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TSAS

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(Mis)Understanding Muslim Converts in Canada: A Critical Discussion of Muslim Converts in the Contexts of Security and Society

Scott Flower and Deborah Birkett

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Lorne Dawson, University of Waterloo

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**(MIS)UNDERSTANDING MUSLIM CONVERTS IN CANADA:
A CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF MUSLIM CONVERTS IN THE CONTEXTS
OF SECURITY AND SOCIETY**

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This research seeks to understand the causes and processes of Islamic conversion in Canada and determine the scale of Islamic conversion growth through this initial pilot study of Muslim converts in Ontario.

Canadian census data shows that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the country, and that although most of the Muslim population growth is related to Muslim birth rates and migration, since 2001 the Muslim population has also increased as a result of religious conversions by non-Muslim Canadians. The growth in Islamic conversions has coincided with a period of increased Islamic missionary activity, and (somewhat paradoxically) a rise in negative media coverage on Muslims and Islam following the attacks by Islamic extremists on September 11, 2001.

Canadian converts are interesting from a research perspective for many reasons, but mostly because there are literally no studies on Canada's "new Muslims" to date. Improving our general understanding of Islamic conversion is particularly important in the contemporary securitized milieu post 9/11. There is a trend for converts internationally to be statistically over-represented for involvement in terrorism relative to those who are "born Muslim," a pattern observable in Canada as well as the UK, US, and Australia.

Understanding the causes and processes of Islamic conversion in Canada is essential to avoid demonizing an entire group of people as potential terrorists on the basis of their religious choice. This is particularly important given the majority of Muslim converts report improved sociability and higher self-esteem as a result of practicing their new religion.



INTRODUCTION

The actual ritual for converting to Islam is straightforward: there is no hierarchical church-type authority in Islam as there is in Christianity, and there are no special religious rituals controlled by clergy to convert to Islam and become a Muslim. An individual who wishes to become Muslim is asked to testify to the creed of Islam, in Arabic:

Ashadu an la ilaha illa-llah wa ashadu anna muhammadan rasulallah.

“I bear witness that there is no God but God;
and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.”

While the ritual is simple, the experience of converting to Islam is not. And for many people, it is not easy to understand what motivates a person to become a Muslim or indeed, to change their religion at all. Muslim converts in Canada are largely misunderstood and this is directly the result of an almost complete lack of scholarly empirical research on the topic.

This pilot study has sought to better understand the causes and processes of Islamic conversion, and to try to begin to determine the scale of Islamic conversion growth in Canada through a small study of Muslim converts in Ontario. In so doing, the study represents an initial step toward correcting negative public media discourses on Muslim converts and provides the first empirical evidence for policy makers to reflect upon. This working paper presents our preliminary findings. It also clarifies and attempts to situate emerging concerns over the security dimensions related to Muslim converts by examining the wider societal context within which Canadian Muslims convert and live their new religion.

Our research essentially explores how social contexts affect converts’ beliefs, experiences, attitudes, and behaviour. We treat Islamic conversion as a normal social phenomenon to be understood rather than being some form of “outlier” or “irrational” behaviour.



CONTEXT, AND WHY THIS RESEARCH IS IMPORTANT

Canadian census data shows that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the country. Although most of the Muslim population growth is related to Muslim birth rates and migration, since 2001 it appears that the Muslim population has also increased as a result of religious conversions by non-Muslim Canadians (Statistics Canada 2011). Apparent growth in Islamic conversions has coincided with a period of increased Islamic missionary activity internationally, and an upsurge in generally negative global and local media coverage on Muslims and Islam following the attacks by Islamist extremists on September 11, 2001.

Canadian converts are interesting from a research perspective because there are no significant studies of conversion to Islam in Canada. The simple fact is that we do not know how many Muslim converts there are in Canada, and there are numerous reasons why this is particularly difficult to determine. The first reason for this relates to the ritual of conversion as a simple and often private activity that is not necessarily subject to the involvement of religious authorities or bureaucratic recordkeeping. Another reason is a phenomenon some sociologists of religion have termed being “unmosqued,” like “unchurched.” It is estimated that over 80 percent of Muslims in the United States, are unmosqued: not attached to a mosque and its community and culture (Haddad 2011, 30; see also Eid 2013).

