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**Foreign Fighters: Terrorist Recruitment and Countering  
Violent Extremism (CVE) Programs in Minneapolis-St. Paul**

*A Qualitative Field Study*

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Directorate

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## About the Report

The authors of this report are Dr. Erroll Southers, Director of Transition and Research Deployment and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Theme Leader, and Justin Hienz, Subject Matter Expert, both at the Department of Homeland Security National Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events (CREATE) at the University of Southern California. The report was supported by researcher Dr. Heather Rosoff and USC Sol Price School of Public Policy graduate students Christopher Fox, Corinna Jiang, Sandy Lo, and Young Park. Questions about this report should be directed to Erroll Southers at [southers@usc.edu](mailto:southers@usc.edu).

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## About CREATE

The National Center of Excellence for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events (CREATE) is an interdisciplinary national research center based at the University of Southern California. CREATE's mission is to improve national security through the development of advanced models and tools for the evaluation of the risks, costs and consequences of terrorism and to guide economically viable investments in homeland security. The Center serves national interests by providing tools and guidance to the Department of Homeland Security, as well as local, regional, and state decision-makers, for the prioritization of countermeasures to terrorism, identifying areas where investments are likely to be most effective, computing relative risks among potential terrorist events, and estimating the societal consequences of terrorism.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary .....	1
Introduction.....	2
Methodology .....	4
Minneapolis-St. Paul Somali Immigrant Community Context.....	6
Terrorist Recruitment in Minneapolis-St. Paul.....	12
Countering Violent Extremism Programs in Minneapolis .....	21
Conducting Fieldwork in an Immigrant Community.....	33
Conclusions.....	39
References.....	41

## Executive Summary

The threat of foreign fighter recruitment is greater today than it has ever been. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is proving lethally effective in drawing extremists from around the world to their ranks, and in the United States, ISIL is targeting the Somali-American community in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota.

There are more than 40,000 Somali-Americans and immigrants in Minnesota. This growing immigrant community is facing substantial challenges, including weak family structures, lack of education, racism and violent crime. In this mix of chronic community challenges, young people can be unsure of their personal identity, leaving them vulnerable to terrorist recruiters.

The research and fieldwork conducted for this study reveals an evident relationship between the Somali terrorist group al Shabaab and ISIL. Indeed, ISIL has appropriated the al Shabaab recruiting network, indicating some collaboration between the two groups and suggesting a future direct alliance between them.

The study also reveals that two common assumptions about foreign fighter recruitment do not consistently apply in Minneapolis-St. Paul. First, it has been suggested that poverty and a lack of social mobility are primary causes for radicalization and departure. In the Twin Cities, this is untrue. The second assumption is that social media is ISIL's primary method of recruitment; in the Twin Cities, recruitment was reported to always include face-to-face interaction with a recruiter. Social media enhances recruitment but is not necessarily the primary tool for it.

There are several programs in the Twin Cities that are positively influencing the lives of young people. At the same time, there are numerous organizations that secure government funding but do not achieve any measurable impact on the threat from terrorist recruiters, nor do they reduce community crime and related concerns. These organizations are exceedingly effective in passing government reviews, making it difficult to validate which programs are having a real impact based on a clearly articulated strategy. Included in this study are the community's recommendations for what is needed to address challenges and halt the threat from terrorist recruiters.

During fieldwork, the report authors identified several best practices for conducting research in an immigrant community. These practices allowed the report authors to rapidly gain trust, build relationships and gather unprecedented insight into the Somali-American community in Minneapolis-St. Paul.

We are proud to present this important study and contribute to the national effort to protect our nation, our young people and reduce the risk of recruitment to ISIL's deadly ideology.

## Introduction

The emergence of the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL) presents a new and dangerous threat to regional stability and global security. ISIL has proven successful in luring young people to its ranks with polished propaganda, sophisticated online messaging and an increasingly complex network of terrorist group alliances. Thousands of young people from around the world have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIL's campaign to establish a caliphate in the Middle East, committing atrocities with a vicious inhumanity that has left the world both horrified and resolved to stem this growing threat.

One important component of this effort is halting the flow of foreign fighters to ISIL's ranks. There are an estimated 100 Americans<sup>1</sup> currently fighting with ISIL, and some of these individuals came from the Somali community in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota. Unfortunately, the phenomenon of foreign fighter recruitment is not new to the Twin Cities. For years, the Somali al Qaeda affiliate al Shabaab has preyed upon the Somali immigrant community in Minnesota, luring young people with a message of nationalism and ultra-strict, violent religious belief.

Given a variety of factors (including community awareness and rejection of violent extremism), al Shabaab recruiting steadily declined since its peak in 2008-2009. In 2014, however, foreign fighter recruiting and departure increased dramatically, except now, young people are traveling to Syria. The question that prompted this study was: *what is the cause of this sudden increase in Somali foreign fighters and the abrupt shift in destination?* After months of research, fieldwork and community interviews, this report presents an answer.

ISIL's recruiting strategy in Minnesota leverages a collage of demographic factors, religious ideas, identity uncertainty, ineffective application of government funding, and the challenges all immigrant communities face when assimilating to a new society. Within this complex web of cultural, economic, sociological, religious and civic elements, there are clear correlations revealing why ISIL has been successful in recruiting foreign fighters, and more importantly, what can be done to frustrate the group's efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s," *International Centre for the Study of Radicalization*, January 26, 2015.

This study also reviews the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiatives in Minneapolis-St. Paul. There are individuals and organizations developing innovative, community-led methods for stemming recruitment and addressing community needs. Unfortunately, other ineffective (and often unscrupulous) organizations in Minneapolis-St. Paul are highly effective at securing government funding without following through on the efforts for which the funding was given. Study findings suggest that local, state, and federal monies and support are going to the wrong groups. Thus, the challenge of reducing and stopping recruitment in the Twin Cities is not just a result of increased ISIL activity but also a lack of *effective* programs available to counter it.

Despite these substantial challenges, solutions are available. The threat from ISIL can be overcome. Engaging with the community, more strategically applying funding, and empowering families and young people to resist predatory recruitment efforts will have an impact on ISIL's efforts. Presented here are the research, data, fieldwork findings, and community recommendations that collectively reveal important insights for the ongoing effort to, in the words of President Obama, "degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL."

## Methodology

The report authors spent 10 days in Minneapolis-St. Paul over the course of three visits. During these visits, the report authors spoke with more than 30 sources, conducting 20 structured interviews, as well as 10 unstructured interviews. The report authors also spent substantial time within the Somali-American community, visiting areas and establishments with a largely Somali demographic and engaging in impromptu conversations with a diverse cross-section of community members.

The study was submitted to University of Southern California's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for an exempt status review. Exempt review indicates that the research involves the use of educational tests that (1) do not collect identifier information from participants, and (2) do not collect any information that would put the participant at risk. The study was approved for exemption in February 2015.

In line with the IRB exempt status, sources' identifier information was not collected. Each source was assigned a number, and the only identifying characteristics that were recorded were the sources' age and gender. Structured interviews were digitally recorded with the sources' permission.<sup>2</sup> The audio from these interviews was transcribed, yielding 440 pages of transcripts and hundreds of pages of handwritten notes.

This study used a grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis, which is designed to assess intensive field research with qualitative data.<sup>3</sup> This research uses an iterative analysis strategy that codes patterns in qualitative data to describe categories and typologies, leading to the creation of various model outputs. In this study, the researchers used MAXQDA 11 software to manage the large amounts of interview transcript data through the application of grounded theory methods.

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<sup>2</sup> Only one source declined to be recorded.

<sup>3</sup> See, K. Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (London: Sage, 2006); M.Q. Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002); and, A. Strauss and J. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007).

The data analysis began with a complete reading of interview transcripts by the research team. The initial reading produced a set of categories that corresponded with the initial set of research questions: *why is foreign fighter recruitment occurring and what programs are proving effective in halting it?* In addition, categories were developed from the experiential items shared by the interviewees during interview discussions. The complete set of categories contributed to the development of a coding scheme with a total of 73 codes. As a result of source demographic and identifier information not being collected, the moderating effects of these factors were not explored in this study.

A critical component of the analysis process was the establishment of intercoder reliability. Multiple reviewers were involved in assessing the 73 codes. The percent agreement between reviewers was calculated and adjustments made (primarily through consensus changes) until all coders achieved 85% agreement. The coders also met to discuss emerging topics, resolve challenges, and to refine coding strategies by consensus to ensure optimality. Finally, through pattern coding, the analysis formed typologies (e.g., of different types of community program validation) and delineated the components of the models developed in this study. The findings were reviewed by the entire team to allow for discussion of potential additional analyses, to check for contrary evidence, and to ultimately lay the groundwork for reporting.

Concurrent with fieldwork and content analysis, researchers conducted a literature review of academic and media sources examining the Somali-American community in Minnesota and the threat of radicalization and recruitment. Information from this research effort is paired with the fieldwork findings and qualitative data analysis, yielding a multifaceted picture of the foreign fighter recruitment activity in the Twin Cities and how community stakeholders are responding.

## Minneapolis-St. Paul Somali Immigrant Community Context

In 2013, Minnesota was home to 38,873 Somali immigrants and Somali-Americans, the largest Somali population in the United States, according to the 2013 American Community Survey.<sup>4</sup> This number has grown since then, and in any case is artificially small because, as sources indicated, many Somali immigrants (particularly those recently arrived from abroad) fear that responding to census questions and engaging any government initiative could put their legal status and personal wellbeing in jeopardy. This is a consequence of emigrating from a background where government services and law enforcement have engaged in aggressive, sometimes inhumane treatment of its civilians, as well as a misunderstanding of how the U.S. government system works and the civil rights and liberties guaranteed to every citizen and resident of the United States.

More specifically, Riverside Plaza, a public and affordable housing complex in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, is often the first place of residence for a new Somali immigrant. While the number of Plaza residents is around 4,000 individuals (the building capacity), community members and law enforcement estimated that the actual number of residents is closer to 10,000. Thus, the current overall number of Somalis living in Minnesota is unknown.

