

Understanding Somali gangs

Interview paper

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2010

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## Literature Review

Each year 3,000 new refugees and immigrants flock to Minnesota. This does not include the substantial number of non-immigrant ethnic groups relocating from other States. Somali refugees are part of this growing figure.

Minnesota now has the largest Somali population in the United States. This has changed the social and economic landscape of cities such as Minneapolis. Upon arriving to Minnesota, Somali families and youth begin running an obstacle course of challenges, many of which will be covered in this literature review ("Place to Call Home," 2004, p. 12).

At a meeting I attended, a Somali youth leader stated, "The Somali community needs to come to terms with the issue of our youth joining the gangs. If we don't face it now, then we will have a generation of youth that will not be reachable through community outreach... Without immediate intervention, the Somali youth will be lost to gang life." (Anonymous, personal communication, Nov 22nd, 2008). This statement rings a similar tune throughout the articles I have researched.

### Somali History

In order to fully understand why Somali youth is turning to gang life, we need to look at the history of the war that they endured and their journey to Minnesota. With the fall of colonialism, Said Barre's brutal regime took control of Somali in 1969. Somalis systematically rejected control because of his tribalistic policies that favored some tribes while disempowering others. (Searle, 1992, pg. 4). In 1991 Said Barre was removed from power and a civil war

broke out. This forced many Somalis to flee to refugee camps in other countries. America gave refugee status to the Somalis, and Minnesota was a one a few locations desired. It was known for it's quality social services, health care system, and education. Sixty thousand Somalis landed in Minnesota for their new home. They steadily immigrated to Minneapolis and other cities in Minnesota. (Darboe, 2003, p. 459).

### Affects of Poverty and Mental Health

One third of the refugees came directly from refugee camps. They witnessed extreme violence, which made it harder to adjust after leaving the war-torn areas. These situations included fatal violence and destruction against their homes and family members. The families were not educated about mental health conditions, specifically Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. When it came to the mental health care of the Somali youth, many families assumed that once they had moved to Minnesota and began their new lives, the youth would easily adapt, and the healthy environment would outweigh experiences related to war. Unfortunately this did not happen. (Hill, 2007).

Refugee families found themselves living in poverty stricken areas. Increasing their financial hardship, the government assistance expired after a few months. The parents were working minimum wage jobs, and were unprepared for the cost of living once the assistance discontinued. Living in poverty and unfamiliar with the economic system in Minnesota, these refugee families survived on bare minimums of employment, education, transportation, and community support. Due to economic hardship and parents being busy trying to survive, majority of the youth were unable to participate in extracurricular activities and were left to create their own identity.

(Adan, 2008, p.14).

### Language Barrier and Role Reversal

Family dynamics abruptly shifted. Parents heavily relied on their children to assist them with paperwork, bank accounts, and education. It is important to note that the Somali language was not in written form until the 1970s. In the lifetime of the parents, they were introduced to their native language in writing, English as a second language, new technology in America, and the "text-talk" of the younger generations. With the overwhelming exposure to new forms of communication, the teens had free range to disconnect from authority and hide their school performance and behavior. (Abdi, 1998, p. 327).

Some external resources felt that the Somali immigrants were too strict in their lifestyle, so they didn't reach out. For the few organizations that did offer activities to the youth, the Somali families believed that mainstream organizations' sole agenda was to convert their children to Christianity. They feared that these organizations would undermine Somali norms and values. Parents struggled to evaluate and tend to their children's needs. The communication gap and new family roles created a rift between the parent and child. (Adan, 2008, p.19).

### Empowerment through Profession

Prior to the civil war, many Somalis were educated in Somalia and had good quality jobs in engineering, sciences, medical fields, and administration. With the educator standards in the United States, they were unable to work in their trade. Desirable opportunities became available as schools opened their doors for them to become teachers

within their communities. These teachers deserve credit for integrating a generation of Somali students into mainstream society and assisting them to become valuable assets to the community. They were the youth's bridge between the home and education. (Pederson, 2006, p. 32).

Initially the Somali students were weak in English; however, they excelled in math and science. This is likely related to the proper instructions provided by the Somali teachers. These teachers worked closely with the Somali community because the well-being and success of this youth was their responsibility. They were an extension of the family and the missing link. They made certain that none of the Somali children were left behind. (Adan, 2008, p.24).

#### No Child Left Behind

There is a strong correlation found between kids being recognized by the teachers as having behavioral issues, and later, the community identifying them as troublemakers. Without the kids receiving early intervention, as we are addressing for Somali community, they often ended up dropping out from school, abusing drugs, and eventually joining the gangs. The "No Child Left Behind" Act was established as an attempt to set a universal standard of education in America. The "No Child Left Behind" Act (NCLB) was unfortunately a change that failed the Somali youth. In 2002 the link between the home and school was taken away when the education standards changed, and these Somali teachers were laid off. Teachers in mainstream public schools were required to have a Bachelor's degree, State certifications, and verification that they are educated in all subjects being taught. (Morse, 2005, p. 2).

