



The author(s) shown below used Federal funding provided by the U.S. Department of Justice to prepare the following resource:

Document Title: **Helpful and Harmful Practices for
Addressing Alleged Transnational Crimes in
Somali-American Communities**

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Document Number: **252137**

Date Received: **May 2019**

Award Number: **2013-ZA-BX-0008**

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Helpful and Harmful Practices for Addressing Alleged Transnational Crimes in Somali-American Communities

OVERVIEW

This study aimed to build scientific knowledge on the emergence and trajectories of alleged violent extremism and trafficking in persons in Somali-American communities in the U.S. It aimed to generate better understanding of possible convergence issues involved so as to inform prevention. This part of the study identified helpful and harmful practices for addressing transnational crimes.

METHOD

This was a three-year, multi-site, mixed methods study informed by push and pull theory. Data collection involved review of public sources on the possible involvement of Somali-Americans in these crimes, and ethnographic interviews of young adults (n=39), parents (n=21), community leaders and service providers (n=30), and criminal justice practitioners (n=26) in three American cities with Somali communities: 40 in Minneapolis-St. Paul; 40 in Columbus; 36 in Nashville. The investigators used the data gathered to conduct qualitative analyses using Atlas/ti software and a grounded theory approach.

CHALLENGES

Practitioners and policymakers from communities, law enforcement, and other government agencies may not be aware of the convergence of risks and practices for different crime types, including transnational crimes such as trafficking in persons and radicalization. The negative convergence of risks and practices occurs when the risks and community and/or law enforcement practices combine in ways that contribute to negative outcomes. This may allow for negative convergent practices which do not solve, and can potentially worsen, the problems at hand.

FINDINGS

Negative Convergence Factors

Sub Categories	Factors
Compounded Multifaceted Victimization and Miscommunication	Perceived discrimination due to racial and ethnic identity Perceived social exclusion and discrimination because Muslims were regarded as linked to terrorism Victims were blamed for not reporting crimes
Sex Work and Violent Extremism Were Viewed as Reflective of Individual Morals	Sex work and violent extremism were viewed through a moral lens
Weak Collective Efficacy	Limited services available to Somali youth Sense of communal disempowerment Inadequate Somali representations Cultural stigma prevents female's testimony
Limited, Securitized, and Distrustful Relationship with Law Enforcement	Community perception that law enforcement isn't doing enough to address crime Desire to resolve issues within community as opposed to going outside or involving law enforcement Law enforcement overreacts to situations alienates the community Distrust of federal law enforcement Distrust of government-funded programming Perception that law enforcement works against the community
Lack of Familiarity with and Reluctance to Cooperate with Criminal Justice Agencies	Limited knowledge of criminal justice system Witness intimidation for reporting and testifying Challenges law enforcement face when investigating crime

Recommended Practices by the Somali Community

Sub Categories	Factors
Build Effective and Sustainable Prevention Programming	Address upstream factors to prevent radicalization Programs should be community led Strengthen prevention programs Education can work against radicalization Support mosques as a space for promoting healthy development Strengthen families
Strengthen Law Enforcement and Community Relations	Improve community cooperation with federal and local law enforcement
Increase Programmatic Emphasis on Community's Needs	Go to the source of the problems which is gangs Develop community organizations and supports Facilitate economic development
Avoid Profiling Somalis and Related Discriminatory Practices	Avoid targeting by law enforcement Avoid Islamophobic media coverage Stop implementing CVE projects in the Somali-American community Research should be community led

RECOMMENDATIONS

Practitioners and policymakers from communities, law enforcement, and other government agencies should recognize important areas of recommended convergence that would offer opportunities for strengthening criminal justice and community policies, programs, and practices.

Recommendations to Strengthen Criminal Justice Policy and Programs

- Criminal justice professionals should avoid actions or excesses that violate individual's civil rights and liberties or which can be experienced as profiling an ethnic or religious minority.
- Community members or family members of youth and young adults should be educated about possible behavioral signs which could reflect early involvement in violent extremism or trafficking, or other illegal activities.
- Community-based programs that strengthen the support of victims and their families, including where indicated, mental health treatment, advocacy, and alternative sentencing should be established.
- Law enforcement and community partnership with ethnic and racial minority communities should be strengthened and expanded, using community policing approaches. Recruitment of members of the ethnic immigrant community to the local police force should be encouraged.
- Community leaders and members should be informed and educated about the U.S. criminal justice system, including police roles and mandates, the structure of the system, its procedures, principles of pre-trial release and detention, adjudication, sentencing, and appeals.

Recommendations to Strengthen Community Practices

- Prevention programs should not be stand-alone programs for either violent extremism or trafficking in persons because they are likely to either be redundant, confusing, or stigmatizing to the communities being served, and are unlikely to achieve sufficient community buy-in to be sustainable.
- Community-based prevention programs should be built with an overall frame that is informed by a public health approach, and which includes general prevention and addresses both common and selected risks for violent extremism and trafficking in persons.
- Social and economic opportunities among Somali-Americans and other adversely impacted ethnic and racial communities should be pursued and developed.
- Programmatic emphasis on gangs among ethnic and racial minority communities should be increased and expanded, including implementing proven gang related, violence prevention models
- Journalists and media outlets reporting on ethnic and religious minorities and crimes should report objectively, with fairness and balance, and be prudent in not providing knowingly or unwittingly negative portrayals of a community.
- Research on communities and possible involvement in or resilience to violent extremism and/or trafficking should have significant community collaboration.

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