Nearly 56% of Somalis living in Minnesota are 24 years old or younger, with the median age being 21.3 years old. Nationwide, 57.3% of Somalis are 24 years old or younger, with a median age of 21.2 years old.<sup>5</sup> Troublingly, for the foreign fighters investigated for this study, the average age at the first instance of extremist activity was 22.73 years old.

Of Somali households in Minnesota, 34.6% are single parent, with an average family size of 4.37 people. For Somali-Americans in Minnesota younger than 25, 39% do not have a high school diploma. And of the state's 16-and-older age cohort, 31.9% of the Minnesota Somali population is not part of the state's labor force, yielding a 55.1% poverty rate for Minnesota Somali-Americans and immigrants, 3.5 times greater than the overall U.S. population.

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “2013 American Community Survey of Somalis 3-yr Estimate,” U.S. Department of Commerce, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Nearly 60% of the Twin Cities Somali population was born in the United States, significantly more than the nationwide percentage, where only 37.29% are born in the United States. Thus, there are upwards of 20,000 Minnesota Somalis under the age of 25 who encounter substantial social and economic challenges, though, as shown in this report, poverty is less pertinent to recruitment vulnerability than other factors impacting the community. Young Somali-Americans seek to overcome these challenges in the face of targeted, sophisticated and ongoing recruitment efforts by terrorist organizations.

The densest Somali communities in Minnesota are in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood in south Minneapolis (also called the “West Bank”) and the University Avenue area between Rice and Hamline Streets in St. Paul.<sup>6</sup> There are also other sizable Somali communities throughout the greater Minneapolis-St. Paul area. While Cedar-Riverside is commonly a first stop for new Somali immigrants, sources reported that the goal for many residents is not to remain in the neighborhood but to establish themselves in their new society and move on to other areas in Minnesota. This is in part because the Cedar-Riverside area has historically been impoverished with significant crime rates. One source noted an occasion when a charitable organization began distributing second-hand clothes in the Cedar-Riverside area. West Bank residents lined up to receive the donations, leading one to comment, “It’s like we’re still in the refugee camp.”

### *Immigration to the United States*

All sources for this report were originally born in Somalia or a neighboring country harboring Somali refugees. A first wave of immigration commenced in the 1990s and at the turn of the century, as famine and warfare pushed more Somalis into refugee camps in neighboring countries. Most sources for this report immigrated during this time period, 80% first immigrating to a city other than Minneapolis-St. Paul, including Atlanta, Louisville, Los Angeles, New York City, San Diego, Seattle, and northern Virginia cities.

Sources reported that during this first wave of immigration, the Twin Cities offered a wealth of jobs in the cities’ manufacturing and food industries, as well as a perceived absence of racial and ethnic prejudice that some sources experienced in other U.S. cities. The local and state government and religious institutions also offer important social programs and benefits. Today, sources reported that the draw to Minneapolis-St. Paul is less about employment opportunity and social services than it is about a cultural and familial infrastructure built over years of immigration.

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<sup>6</sup> Fartun Dirie, “Mental Maps: Gaining Insight into the Diverse Somali Perceptions of Residential Desirability in the Twin Cities,” *Midwestern Undergraduate Geography Symposium, Macalester College*, April 27, 2013.

There is currently a second wave of Somali immigrants arriving in the United States. In 2014, 1,050 Somali immigrants arrived in Minnesota (nationwide, 9,000). The growing Somali immigrant population is yielding a corresponding increase in the social needs of the Minneapolis-St. Paul community. For example, Somali student enrollment in the Minneapolis School District has increased 70% since 2011, and Somali use of Minnesota food assistance has doubled in the last five years.<sup>7</sup>

Ongoing immigration also continues a trend of clan allegiances being transplanted to the United States. The Minnesota Somali community is made up of numerous confederations of *qabil*, or clans, the most prevalent being the Darod, Dir, Hawiye and Isaaq. These groups are composed of sub-clans, with lineage that can often be traced back hundreds of years. While these clan affiliations were central to the civil war that long-ravaged Somalia, in Minnesota, sources described clans as a form of insurance. For example, if a clan member were in a car accident but could not afford to pay the damages, clan members may contribute money to satisfy the debt or need.

This traditional form of community support does sometimes conflict with U.S. laws. As it was related to the report authors, a challenge for law enforcement is that clans often resolve conflict internally rather than turning to the U.S. justice system. Law enforcement sources discussed violent crimes, including homicide, within the Somali community that are resolved through *xeer*, a traditional method of conflict resolution driven by clan elders. In a case of violent conflict (such as a shooting), a clan may pay “blood money” as reparation for the violence. Once a clan-to-clan agreement has been reached, clan members are forbidden from discussing the crime with officials. This is a source of frustration for local law enforcement, as it leaves murders and other crimes unsolved for want of witnesses, sometimes including the victim themselves.<sup>8</sup>

Immigration inherently challenges one’s identity, forcing one to reconcile “old world” tradition and culture with the social, ethical, legal and economic realities of a new country. While there are many differences between Somali and American culture, these do not necessarily prohibit evident patriotism and a deep appreciation for the United States’ guaranteed freedoms and readiness to accept refugees fleeing war and famine. Structured interviews yielded 119 positive statements about the United States, including sentiments about freedom, safety and the rule of

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<sup>7</sup> Mila Koumpilova, "New Somali Refugee Arrivals in Minnesota Are Increasing," *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, Nov. 1, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> One law enforcement source described an instance where a shooting victim lied under oath rather than identify the defendant as his attacker. In that case, the jury saw through the victim’s false testimony and found the defendant guilty. This was described as an exception rather than the norm for violent crime within the Somali community.

law. Yet, there were negative sentiments about the Somali immigrant experience, including challenges to assimilation, racial tensions and a distrust of authority (notably, the FBI). There were also repeated references to a perceived sense of American animosity towards Islam, often in reference to airport screening.

### *Religion in the Minneapolis-St. Paul Somali Community*

Islamic belief and tradition permeate every aspect of Somali society, guiding dress, relationships, education, diet, recreation, and a host of factors that make Somali society unique. Islam has a long history in Somalia. Historically, Islamic belief in Somalia was of the Sufi variety, which is a mystical interpretation of Islam that employs repetitive sayings and other devotional actions (*dhikr*) to reach a greater insight, connection, and worship of Allah. These longstanding religious traditions have changed in the face of regional and global conflict, and a brief review of Somali political history reveals how civil war and famine has impacted the country's religious landscape.

For the last century, Somalia has been a battleground for competing geopolitical interests. Colonialism and two world wars brought modern weaponry to the country, and in 1969, the military dictator General Mohamed Barre took power in a bloodless coup d'état.<sup>9</sup> As Barre revealed his dictatorial approach to rule, he formed the Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party, aligning the country with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Barre nationalized industries, forbade clanism (even as he favored his own clan), and sought to supplant local and genealogical allegiance with loyalty to the state. Barre's totalitarian regime and the violence it wrought prompted Somalis to begin leaving the country, a trend that would only increase in the decades ahead.

Barre invaded neighboring Ethiopia in 1977, and the Soviet Union sided with the communist regime in Ethiopia. Barre changed his allegiance to the United States, making Somalia an even more violent Cold War proxy battle, injecting substantial amounts of weapons into the country. When the Cold War ended and western aid evaporated, Somali government and society, plagued by decades of conflict, collapsed. Barre was forced from power in a coup and clan-based warfare erupted around the heavily armed country.

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<sup>9</sup> Jama Mohamed Ghalib, *The Cost of Dictatorship: The Somali Experience* (New York: Lilian Barber Press, 1995).

In 1991 and 1992, 25,000 people were killed in the capital city of Mogadishu, with 1.5 million people fleeing to neighboring countries and another 2 million people displaced internally.<sup>10</sup> Widespread, persistent fighting and the breakdown of a centralized government authority contributed to famine that struck Somalia in the 1990s. While many Somali refugees have received residency and citizenship in other countries, and some have returned home, the United Nations Human Rights Council reports that there remain nearly 1 million Somali refugees, most harbored in Kenya, Ethiopia and Yemen, with smaller numbers in Uganda, Djibouti, Egypt and other nearby countries.

With clan structures deteriorating, elders and religious leaders killed in fighting, and the evaporation of longstanding social structures, a window of opportunity emerged for Islamic influence from other Muslim-majority countries, notably, the Wahhabist Saudi Arabia. Factions of Sunni Islam began to grow and influence the ravaged Somali society, one of these being Salafism. A segment of Sunni Islam, Salafism calls for a strict interpretation of religious literature, absolute adherence to Islamic law (*shari'a*) and an overall return to the theocracy reflected in writings about seventh- and eighth-century Muslim society. Indeed, in Arabic, *salaf* means “ancient one,” a reference to the first followers of the Prophet. This form of Islamic belief cannot accommodate the culture- and tradition-based, exploratory religious practice that is Somali Sufism. This is one reason why, even today, the Salafi-grounded al Shabaab systematically destroys Sufi shrines and other traditional religious infrastructure that deviates from the unforgiving Salafi theology.

Today, Sunni Islam is the dominant Islamic interpretation in the Minnesota Somali community. Only one source noted an awareness and understanding of Sufi belief and practice. This limited reference to Sufism in Minneapolis-St. Paul is perhaps less a reflection of religious preference than it is a consequence of civil war that has left many learned religious leaders and elders dead, unable to pass on their religious knowledge.

There are more than 20 mosques in the greater Minneapolis-St. Paul area. These mosques are not exclusively attended by Somali-Americans, though some congregations are predominantly Somali. Mosques and other Islamic centers are the locations for daily prayer, but there are also religious study groups and functions for a Muslim community. For example, Minneapolis-St. Paul is home to several Somali Islamic schools (*dugisis*), which simultaneously offer a Western academic curriculum and teachings drawn from Somali culture and tradition. Overall, sources

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Bradbury and Sally Healy, “Endless War: A Brief History of the Somali Conflict,” *Whose peace is it anyway? Connecting Somali and International Peacemaking*, 2010.

indicated there are a plethora of opportunities in Minneapolis-St. Paul for a Muslim to garner religious knowledge and guidance, including Sufism.

