



**Brief for Community Members**

**Somali Community in North America: Engaging our greatest resource**

**EARLY FINDINGS**

- The Somali community resettled in North America is an important partner in reducing the risk of Somali youth joining al-Shabaab.
- In support of this, we present here preliminary findings collected as part of the first wave of a longitudinal study of Somali refugee young adults in North America examining early risk and protective factors in relation to support for violent extremism.
- We conducted interviews with 434 Somali youth from 5 communities in North America.
- Participants reported a high level of perceived discrimination from society in general as well as from local police and federal officers. This may undermine efforts to counter violent extremism in important ways:
  - Participants who reported experiencing more discrimination also tended to express greater levels of support for violent extremism.
  - The community may be less available to assist law-enforcement personnel if they have had previous encounters in which they felt they were treated disrespectfully.
- Participants expressed appreciation for participating in the interview, noting that while violence and discrimination are central to their daily lives, nobody had asked them about their opinions or experiences. Many young individuals also noted that they perceive violent extremism to be an extremely minor issue in their community but that many other pressing issues, such as community violence, deeply affect the community.
- We propose that Somali-American communities and law enforcement agencies can work together to build strong, resilient partnerships in countering violence.

**PROJECT BACKGROUND**

The 2010 National Security Strategy places significant emphasis on the importance of placing *communities* at the forefront of a smart and effective counter-terrorism toolbox.<sup>1</sup>

The Somali community is a major refugee community resettled in the U.S. and Canada. Because of concerns that some Somali refugee youth have left North America to support al-Shabaab and, in some cases, engage in terrorism, the resettled Somali community has a strong stake in understanding and preventing violent extremism.

This brief examines the following questions:

- How effectively is the Somali community in North America being engaged?
- How do Somalis living in North America view their interactions with local and federal security agencies?
- How do Somalis living in North America perceive their acceptance or rejection by the broader community?
- How might experiences of acceptance or rejection relate to attitudes towards violent activism?

**Being central partners in the process**

Our study team has, over the past decade, built a community-based participatory research (CBPR) program with the Somali-American community. CBPR is an approach to research which 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 and also the solutions that are derived from the data. Examples of how this project embodies CBPR at the implementation stage include:

- Community members are included as core members of our research team

<sup>1</sup> National Security Strategy

- Community leaders from each city are engaged as central partners in the study
- Somali-American team members, along with the community leaders, work with youth and other outreach workers to generate interest, refer participants, describe the study, and answer study-related questions
- Community leaders work with the research team to interpret and disseminate results, and develop proposals for prevention/intervention to support the community

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 diverse community members, including gang-involved youth, in each location.

## METHODS

465 participants participated in structured interviews assessing experiences such as trauma, participation in crime, gangs, and civic engagement, and attitudes towards legal/non-violent and illegal/violent activism. Interviews were conducted with Somali-Americans aged 18-30 in the following 5 communities:

- Boston, MA (n = 120)
- Lewiston, ME (n = 71)
- Portland, ME (n = 41)
- Minneapolis, MN (n = 115)
- Toronto, Canada (n = 118)

### Boston

Somali refugees are among the largest immigrant groups to resettle in the Boston area. There are approximately 10,000 Somalis in Boston. Study participants in Boston had lived in the U.S. about 11 years, and 71% of participants were in school at the time of the first interview.

### Lewiston

Approximately 5,000 Somali refugees live in Lewiston, representing about 14% of the population and one of the highest concentrations of Somalis in the U.S. Lewiston has a notably high proportion of Somali Bantus (about ¼ of the Somalis in Lewiston are Bantu), a minority ethnic group that has a history of being marginalized in Somalia.

### Portland

Approximately 1,000 Somali refugees live in Portland. Study participants in Portland had lived in the U.S. an average of 10 years, and 84% were in school at the time of the first interview.

### Minneapolis

Minneapolis is home to the largest Somali population in the U.S. Currently, approximately 15,000 Somalis represent about 4% of the city's total population. At the time of the first interview, study participants in Minneapolis had lived in the U.S. for an average of 13 years, and 50% of participants were currently in school.

### Toronto

Toronto has the largest Somali population in North America. Approximately 80,000 Somalis live in Toronto, which represents 3% of the overall population. Participants in Toronto had lived in Canada for an average of 17 years, the longest across our study sites, and 64% of study participants in Toronto were in school at the time of the first interview.

**Interactions with Society: The experience of discrimination**

Participants reported experiencing high levels of daily discrimination across all communities, especially in Minneapolis and Toronto, notably the two sites with the largest of Somali population in North America. Ninety-one percent of participants in our sample reported experiencing some level of discrimination on a daily basis. The main reasons participants believed they experienced discrimination were their religion (23%) and/or their ethnicity (20%). Table 1 shares the most frequently endorsed experiences of discrimination by participants.

Table 1. Frequently endorsed experiences of discrimination.