There is reason to believe this phenomenon also exists in Canada, although we cannot say with any certainty that it applies to the majority of Muslims. Yet it’s another factor that makes it difficult to contact and research converts. In our study, the majority can be described as unmosqued. We cannot assume that the Canadian context mirrors the American context, where very different social, cultural, historical, and demographic dynamics are at work, and where converts are estimated to be between 25 to 30 percent of the Muslim population, (Cesari 2007) nor can we necessarily assume that it mirrors other Commonwealth countries such as the UK where converts are reliably estimated to represent 2 to 3 percent of the Muslim population (Brice, 2010). Good quantitative research on convert numbers is needed despite this being a challenging task.

Undertaking good qualitative research to understand the particular characteristics and



features of conversion to Islam in Canada is more attainable and will allow scholars to describe the normative and parochial elements of conversion to Islam in the country. Our preliminary findings indicate that the picture of Muslim converts in Canada is much more complex, diverse, and nuanced than is commonly realized. Improving our general understanding of Islamic conversion is particularly important in the post-September 11 securitized context. Deeper analysis is required to investigate why simple statistics seem to suggest a tendency for converts internationally to be overrepresented for involvement in terrorism relative to those who are born Muslim, a pattern observable in Canada as well as the UK, US and Australia.²

By way of example, in the UK there are currently between 60,000 and 100,000 Muslim converts or 2 to 3 percent of Britain's 2.8 million Muslims (Brice 2010); however they have been involved in 27 percent of UK jihadist-related incidents from 2001 to 2013 (Simcox et al 2010). With regard to Canada, the following recent events represent the context within which our TSAS pilot study of converts in Canada is situated. We observe that Western security agencies perceive three categories or "types" of convert threat:

- converts involved in domestic terrorism activity;
- converts as foreign fighters;
- converts influencing other Muslims to violently radicalize.

Since 2001, six Canadian Muslim converts were involved in plots and activities that fall into at least two of these three categories. The first category (converts involved in domestic terrorism activity) includes John Stewart Nuttall and Amanda Marie Korody who were arrested last year for plotting to bomb the B.C. provincial legislature (Elias 2013), and Steven Vikash Chand who was convicted for being part of the Toronto 18 terrorist group that planned extensive plots against Canadian targets (Pazzano 2013).

The second category (converts as foreign fighters), includes William Plotnikov, killed in 2012 fighting alongside jihadists in Dagestan (Bell 2012), Xristos Katsiroubas who was killed in the January 2012 Algerian gas plant attack in which he attempted a suicide bombing using an improvised bomb he built himself (Ayed 2013), and Aaron Yoon, who spent time in a Mauritanian



jail on terrorism charges (Freeze 2013). We are not aware of any Canadian examples in the last category of converts influencing other Muslims to violently radicalize, although that's not to say there are not any. It is also important to recognize that the three Canadian Muslim converts who have been charged or convicted of terrorism-related crimes in Canada represent .00028 percent of the country's Muslim population.

Occurrences of terrorist activity or intention such as these have contributed to an atmosphere in which Canadian Muslim converts have become securitized subjects.

CONVERTS AS "SECURITIZED" SUBJECTS

As mentioned, there are no dedicated peer-reviewed journal articles or books on Canadian converts; however, there are numerous journalistic or quasi-scholarly articles often based on little evidence that assert links between conversion and radicalization (Neumann and Kleinmann 2013). The often-mentioned and conflated themes of conversion and radicalization include:

- disaffection;
- Islam as social protest;
- act of rebellion.

Uhlmann's work (2008, 31) represents the most extreme conflation of conversion and radicalization processes in the academic literature, as she even goes so far as to state that post-September 11 "converts to Islam are actually converts to terrorism," however this assertion is debunked when the empirical record is examined. Even for the miniscule number of converts who are radicalized to the point of violence, there are generally quite long time frames between their conversion and later radicalization, and little evidence to show they were primed for violent radicalization at the time they became Muslim. Additionally, Kleinmann (2012, 279) has shown that while individual processes (for example, cognitive function or identity issues) "play a much greater role in radicalizing converts" than born Muslims, "radicalization is largely the result of recruitment by militant movements or radical friends and family. Internal mechanisms alone are not sufficient for radicalization."



The reality is that the vast majority of Muslim converts do not radicalize. Almost all converts report some degree of increased self-esteem, self-control, or higher levels of sociability—not negative psychopathy or greater interest in undertaking violence. Clearly there is a need to understand the processes and causes of conversion to Islam themselves prior to being able to even understand what leads a microscopic percentage of converts to become militant or support violence.