#### *Al Shabaab in Minnesota*

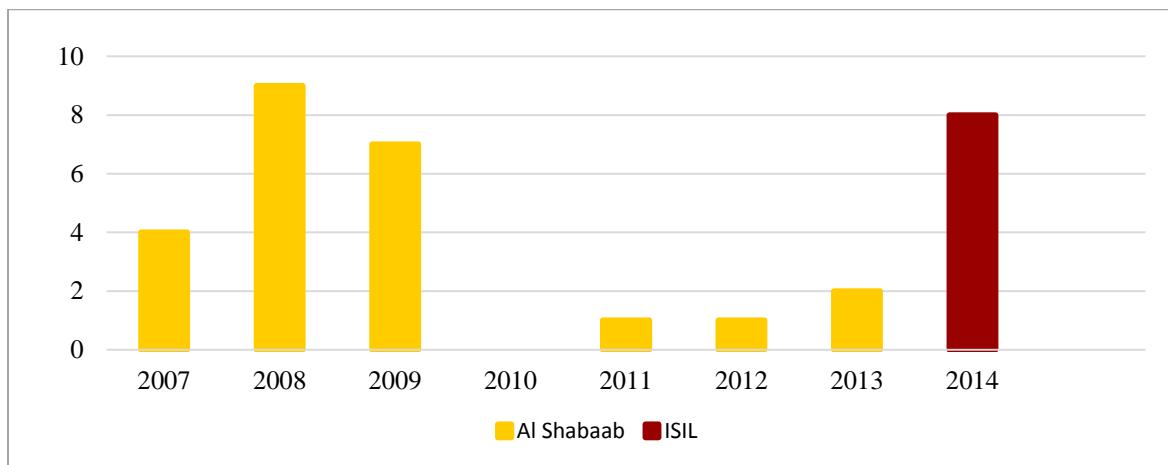
In 2008, al Shabaab seized control of the Somali capital, Mogadishu, and the southern half of the country. Following an extremist Salafi theological interpretation, al Shabaab (Arabic, meaning “the youth”) initially garnered support among the Somali diaspora because they claimed to represent an Islamic nationalistic movement opposed to the interventions of neighboring countries and seeking to rebuild a nation. For a people lamenting the destruction of their motherland, elements of al Shabaab’s message resonated worldwide. While only during unrecorded, unstructured interviews, multiple sources said that they initially supported al Shabaab because they believed they were pursuing a reconstruction of a failed state.

After al Shabaab began aggressively recruiting Somali immigrants in Minneapolis-St. Paul, the community perception of the terrorist group began to change. Somalis who joined the group relayed stories of the atrocities they saw al Shabaab commit. Sources reported stories of young people who attempted to leave al Shabaab and return to their families in the United States but were executed by al Shabaab before that was possible. Word spread that the group was not the nationalistic movement it claimed to be, and one primary reason al Shabaab recruiting decreased after 2009 was that the community became more aware of al Shabaab’s true, terrorist nature and rejected it.

Today, recruiters are again pulling young Somali immigrants to foreign terrorist groups, except now, young people are traveling to Syria.

## Terrorist Recruitment in Minneapolis-St. Paul

Since 2014, numerous Minneapolis Somali residents have left the United States to travel to Syria to join ISIL. This is an abrupt shift in destination, as previous departing residents went to Somalia to join al Shabaab. Clearly, something changed, not the people vulnerable to recruitment but the benefactors of the recruiters. Presented here are details of recent foreign fighter recruitment efforts that resulted in Somali-Americans joining or attempting to join ISIL and what it reveals about the risk of terrorist recruitment in Minneapolis.



**Figure 1 - Foreign Fighter Departures**

### *Cases of Recruitment and Departure*

In November 2014, we conducted an interview with the family of a young woman who surreptitiously fled to Syria. The family described a jubilant, sociable, articulate person. Recently graduated from high school, the 19-year-old told family she wanted to become a nurse and planned to register for college in January 2015. She had shown no interest in marriage, though it would not be uncommon for her to marry at that age.

In mid-2014, she became involved with a young man and changed her place of worship. Meanwhile, her family noticed a distinct shift in her manner and social interaction. Her mother said that she stopped speaking to friends and acquaintances. She spent much of her time alone in her room, reading the Qur'an, and she reportedly said she wanted to live in an Islamic country and desired more Islamic education.

On a Friday, she told family she was going to a friend's bridal shower and called later to say she would be spending the night away from home, returning on Saturday. On Sunday, she sent a text message to her mother, saying that she was in Syria.

The story of this young woman closely mirrors that of other young people who have journeyed to join ISIL. In February 2015, London teenagers Amira Abase, Shamima Begum and Kadiza Sultana traveled to Syria via Istanbul to join ISIL. Abase's excuse to her father for leaving was that she was going to a wedding, a curious (if not suggestive) similarity to the excuse offered by the young Somali woman.<sup>11</sup>

Another example is that of Abdi Nur, who left Minneapolis in May 2014 to join ISIL in Raqqa, the so-called capital of the Islamic State. Nur was attending community college with aspirations of studying law before he became more religious and began proclaiming extremist, pro-ISIL statements.<sup>12</sup>

One might assume that a newfound, strict religious belief is a warning sign that a young Muslim is on a path towards extremism and vulnerability to recruitment; however, in an Islamic family or social group, increased religious activity is not necessarily seen in a negative light. The young Somali woman's family characterized themselves as religious, able to recite the Qur'an from memory. Her increased religious activity was not a troubling sign but a fuller embrace of the family's beliefs, which, from the family's perspective, was inherently good, as it would be for any family holding religion as a core value.

This is one of the principal challenges of empowering families and communities to recognize and disrupt the radicalization and recruitment process. At what point does increased religious activity cross a line from a healthy embrace of belief to a negative, extreme interpretation of religious tenets? It is because of this uncertainty that families may not initially see their young people progressing through the radicalization pathway. Terrorist recruiters can capitalize on this to place an extreme worldview on their targets' developing beliefs. One example is that of Amir Meshal.

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<sup>11</sup> Holly Yan and Nima Elbagir, "Authorities Scramble to Find Teen Girls Before They Join ISIS," *CNN*, Feb. 23, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Scott Shane, "From Minneapolis to ISIS: An American's Path to Jihad," *The New York Times*, March 21, 2015.

Amir Meshal is an American of Egyptian descent, originally from New Jersey. In 2014, he began frequenting Minnesota mosques. Leaders of the Al-Farooq Youth and Family Center in Bloomington, a suburb of Minneapolis-St. Paul, filed a no-trespass order against Meshal, citing concerns about his interaction with the community's Muslim youth.<sup>13</sup> Not long after, religious leaders at the Al-Tawba mosque in Eden Prairie called police when a worshipper relayed that Meshal, who was attending, made extremist statements contrary to the imam's lecture.<sup>14</sup> Meshal has not been seen in Minnesota since.

One source for this report was intimately familiar with the story of Meshal, as he is commonly asked to help Twin Cities Somali families facing legal problems (including terrorism charges). The source narrated what he had gathered about Meshal's radicalization and recruitment process, having spoken directly with the young people who met with Meshal.

The process was described to take place over several months. It began with an offer from Meshal to a Somali young man for a free haircut or a free lunch. In an impoverished community with a background of extreme need, such an offer is not flippant. This evolved into a group of four young men meeting weekly to discuss Islam. They deliberately avoided meeting at mosques or in a religious setting. Instead, they met somewhere different each week, sometimes at the family homes of the young men, with family members looking on. There was no obvious reason for concern at first, as the meetings were benign, simply opportunities to discuss the tenets of Islam with young people.

As the conversation shifted from beliefs and practice to the role of jihad in a Muslim's life, the four young men were instructed not to tell anyone about their meetings, enhancing the relationship and trust between members of the group via the element of confidentiality. Meshal talked about how jihad has been used in the past, in the time of the Prophet and in the growth of the faith afterwards. Having carefully brought his students to a *cognitive opening*, a point at which one can accept and internalize violent extremist ideas, Meshal asked the question, "Looking at the world today, is there a need for jihad?" To be sure, he constructed a view of the world where his recruits would answer in the affirmative.

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<sup>13</sup> Paul McEnroe and Allie Shah, "Federal Grand Jury Targets Local Terrorist Pipeline," *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, Sept. 20, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Laura Yuen, "Suspicions, Speculation Grow as FBI's Minn. Terror Probe Churns," *MPR News*, Nov. 13, 2014.

This radicalization process ended with direction for Meshal's recruits to travel to Syria. In July, the FBI stopped an 18-year-old man before he boarded a plane for Istanbul, Turkey. He was destined for Syria, and press reports state that during interrogation, the man identified Meshal as his recruiter.<sup>15</sup>

Reports of how many people have departed the Twin Cities to join ISIL often conflict and lack specificity. What is more, due to the open-source nature of this study, there are limits on the kinds of information the report authors accessed during research; publically available FBI figures are often vague and not easily aggregated. That said, the report authors confirmed that at least eight Somali-Americans have left Minneapolis for Syria since the end of 2013, and there are others who have left who have not been reported to authorities (according to sources). Meshal was identified and rejected by the community but not before he radicalized at least one Minneapolis resident. Logic, as well as source statements, suggests there are more recruiters in the community.

