



**Refugee & Immigrant
Assistance Center**



Somali Youth in North America: Engaging our greatest resource to increase youth Resilience and reduce risk

Summary: This brief describes a successful approach to engaging Somali young adults in North America in research and provides preliminary findings related to challenges faced by Somali youth in the U.S. and Canada.

PROJECT

This project is a longitudinal study of Somali young adults in North America that seeks to understand how the experiences of youth in resettlement relate to their beliefs and behaviors about civic/political engagement and violence (both community violence and openness to violent ideology).

GOALS: Why is this Research Needed?

- The majority of Somali youth we interviewed in the U.S. and Canada are law-abiding citizens who are striving to succeed in their countries of resettlement. At the same time, concerns have been raised around issues of Somali youth in North America engaging in violent activities. In places like Minneapolis and Toronto, gang violence has been a major problem with often other Somalis being the victims. As well, handful of Somali youth from the U.S. and Canada has left to join extremist groups such as al-Shabaab and ISIL.
- Very little research has attempted to understand the experiences of Somali youth living in North America by talking to the youth themselves. A better understanding of their experiences is needed to both define the problems the community is facing and identify solutions.
- To fill this gap, we undertook a longitudinal, mixed methods (both structured and unstructured interviews) study of Somali young adults in North America.

PROJECT BACKGROUND: How We Approach Working with the Community

Our study team has, over the past decade, built a community-based participatory research (CBPR) program with the Somali community. CBPR is an approach to research that includes the community of study as an equal partner in conducting the research. Under this approach communities have a central stake in defining both the research topic as well as the solutions that are derived from the data. Examples of how this project embodies CBPR at the implementation stage include:

- Somalis are included as core members of our research team.
- Community leaders from each city where the research takes place are engaged as central partners in the study.



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- Community leaders work with the research team to interpret and disseminate results, and develop proposals for prevention/intervention to support the community.
- There is a concerted effort to translate findings into policy and programs that support youth.

This approach has led to high levels of engagement in all cities where our study is operating. For example, in both Minneapolis and Toronto, more than 110 young adults participated in interviews within a week. In addition, we accessed a wide range of community members in each location, including at-risk youth and college students.

Participant Profile

- **465** Somali-American and Somali-Canadian young adults from 5 communities (Minneapolis, MN, Boston, MA, Lewiston and Portland, ME and Toronto, Canada)
- **Age range: 18 – 30** (average age **21.38**)
- **291 (62.6%)** were males, **174 (37.4%)** were females
- Approximately **20% were neither employed nor in school**. Males were almost **three times** more likely than females to report having no job/school enrollment.
- **71%** reported experiencing **traumatic events** during their lifetime
- **45%** lived with a **single mother**
- Despite these hardships, the majority of participants reported feeling a strong sense of connection to both their Somali community/their country of resettlement.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND THEMES

Interactions with Law Enforcement: Contact and Perception of Treatment

38% of participants reported having had **contact with local police** in the past year.

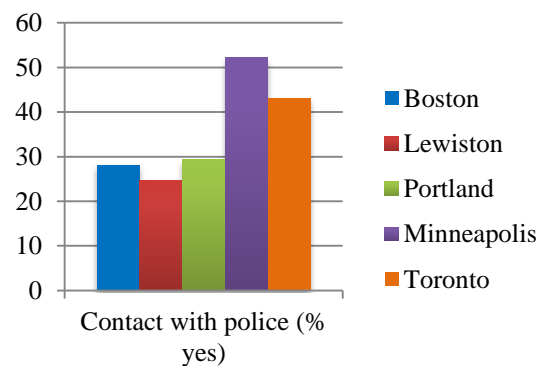
50% of those participants who had contact with police, **felt they were treated with respect** by the police sometimes or always.

40% felt that they were **stopped or searched unfairly**.

Recommendations for Law Enforcement

- **Communities and law enforcement should work together** to close the gap between youth and law enforcement and to counter the negative perception of law enforcement among Somali youth in North America.
- **Having law enforcement participate in community activities**, such as basketball leagues and Eid celebrations, creates opportunities for positive interaction with the Somali-American community. This may help youth see law enforcement not as a threat, but as a source of protection and reduce prejudice among law enforcement officers who might hold negative views of the youth.

