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Gang Affiliation and Radicalization to Violent Extremism
Within Somali-American Communities

Draft Final Summary Overview

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Project Purpose:

The primary purpose of this project was to understand to what degree radicalization to violent extremism and gang involvement are related. We proposed to empirically assess the degree to which gang affiliation and radicalization to violent extremism among Somali-American youth are related to each other, and potential divergences or convergences in these phenomena. Somali communities in North America offer a unique and important opportunity to explore questions of gang affiliation and radicalization to violent extremism within a discrete population that has had an unusually high base rate of exposure to psychosocial circumstances that can be related to these problems, such as discrimination, the challenge of developing one's social identity while contending with acculturation, and the potential to feel alienated from the larger society. We examined the intersection of radicalization to violent extremism and gang affiliation in two stages: 1) Pre-radicalization, where we broadly examined factors associated with attitudes towards violent extremism and gang affiliation among a general ethnic Somali population, and 2) Known radicalization, where we examined in-depth case studies of Somali youth who had left Minneapolis to allegedly join extremist groups for mention of or reference to gangs. In addition, supplemental funding allowed us to explore changes in radicalization to violent extremism over time. Specifically, we sought to understand how changes in psychosocial factors contributed to changes in attitudes towards violent extremism. Finally, we sought to examine how Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programming was experienced by and impacted members of a general Somali immigrant population.

Project Subjects

Participants in the quantitative portion of our project were 520 Somali youth (ages 18-30 at time of initial interview) in five cities in North America (Minneapolis MN, Boston MA, Lewiston ME, Portland ME, and Toronto Canada), interviewed at four time points over a period of six years as part of a longitudinal study called ‘Somali Youth Longitudinal Study’ or SYLS. Participants were recruited broadly from each of the five communities, with representation from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Demographics from the most recent wave of data are presented in Table 1.

	M (Range); n (%)
Age	25.4 years (20-38 years)
Gender	
Male	126 (54.1%)
Female	105 (45.1%)
Years in the US	17.9 years (6-28 years)
Lived with as a child	
Both parents	98 (42.1%)
Mother only	106 (45.5%)
Other relatives	16 (6.9%)
Father only	8 (3.4%)
Foster family	1 (0.4%)
Interview location	
Boston	73 (31.3%)
Minneapolis	44 (18.9%)
Maine	38 (16.3%)
Toronto	65 (27.9%)
Other (US)	6 (2.6%)
Other (CAN)	6 (2.6%)
Other (outside US/CAN)	1 (0.4%)
Immigration status upon arrival	
Refugee	88 (37.8%)
Green card	28 (12.0%)
Asylum seeker	14 (6.0%)
Other	8 (3.4%)
N/A or unknown	95 (40.8%)
Place of birth	
US	15 (6.4%)
Canada	60 (25.8%)
East Africa	146 (62.7%)
Other	11 (4.7%)
Marital status	
Single	174 (74.7%)
Married	56 (24.0%)

Engaged	2 (0.9%)
Separated	1 (0.4%)
In school or employed	
Yes	202 (86.7%)
No	31 (13.3%)

Table 1. Demographics from Wave 4 data collected between April 2018 and February 2019.

In addition, previously collected SYLS qualitative interview data and focus group data from the ‘Boston Somali Study’ or BSS were used in analyses. BSS focus group participants included 36 Somali males living in Boston MA participated. Average age of BSS participants was 21 years (SD = 2.13 range 18-25), and average length of time in the U.S. was 9.6 years (SD = 4.82, range 1-18). Additional open source data and community and stakeholder interviews provided information related to Somali youth who left Minneapolis to allegedly joined extremist organizations overseas (n = 39).

Project Design and Methods

Our project was built on a decade-long Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) partnership between the PI (Dr. Ellis) and the Somali community; this partnership has led to unprecedented data collection on sensitive issues, including violent extremism and gangs, within a community that is historically very difficult to engage in research. This project drew on both previously collected as well as new datasets; these datasets and the associated methods are described below. Collectively, the data supporting this project included mixed-methods qualitative and quantitative psychosocial research data as well as open source historical data, stakeholder perceptions, and personal narratives of community members affected by youth leaving Minneapolis to allegedly join extremist organizations overseas. These multiple perspectives, data sources, and methods provided an opportunity for triangulation and cross-validation of themes related to the phenomena of gangs and radicalization to violent extremism within the Somali immigrant community.

Multi-Site Somali Youth Longitudinal Study (SYLS)—Quantitative. SYLS participants completed structured survey interviews that included standardized assessments of psychosocial, demographic, behavioral and attitudinal variables including the following constructs: Trauma exposure, mental health, gang affiliation, attitudes towards violent activism, experience of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs, social bonds, discrimination, trust in government, and civic engagement. Selected instruments are detailed in Table 2.