MUSLIM CONVERTS IN ONTARIO: METHODS AND DATA

This preliminary report of findings is based on primary research and existing literature, and utilizes a combination of qualitative research methods. The primary research underpinning this project is based on field research that includes participant observation and in-depth, semi-structured ethnographic interviews with twenty-five Muslim converts conducted during February and March, 2014. We interviewed fourteen women and eleven men, ranging in age from eighteen to seventy-five. All were based in Ontario, concentrated in the central and southwestern areas of the province. The great majority had post-secondary education, yet represented a wide range of current socioeconomic statuses. For instance, our sample included: university and college students, a single parent receiving government assistance, marginally employed retail workers, self-employed artists, an independent consultant, full-time employees, contract workers, a recently laid-off individual, and an affluent retiree.

The religious upbringings and backgrounds of the participants were equally diverse including Roman Catholic, various Protestant Christian denominations, Hindu, Baha'i, Ismaili,³ and atheist. The interviews took place in various locations, as suitable spaces could be found, including participants' homes, the researcher's home, academic and business offices, and a coffee shop. Only one took place in a purpose-built mosque.

In order to find Muslim converts to interview for our study, we relied on two main methods of recruitment. We first produced a simple survey about conversion and sent it to 124 mosques and Islamic centres throughout Ontario, along with information about our project and a recruitment poster that could be displayed in the mosque. We also included a letter of support for



our project from a well-known imam from a major Toronto-area mosque, and self-addressed stamped envelopes for the return of the survey. We followed up with these mosques and Islamic centres by phone and e-mail. This method obtained a very poor response. We received only two surveys back, and while a few imams indicated willingness to be supportive of our project, only one actively engaged with our research team and connected us with some Muslim converts who attend his mosque. One mosque specifically declined to participate in the project, but the vast majority was non-responsive. A few indicated good will or good wishes for our project but little more. Without talking to them, it is hard to know how to account for the poor response.

Much more productive was the snowballing method of contacting potential participants. Starting with a personal network of contacts that are Muslim converts, augmented by professional contacts obtained via the Internet and some referrals from Dr. Lorne Dawson, (sponsor of our project) we received a generally positive response. Personal referrals to other converts from the initial batch of converts enabled us to “snowball” participants and build our sample.

In particular, we received a great deal of support from three individual leaders in the Muslim community, two of whom are involved in organizations focused on integrating converts into the Muslim community, and one who is a co-founder of a network of Canadian mosques. Each of these individuals referred several participants to us. In addition, it appeared that once we had interviewed people, they were even more willing to refer others to us, suggesting that if they had had any reservations about the purpose of the study or the interview process itself, these were overcome in the course of their participation.

KEY FINDINGS

Although this paper is based on in-depth, semi-structured ethnographic interviews and was qualitative rather than quantitative, we have nonetheless been able to generate some basic descriptive statistics that help to build a collective profile of Canadian Muslim converts. It should be remembered that this pilot study sample is not large enough to provide generalizable findings, however the small sample does provide an empirical basis upon which to draw inferences to theory construction and future data collection.



The converts in our study are well educated. The majority of converts have some form of tertiary education; with 84 percent of our sample having at least some post-secondary education and most having completed one or more degrees or diplomas.

The Canadian Muslim converts in our sample have diverse religious upbringings and backgrounds, ranging from Roman Catholic, various Protestant Christian denominations, Hindu, Baha'i, Ismaili, and atheism.

The average current age of participants in our sample was thirty-five, and the average age at conversion was twenty-six. The youngest age at which anyone in our study had converted was twelve, and the oldest was sixty-nine. But the mode (the age at which the greatest number of participants in our sample had converted) was nineteen.

The average amount of time that converts in our sample had been Muslim was a little over eight years, although nearly one-third had been Muslim for anywhere from fourteen to twenty-one years, and one participant had converted only ten weeks before her interview. (See appendix for graphs of age-related data.)

While we did not directly inquire about ethnicity, the subject came up in virtually every interview. Of the twenty-five participants, sixteen identified as or could be identified as "white." The others included people who identified their ethnicity as South Asian (Indian and Pakistani), "mixed" East Asian, Arab, African, and an individual who identified as a mix of aboriginal peoples and black. Several identified as Sunni, but many outright rejected sectarian identification, preferring to be seen as "just Muslim."