#### *Collaboration between Al Shabaab and ISIL*

Some sources for this report said they were confused by Twin Cities Somali youths traveling to Syria. Al Shabaab's recruiting message had been based on nationalism and genealogy, as well as religion, and multiple sources said they could understand the enduring desire to see their mother country stabilize and improve, even as they disagreed with the extremist interpretation of Islam that al Shabaab espouses. In Syria, however, that nationalistic zeal does not apply, meaning recruiters are attracting young people not based on their country of origin but by appealing to the notion of a global Muslim community and ISIL's vision of a caliphate and apocalypse.<sup>16</sup>

Sources reported that the recruiters who sent young people to Somalia are the same recruiters now sending young people to Syria. One Cedar-Riverside source, who has known several young people who departed the United States to join a terrorist group, said: "*A kid who left [for Somalia] sent a text message to say the new order is to go to Syria. They are using old friends as the messengers.*"

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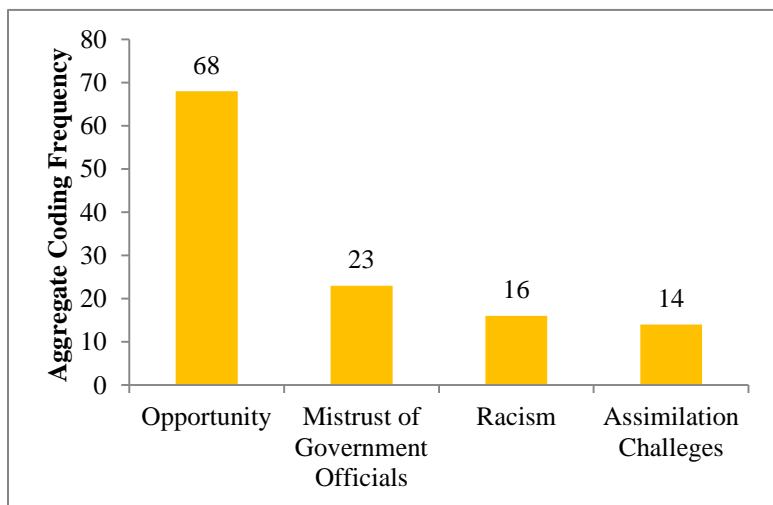
<sup>15</sup> Tom Lyden, "EXCLUSIVE: Man booted from Minn. mosque an ISIS recruiter or FBI mole?" *Fox 9 KMSP-TV*, Oct. 05, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Jessica Stern, "ISIS's Apocalyptic Vision," Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Feb. 25, 2015. *Also see,* Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015.

U.S. Attorney Andrew Luger concurred with our findings that ISIL has appropriated the al Shabaab recruiting network. What is not yet clear is the nature of the relationship between the two terrorist groups. There are reports that ISIL, via its media outlets, has offered a public invitation for al Shabaab to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State, in the same way that the Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram did in March 2015.<sup>17</sup> The message also encouraged Abu Ubaidah, the leader of al Shabaab in Somalia, to conduct attacks in neighboring countries. While circumstantial, the fact that al Shabaab recruiters are sending people to Syria and that al Shabaab recently attacked Garissa University in neighboring Kenya suggests that the Somali terror group is edging its way towards a direct alliance with ISIL.<sup>18</sup>

### *Immigration, Identity and Vulnerability*

The Somali diaspora following the civil war and famine has thrust a unique Islamic culture and tradition into secular societies. On the one hand, sources overwhelming spoke about the United States as a place of opportunity, and there is a deep appreciation for the refuge the United States offered Somalis fleeing their homeland. Yet, there is a significant mistrust of government at all levels, stemming from a perception that social benefits and support are not accessible to the Somali community in Minneapolis-St. Paul.



**Figure 2 – Somali-American Perceptions of the United States**

tension in the United States, experienced particularly by African Americans, is not one shared by Somalis, and immigration to the United States forces an amendment to one's identity to accommodate racism and xenophobia among the varied ethnic communities in the Twin Cities.

Sources expressed insult and anger that, due to their traditional dress and names, they receive undue scrutiny at airports and other public places. Frequent and reportedly invasive police and FBI activity has compounded a sense of opposition with government (broadly speaking). Beyond this, sources reported that the first time they encountered the phenomenon of race relations was when they arrived in the United States. The history of racial discrimination and

<sup>17</sup> Caroline Hellyer, "ISIL courts al-Shabab as al-Qaeda ties fade away," *al Jazeera*, Mar. 23, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> "Kenya attack: 147 dead in Garissa University assault," *BBC News*, Apr. 3, 2015.

These sentiments are encapsulated in a saying several sources offered: “I’ve got five strikes against me, and I just got here. I’m an immigrant. I’m East African. I’m Somali. I’m black. I’m Muslim.” Some female sources added a sixth strike, their gender.

Each of those points contributes to a shared sense of cultural isolation. In this mix of socio-economic challenges and culture clash, young people struggle to define their identity. A third of Minnesota Somali households are single-parent with children,<sup>19</sup> and while the children adopt English and begin to learn U.S. customs from school, the parents often remain isolated, lacking language skills and knowledge of public services. Young people are left to grapple with the inherent conflict between the lifestyle and worship taught by their elders and practiced at home and the secular, American culture they inevitably share by virtue of growing up in the United States. One source said: “There’s a lot of competing threats to a person’s sense of self-worth. And then, within that chaos of ‘who am I,’ it creates an opening for someone else to come in and kind of say, ‘This is who you are.’”

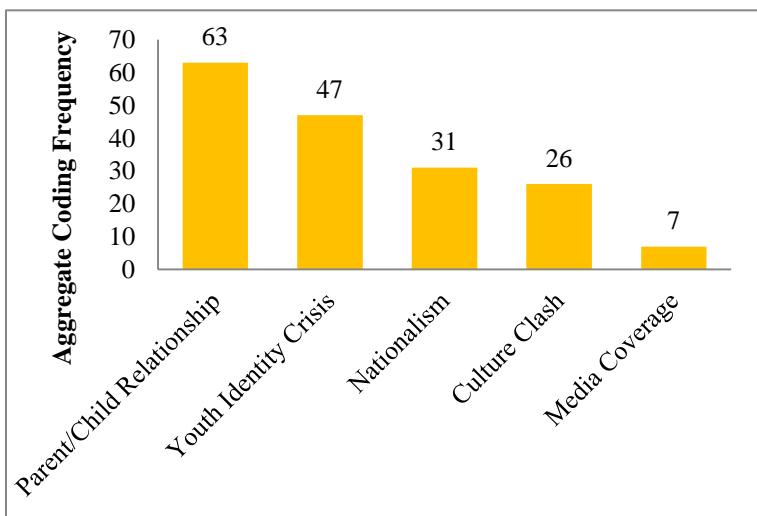
In this challenging environment, there can be a craving for structure and acceptance, one that is commonly found in America’s urban street gangs. Some young Somali men join Somali gangs, which *all* sources said present the greatest safety threat to the Minneapolis-St. Paul community. The Somali Outlaws and Madibon With Attitude (MWA), the two primary Somali gangs in Minneapolis-St. Paul, provide a social structure and identity compatible with U.S. culture (though not necessarily its laws). The Somali gang structure is not hierarchical like many U.S. and international urban gangs, though the groups do resemble American gangs in terms of fraternal structure. Seeking relationships and recognition they are unable to find at home, at school, and in the community, these young men are not unlike other ethnicities and nationalities that join gangs to replace critical social elements. In this regard, the attraction to gangs is universal, as they offer understanding and acceptance, becoming the members’ “real” family, the one they can always count on and who will never judge them.

Other young people, however, find structure in an increasingly rigid view of their faith, which may become incompatible with U.S. customs and laws. An increasingly absolute Muslim identity can be encouraged or exploited by a skilled recruiter. Studies show that immigrant adaptation to a new society is best achieved by embracing both an ethnic identity and the new national identity.<sup>20</sup> Foreign fighter recruiters strive to dispel the latter, disrupting an individual’s

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Census, “American Community Survey.”

<sup>20</sup> See, Jean Phinney, et al. "Ethnic Identity, Immigration, and Well-Being: An Interactional Perspective," *Journal of Social Issues*, 57, no. 3 (2001): 493-510; Francis Fukuyama, "Identity, Immigration, and Liberal Democracy,"

opportunity to assimilate and embrace the benefits of their new country. Thus, young people in Minneapolis are vulnerable not simply because they have opportunity to congregate in unsupervised spaces but, more fundamentally, because they are young people in a complex environment with limited familial guidance, conflicted and developing identities, and predatory terrorist recruiters.



**Figure 3 - Risk Factors for Recruitment**

parental trust. The second most commonly mentioned risk factor was a youth identity crisis. The desire for structure and identity, coupled with a weak parent-child relationship, can make young people susceptible to a recruiter's message, particularly if they seek the approval of a surrogate family member (in the case of Amir Meshal) or a romantic interest (in the case of the aforementioned young woman). A nationalistic zeal<sup>21</sup> for rebuilding Somalia and immigrant cultural conflict, inflamed by sensationalistic media coverage of terrorist threats, may also make a young person susceptible to a compelling terrorist narrative that leverages these themes.

### *Correcting Assumptions*

There are two common assumptions made about extremist recruiting that our research revealed to be inaccurate in Minnesota. First, recruits from Minneapolis are not necessarily (or even primarily) lacking in opportunities for a successful future in the United States. Take the example

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*Journal of Democracy*, 17, no. 2 (2006): 5-20; and Salman Akhtar, *Immigration and Identity: Turmoil, Treatment, and Transformation* (Jason Aronson: 1999).

<sup>21</sup> This factor has been noted in studies of other communities and violent extremists, such as Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, who attacked the 2013 Boston Marathon. See, Masha Gessen, *The Brothers: The Road to an American Tragedy* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015), 73.

<sup>22</sup> Sources indicated this risk factor with regard to previous al Shabaab recruiting and not with ISIL.

To be sure, there is no single factor responsible for causing an individual to become a violent extremist. There is no terrorist profile, though there are risk variables. In source interviews, the most commonly mentioned risk factor for recruitment in the Somali community is the difficult relationship between parent and child.<sup>21</sup> Obstacles include language barriers between parent and child, long hours for working parents, and a child's abuse of

of Zakaria Maruf, relayed to us by one of his childhood friends who knew him before he left for Somalia in 2008.