Construct Measured	Instrument	Instrument Description
Trauma	Time 1: War Trauma Screening Scale (WTSS; Layne, Stuvland, Saltzman, Djapo, & Pynoos, 1999), adapted for Somalis (Ellis et al., 2008) Time 2: My Exposure to Violence (ETV; Selner-O'Hagan, Buka, Kindlon, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1998; Brennan, Molnar, Earls, 2007)	The WTSS is a self-report checklist of violence and adversity experienced in the context of war exposure. The WTSS was modified to reduce the number of items to 19 items for ease of administration. 18 items assess experiences of trauma and adversity (such as, "Did you ever directly witness the massive destruction of property?") and 1 item assesses participants' emotional response to the trauma experiences. Location of trauma (e.g. war vs. resettlement) and emotional impact are also assessed. A count of numbers of traumas endorsed is used in analyses. Used at Time 2-4 instead of WTSS: My Exposure to Violence (ETV) assesses the subject's experience of and exposure to different types of violent acts (14 items).
Perceived injustice	Every Day Discrimination (EDD; Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997)	Discrimination is examined with a 15-item self-report measure of on-going, minor cases and long-terms incidences of perceived injustice/ discrimination. The scale consists of two subscales: a nine-item, day-to-day incidences of discrimination and a six-item lifetime experiences of discrimination. Participants are asked to rate how often they experience day-to-day incidences of discrimination (e.g., "You are treated with less courtesy than other people") on a 7-pt Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 = <i>Never</i> to 7 = <i>Almost Every Day</i> . Participants are also asked if they experienced more general discrimination incidences (i.e., "At any time in your life, have you ever been unfairly fired from a job or been unfairly denied a promotion?"), and if so, how many times in their life this happened. Scores across items are summed for a total score.
Social Bonds: Societal identification	Time 2-4: Revised version of Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988)	MSPSS assesses social bonds on a family/peer level, which will allow us to examine the social bonds concept in its entirety. The original measure examines perceived social support from 3 domains: family, peer, and significant other.
Civic Engagement	Civic Engagement Measure (Stepick, Stepick, & Labissiere, 2008) Added for Time 2: Civic Measurement (Flanagan, Syversten, & Stout, 2007) to assess types and frequency of civic engagement	Civic Engagement Measure is a 20-item measure that assesses civic engagement of youth, asking participants to report (<i>Yes/No</i>) on their civic engagement in the past 12 months. Added for Time 2: Civic Measurement scale examines both behaviors and values associated with civic engagement. The civic behaviors subscale contains 12 items (e.g., "Being actively involved in community issues is my responsibility") on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = <i>Strongly Disagree</i> , 5 = <i>Strongly Agree</i>). The civic values subscale contains 10 items examining importance of various values related to civic engagement ("It's important to me to improve race relations" or "It's important to me to be active in politics"), also on a 5-point scale (1 = <i>Not at All Important</i> , 5 = <i>Very Important</i>).
Social Bonds: Attachment to Nation	Adapted Measure of Identification with the National Group (Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006); 16 items	Identification with the Nation scale is a 16-item scale consisting of two subscales: Attachment and Glorification. The Attachment subscale examines one's attachment to his/her nation (e.g., "Being American is an important part of my identity"). The 8-item Glorification subscale examines if one views their cultural group as superior to others (e.g., "Other nations can learn a lot from us"). Both subscales are answered on a 5-point scale (1 = <i>Strongly Disagree</i> and 5 = <i>Strongly Agree</i>).
Gang Involvement	Gang Attitude and Involvement Scale & Neighborhood Gang Scale (Kent & Felkenes, 1998)	Three aspects related to gangs were assessed: Gang affiliation, gang participation, and attitudes toward gangs. Gang affiliation was assessed using 5 items that examined if participant's family members or friends have been involved in gangs. The three-item Gang participation scale examined past and present gang involvement (<i>Yes/No</i>). Two items were taken from the Gang Attitude and Involvement Scale and