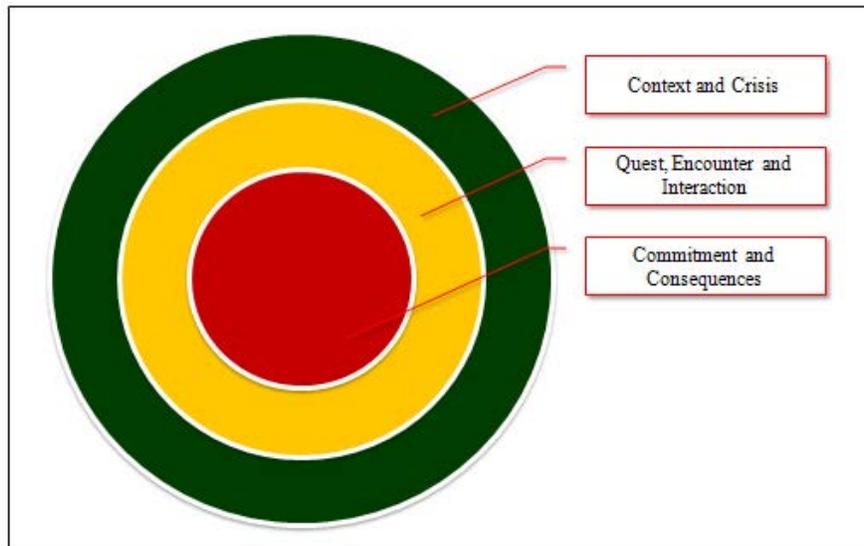
Theoretical framework and our data

Our data is analysed through a theoretical framework comprised of a seven-stage non-linear process (Rambo 1993) (see Figures One and Two). This framework is valuable as a way of studying religious conversion because it examines the process of conversion and not simply the causes. It captures key elements of the process of religious conversion under the headings: Context, Crisis, Quest, Encounter, Interaction, Commitment, and Consequences.

FIGURE ONE: RAMBO'S SEVEN-STAGE PROCESS MODEL OF CONVERSION.

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5	Stage 6	Stage 7
CONTEXT	CRISIS	QUEST	ENCOUNTER	INTERACTION	COMMITMENT	CONSEQUENCES

FIGURE TWO: OUR ALTERNATE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF RAMBO'S MODEL



Human religious experience is rarely simple or consistent. For the Muslim converts in our study this diversity of religious experience was evident in the data, which makes Rambo's framework attractive because it provides an effective way to manage the wide range of complex data for analysis.

The stages are not meant to be sequential or fixed, just as conversion itself is not necessarily permanent or fixed. The stages are interactive and iterative and the nature and degree of intensity of each stage of the conversion process is also variable with the impacts being different among both individuals and groups. For example, for almost all Muslim converts their path to conversion began either with an encounter or stemmed from a sense of crisis.

Conversion to Islam for Canadian converts varies in the extent to which the act of conversion is a life-changing experience that encompasses every element of life, character, and beliefs. These stages are not sufficient as a cause of conversion because an individual's context or crisis may



lead them on a quest to seek a new religion, but without an encounter and subsequent interaction with a Muslim or with Islamic experience, no conversion to Islam will occur. In this narrow sense, conversion to Islam may simply result from the fact that a growing number of Canadians are open to religious change, and by chance come across Islam rather than deliberately seeking it.

Following is a brief outline of each of these stages with some examples or details from our data.

Context

Context encapsulates the personal and social dimensions of a person's conversion experience and involves their society at large to their family, friends, or other aspects of personal life that affect their thoughts, attitudes, or behaviours to the new religion. For example, for almost all converts in our sample there were negative implications that could have acted as a barrier to conversion, such as being disowned by family. In fact, several of our participants have experienced temporary or permanent estrangements from family, and others exist in the shadow of this fear of estrangement. One of them, a twenty year old university student and former Hindu, who converted secretly when she was fourteen, has been hiding her real religion from her family for six years. When she's home with them, she prays in her bedroom closet. She wants to wear hijab but can't yet. She can't fast when she's living at home, so she tries to make up her fasts while at school. She thinks her parents suspect her conversion, but are avoiding confronting her in the hope that it's a phase.

Crisis

Crises generally operate in two ways: they can be a spontaneous/shock event that raises doubts of a fundamental nature in an individual's mind such as clarity about their "root reality" (Heirich 1977, 674), or they can be a series of mild, progressive, and cumulative problems across numerous contexts that cannot be solved within a person's current (religious) perspective. Our data suggest that for Canadian converts there is a blend of these two types of crisis as a factor contributing to conversion. Although a couple of participants reported dramatic events that



spurred a crisis for them, such as one participant whose friend was killed in an avalanche, in fact, crisis is sometimes too strong a word for several converts in our sample—words like “incident” or “event” more accurately convey the degree of disruption represented by this stage.

