incidentally based on their tastes, but actively strove to achieve in all aspects of their lives. I will be evaluating the mentality involved with choosing a deviant lifestyle, how they viewed the society that they chose to rebel against, the paradox between claiming independence while actually being dependent, how they viewed themselves then and now, and how deviance manifested in their appearance and behavior. Additionally, I will be analyzing how their beliefs were shaped by interacting with (and living off of) “normal” members of society. Because I am interviewing former travel kids, I will also be analyzing the ways in which they have changed since they have decided to rejoin mainstream society and what affect this has had on them.

Crucially, the author gives an outline of everything that will be covered in the paper.

In gathering my research on the deviance of travel kids, I conducted interviews with three former travel kids who have stopped traveling and settled into routine, “normal” lives. Because of the separation from their past lifestyles, I was able to assess the ways in which they had gone from rebelling against societal norms to, somewhat,



embracing them. I gathered my sample with availability sampling because I have known each of them for many years and they belong to a population that can be hard to find members of. I interviewed Evelyn, her husband Chase, and Chase’s ex-girlfriend Mari. With each member of my sample, I conducted a semi-structured interview with 12 prepared questions and follow-ups were used as needed. They lasted 1-2 hours and were performed either at or near their

Photo 2

In this paragraph (continued on the next page) the author provides their methodology.

homes and I took handwritten verbatim notes. When taking the photographs, I accompanied each person in my sample to various other locations, including a skate park, music venue, parking lot, and tattoo shop in order to be able to give a fuller picture of who they have become and what they enjoy now that they have settled down.

Additionally, I am including old photographs of my subjects for the sake of contrast, context, and explanation of their former selves. This includes Photo 3, which is a photo taken of Evelyn when she was traveling, which I will compare to the current photos I took of her.

Author provides a generalized explanation for the phenomena they are investigating. They give examples from everyone they studied.

The circumstances that caused by subjects to leave home and travel for the first time shed light on how they decided to adopt their new, deviant lifestyles as, essentially, an attempt to extricate themselves from the bounds of society. All three of my subjects were experiencing some sort of personal problem, while simultaneously dreading the idea of entering the adult world, with all the responsibilities that would entail. When describing what his life was like when he decided to leave for the first time, Chase told me that he had “nothing going on,” lacking both money and future plans, in addition to the fact that he would have been a senior in high school, but “hadn’t been to school in three years.” Additionally, he was the only respondent to identify the lure of adventure as a primary motivating factor that led to him leaving. The two women I interviewed, on the other hand, both emphasized that they used travelling as a way to escape their problems at home, citing more push factors than pull factors. For Evelyn, it was the ended of a serious two-year relationship in addition to a nasty divorce between her parents that made her want to leave. Mari also left because she was having home problems, including a mother with difficult health issues. I found these revelations very surprising as I had always just assumed that travel kids decided to travel because it was an exciting adventure. Though I have been friends with many travel kids over the years, I have never

felt the desire to do what they do, which I always contributed to the fact that I am not a very adventurous person. However, I now realize that my stable, supportive home life meant that I was privileged enough to never really have anything that I felt like I had to escape from. All three of them also expressed a desire to escape the pressure they felt to become an adult member of society. Chase was drawn to “the idea of no commitments and freedom,” Mari said she felt an “inability to accept a normal life with a 9-to-5 job” and a desire to “live recklessly and freely