	Added for Time 2: Subscale from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (Earls, Brooks-Gun, Raudenbush, & Sampson, 2000).	Neighborhood Gang Scale (Kent & Felkenes, 1998): “Were you ever a member of a gang?” and “Are you currently a member of a gang?” One additional item was asked from the Self-reported Offending and Delinquency scale (Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001), “Have you ever been involved in a gang fight in the past year?” Attitudes toward gangs were assessed with 5 items. Response choices ranged from 1 = <i>Strongly Disagree</i> to 5 = <i>Strongly Agree</i> . Added for Time 2-4: Subscale from the larger gang measure used in the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods to measure perceptions gang members’ involvement in the community.
Crime	Self-Reported Delinquency (SRD; Elliott, Ageton, & Huizinga, 1985; Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001)	The SRD is a 16-item self-report measure used to assess specific delinquent behaviors and frequency of those behaviors in the past year. We removed 4 items that were not relevant to our population, and added items that are more appropriate for refugee young adults from Somalia. In addition, we created one item (“Used someone else’s username and password, without their permission or knowledge, to log onto a computer or internet account?”) because it was relevant for our population who frequently use technology. A composite score is created by summing the items.
Radicalized beliefs	Activism and Radicalism Intention Scales (ARIS; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009)	The ARIS is a 9-item self-report measure. Items assess types of political activism understood/supported by the respondent. Ratings are made on a 7-pt Likert scale from 1 = <i>Disagree Completely</i> and 7 = <i>Agree Completely</i> . Four items address non-violent activism (e.g., “I can understand someone who would donate money”) and 5 statements address radical intentions (e.g., “I can understand someone who would participate in protest even if it might turn violent”). Higher scores indicate more activism/radicalism.

Table 2. Selected constructs/instruments from SYLS battery

Multi-Site Somali Youth Longitudinal Study (SYLS)—Qualitative in-depth

interviews. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with a subset of SYLS participants (n = 29) between 2014 and 2015. In-depth interviews focused on changes in life experience over the past year. Interviews were transcribed and coded for recurring themes; these code segments were then clustered and analyzed.

Boston Somali Study (BSS) Focus Group Data. BSS’ focus group guide was organized around three major topic areas: Somali piracy, Somali-American involvement in terrorism, and Somali-American involvement in gangs. Discussion was prompted by presenting a series of newspaper headlines that addressed each of the three topic areas. Focus groups were transcribed, coded for emerging themes, and these themes clustered and analyzed.

Case Studies. Open source data of youth who were alleged to have left Minneapolis to join Al-Shabaab, ISIS, or Al-Nusra were pulled to develop case summaries. Additional interviews with stakeholders and family/friends/acquaintances of these youth were conducted to augment case descriptions and provide a deeper understanding of community context and

perceptions. Case summaries and stakeholder interviews were analyzed for themes related to gangs, violent extremism, and their potential intersection.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using multiple analytic approaches.

1. Descriptive analyses were conducted for variables over time and also CVE exposure/response variables.
2. Latent Transition Analyses (LTA) examined co-occurrence of attitudinal and behavioral variables, stability among latent classes, and predictors of change. Data first were analyzed using a Latent Class Analysis (LCA) approach to verify the optimal latent class structure. Second, an LTA was conducted in order to test the stability of latent class membership over time or, in other words, the incidences of transition between latent classes, controlling for measurement error.
3. Comparative analyses of radicalization and antisocial behavior was examined using path analyses; in building the hypothesized mediation model for antisocial behavior and radicalization to violence, the association between 1) the candidate independent variables and dependent variables, 2) the candidate mediator variables and dependent variables, and 3) the candidate independent variables and candidate mediator variables were tested in separate models; all models were adjusted for age, gender, and years in the U.S. or Canada.
4. Interviews with family and friends of youth who joined Al-Shabaab were analyzed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); IPA is an approach to qualitative data that allows the participants and the researcher the flexibility to construct meaning from their experience without the constraints of predetermined expectations (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

5. Data from both the BSS focus groups and SYLS in-depth interviews were jointly analyzed using qualitative methods; authors reviewed all identified code reports from both focus groups and in-depth interviews and noted observations within and across data sources.

Project Findings

Overall, radicalization to violent extremism was seen by participants as a remote and irrelevant issue in the Somali community. Participants distanced themselves from the idea of radicalization to violent extremism and those who participated in radical acts or beliefs. In contrast, gang involvement was characterized as a major problem for Somali communities, and a product of the marginalization associated with being a refugee in Canada or the United States (see Ellis, Decker, Abdi, Miller, Bixby, & Lincoln, under review).

While openness to violent extremism steadily declined over the six year period of study for both males and females, and within both the U.S. and Canada, positive attitudes towards gangs showed a more uneven trajectory. Gang support decreased between waves 1 and 2, but increased between waves 2 and 3 and remained level at time 4. This suggests that while openness to violent extremism may diminish with age, psychosocial factors that perpetuate gang presence may continue to present challenges for the Somali community.