Interestingly, while there was great diversity of motivating experiences among our sample, the single most frequently occurring type of crisis was a theological one. They experienced theological conflicts—for example, an inability to accept notions of the Trinity in Christianity, or unsatisfying answers to complex religious questions—that for them could only be resolved by converting.

Quest

The quest stage covers the ways in which converts have responded to their actual or perceived crises. The degree of agency or “response style” of a convert can vary between “passive” and “active” and that variation in agency is linked to individuals’ motivations and availability. Yet, for our small Canadian convert sample we observe that converts exercise a high degree of agency and creativity in managing their own conversions, and their journey to Islam is the result of extended deliberation and reflection rather than being convinced by influential or compelling Islamic missionary proselytism. It appears at this stage as though Canadian converts (in general) are seeking meaning and purpose in life, and that crises increase the likelihood that a potential convert will undertake a quest for a new religion due to their need to resolve a perceived personal or social crisis, or adopt a more meaningful or satisfying identity.

Encounter and Interaction

The encounter and interaction stages explore the relationship between the convert and an agent or mediator of conversion, which is traditionally some sort of advocate, proselytizer, or missionary. Our data strongly suggest that Rambo’s notion of “encounter” needs to be broadened to include encounters with non-human representations of Islam: for example, elements of popular culture such as books and music, educational experiences such as courses and travel, and many forms of media coverage of Islam and Muslims. An encounter can occur before the cri-



sis or quest stage, and can actually precipitate a crisis and foster a desire in the potential convert that leads them on a quest.

In a sample already characterized by considerable diversity, this was one of the areas in which there was the greatest diversity. One person's initial encounter with Islam came through hip-hop music, another through Bollywood music. One participant mentioned *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; another mentioned Camilla Gibb's novel, *Sweetness in the Belly*. A couple mentioned specific high school or university courses that addressed Islam. Others mentioned Muslim friends, roommates, classmates, and neighbours as sources of encounter and interaction, although none of those individuals was actively proselytizing his or her religion.

Commitment and Consequences

A wide range of motivating factors can influence a convert's degree of commitment and consequences. The commitment stage represents the decision threshold that the convert reaches when they finally decide to switch religious affiliation and convert. For conversion to Islam, commitment involves a variety of observable behaviour such as declaration, institutional recognition, and behavioural change. By making the commitment, converts are likely to experience feelings of relief or liberation and a change in behaviour, attitudes, and worldview. The degree of commitment will determine the range of consequences resulting from the conversion.

The consequences or effects of conversion depend in part on how many aspects of the convert's life are affected and how comprehensive these changes are. The impact of individual and group religious change can foment profound change within social and political arenas, making these last two stages of conversion important for security analysis. In our sample, several participants experienced significant negative effects subsequent to their conversion, including being disowned by their families. Some were permanently estranged. One man, a convert from Hinduism to Islam, indicated that he actually feared his family would kill him; he said that they would "honour kill" him for converting to Islam. Less severe but still noteworthy were those participants who converted during their university years, the most common time to convert, and whose families withdrew financial support and disrupted their educations. These individuals were still



trying to complete their education—in one case, about twenty years after the fact. Some of the female participants who had adopted the practice of hijab reported ongoing and varied harassment and discrimination.

However, there were of course many positive consequences of commitment—otherwise, people would not convert. While the great majority of converts reported that they experienced resistance from their families, many of them were, with time and effort, able to establish mutual understanding and acceptance. Sometimes, inspired by the example of the converts in our study, their other family members even chose to embrace Islam. One man’s conversion, which occurred when he was already married and had children, was followed by his wife’s conversion a year later, and his children’s willing involvement in the religion. Another convert’s family was so positively impressed by his dramatic transformation from an angry, impatient, selfish man into a gentle, thoughtful, and patient person that several of his close family members also chose to convert to Islam.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Security in the Context of Society

Our small sample from Ontario further supports research by McCauley and Moskalenko (2008, 2009) that there is no evidence supporting a “conveyor belt” mechanism of radicalization from conversion to terrorism.

It is important to emphasize that although conversion and radicalization might on the surface involve similar changes in beliefs, attitudes and behaviour, radicalization is functionally different because it is a process in which new beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours are deployed and heightened in preparation for, and (with a) commitment to intergroup conflict. This in and of itself means that conversion to Islam alone is not a valid or reliable predictive indicator of whether a person is likely to radicalize.