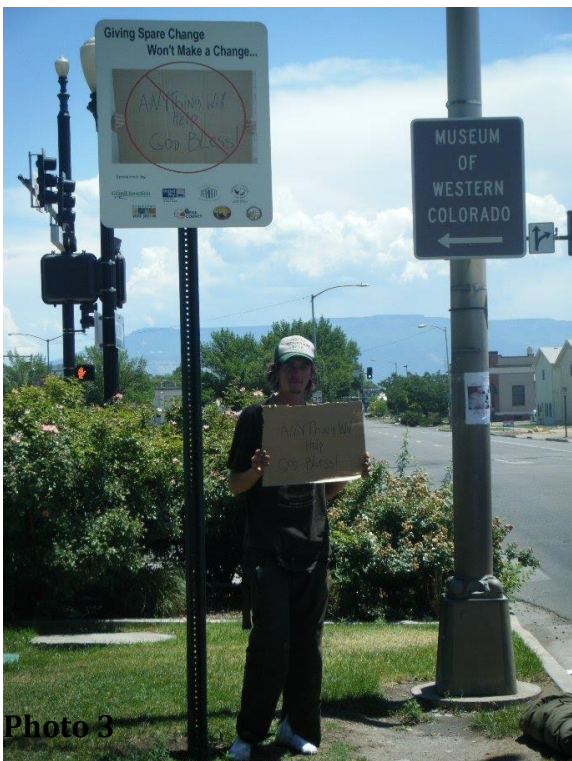


Photo 3

without any cares,” and Evelyn said it was a way to “take a break and see the world before ‘real life’ starts.” All three subjects also explained that it wasn’t until after they had already started traveling that they realized it was actually fun, which led each of them traveling for 4-5 years. The most important observation here is that when a chaotic home-life is combined with the anxiety that results from pending adulthood, people are able to make drastic decisions. However, many groups of teenagers and young adults experience this sense of anxiety, which often manifests into less significant acts of rebellion, such as partying during college. Acting out in this way is seen as harmless and a natural “phase” many, if not most, young adults go through before they are forced to enter the real world. However, for the interviewees, their act of rebellion was to consciously reject the idea that they even had to enter the adult society at all.

Author “unpacks” it, using their observations to make an argument about why people become a part of this group

One possible reason that my subjects rebelled in such an extreme way was their preconceived beliefs about what being an adult member of society entailed. All my interviewees told me that before and while they were traveling they had very negative views of society and the people who participated in it. Mari told me that her choice to travel was, in part, a conscious attempt to not be a part of society because she felt as if belonging to society meant losing your freedom. Before I performed my interviews, I had assumed that the travel kids I knew developed their deviant characteristics, such as overdrinking in public and wearing filthy clothes, as a result of peer pressure and travel-kid-tradition. I thought their deviance just evolved by default and I

An important observation: conscious rejection of societal norms

was shocked to realize that their initial choice to leave was a conscious rejection of societal norms. The deviant physical traits they would go on to acquire just served to show the world that they rejected the idea of having to belong to society. Also, I had always assumed that they developed negative opinions of the people who belong to mainstream society because of how people treated them while they were dirty street kids. This was certainly true of some people that treated them poorly, including aggressive police officers, who were seen as the ultimate manifestation of an oppressive society and, thus, biggest enemy of travel kids. Photo 4 shows Chase while he was traveling holding a cardboard sign that says “Anything Will Help, God Bless” next to an official government sign with a picture with the same words as his sign with a red X over it and text that says “Giving Spare Change Won’t Make a Change,” as a way to deter people like him from panhandling. This is a great example of the bias and discrimination travel kids can face, which only makes them feel more like outsiders and gives them more of a reason to dislike society and the government. However, for the most part, the interviewees already held negative opinions of people in mainstream society before they started traveling. My respondents described feeling like regular working

An important observation: transient's views of regular working people

people were, in a sense, just cogs in a machine at the mercy of “the man.” As they travelled, however, these cogs became something worse: “gullible suckers to take advantage of” was how Evelyn described them. As travelers, one

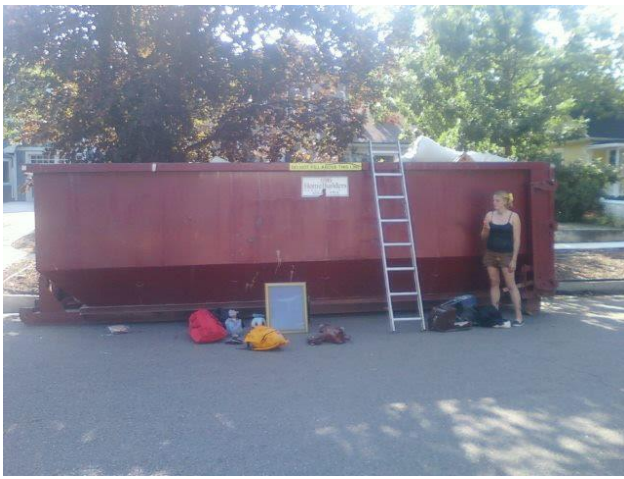


Photo 4

way they made money to sustain themselves was relying on the charity of others and once they realized how easy it was to manipulate people into giving them whatever they wanted, their already low opinion of regular people fell even further. Essentially, looking like a sad, dirty victim of circumstance was a way to get money from people who were stupid enough to work all day long for that money. In

fact, Chase said the thing he misses the most about traveling is that no one feels pity for him now. It was pretty shocking to hear that my

interviewees' negative views of people in regular society were only worsened when those people were charitable toward them. Another way the travel kids fed themselves was by “dumpster diving” where you jump in the dumpster of grocery stores for food that isn't spoiled, but may be too old to sell in the store. Mari stressed the fact that witnessing so much food that people made her outlook on society even grimmer. Photo 5 is great because it shows that not only is Mari willing to do something against social norms (eat out of the trash), but doing it so blatantly with



a ladder in the middle of the day also tells society that she does not care what you think about her doing that. In fact, Mari is proud enough of dumpster diving to get a tattoo of a raccoon in a top hat dumpster diving (Photo 6)