Maruf was socially popular, athletic and succeeding in school. He was also affiliated with a Somali gang, which at the time called itself the “Somali Hot Boyz.”<sup>23</sup> After graduating from high school, Maruf separated from the gang and became increasingly religious, eventually becoming a teacher at a dugsi in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood. Maruf swapped his gang-centered social structure for one founded on an ultra-strict interpretation of Islam. Based on the findings from this study, it seems clear Maruf did not travel to Somalia because he was poverty-stricken and hopeless but because his identity, based on a narrow interpretation of Islamic beliefs and a vague sense of nationalism, required it of him. As Maruf himself said in a 2009 statement broadcast over a Somali radio station:

*“They want to make it appear as if the people who left or want to leave, those who migrated for the sake of Allah, were people who did not have a life, and they simply want to wrong their name. These are lies and propaganda. It is not possible to brainwash or coerce a conscious, grown man. And where we come from is not a place where people are coerced or brainwashed.”<sup>24</sup>*

The report authors did not find any direct link between Minnesota Somali gangs and terrorist recruitment, a view supported by law enforcement sources who monitor Somali gangs and engage the Somali-American community. A law enforcement gang officer said of gang members: *“They don’t want that structure of trying to join ISIS or al Shabaab where they have someone telling them what to do. They want to be out there on the block, doing whatever they want to do.”*

Sources said that some of the individuals recruited by terrorist organizations may have been rejected from gang membership and thus open to other social networks and beliefs. One source suggested recruiters target gang members, their message being that gang affiliation and action is sinful and the target should conform to Islamic morals; however, no other source mentioned this phenomenon and the report authors were unable to find any evidence of it.

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<sup>23</sup> Today, the gang calls itself the Somali Outlaws.

<sup>24</sup> “Radio Interview with Zakaria Maruf,” transcript, *The New York Times*, July 11, 2009.

The second inaccurate assumption is that social media has been the primary vehicle for ISIL recruitment efforts in the Twin Cities. In every incident reported during fieldwork, face-to-face interaction was a critical element of the recruitment process. Social media interaction and links to extremist online content reinforce the messages that recruiters offer in person. To be sure, digital communication plays a role in recruitment, but at least in the Somali community in Minneapolis-St. Paul, in-person interaction is irreplaceable.

There are chronic socio-economic challenges in Minneapolis-St. Paul among the Somali-American community. Even as terrorist recruiters hide in the population and seek vulnerable targets, the community is struggling with gang violence, poverty, racism, unemployment, and an ongoing need to assimilate to a new culture and country. While the challenges are great, there are a range of programs and organizations in Minnesota that are geared towards improving the welfare and quality of life of the Somali residents and countering the violent messages of ISIL and al Shabaab.

## Countering Violent Extremism Programs in Minneapolis

In the Twin Cities, growing in tandem with the threat from ISIL recruitment are multiple programs that seek to dispel terrorist narratives, engage young people, and improve community engagement and quality of life. As a part of its August 2011 Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategy, the Obama Administration’s “Strategic Implementation Plan (SIP) for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States” focuses on three primary objectives: enhancing federal CVE community engagement; cultivating public sector expertise in CVE; and countering extremist messaging.

This initiative resulted in the development of a CVE pilot program in Minneapolis, led by U.S. Attorney Andrew Luger. The pilot focuses on stemming recruitment efforts by cultivating and funding youth programs, job training, and expanded after-school programs intended to facilitate mentorship. Working with community representatives, the pilot takes a holistic approach to improving the welfare and support for Somali-American young people in Minnesota. The pilot is also the basis for community-led intervention programs, making it easier for families to request help from mental health professionals, religious leaders, teachers, and others if their children are suspected of associating with, or being recruited by, terrorist organizations. This creates a safe way for the community to address threats and concerns without drawing undue attention from law enforcement, which is a pervasive fear throughout the community.

This government-supported, community-based strategy exists alongside independent, grassroots CVE efforts in Minneapolis-St. Paul. There are currently two types of programs that may have an impact on the thinking and actions of young people in Minneapolis: CVE-focused organizations; and community-improvement-focused organizations. Efforts in each area are yielding important advances in how the Minneapolis-St. Paul Somali community nurtures its younger populations and guards against extremist recruitment.

### *CVE Organizations in Minneapolis-St. Paul*

Mohamed Ahmed is a husband and father, a manager at a convenience store, and the creator of *Average Mohamed*, a website ([averagemohamed.com](http://averagemohamed.com)) presenting counter-radicalization messaging geared towards young people (ages 8 to 16). The project uses cartoons to present Islamic messages that counter the radical ideology preached by ISIL, al Shabaab, and other terror groups, approaching youth in a media format with which they are familiar and interested. Ahmed collaborates with local religious leaders to craft the messages in a way that relays Islamic ideas

while dispelling ISIL's ideology. Ongoing for nearly a decade, the project has been entirely conceived, funded and managed by Ahmed. He said of his project:

*"It takes an idea to defeat an idea. Extremist ideology must be competed against. It only takes an average man to radicalize and recruit vulnerable young people, and it only takes an average man to offer a different, peaceful narrative. Average Mohamed is the answer to the ongoing efforts to mislead our children."*<sup>25</sup>

While Ahmed's efforts clearly align with the administration's SIP objectives, Ahmed and his project have no affiliation with government efforts, his work and successes existing outside the realm of government-driven initiatives. It is perhaps for this reason that Ahmed has been able to spread his message to the Minneapolis-St. Paul Somali youth without much community suspicion with regard to his motives, unlike other Minneapolis programs that the community widely believes to be pawns of Federal counterterrorism efforts.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, other studies have discovered that government sponsorship inevitably undermines the legitimacy of any program that counters extremist messaging from a theological perspective.<sup>27</sup>

The cost of developing and operating *Average Mohamed* is significant for Ahmed, and while he says funding would be welcome, the report authors found opportunities to advance his effort without direct monetary support. For example, Dr. Erroll Southers was asked to speak to CNN's *New Day* in January about U.S. CVE efforts.<sup>28</sup> By sharing a University of Southern California article (also written by the report authors) with CNN, we were able to secure a joint interview on *New Day* with Southers and Ahmed. We also worked with Ahmed in his media relations with other news outlets. Finally, as global public awareness of Ahmed's project grew, we worked with him to plan a growth strategy, discussing a project transition into a non-profit and connecting Ahmed with experts in that field to advise him. Ahmed founded a non-profit in April 2015, asking Southers and Hienz to serve on the board of directors.

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<sup>25</sup> "USC's CREATE Works with 'Average Mohamed,' a Grassroots Effort to Counter Foreign Fighters," *Sol Price School of Public Policy, University of Southern California*, Jan. 29, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Specifically, some members of the community indicated they see the CVE organization Ka Joog as working *for* the FBI, a product of the organization accepting an FBI award. Further research is needed to enumerate the degree to which this perception is held in the community. See, "Somali-American Ka Joog Organization Honored for Community Leadership," *FBI Minneapolis Press Release*, Oct. 25, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Todd C. Helmus, Erin York and Peter Chalk, "Promoting Online Voices for Countering Violent Extremism," RAND Corporation, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> New Day, "Group Works to Counter Radicalization," *CNN*, January 20, 2015  
<<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1501/20/nday.03.html>>.

There are other community-driven programs in Minneapolis that seek to prevent young people from embracing the extremist narrative. Examples include:

*The Islamic Civic Society of America (ICSA):* Based in Minneapolis, the ICSA strives to relay a view that Islamic tenets and civic principles in a democratic society are compatible. Importantly, given research findings on recruitment in Minneapolis, ICSA is focused on helping Muslims develop a personal identity that can safely accommodate both Islamic and secular principles. ICSA is affiliated with the Minneapolis Dar Al-Hijrah Mosque.

*Somali Citizens League:* A grassroots organization, the Somali Citizens League works with the Minneapolis community and law enforcement to advance the welfare of the local population through education, services and funding.

*Ka Joog* – A non-profit founded in 2007, the purpose of the organization is to provide “positive elements of education, mentorship, employment and the arts” to Somali youth in Minneapolis.<sup>29</sup> While the group is not only focused on preventing radicalization and recruitment, the genesis of Ka Joog can be traced to al Shabaab’s earlier success recruiting in the Twin Cities. The organization tracks academic grades, school attendance and “behavior changes,” while also working with parents. Data is collected every 90 days throughout a young person’s time in high school, and according to Executive Director Mohamed Farah, since 2007, no Ka Joog participants have been involved in recruitment or gangs. This is not proof of success, but it is “evidence of absence.”

#### *Minneapolis Law Enforcement and Community Engagement*

Multiple sources reported that the community relationship with local law enforcement has improved dramatically in recent years. One reason for this is a focused effort to hire Somali-Americans as sworn law enforcement officers and community liaisons. Somali-American police officers enforce the notion of community participation in public safety, and their work and insights profit local law enforcement a deeper cultural understanding of the communities they serve. This aligns with findings in previous research, indicating that when authorities are seen as

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<sup>29</sup> Mohamed Farah, "Press Conference Statement," *Somali Current*, Jan. 20, 2015.

legitimate, “their rules and decisions are more likely to be accepted. Community engagement is—in part—an effort to make law enforcement authority more accepted within localities.”<sup>30</sup>

In St. Paul, the city has created a council of Somali elders that advise the police department. The city’s Police Athletic League attracts hundreds of Somali young people, and the St. Paul Police Department has also hosted halal<sup>31</sup> cookouts.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) conducts ongoing programs to engage the community. The Somali Women and Women in Law Enforcement gatherings provide MPD an opportunity to interact directly with the mothers and other relatives of young people, building relationships that could lead to closer collaboration between law enforcement and the community when it comes to preventing radicalization and recruitment. An existing relationship increases the likelihood that a parent or other community member will report troubling changes in behavior and belief, or worse, a departure to join a foreign terrorist group. Al Shabaab has intimidated members of the community into silence, warning that if family members speak to authorities, they will never see their child again. For a parent, the smallest glimmer of hope that a child will come home is more palatable than any benefit that might be gained by working with authorities.

The MPD also operates a Youth Safety Camp where one primary goal is to engage Somali youth and create an environment where they can interact with the other community cultures in Minneapolis. This program is offered for middle school students so that when they reach high school, they have formed cross-cultural friendships, thus reducing the risk of culture-based conflict. The MPD is also planning to launch a new program, Conversations with Cops in Coffee Shops. With this program, police officers will frequent cafes where Somali-Americans congregate, particularly the Starbucks on Nicollet Ave. and Franklin St. in Minneapolis, where the clientele is largely Somali men from the community.<sup>33</sup> The goal is to increase communication with the Somali community and offer regular opportunities for citizens to have positive interactions with MPD.

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<sup>30</sup> Jerome P Bjelopera, "Countering Violent Extremism in the United States," *Congressional Research Service*, Feb. 19, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Food that is prepared in accordance with Islamic rules.

