



Boston Children's Hospital



Methods for successful research related to Violent Extremism in the Somali-American community

Summary: *This brief describes the methods used to successfully engage and conduct an extensive research project with Somalis living in North America. These methods can inform future research on sensitive topics and with under-studied groups, and may also provide a model for outreach to and engagement of youth in CVE programs.*

THE CHALLENGE

1. A small number of Somali refugee youth have left North America to support al-Shabaab or ISIL and, in some cases, engage in terrorism.
2. Data on attitudes towards violent extremism within key communities is virtually absent from the field.
3. The empirical identification of resettlement experiences that relate to increasing support for violent extremism is urgently needed.

THE REALITY

1. The resettled Somali community has a strong stake in understanding and preventing violent extremism, but also strong concerns about their community being unfairly targeted and stigmatized in relation to this topic. Community members do not want to participate in research that might further stigmatize their community as one associated with violent extremism.
2. Successful research on sensitive topics requires trust in the process, belief that the findings will be used to help – not hurt – the community, and both scientific and ethical integrity.

OUR RESPONSE

We – a team of academic researchers and Somali community partners – are conducting a longitudinal study of Somali-American young adults in North America examining early risk and protective factors in relation to support for violent extremism. We interviewed 465 Somali youth, with high retention in our second wave of the study. Participants have been open, honest, and many times voiced appreciation that their experiences and ideas are being heard.

WHAT METHODS ALLOW US TO ACCOMPLISH THIS?

From a Community Standpoint

- The project grows out of a long-standing community-based participatory research (CBPR) collaboration with the Somali-American community.
 - The Somali community is an equal partner in conducting the research.
 - The Somali community has a central stake in defining both the research topic and also the solutions that are derived from the data.
- Somali-Americans are core members of our research team.
- Community leaders in each of the study locations ensure that the study is mindful of the ways in which their community is unique, and allow these leaders to:

- Describe the study and its potential relevance and importance to their own community.
- Interpret and disseminate results, and develop proposals for prevention / intervention to support the community.

From a Scientific Standpoint

- Participants are Somali-American young adults from 5 Somali communities in North America (Boston, Minneapolis, Lewiston and Portland Maine, and Toronto, Canada).
- Each participant completes 2 quantitative interviews separated by 1 year that look at adversity, social bonds, community social control and attitudes towards violent extremism.
- In-depth qualitative interviews are completed with a subset of the participants to explore mechanisms of the relationships identified in the quantitative data.
- Our Time 1 sample size is 465; we successfully accessed a diverse group of Somali youth, including gang-involved youth.

What are the barriers we face and how are we overcoming them?	
Barriers	Strategies
Trust: How to overcome the historical distrust of authority that the Somali community has due to war and refugee experiences	Community leaders in each city who were trusted members of the community conducted outreach related to the study to get community acceptance and ensure the study is relevant, ethical and has the potential to help address real needs. Project builds on history of partnership and track record of using research to inform interventions and services.
Engagement: How to engage a community that is typically resistant to outsiders and/or research	Community leadership teams provide outreach. Study staff includes Somali-Americans. Specific community concerns, e.g. gang violence, mental health, included as core goals to understand as part of the research.
Confidentiality: How to collect and assess sensitive information such as openness to violent extremism while ensuring confidentiality and space for honest dialogue	We used Computer Assisted Self Interviewing (CASI) ; participants enter responses to survey questions about sensitive topics such as gang involvement or attitudes to violent extremism directly onto an iPad, which allows the data to be immediately de-identified and uploaded into a protected database.
Confidentiality: How to conduct an anonymous longitudinal study.	We created a code system (similar to security questions you choose/answer for online passwords that have been forgotten) that makes it impossible for anyone, including the researchers, to connect an individual with their data without assistance from that individual.
Ethical Concerns: How to make sure participants fully understand the goals of the study and their involvement	Research staff from the Somali community conducted extensive verbal consent (preferred by the community over written) and translated as needed
CBPR concerns: How to ensure that we are covering topics other than violent extremism that are important to the community	We incorporated additional outcomes of civic engagement, gang involvement, and delinquency that were important to the community to better understand additional pathways

Outcomes

- **True partnerships** in each of the cities where we conducted the research. The community leaders and community leadership teams have become established partners in our broader agenda of working with communities to counter violent extremism and build stronger refugee and immigrant communities.
- **Established infrastructure** in each city that has already allowed for
 - The implementation of a preventive intervention designed to bolster social identity and social support and
 - A second research study understanding the convergent and divergent mechanisms in the pathways towards involvement in gangs and in violent extremism.
- **Unprecedented dialogue** with Somali-American youth. We have disproved both the misconception in the Somali community that the host community isn't interested in talking to them, and the misconception in the broader community that the Somali community doesn't want to talk. The response has been overwhelmingly positive among participants, who feel they have a voice for the first time.

IMPLICATIONS

Empirical research to inform efficient and effective prevention and intervention programs is not only possible, but can be done in a way that builds constructive partnerships and dialogue.

Inclusion of community partners in the research process yields high engagement, reliable data, and the potential to address problems of significant concern to both community members and policy makers through partnerships.

Engaging community members as central partners may provide a model for developing and disseminating CVE programs that meaningfully engage Somali youth.

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