Path models predicting antisocial behavior and openness to violent extremism were developed and compared. These models indicated that discrimination was associated with both antisocial behavior and openness to violent extremism, and that in each case this association is mediated by social bonds. The models held true across time and gender. These findings suggest that diverse forms of antisocial attitudes and behavior may share common roots (see Cardeli, Sideridis, Lincoln, Abdi, Horgan, & Ellis, 2019, in press).

Latent class and latent transition analyses conducted with waves 1 and 2 indicated that some participants expressed support for gangs without expressing support for violent radicalism, those who expressed support for violent radicalism typically also expressed support for gangs and demonstrated civic engagement (see Ellis, Sideridis, Miller, Abdi, & Lincoln, under review). Furthermore, although males tended to show positive transitions away from gangs and support for violent radicalism over time, this was less likely to occur among those with past trauma exposure (see Ellis, Sideridis, Miller, Abdi, & Lincoln, in preparation).

Among those youth who were alleged to have joined extremist groups, community members perceived that the urge to protect youth from pervasive and negative gang influences contributed to the problem of radicalization. Specifically, religious involvement was seen as a protective influence and even signs of unusual and isolating involvement at mosques were seen as less threatening than youth being on the street and accessible to gangs. Other community members noted that for youth who were seeking a way out of gangs, religious extremism seemed to offer a way to prove themselves. Thus the presence of gangs may have created conditions that contributed to the risk for radicalization (Abdi, Issa, Miller, & Ellis, in preparation).

Overall, there was limited exposure to CVE activities with only 18% of the sample reporting having participated in CVE activities at either Time 3 or Time 4, and 25% having heard about them. Of those who had heard about CVE activities, most were from Boston, Minneapolis, or Toronto. The most common avenues through which youth heard about CVE activities were local community associations (30%), mosques (23%), schools (22%), and friends (22%). Average emotional response to hearing or learning about CVE activities was more positive than negative ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.6$; Likert scale of 1-7, where 7 is most positive), but notably 43% of those who reported knowledge of CVE activities also reported an overall

negative emotional response to CVE. The lowest level of positive emotional response to CVE was found in Minneapolis (mean = 3.8), and the highest was in Toronto Canada (5.0). Average emotional response to CVE was not correlated with radicalism intentions score (RIS; $r = -0.02$, $p = 0.8$) even when controlling for attitudes about government injustice ($r = 0.02$, $p = 0.8$). Thus it appears that CVE activities are not widely experienced within the Somali community, and while the majority of those who have heard about CVE had overall positive reactions to it an important subset felt negatively about CVE activities (Ellis, Miller, & Abdi, in preparation).

Implications for Criminal Justice Policy and Practice in the U.S.

A major question facing practitioners and policymakers today is whether CVE can and should build on the much longer history of knowledge related to gang involvement and gang prevention. Overall, our project suggests that while gang involvement and radicalization to violence are unique phenomena that should not be conflated, the two issues are interrelated in complex and important ways. Both may be at least partially the product of adverse psychosocial experiences (e.g. discrimination) and weak social bonds; this suggests that interventions that target structural problems such as discrimination and marginalization may address diverse antisocial problems. Furthermore, the presence of gangs in communities may create conditions that facilitate radicalization either by drawing parental attention away from the potential risk of extremism (as was noted in the case of several youth who were alleged to have joined extremist groups) or by seeming to offer a means of redemption for those who seek to leave gangs. Finally, our project suggests that the Somali community is deeply concerned about gang influences on their youth, and eager for supportive interventions in this area; in contrast, CVE was seen as less relevant and appeared to solicit mixed reactions. Reactions to CVE

differed by region; it may be useful to further examine approaches used in regions with more positive responses (e.g., Toronto, Canada).

Based on the findings of this project, we recommend that policies and programs target adversities that may underlie multiple antisocial problems (e.g., gang involvement, delinquency, and radicalization to violence) rather than focusing solely on radicalization to violence. Programs and policies that seek to diminish or address trauma, marginalization, and discrimination are likely to be broadly accepted and to create positive outcomes across a diverse range of problems, including those that community members see as most significant. Violence prevention programming that dually focuses on reducing societal discrimination while also fostering social connection and acceptance of diverse identities might be particularly valuable for Somali-American young adults.

In addition, our findings suggest that positive contributions to society through high levels of civic engagement typically co-occur with attitudes in support of violent extremism. This suggests that some youth may be seeking ways of making change through constructive means; programs that foster civic engagement may serve to channel activism in positive directions and lead to both positive change at the community level while simultaneously diminishing frustration and radicalism to violence at the individual level. Positive Youth Development is one approach that supports civic engagement and connection among youth, and could offer a valuable framework for practitioners and policymakers seeking to build more resilient communities.

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