Figure 1. Percent of participants in each site who had contact with the police in the past year.



*"The Americans living in the US feel unsafe, and the Somalis feel, you know, disrespected."
(Male, 20, Boston)*

- **Programs that attract Somali-American and Somali-Canadian youth to intern and seek employment with law enforcement should be promoted.** Steps taken by

"I think you can first of all give them something to look forward to, like a job. Something to get them off the street..."
(Male, MN)

Minneapolis police to hire Somali officers are already contributing to improving youth's perception of that police department. As one youth put it, *"We have Somali police officers now, so I think we are moving up the ladder. We're being known as a different community"*.

Job Opportunities and Growth

A high number of participants reported as having neither a job nor attending school. The numbers were very similar in **Minneapolis (22%)**, **Toronto (23%)**, and **Lewiston (21%)**. **Boston** had slightly lower number (**17%**). Youth articulated the need to create jobs for youth in order to keep them out of trouble and engaged in constructive, rather than destructive, activities.

Employment Recommendation

Programs that promote youth employment and training are urgently needed. Community leaders, educational institutions, employers and policymakers need to work together to help youth find jobs and gain skills that would make them competitive in the job market. This should be seen as a key component of violence prevention activities.

Community Leadership and Somali Community Belongingness

Problems identified by youth: One theme that emerged in interviews with some youth was seeing themselves as not "good enough" for the Somali community at the same time that they don't feel like they belong to their US/Canadian communities. Some youth described how their parents and other community elders were unable to understand the challenges they faced, such as joblessness and discrimination, and tend to respond to a young person's failure to find a job or complete education by blaming or seeing them as failures rather than supporting them.

Potential solution identified by youth and community: A community level effort is needed to bring together elders and youth and come up with ways to enhance intergenerational communication, share more of each other's experiences, and create an open dialogue so that youth feel that they have a place to go when faced with difficult choices. Youth want community leaders to advocate for them, rather than ostracize them when they get in trouble.

"Don't judge your kids, it's not helping them." (Male, 21, ME)

Strong Social Bonds and Civic Engagement are Key to Resilience

If you divided the youth into two groups—1) those who have committed delinquent acts or would endorse use of violence to achieve political ends, and 2) those who are more "resilient" and who, despite similar backgrounds, do not endorse destructive behaviors, the primary difference is that the more resilient group reports stronger social bonds. These youth also report being civically/politically engaged. This makes sense since resilience is related to optimism (sense that things can and will get better) and a sense of control over one's life (belief that one can bring about that change). **Youth who are more resilient have stronger social bonds, and believe that things can change and that they can be part of the forces that can bring about social change.** Thus youth **civic engagement** should be promoted both as a protective factor but also to help youth contribute to changes in their lives. Furthermore, **positive social bonds** both within the Somali community and wider American/Canadian community should also be fostered.

CONCLUSION

- Somali Youth in the US and Canada can be engaged as resources in identifying problems and finding solutions.
- Somali-American and Somali Canadian youth demonstrate a remarkable willingness to engage in dialogue about the issues they face and to share their concerns and opinions. They have also shown a great insight into the issues they face, whether struggling with the effects of trauma and war, the challenges of finding employment or facing discrimination in the communities in which they live.
- The majority of Somali youth we interviewed showed remarkable resilience in the face of great adversities. More can be done to support this resilience.
- The majority of Somali American and Canadian youth work, go to school, and seek out support in their communities and they are optimistic about their future. As a community and as a nation we need to show these youth that their optimism is well placed by creating a more welcoming, supportive and safe environment for them to grow and achieve their goals.
- The problems and solutions identified by the Somali community in North America provide direction for promoting resilience in Somali youth.
- Some youth struggle to find jobs or perceive that they are unfairly treated by law enforcement; governments and policymakers can make efforts to ensure fair treatment and access to the same opportunities as other citizens for Somali youth in North America. As well, there is a need to promote a better understanding between these youth and law enforcement and to create channels where youth can go to express grievances if they feel mistreated.
- Some youth feel disconnected from and rejected from their Somali community; Somali elders can provide leadership in integrating these youth back into their communities.

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