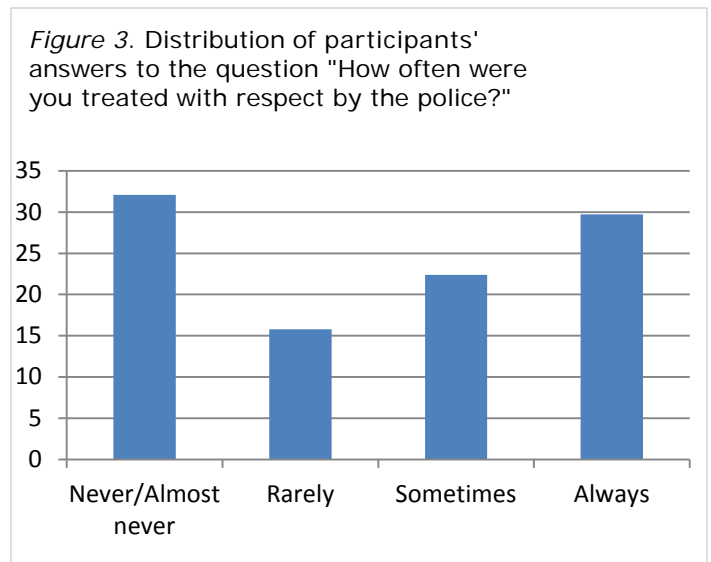
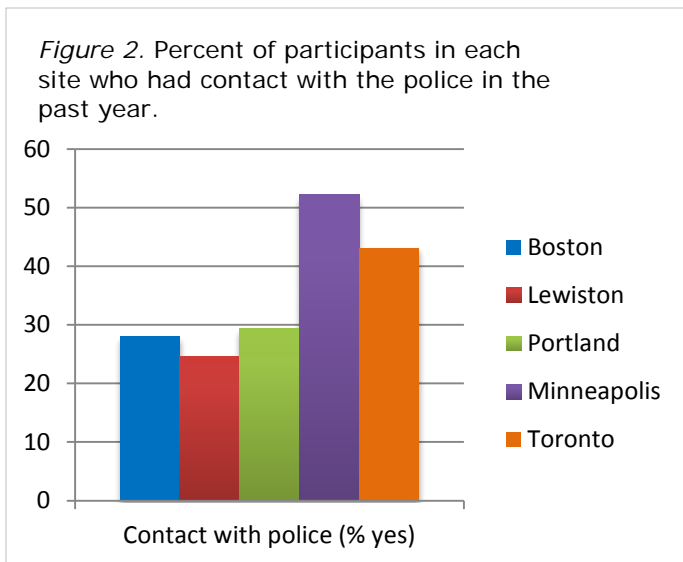
Subscale	Individual item	% of participants who endorsed item
Daily discrimination	Other people thinking they are better than you are	81%
	Being treated with less courtesy than other people	74%
	Other people thinking you are not smart	69%
Major life events	Being unfairly stopped, searched or questioned by police	45%
	Being unfairly not hired for a job	30%
	Being unfairly denied a promotion	19%

Taken together, these data suggest that many **Somali youth resettled in North America perceive that they are treated unfairly both in small, daily interactions and also in relation to major life events.** The perception that Somalis are treated unfairly by society due to their religion and ethnicity is a major concern.

**Interactions with Law Enforcement: Contact and perception of treatment**

Across all communities, 38% of participants reported having had contact with local police in the past year. Rates of police contact were highest in Minneapolis and Toronto (Figure 2). Of those participants who had contact with police, only half felt they were treated with respect by the police sometimes or always (Figure 3).

Contact with the Federal Bureau of Intelligence (FBI) or with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)/Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) was reported to be relatively infrequent (4% of participants). Of the participants in the overall sample who had contact with the FBI, 38% said they



always felt respected, but almost as many—31%—reported feeling that they had never been treated with respect during these interactions. The main reason participants felt disrespected was because of their Muslim background. The following are examples of Somali-Americans describing why they feel they are disrespected:

*"I feel that I'm a target and they feel that I'm a threat." (Male, 18, Boston)*

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

The fact that approximately 1/3 of those who have been in contact with the FBI or RCMP/CSIS had negative experiences raises concern; strong partnerships between community and law enforcement agencies are needed to counter violence and promote safe communities.

### Discrimination and attitudes towards violent activism

Participants who reported experiencing more discrimination also tended to express greater levels of support for violent activism, as measured by a 4-item scale asking about the degree to which the participant could understand someone who engaged in various forms of violent or illegal activism<sup>2</sup>. Reducing discrimination and improving community-law enforcement relations may be important for early prevention efforts to decrease the likelihood that targeted recruitment by violent extremists would find a sympathetic response.

### Engaging with society

These reports of youth experiencing discrimination and feeling disrespected by law enforcement, however, are offset by many of those same youth reporting high levels of positive engagement with society. In our overall sample, positive civic engagement was common:

- 75.4% volunteered or participated in community service
- 62.4% mentored a younger community member
- 25.7% attended a peaceful demonstration or protest

These high levels of civic engagement indicate a strong willingness to participate constructively in society, and are a great strength of Somali communities resettled in North America.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITIES

**The Somali community resettled in North America is a central partner in countering violent extremism.** Supporting resettled Somali youth and fostering positive involvement in their communities is a critical part of this process.

- Foster ways for youth to feel and be a part of their communities (both the Somali community and the wider American/Canadian community). Let youth know that they are important partners in countering violence and building strong communities.
- Join the conversation about countering violent extremism; let law enforcement and policy makers know that the Somali community stands ready to be an equal partner in keeping our communities safe.

## RESEARCHERS AND CONTACT INFORMATION

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<sup>2</sup> Moskaleiko, S. & McCauley, C. (2009). Measuring political mobilization: The distinction between activism and radicalism. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 21, 239-260.