Not only were they able to emotionally manipulate strangers, but the money that they did receive was primarily spent on alcohol and partying when it was clearly intended to help them buy food and get their lives together. When you imagine a scene where a kind stranger gives a street person some money, I doubt you would ever imagine that the dirty person living on the street is the judgmental one who feels superior to the regular person. Because they believed these regular people were just enabling the oppressive society that the travelers were trying to escape, it was easier to

Photo 5

take advantage of them without any guilt. At the same time, this gave travel kids the ability to create a sense of superiority, which they no doubt desperately needed. Also, the travelers had no problem taking advantage of actual societal structures and programs, such as filing to receiving food stamps and then selling them to get money for alcohol. This was a common practice that all interviewees mentioned having done, as if they were proud of their ability to use this societal benefit in order to lead a lifestyle that was counter to it's intended goals. The results of a successful food stamp sale are shown in Photo 7. which also shows Mari sitting under a bridge with her pack: a typical visual representation of how she looked while traveling.

Since all my interviewees have stopped traveling, however, their views about society and the people who



Photo 6

make it up have changed significantly. When asked how they view the people they used to consider “gullible suckers,” my two female interviewees told me that they realize those “suckers” were actually, usually, just generous and kind people who felt sorry for them. Mari said that reflecting on the generosity of those people that helped her makes her “feel hopeful about the compassion of the human race overall.”

Evelyn was especially apologetic for her earlier beliefs and told me that since she's stopped traveling, she is actively trying very hard to become “nicer,” and “more open and understanding.” In fact, she claims that one of the reasons she ultimately decided to stop traveling, her “breaking point” was when she got fed up with all her travel kid cohorts criticizing “society” because despite the fact that she had once also held this view, she had begun to realize that the “society” they were criticizing and rebelling against is just made up of good people who were willing to help them. She has also says she helps out current travel kids who need assistance whenever she can, which is especially selfless considering that she knows how poorly she thought of the people who used to help her. There are likely many reasons for this change in heart including maturity and having enough time go by for ample reflection, but the most significant reason is likely the fact that since these traveling kids have stopped traveling, despite their best efforts to resist it, they have given in and become part of mainstream society. However, they all acknowledge that they were a bit naïve and immature to think that living a life

[Photo redacted]

Photo 8

apart from society was something they could and should do. The most concrete evidence that they have accepted the importance of belonging to society is the fact that all three interviewees have actual jobs. Chase works at his family's business, Evelyn went to culinary school and has worked in various restaurants, and Mari is an apprenticing tattoo artist. Photo 8 shows her hard at work designing a tattoo sketch in her tattoo parlor. She is very talented and is appreciative of the fact that she is able to have a job (belong to society), while also not having to sacrifice her

[Photo redacted]

affinity for the deviant (in the form of tattoos). They all pay taxes and now have to wake up at the right time (at the right place). Additionally, Chase and Evelyn are parents to a 2-year-old girl named Penny. Photo 9 shows Evelyn holding Penny in an adorable way as they both smile. Comparing this picture with Photo 3, you can see that not only has Evelyn changed physically to look more like a successful member of society, but the travel kid's innate love for dogs has been overtaken by a mother's love for her daughter. Penny is now the most important part of both of their lives, which is starkly different from what they cared about while traveling

(when asked about what was, Chase immediately replied "cigarettes and dogs"). Mari, on the other hand, told me

Photo 9

how important it was for her now to participate in society and,

even, the in government she once railed against. She described her prior opposition in the following way:

"participating in the running of the government symbolized being chained down to a life where you feel trapped."

However, she now realizes that this participation is actually just a way to give people the ability to have more of a say in how things are in the world.