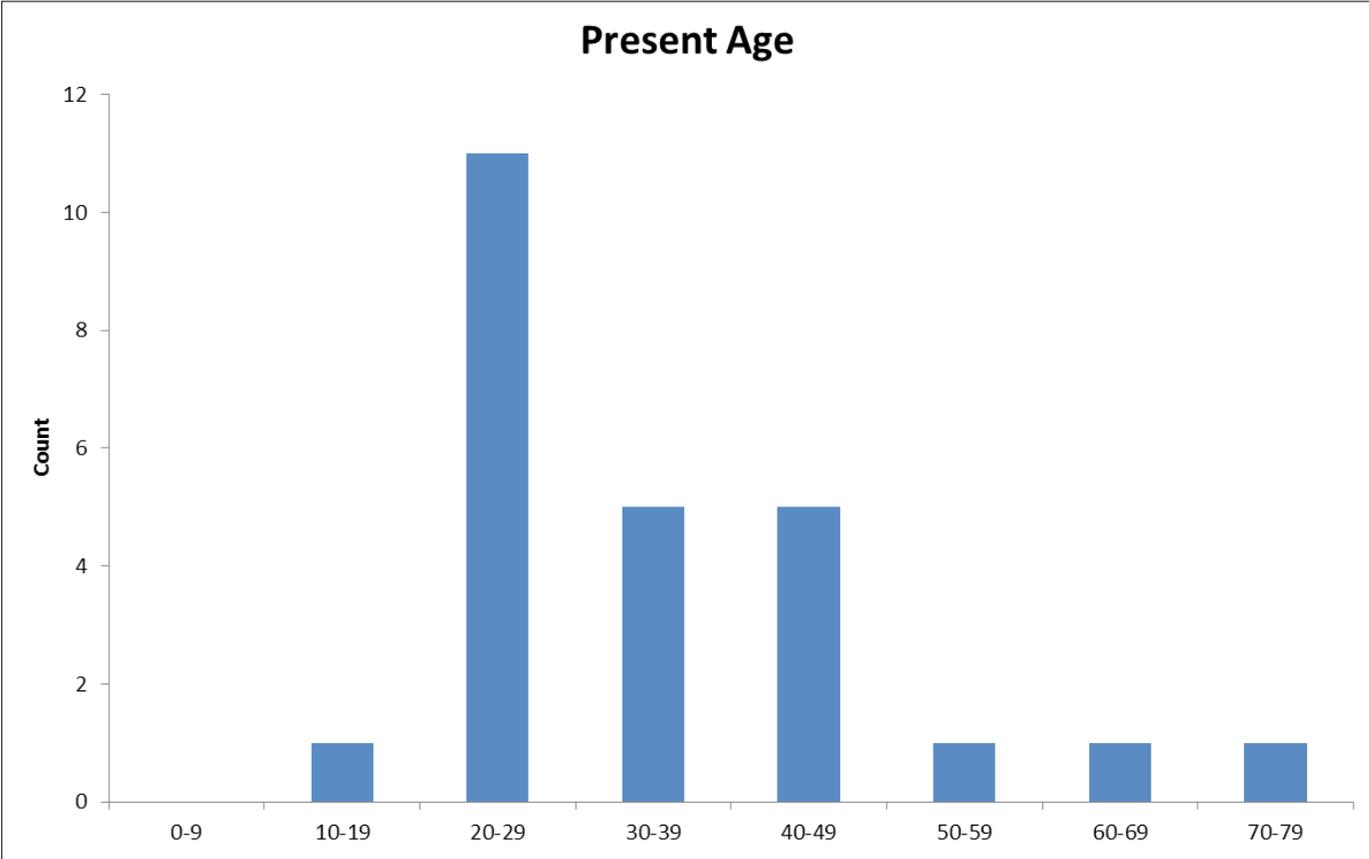


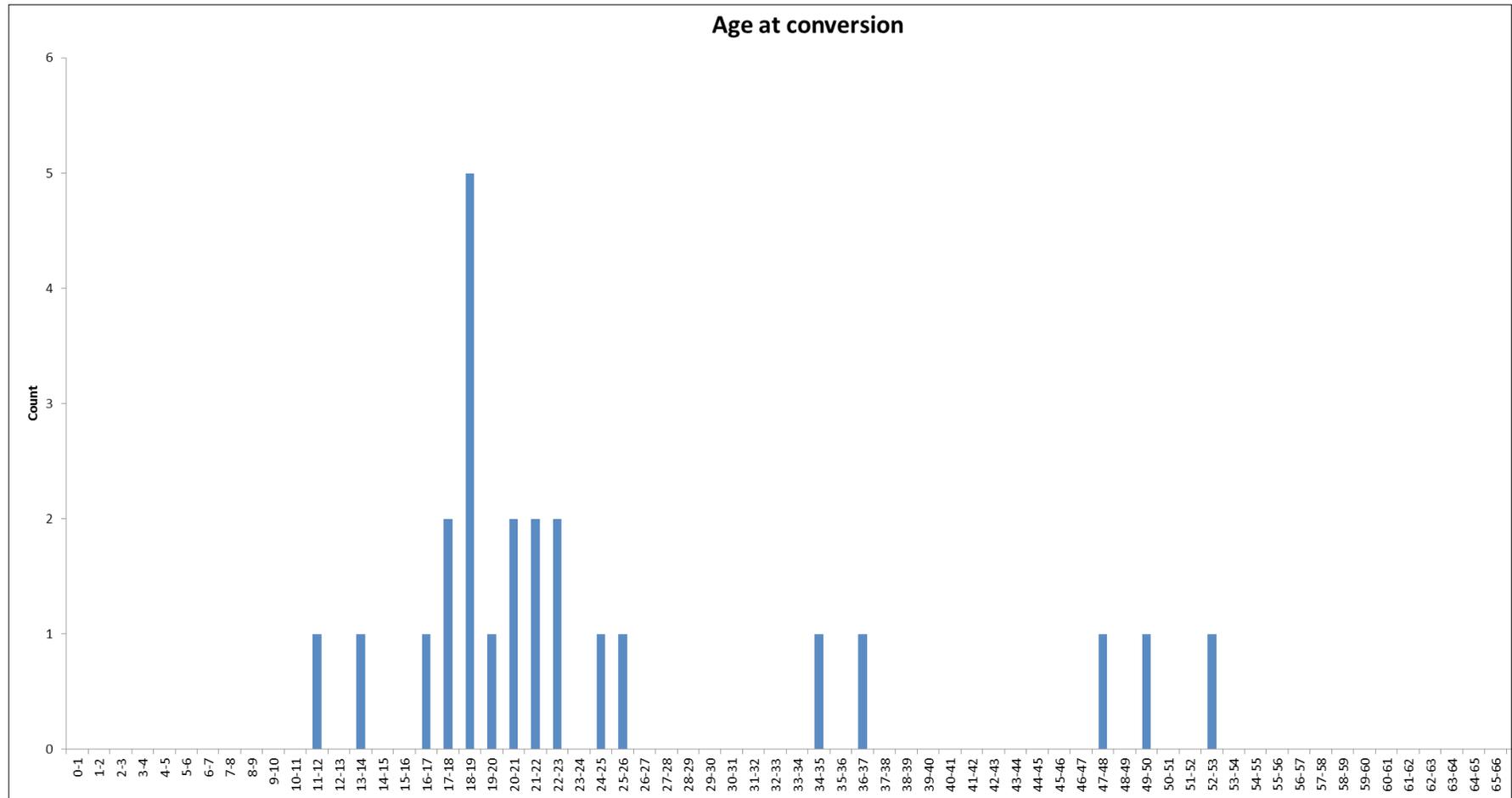
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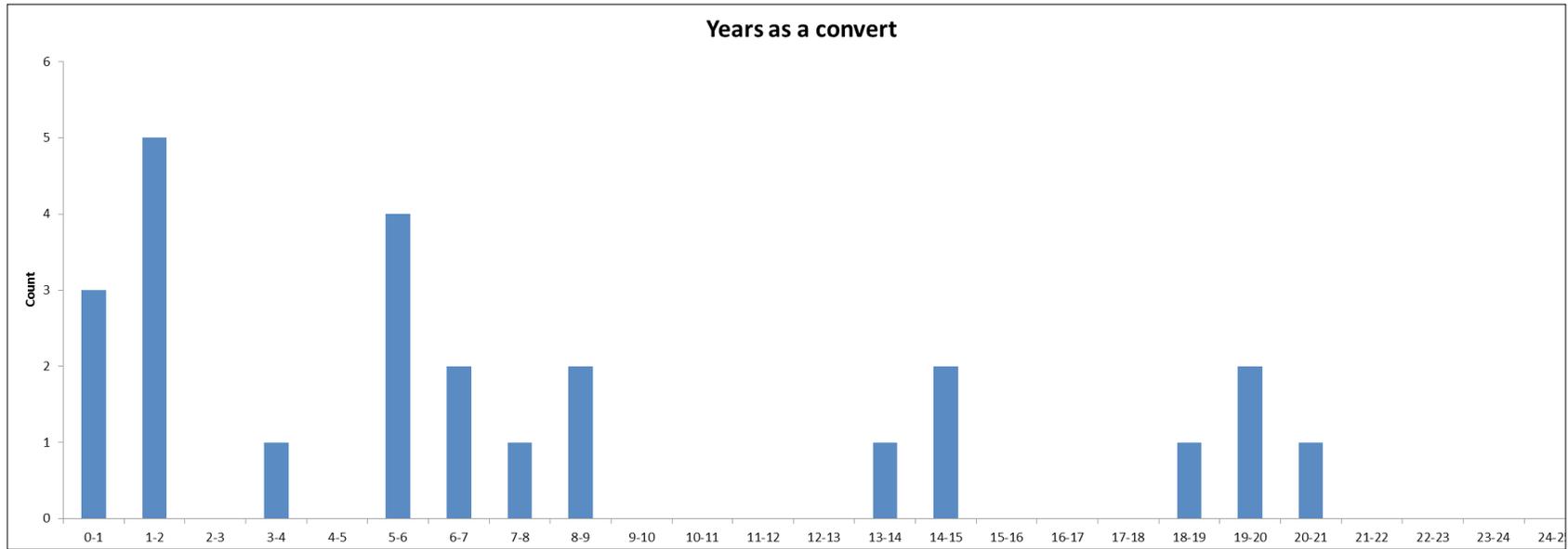
By establishing an empirical understanding of Muslim converts in Canada it is possible to improve the public's knowledge of Muslim converts, who are often negatively portrayed in the media and misunderstood by wider society. As stated, the reality of Muslim converts in Canada is complex, diverse, and nuanced. National security requires policy decisions to be based on empirical evidence and yet there remains little research on the nature of conversion to Islam in Canada let alone converts represent an emergent security threat. Further investment in a comprehensive nation-wide study of Canadian Muslim converts would consolidate our initial findings. Such a study would generate knowledge that can contribute to improving social cohesion and interfaith dialogue between Muslim Canadians and Canadians of other faiths and traditions. Understanding the causes and processes of Islamic conversion in Canada is essential to avoid demonizing an entire group of people as potential terrorists on the basis of their religious choice.