<sup>32</sup> Executive Staff, FBI National Security Branch, "A New Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Sharing Expertise and Empowering Local Communities," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, October 2014.

<sup>33</sup> The report authors found that the patrons of this establishment can be an excellent source of information regarding the landscape of the community and its concerns.

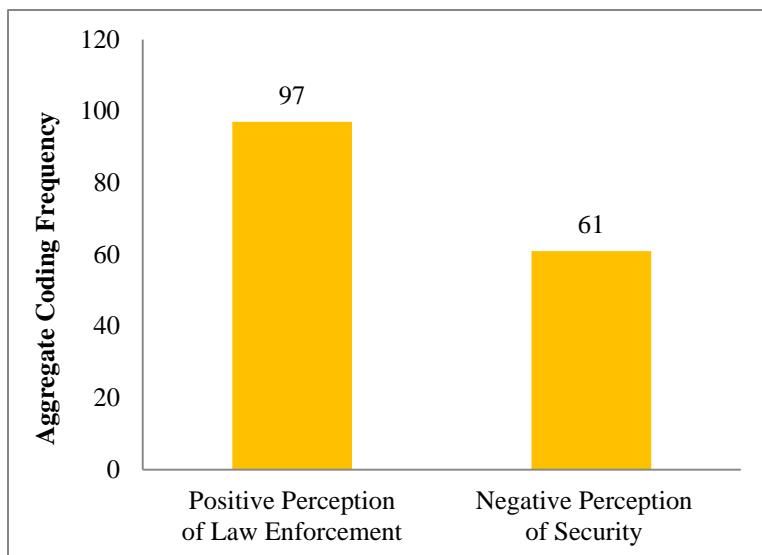


Figure 4 - Perceptions of Law Enforcement

These efforts by local police to engage the community are having an important, positive effect on perceptions of local law enforcement. In interviews, there were 97 instances of a positive perception of law enforcement, and of these, 66% were specifically in reference to MPD, the department's value, and how their presence in the community is yielding positive outcomes. This positive view leads to greater trust between the community and law enforcement, which can yield more effective collaboration in addressing community concerns and identifying bad actors in Minneapolis-St. Paul. Even as the community-police relationship is improving, there remains a reticence to proactively inform police about a case of radicalization and recruitment. During the first meeting with a community engagement officer in Minneapolis, the report authors were told, “You found out more in two days than I’ve found out in two years.”

While local police efforts have improved relationships, the community’s positive sentiment towards law enforcement does not extend to the federal level. There were 61 instances of a negative perception of law enforcement, and 65.5% were specifically in reference to the FBI. The Bureau has been working with local law enforcement to engage the community; for example, attending community meetings and participating in Somali Independence Day celebrations.<sup>34</sup> Yet, the FBI remains in a perceived adversarial role vis-à-vis the Somali-American community in the Twin Cities.

#### *Community Organizations and CVE*

There are 35 nonprofit organizations in Minnesota that serve the Somali-American community, and 23 of these are in Minneapolis-St. Paul, according to CharityNavigator.org. In addition, there are organizations and programs that exist outside the nonprofit arena. One of the most widely known and respected of these is the West Bank Athletic Club (WBAC), run by a man known throughout the community simply as “Coach.”

<sup>34</sup> FBI, “A New Approach to Countering Violent Extremism.”

Coach Ahmed is the founder and leader of the WBAC soccer teams. Founded in 2012, WBAC works with Minneapolis young people year-round. Interest and participation has steadily grown over the last three years. There are currently 45 young people (14-19 years old) playing for WBAC, split into three teams of 15 players. However, there are 150 young people on a waiting list, indicating the massive interest in the club, as well as the consequences of severely limited funding. WBAC is working to secure funds for practice space and equipment and aspires to have 10 to 12 teams catering to players 5 to 18 years old.

As a part of our fieldwork, the report authors attended soccer practices and team gatherings. One of the club's 19-year-old members spoke about how Coach Ahmed plays an active role in young Somali-Americans' lives that stretches beyond the soccer field. He said:

*"My coach is really good. He takes me home most of the time. He gives us rides when I don't have one because my mom doesn't drive...he waits for me until I get in the house. Then he'll call, 'Are you safe?' I'm like, 'Yes, Coach.'*

*"Coach always tells us, 'Stay away from bad things and bring in grade reports. Stay good in the school. I'm not coaching you guys because you are the best players. I'm coaching you guys so you can be something later on. I want you guys to play for colleges. I want to see you getting good grades.' He's getting us a tutor so he can help us with math, so our GPA can go up and our soccer will be good and then we'll be good enough."*

This focus on personal and academic development is similar to other organizations in Minneapolis-St. Paul, but critically, Coach Ahmed is not paid for his work, the costs of practice areas and equipment funded by family and community donations. Far from the million-dollar-grant aspirations of other organizations, Coach Ahmed is focused entirely on the wellbeing of his soccer players. In structured interviews, there were 135 statements championing Coach Ahmed and his program, and multiple sources reported, "Coach is doing the real work."

This common refrain was not simply an acknowledgement of Coach Ahmed's impressive work but also an implicit criticism of other individuals and organizations that claim to help Somali-American youth in Minnesota but ultimately are motivated to increase personal wealth and prestige through grant money intended for the community's young people. The community calls these people and organizations "The Pretenders."

### *The Pretenders*

There are competing interests among the community-based organizations in the Twin Cities. There is some rivalry between organizations vying for grant money, and there are enduring clan allegiances that have carried over from Somalia. Thus, a criticism of a specific group must be assessed not just for its validity but also for whether it is a self-serving criticism intended to tilt perception in favor of the criticizer. That said, there is a persistent view throughout the community that there are individuals and organizations that have become adept at securing government funding, though that funding is not directed to the intended recipients of the aid (i.e., Somali-American young people). This sentiment, mentioned 72 times during interviews, is pervasive in Minneapolis-St. Paul. Anecdotally:

A Somali Law Enforcement Officer said:

*There are a lot of community organizations who get money in the name of the community and never come back...So-called Somali community leaders have been receiving money from the city or the state or local but the community never benefit. They benefit only that little group. And the community is pissed off.*

One of Coach Ahmed's soccer players said:

*"Most of the leaders in the community, most of them tell us, 'We'll do something for you guys,' but they never have done anything. The coach is like, 'We'll help you guys. We'll come everywhere. I'll call the kids.' But [the Pretenders] make a promise and then they never make it up."*

Another source was even blunter:

*"[The Pretenders] are bloodsuckers. All they need is the paycheck. They don't care about the ills and the problems."*

And during a protest in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, Mubashir Jeilani, co-founder of Cedar Riverside Youth Council, told the *Twin Cities Daily Planet*:

*“Our real problems are community development. We have so many different organizations claiming that they help our youth, but...they don’t help us.”<sup>35</sup>*

How are leaders able to secure funding when they are not effecting change in the community? In the words of another source, “The community leader programs always pass. I’m sure they’ve been vetted. They just pass. They know the loopholes and what they need to do.”

Sources recounted a troubling anecdote that evidences this ability to pass official assessments. During DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson’s 2014 visit to Minneapolis to meet with community leaders, he sat with individuals who claimed to be CVE advocates but, according to sources, were previously proponents of al Shabaab *and* its extremist message.

The Pretenders are skilled at manipulating information and imagery to secure funding. Coach Ahmed recounted instances where organizations asked him to bring some of his soccer players to an event or meeting, so the organization could claim they help a given number of young people. Yet, time and again, Coach Ahmed said, these organizations do not use their funding to help the young people as they claimed they would.

It is this phenomenon of a Pretender that makes program validation difficult, inconsistent and potentially misleading. A rigorous vetting process does not necessarily reveal a Pretender, as sources reported they are good at being vetted.

### *CVE Program Recommendations*

It is not possible to prove a negative. No organization can claim with certainty that their work directly prevented or reduced the risk of radicalization and recruitment because it is impossible to identify who would have become an extremist without the organization. Perhaps the most that can be hoped for is “evidence of absence:” a lack of recruitment for a given group *suggests* that the group is successful in preventing recruitment. Yet, even this is a challenge for many Minnesota organizations, as metrics tracking appears to be a secondary priority to the work of

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<sup>35</sup> Parker Lemke, "In Cedar-Riverside protest, youth link terrorist recruitment to lack of resources," *Twin Cities Daily Planet*, Oct. 1, 2014.

the program. This is somewhat understandable, particularly for the community organizations that are run with virtually no budget and limited staff.

There are numerous Minneapolis-St. Paul organizations focused on helping young people resist recruitment, but Somali-American youths continue to depart to join foreign terrorist groups. On each visit to Minneapolis, the report authors were informed that more young people had left, and on each occasion, at least one of these missing young people was not reported to police.<sup>36</sup> Clearly, current programs are insufficient to stem the flow of fighters to ISIL. More needs to be done. This does not necessarily mean increased funding, but instead, a smarter, more strategic application of funds to programs that reflect the stated needs of the community and are continually delivering evidence that funds are spent on real, immediate efforts and not used as a way to increase personal income and prestige.