Mari describes having a say in the world, but I would argue that she is actually talking about regaining power over her life and environment. Either way, it was an interesting point that illustrates one of the biggest paradoxes I noticed in my conversations: travel kids see leaving as a way to be free and independent, while actually being more dependent on society than most people are. Just because you have no responsibilities and no accountability, it doesn't mean that you don't need other people to survive. Unless you are a

[Photo redacted]

self-sustaining survivalist living off the grid, it is almost impossible to actually

Photo 10

An important observation: paradox of dependence

extricate yourself from society completely. However, they clearly saw not feeling accountable to society's norms was rebellious enough to make themselves feel like they really were living a life apart from mainstream society. Additionally, although they relied on the generosity of strangers and the loopholes in the social safety net to meet their needs, don't forget that all three of my interviewees had loving families back home that were always there in case they needed to be bailed out (literally or figuratively). They looked down on regular people because they were "stupid" enough to have jobs and give taxes to the government, as if those people didn't have any autonomy or power. But if you can't eat because no one gave you any food or you are stuck in a town for days on end because you can't get a ride, you are certainly dependent on others. Chase actually acknowledged this hypocrisy himself saying "we were really just leeching, we weren't actually independent," which I found extremely astute and I gather it is something he would not have thought (or admitted) just a few short years ago. He went on to explain the satisfaction he feels now that he doesn't have to depend on any one else in order to feed himself. Despite the fact that he has more responsibilities than ever with a child, a wife, a job, and bills, which means that now his decisions actually matter and can affect others, he seems very satisfied with his choice to settle down. This satisfaction is shown in Photo 10 as he poses with Penny looking far more presentable than he did while traveling.

Though acquiring a job and a sense of autonomy are two of the most significant post-traveling changes my interviewees reported, the most obvious difference to outside observers is the change in their appearance and how they present themselves. Though the changes, in some cases, have been quite dramatic, all interviewees managed to successfully retain some of their "deviant" elements. Deviance has clearly become an important part of their identity, but they have all found ways to express their nontraditional tastes in more socially acceptable ways. When asked what the biggest physical change has been for them all three interviewees immediately gave me the same answer: the smell. According to Evelyn, the dirtier you were and the worse you smelled, the more "street cred" and respect you



Photo 11

An important observation: retain some deviant elements

received from other travel kids. Having clothes so dirty that they had a crusty layer of grime was seen as a badge of honor. Often times veteran travel kids are wary of clean travelers because it is a sign that they are “green” (inexperienced), which often means they don’t know what they’re doing or how to behave. Not only was the ability to shower a rarity while traveling, when they did get the opportunity, they would often purposely not wash their clothes to retain their filthy state. Unsurprisingly, this was often the aspect that polite society found most offensive leading to judgments, insults on the street, and people on public transportation demanding they get off because of the smell. Though she is now showering again, Evelyn retains her “stink” permanently in the form of a literal badge of honor: a tattoo of garlic under her arm (Photo 11). The symbolism here is pretty obvious: the smell of someone’s breath after they’ve just eaten garlic is akin to the smell that used to emerge when Evelyn lifted her arm. I also appreciated the fact that she let me take the photo even though her underarm was unshaved because it shows that she is still does not follow all societal beauty norms. All interviewees talked about how being clean is now a welcomed and necessary part of how they present themselves to the world. Mari said that she has “discovered” hygiene and “gained a deep appreciation for bathtubs.” Additionally, both girls had dreadlocks while they traveled, another typical travel kid trait, which were impossible to wash completely, so that they retained their smell after a shower.

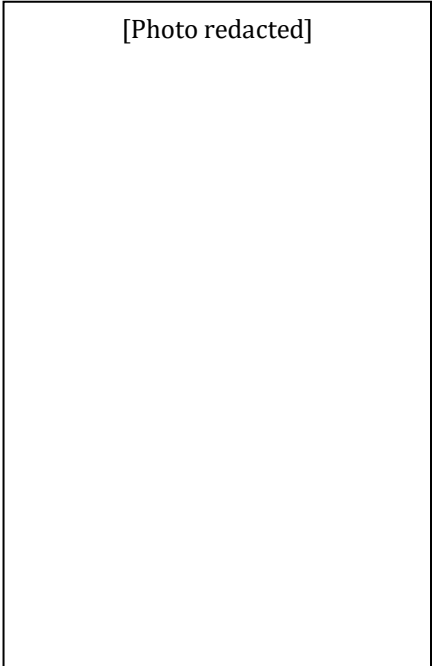


Photo 12

Also, having dreadlocks was almost as much about belonging as it was about it just being a natural consequence of not washing or brushing your hair for extended periods. Both girls have since shaved their dreadlocks, which Evelyn described as an almost traumatic experience, having been used to long hair for so many years. However, Mari is a big fan of changing her hair often and she said that it is weird for her to have her hair that is her natural blonde color, as is currently the case. She told me that she is constantly fighting the urge to dye it colors like green and pink, like she used to, because she now sees the “genuine value of fitting into a crowd” and is content no longer standing out. Photo 12 shows how Mari looks now with her new favorite mode of transportation, her bicycle.