APPENDIX









(Endnotes)

Notes

1 About the authors: Scott Flower PhD is a McKenzie Fellow at the University of Melbourne and can be reached at scott.flower@unimelb.edu.au; Deborah Birkett MA is a Visiting Scholar at the Department of Sociology and Legal Studies, University of Waterloo and can be reached at dlbirket@uwaterloo.ca.

2 While there is currently no reliable survey data on the number of converts in Canada, we can infer from the reliable data on the total Canadian Muslim population and arrest/conviction data for terrorism offences in Canada that Canadian converts are also likely to be overrepresented in extremist violence compared to the population that was born Muslim. The challenge is determining the degree of overrepresentation.

The 2011 Canadian Census shows a total Muslim population of 1,053,945 of which 294,710 were born in Canada, 720,125 are migrants, and 39,110 are non-permanent residents. There have been three plots/foiled attacks by “Islamic extremists” in Canada: two out of three plots have involved converts (on this rough measure converts were in 66% of plans/foiled attacks involving Muslims in Canada). However, this is an unfair representation of statistics due to the skewed distribution effect that results from a small sample size ($n=3$). A more accurate measure would be the number of convictions across the three cases. The total number of converts involved in the three cases is only three, while there are thirteen born Muslims convicted from the total three cases. This means that from sixteen convictions, converts represent 18.75 percent of the whole convicted population of Muslims.

Based on our own observations and the census data we can safely assume it is unlikely that converts make up 18.75 percent of Canada’s entire Muslim population, which means that Canadian converts are likely (though not certain) to be overrepresented. Considered another way, let us assume that Canada is similar to Australia and the UK, and approximately 3 percent of the total Muslim population are converts. Statistically (using Bayes Theorem), one should expect converts to make up about 3 percent of the Muslims convicted for involvement in extremist activity; thus convert involvement in plots/foiled attacks should roughly be the same percentage as their relative size within the total Muslim population. Clearly this is not the case based on the data presented above.

3 While the authors of this study recognize Ismailis as part of the Muslim community, the particular participant who had been Ismaili before converting to Sunni Islam did not see himself as having been Muslim prior to his conversion. We acknowledged his perspective but do not necessarily embrace it.



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