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Risk, Resilience & Community Engagement with Young Somali-Canadians in Toronto, Ontario & Edmonton, Alberta

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

This research examines risk and resilience among Somali-Canadian youth and young adults (16-30) in Toronto, Ontario and Edmonton, Alberta. We explore why some young Somali-Canadians in both cities – young people who face significant levels of marginalization and exclusion – may find a ‘place of belonging’ in radical groups (such as al-Shabaab and, more recently, ISIS). Whereas, others become involved in drug, weapon and gang-related crime, and still remain resilient in the face of such challenges. As a second focus, this research examines the role that police community outreach and engagement may play in creating and/or bolstering resilience among Somali-Canadian youth more generally.

METHODS

We conducted in-depth interviews with 454 Somali-Canadian youths and young adults in Toronto and Edmonton, and interviewed officers from the Toronto Police Service, the Edmonton Police Service (Edmonton interviews still underway), and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police INSET Community Outreach Section (COP). We also observed – via a series of ride-alongs – community engagement strategies in action, and spoke with community leaders about their perceptions of such initiatives.

DISCUSSION

It is important to note that the majority of young Somali-Canadians have managed to remain resilient in the face of high levels of poverty, discrimination and marginalization, and are committed to participating in mainstream Canadian society. Rather than viewing young Somali-Canadians as ‘at-risk’, we argue that law enforcement and policy makers would do well to instead view them as sources of resilience that can assist in the development of strategies aimed at the minority of young Somali-Canadians who are involved in criminal activity. From a prevention standpoint however, it is also imperative that problems and/or gaps that may exist in terms of supports and services, be identified and attended to before they further undermine existing strengths in Somali-Canadian communities.

STUDY AIMS

Key aims of this research include:

1. Understanding the challenges and barriers young Somali-Canadians face in both cities;
2. Learning from study participants how governmental and non-governmental agencies (including the police) could be more effective in supporting them, thereby reducing the risk of violence/violent extremism; and
3. Highlighting ‘best practice’ among current law enforcement strategies being used to build relationships with young Somali-Canadians.

RESULTS

1. Young Somali-Canadians are very concerned about high levels of violence, particularly among young Somali males. Many are also troubled by the low clearance rates in the killings of young Somali-Canadian men;
2. Though many young Somali-Canadian men report having been exposed to radical groups and their recruitment tactics (typically on-line), they articulate powerful counter-narratives that work against the ideologies and radicalizing strategies of groups like al-Shabaab and ISIS;
3. Young Somali-Canadians in both cities generally report antagonistic relationships with the police, however, they also articulated considerable support for community engagement activities, which are preferred over traditional “law & order” policing strategies;
4. Some law enforcement community outreach initiatives are regarded more highly than others, and study participants had numerous ideas of how existing initiatives might be made more effective;
5. In both cities, young people told us that self-identified “community leaders” – who are typically older men – do not represent them and are “out of touch” with the reality of their lives. We therefore identified young leaders in the community who are willing to work with government and law enforcement to establish partnerships that, it is hoped, will promote effective and meaningful outreach and engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

Although there were similarities in terms of the issues identified by young Somali-Canadians in Toronto and Edmonton, there were important differences regarding how they felt these issues might be best addressed. Indeed, while Somali-Canadian youth and young adults appear to be disproportionately involved in drug-related and violent crime in both cities, our findings demonstrate how solutions to these problems can be highly specific to the locality in which they occur. In other words, local context *always* matters when trying to understand the life trajectories of marginalized members of society; there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution to reducing and preventing crime and violence among young Somali-Canadians living in different parts of the country.

For a copy of the final report of the Toronto study (the Edmonton project is still in the field), please contact Dr. Sara Thompson (see below).

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