Though her hair is now natural, her scarf and dark clothes still give off a cool, edgy vibe. I believe this photo shows that she has achieved her goal of not standing out in a crowd.

Body modifications are another deviant aspect of appearance that virtually all travel kids have. Primarily, they include tattoos, septum piercings, and ear gauges. Both girls still have multiple facial piercings, and a large number of tattoos. Though, of course, some of these things are permanent, both girls have elected to retain some of the removable piercings. Evelyn usually keeps the piercing on the bridge of her nose in and pretty much always wears shorts, despite the fact that her most noticeable tattoo, a narwhal, is on her upper thigh. However, she told me that she now realizes that there are times and places where it is appropriate to remove her piercing and cover her tattoos. She is clearly very cognizant of her appearance and how it may contribute to people judging her as “deviant,” such as when she’s around Chase’s parents. Evelyn says she realizes that there is a proper way for a mom to look and she believes she has found the right balance between looking presentable and retaining some of her

An important observation: body modifications



rebellious spirit and edge. However, though Mari is now clean with natural hair, she has continued to get additional tattoos. She stressed that even before she began traveling she had an affinity for tattoos, however. I believe she told me that to clarify that she wasn’t peer pressured to get tattoos because the other travel kids had them. However, unlike mom Evelyn, Mari works in a tattoo shop, which gives her more freedom than most people in more traditional jobs to continue to add to her body art. Mari told me that she believes she has successfully been able to find a balance between her past (traveling) life and the life as a productive member of society that she aspires to achieve. She says that she appreciates not being treated like “a scourge of the earth that is trying to shoplift” by others when she goes in public; she describes this as “respect.” Chase also has a tattoo on his foot that includes the words “Luck On The Road” (Photo 13). His

Photo 13

tattoo, like most of Evelyn’s and many of Mari’s, is a “stick-and-poke” tattoo, as most travel kid tattoos are. These tattoos are done by hand, slowly and painfully, by taking any

sharp object, dipping it in ink, and then poking it into the skin. These tattoos were not only popular with travel kids because they are cheap and easy, but also because they could help to pass the time and break up the monotony that they so often had to deal with. I was particularly drawn to the message of Chase's tattoo because it emphasized something I heard throughout my interviews; they needed luck not only for rides and money, but also for self-protection, as danger was literally around every corner. My interviewees often would describe situations and incidents that sounded very scary and dangerous to me personally, but they seemed unfazed when recounting them. Traveling is definitely one way to make yourself braver and stronger, but the need for self protection was often overlooked both because of carelessness and because often the only available options were very risky ones. The story behind how Chase got his tattoo is a good example of this, he says that when he was getting the tattoo put on his right foot, he was driving a van and controlling the pedals with his left foot. He thought it was a pretty funny story, but I was shocked for him. Traveling definitely gives people a thicker, often tattooed, skin.

This fearlessness in the face of danger and the desire to preserve some elements of a deviant lifestyle can clearly be seen in a number of activities that my interviewees continue to practice. Chase, for example, has gone from illegally hopping freight trains to another similarly dangerous mode of transportation: riding a motorcycle (Photo 14). He brought me to a parking lot where he was practicing wheelies while me and a few of his friends watched. It didn't take long for the store employee to come out and tell us to leave, which we did. Because I worry extensively about getting into