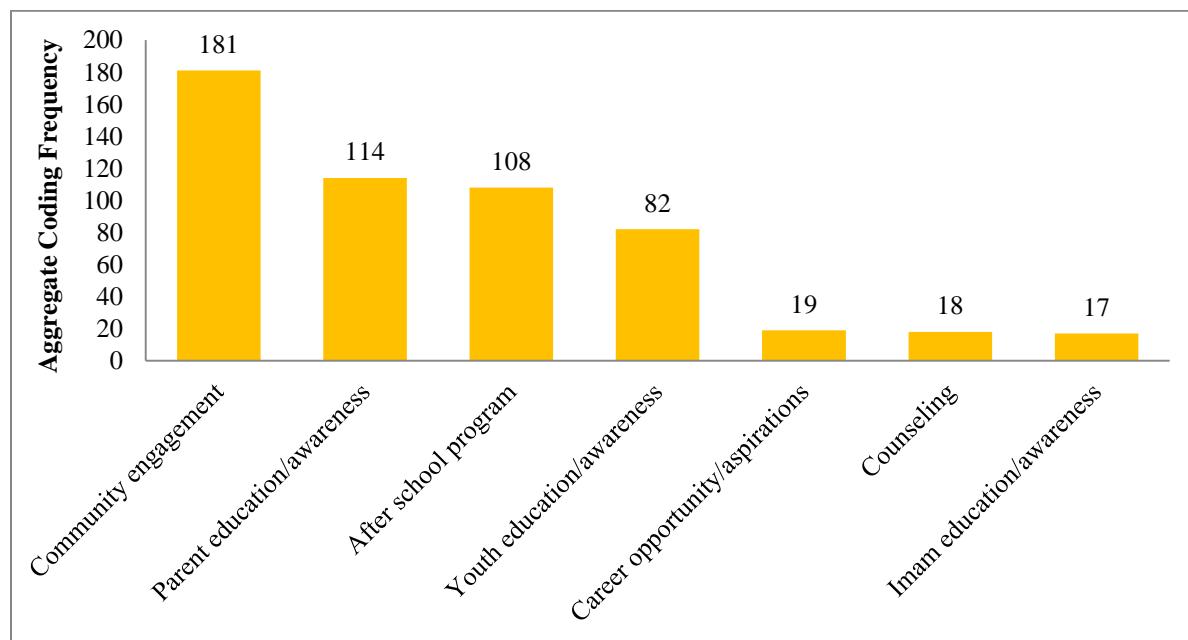
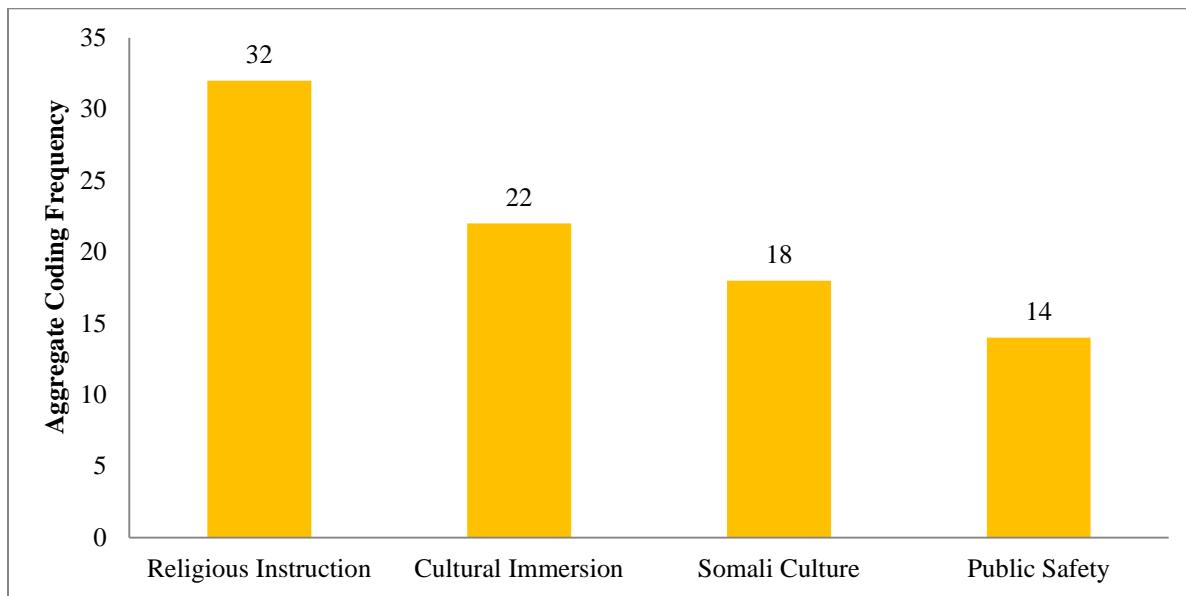


Figure 5 - Community Program Recommendations

Sources were asked to recommend important elements in a CVE program. The community's recommendations focused on a holistic, integrated approach to supporting young people and their families. "Community engagement" was by far the most commonly mentioned element.

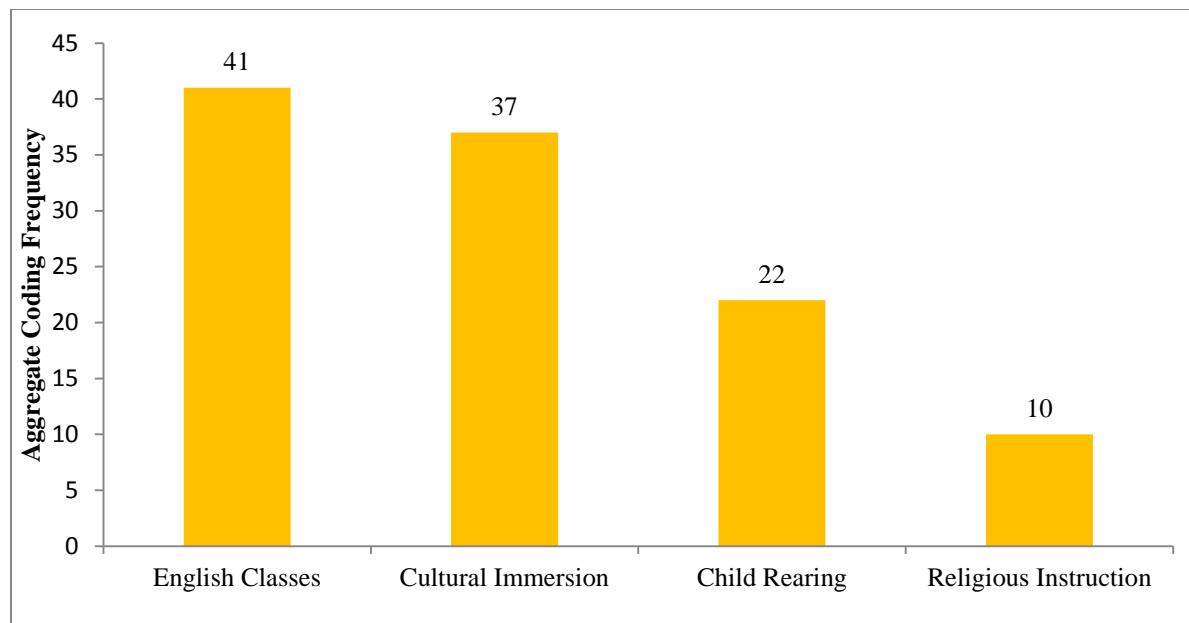
<sup>36</sup> The report authors provided this information to Minneapolis police without compromising the anonymity of our sources.

The community wants to be a part of the effort to stem violent extremism, and the efforts by local law enforcement to work with the community are having an important effect.



**Figure 6 - Youth Program Recommendations**

The involvement of schools and teachers in parental and youth education and afterschool programs was also widely cited. For youth programs, religious instruction was identified as the most important element. A clearer understanding of religious texts and beliefs can undercut the violent theological message of terrorist recruiters, and it can also support healthy identity formation, as young people understand, via legitimate community-led education, that Islamic beliefs and a secular society can safely exist simultaneously in one's view of themselves. Likewise, the importance of cultural instruction was emphasized with regard to Somali tradition, history and language, *as well as* U.S. culture, civic principles, and pluralism.



**Figure 7 - Parental Program Recommendations**

For both parental and youth programs, guidance on cultural immersion was cited as an important element, indicating a community-wide recognition that after immigration, new residents require further support to fully embrace their new home. For parental education programs, sources more commonly noted practical topics: learning to speak and read English; and advice for child rearing. The latter is particularly important because 34.6% of Minnesota Somali households are single parent, a challenge for any family that is exacerbated in Minneapolis-St. Paul by the challenge of assimilating to a new country.

There are cascading benefits that can be realized by engaging parents in the Minneapolis-St. Paul school systems, including the Somali charter schools. The director of a Minneapolis dugsi said that his school serves as a hub for the community, helping parents navigate a new culture and country while also supporting their children's education. The director said that the three primary challenges for families are "translation, transportation and connectivity."

Language barriers can preclude parents from fully engaging a new society. At the same time, parents might have limited mobility. Particularly in the sub-zero temperatures of a Minnesota winter, the inability to drive and navigate the city isolates parents and challenges assimilation. With language and transportation barriers, parents can find it difficult to access the social, medical and legal services available in the United States.

The dugsi director explained how his organization is working to engage parents more fully in the education of their children, using it as an opportunity to address the core community challenges.

## Conducting Fieldwork in an Immigrant Community

The first interview the report authors conducted in Minneapolis was held in the evening, in a back office of a brick two-story building in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, the epicenter of Somali immigration to the United States. We were led into a small room where we found several Somali men and women with uncertain gazes. They closed the door, and the eldest figure in the room leaned forward and asked, “What do you want?”

As the conversation evolved, it was clear they had researched us, though we knew very little about them. Each of the people in that room ultimately became an essential source for the findings in this report. Indeed, this group came to refer to the report authors as “family.” We ate dinner together, went to Somali Islamic schools, and watched young people play soccer. We learned about their families, their backgrounds, and their admirable embrace of American society. Over the course of three trips, these connections opened the Somali-American community to us in a way that is not often reflected in previous studies of the Twin Cities communities. The question is, why were we successful in eliciting so much information, in a matter of months, when previous researchers found the community to be closed and unwilling to talk?

Based on this research experience, there are several evident best practices for conducting research in the Minneapolis-St. Paul Somali community, and potentially, in immigrant communities across the country.

### *Leveraging Backgrounds*

The report authors recognized early on that there were two critical attributes that allowed us to quickly establish common ground with our sources, the basis for trust and collaboration. Dr. Erroll Southers is African American. The advantage of his ethnicity was most clearly seen during our first visit, when a resident said, “*I am African. You are African-American. You know exactly what we go through in America.*”

The individual was explaining the consequences of profiling, exacerbated by immigration and the ongoing homeland security threats. While infrequently mentioned directly, sources exhibited comfort and familiarity during interviews and subtly acknowledged that Southers' race made a difference to them.