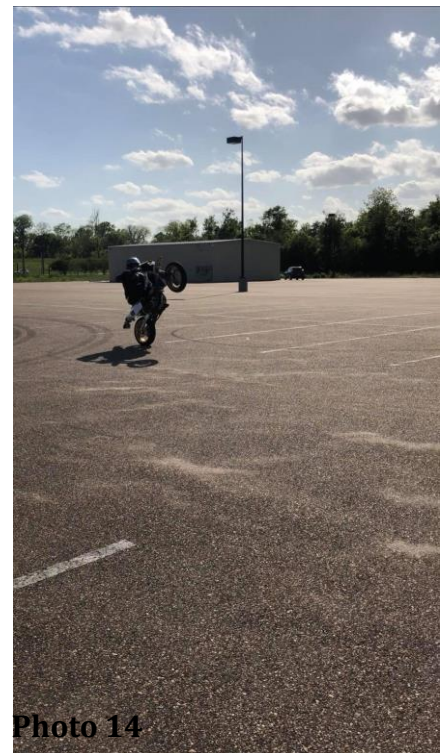


Photo 14

trouble and do tend to listen to authority figures, I did not return. However, Chase retains his desire to “fight the man” and I later found out that he not only returned to the same parking lot and continued riding, but he was asked to leave, left, and returned an additional 3 times. It is clear that he still feels as if authority can't tell him what to do, especially if that authority figure is trying to interfere with him having dangerous fun.

[Photo redacted]

[Photo redacted]

Despite being a very attentive mom now, Evelyn also has been able to retain some of her deviant edge. She told me that she pretty much wears the same thing she wore traveling almost everyday: a black tank top, cut-off shorts, and a vest.

However, now, of course, the clothes are always clean. She still identifies with “punk” culture. She not only dresses “punk,” but she has begun playing bass and singing in a punk band with her brother called Screaming Underwater. Photo 15 shows her performing with the band at one of their first shows. Chase also brought Penny to watch her mom perform and despite being nervous about playing with a new band for the second time, Evelyn was still very sweet and attentive to Penny right up until the minute she had to get on stage (Photo 16). Also, for the many years I have known her, Evelyn has always been a physically strong, sometimes aggressive woman. But now, instead of getting into drunken fights, she is proudly sober and channels her fighting instinct into roller derby. Photo 17 shows Evelyn practicing her skating skills while also trying to teach Penny how to skate at the skate park. Again, the love Evelyn has for Penny is constantly shining through ever photo I take of them. Also, here you can see some of the punk clothing choices that she continues to wear: a black band tank top and a bandana. As Photo 3 shows, bandanas are a must have accessory for any travel kid both for aesthetic and practical reasons and wearing them is a habit Evelyn continues to keep. Both Evelyn and Chase have been able to take extremely deviant and dangerous behaviors that they used to exhibit into their more socially acceptable, but still mildly deviant forms. It seems as if they both have calmed down as they have gotten older and stopped traveling, but also, because they now have a child together, it is far more important that they don’t get seriously injured. However it’s possible that riding on a train is as perilous as riding a motorcycle, but one is definitely more socially acceptable.

The primary argument that this paper supports is no matter what type of person you are, people just want to feel like they belong and can take drastic measures when they feel excluded. When people feel like they don’t belong in society, they may actively fight against society and everything it represents. Essentially, like is the case

with the selling of food stamps, they can use the benefits provided by society against society. Additionally, when people feel rejected or discriminated against in their personal lives, they may begin to feel as if society as a whole is against them, which can make them want to rebel against it. One of the main issues underlying interactions between travel kids and regular people (and most groups that don't get along) is a lack of empathy. While both groups found it easy to look down upon and judge the other, either for a lack of resources or a lack of freedom, once my interviewees began to understand that people in society could just be nice people who tried to be happy, their prejudice against them decreased significantly. My interviewees also expressed that when they were traveling, they had hoped that people would choose to get to know them instead of judging them based on their appearances. Realizing that it is possible for people to mature and their views to evolve can also increase empathy. An additional future area of study would be to assess how current travel kids feel about society to see how views have changed in the 10 years since my interviewees traveled. Additionally, as deviant things, such as tattoos, are becoming more and more socially acceptable, we should be less judgmental about people's choices disobey some social norms, especially regarding physical appearance, because they are constantly evolving and things that may seem awful and extremely deviant at one time may very well become the norm one day. Even kindergarten teachers can have tattoos nowadays, so maybe one day in the future a lot more kids will choose to explore America before real life begins.

[Photo redacted]

Photo 17

This paper does exactly what qualitative research strives to do; the reader gains a detailed understanding of this group of people/culture.

Great data collection. Writing is detailed throughout.

The author's themes highlight important aspects about this group of people. These themes organize the paper well. The detailed writing on each theme helps the reader understand a lot about this group of people.

The author uses their sociological knowledge of deviance to guide their writing. The author focuses on the data they collected, but their knowledge of deviance helped with the analysis of their data.

There are few things that would improve this paper. The photo formatting created awkward breaks in the paragraphs, putting the photos at the end would have avoided this issue. The paper goes over length limits (it uses 10 point font), but the paper has a level of quality which makes this acceptable.