Justin Hienz is a scholar of religion with years of academic and professional study of Islam, including time spent living and traveling throughout the Middle East. Hienz's deep familiarity with Islamic texts, terms, history and other religious ideas allowed the report authors to immediately evidence our appreciation for and understanding of our sources' belief system. Several sources remarked, "*You know more about my religion than I do.*"

These two qualities—Southers' ethnicity and Hienz's understanding of Islam—allowed the report authors to connect with sources on the two parts of their identity that create the most concern in Minneapolis-St. Paul. Racial tensions in Minneapolis create a sense of isolation for the Somali-American community, and Southers' ethnicity inherently implied to sources that he could understand their concerns and experiences on a personal level. Meanwhile, given the noted perception of government animosity towards Islam, Hienz's ready knowledge of the faith implied to sources that they could speak openly without fear of being misinterpreted, including frank conversations on the concept of jihad, which, while a dangerous motivation for violent extremism, is also a legitimate, sacred-text-based Islamic concept.

Future researchers would do well to consider their own backgrounds and whether they can be leveraged to establish common ground and trust. One critical question every researcher should ask themselves *before* commencing fieldwork is, *Am I the right researcher for this project?* Intellect and professional accomplishments are not always sufficient to yield valid, deep insights in a community cautious of outsiders.

#### *Honesty and Transparency*

While the report authors were aware of the benefits of their respective backgrounds, they were also keenly aware of the drawbacks. Dr. Southers is a former FBI Special Agent and a career law enforcement officer. Given the animosity towards federal law enforcement, this professional background could have presented an impediment to trust and openness. The report authors were aware of this potential conflict before arriving, and from the initial meeting with community leaders through the final interview conducted for this report, Dr. Southers purposefully informed each source that he formerly worked for the FBI. This forthrightness yielded candid, often-

negative statements about the Bureau’s CVE efforts, though comments were offered in a way that acknowledged Southers had no responsibility for the FBI’s perceived missteps.

This transparency cultivated trust in part because many of the sources had researched Dr. Souters and were already aware of his previous work with the FBI. His readiness to admit his work for the Federal government evidenced honesty. Had he concealed any part of his background, most sources would have recognized deceit and reciprocated with less-than-truthful responses during interviews.

Likewise, the report authors did not hesitate to tell sources that this project has been funded by the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate. Nor did we conceal that our primary interest was in the foreign fighter recruitment occurring in Minneapolis-St. Paul, a sensitive topic in the community that has attracted significant attention—and generated significant resentment of federally funded research efforts.

### *Overcoming Preconceived Notions*

One of the first and most frequent criticisms the report authors heard from sources about other research efforts was that the community feels like an experiment under observation, like “lab rats.” After years of researchers, journalists, government offices, and other organizations coming to Minneapolis-St. Paul to study radicalization and recruitment, many in the community feel that all promises of help are hollow, all declarations of support self-serving.

Particular grievance was expressed regarding a study in which the researchers reportedly paid individuals for interviews. The principal investigator was characterized as aggressive and insulting, and the injection of money created tension within the community. This evidenced, in the eyes of our sources, a distinct absence of respect and appreciation for the community. As a result of this blunt approach, sources said they were less than forthcoming with interviewers, withholding critical information that by consequence made the study incomplete and in some cases, inaccurate.

Sources used this example of a poorly conducted study to highlight why we were being given so much information and access to the community. Sources mentioned the value of relationship building 42 times, indicating it is a widely shared sentiment. The community is willing to work with people who take time to build trust. On our first visit to Minneapolis, we spent more time

listening than asking questions. We did not conduct structured interviews and did not record any discussions. During most conversations on the first visit, there was little or no talk about terrorism or terrorist organizations, foreign fighters, or CVE. This gave sources time to assess the motivations and forthrightness of the report authors, allowing trust to develop naturally, a tactic that proved vastly more productive than offering money for interviews.

### *Encouraging Community Collaboration*

Sources also indicated that because the report authors showed genuine interest in the community, its challenges *and* its accomplishments, they were more willing to discuss the primary research interest—terrorist recruitment and methods for countering it. Despite the focus of this report, interviews always began with questions about where the sources had lived in the United States, their path to Minneapolis and the primary public safety concerns for their community. With few exceptions, it was not until midway through interviews that the topic of extremism and recruitment was raised. Sources were consistently aware of the report authors' primary research interest, but focusing on the source's personal history and concerns evidenced genuine interest in the source, by consequence building a trust level that allowed sources to feel comfortable discussing a sensitive topic.

Yet, the purpose of the questions regarding community concerns was not simply to engender trust and comfort with the report authors. Potential violent extremists all have families and live in communities that possess the potential to reduce the risk of a deadly attack. With an appreciation of how charismatic figures, group dynamics, and the radicalization pathway contribute to the emergence of violent extremism, it is essential to understand and leverage a community's identified priorities as a means to enhance public safety (and reduce the risk of foreign fighter recruitment). Doing so requires a more nuanced community-based strategy, a *Mosaic of Engagement*. This is the concept of a “community-based strategy to improve the quality of life by reducing the risk of extremist recruitment, radicalization and related criminal activity. This goal is only feasible through engagement of *tipping point* stakeholders via Neighborhood Alliances, as well as community consensus that [homegrown violent extremism] reduction is the desired by-product of a safe community.”<sup>37</sup>

### *Committing to Long-term Engagement*

Another frequent criticism of previous research efforts was that interest in the Somali community lasted only as long as the research project. Community members complained that they had not

<sup>37</sup> Erroll Southers, *Homegrown Violent Extremism* (Routledge, 2013), 107.

seen positive results from supporting research efforts in the past and felt that despite their readiness to help, researchers consistently abandoned the community when the research funding was exhausted.

Recognizing the enormous public safety and national security concerns in the Twin Cities and the chronic socio-economic challenges to the Somali-American community, the report authors committed early in this research to long-term, ongoing work with the community. During our second visit to Minneapolis, multiple sources reported that they were “shocked” that the report authors returned, surprised because previous researchers (evidently) did not return after the initial visit.

This kind of ongoing research profits not just initial information but instead an invaluable relationship that affords the kind of openness and trust that is essential for understanding the constant evolution of terrorist recruiter tactics and targets in Minneapolis-St. Paul. Put another way, ongoing research yields tremendous assets for future projects and initiatives.

### *Research Limitations*

Even as the report authors successfully accessed a complex community, rapidly building trust and learning critical information, there were aspects of the research effort that presented limitations. There were practical challenges, such as the project’s time constraints, limited timeframes where both report authors could set aside other professional responsibilities and travel to Minnesota to conduct the fieldwork, and the freezing Minnesota weather, which tended to keep residents home, indoors, and overall less mobile and available.

The report authors also faced the challenge of conducting fieldwork while simultaneously growing the network of sources and establishing trust with them. During the first visit, we were dependent on a limited number of individuals to assist in identifying and locating people who might participate in the study. In time, the report authors’ network of sources began to grow independently and exponentially, with people eager to talk, contribute, and offer further introductions to worthwhile sources. What is more, the report authors have mentioned this study during lectures and presentations throughout the country, and that has profited additional contacts from people who know residents in the Cedar-Riverside community. Continued research in Minneapolis-St. Paul will inevitably be more productive as we now have dozens of contacts who have stated a readiness to continue working with the report authors.

Another challenge was ensuring that we interviewed a representative cross-section of the Twin Cities Somali community. Many clan and sub-clan allegiances, carried over from Somalia, perpetuate in the cities, and while clan divisions were characterized as antiquated and fading, it remains a factor in developing relationships and capturing an accurate, comprehensive picture of the community. The report authors were told by sources that future research must purposefully engage more clans or else segments of the community will assume that the report authors are advocates of specific groups, rather than objective researchers interested in the entire community. Yet, achieving this is made difficult by the fact that it is considered inappropriate (if not completely taboo) for people outside the community to inquire about clan affiliation. Thus, future research will demand that the report authors navigate an issue about which they cannot directly ask.

These research tactics proved successful in ingratiating the report authors with the community, rapidly yielding critical information and insights. It is remarkable that simply by listening, showing respect and allowing the community time to assess the report authors, sources shared information that is typically not discussed outside the Somali community. One cannot conduct counterterrorism research from behind a desk, and the results of this project are evidence of that.

## Conclusions

While this qualitative field study has ended, the work in Minneapolis-St. Paul is far from over. This study was the first step on a long road to addressing the chronic challenges in the Minnesota Somali community and halting ISIL's recruitment efforts. The findings are critical to the larger global effort to defeating and destroying ISIL. The most essential findings are that:

- ISIL has appropriated the al Shabaab recruiting network in Minneapolis-St. Paul;
- Recruitment in Minnesota includes face-to-face interaction and is not solely a social media-driven effort;
- One of the core factors in vulnerability to recruitment is a young person's crisis of identity; and
- There are individuals and organizations in Minneapolis-St. Paul who are adept at securing government funding without effecting any real change in the community.

Just as important as these findings, however, is that the report authors now hold strong relationships with many members of the Minneapolis-St. Paul Somali community and have opportunities to expand our network of sources and elicit even more critical information. As noted above, the Somali community desires help in preventing their young people from being drawn abroad, provided they are approached as partners in the effort. The report authors evidenced this approach to CVE during the course of this study, and going forward, continued collaboration will yield the greatest benefit to the community, as well as great gains for U.S. national security and the fight against ISIL.

Considering next steps, members of the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office have offered to coordinate a series of roundtable discussions between community religious leaders, law enforcement and the report authors. The information gleaned from these conversations will be invaluable in continuing to understand the nature of the evolving foreign fighter threat and how CVE programs can be developed to address it.

Following on findings in this study, the report authors are preparing to return to Minnesota to speak with a wider sample of the Twin Cities age cohort potentially vulnerable to recruitment so as to more finely understand the nuances and factors that recruiters exploit in the community. In

addition, the report authors will also strive to specifically identify ISIL recruiters in the community.

The incredible access and trust the community has offered will undoubtedly lead to information and insights that can only be gained through collaboration and collective agreement that ISIL recruiters can, will, and must be defeated. The report authors, as well as the sources for this study, are committed to continuing their research, analysis, and support until terrorist recruiters are expelled from Minneapolis-St. Paul.

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