Public schools no longer had the Somali teachers, and some of them relocated to charter schools because they were not required to follow the NCLB Act. Some of the Somali students were relocating to these charter schools as well. It is also good to note that each child that left the public school took approximately \$10,000 annually of funding from that school district. With consideration to the poverty, mental health challenges, and communication gap in the home, the NCLB Act was the straw that broke the camel's back. The public schools became unequipped to accommodate the needs of the remaining Somali students and the newer immigrants. The newer students that did arrive ended up being placed in classes with students of same age instead of their education level, (Velasco & Fix, 2000, p.12).

### Homelessness

With so many things working against the Somali youth, they found themselves in a new world in which they felt unwelcomed on all sides. The parents and children had a role reversal due to the heavy reliance on their children. Role-change had created tension from the loss of respect for the elders, while the youth didn't have anyone to identify with as they grew into adolescents and young adults. There was a general lack of acceptance from one another. Unable to relate to their parents in regards to the treatment from the non-Somali community and with the parents feeling disrespected, as a form of punishment, the Somali clan would abandon the youth. This was their last form of social support. A large and growing number of Somalis were becoming homeless. One year after "No Child Left Behind" Act took effect, 120 Somali children were considered to be chronically homeless. This number

did not include the youth that stayed outside of shelters. Out casted youth had been found taking refuge in the staircases of the Cedar-Riverside high rises. Occasionally an older brother-type figure would take responsibility for 10-15 homeless peers. This individual would work and maintain a small apartment. These apartments would only contain mattresses on the floor, and the others would sleep there at night.” (Anonymous, personal communication, Nov 1st, 2008). A significant number of the Somali youth were relying on others in their situation for social support, community, and survival. (Adan, 2008, p.20).

#### Formation of the Somali Gang

In desperation to feel connected and needed, the at-risk Somali youth found comfort in one another. They started to restructure their new community and a collective social identity. This led to one of the very first formations of a Somali gang called, Rough Tough Somalis (RTS). They were different from other common gangs, because they were known to be non-violent youth that simply wanted to be heard. Many of the original members were able to successfully transform into model citizens. (Hill, 2008) .

The second formation of the gang by the Somali youth is called, Hot Boyz. Like the RTS, Hot Boyz' original members left the group successfully. They even started their own rap music group. Unfortunately the same cannot be said about the Somali youth that joined later on. In the year 2005, a string of robberies in the city of Minneapolis was the first sign of the Somali youth forming gangs with criminal activity. They were found to have a fairly organized gang structure. (Aynte, 2007). They are known to be very aggressive, carry weapons, and commit



violent crimes. They are also alleged to have committed armed robberies. (Adan, 2008, p.28).

The 3<sup>rd</sup> gang is called, the Somali Mafia. They are very organized and aggressive. They are strong on gang loyalty and are actively seeking new members. Somali Mafia is known to carry deadly weapons. They are known for attacking Somali shopkeepers and businesses in the Somali malls in Minneapolis. With these three gangs under police radar, the Somali Mafia is considered to be the most dangerous. There are fifty-two Somali youths identified as gang members. This is 1% of all individuals identified as gang members in Minnesota. (Adan, 2008, p.28).

#### Gang Activity and Transformation

At a Somali community gathering of November 2008, a prominent Somali youth leader explained that Somali gangs are changing and becoming more dangerous. He informed the community that there is one significant characteristic of the Somali gangs that distinguishes them from other gangs. They typically do not have a particular leader. Even without an established hierarchy, the older members are treated with more respect than the newer members. Each of these gangs are known as criminal gangs. They have started to develop patterns similar to larger gangs from other communities. They are networking with one another and temporarily letting go of tribal issues. Forgiving the tribal division under certain circumstances can create more violence when the situations become heated. An example was given that when crowds become intoxicated, they can break into violent fights simply because of their tribal alliances.” (Anonymous, personal communication, Nov 1st, 2008). Ironically one of the sources for they’re being out-casted from their families, creates hate among them on the street.

The gang members are also visiting each other during incarcerations to show support and pass information. As a drastic display of loyalty, younger gang members are taking responsibility of crimes committed by other gang members that already have a criminal record. Their goal is that the younger members who have not gone through the corrections system would likely be sent to juvenile detention centers with lesser sentences. After incarceration the youth rely on the gang life more than before. Incarcerated, Somali gang members acquire more skills leading them to enhance their criminal skills, while increasing their street credibility and recognition. (Adan, 2008, p.18).

#### Somali Youth Intervention & Observation

The Somali gang activity became more prevalent in 2006 on the Eid holiday following the holy month of Ramadan. The Mall of America had to be completely shut down due to Somali gang fights with a non-Somali gang. The incident started on the South side, level three at the food court, and it spread to the East side of the mall near the rotunda. Unable to control the situation, security decided to close down the mall until peace could be restored. The Mall of America and the Bloomington Police department were taken by surprise because prior to this incident, the Somali gangs were not of concern to the Mall of America.” (Anonymous, personal communication, Nov 17th, 2008). In 2007 arrangements were made with the Mall of America to bring in Somali youth from a local Muslim Community Center for intervention. The Mall of America accepted this offer. On that Eid holiday, two volunteers came to MOA. One of the Security Supervisors was so impressed with the volunteers that he requested to have more volunteers next year. In October of 2008, five Somali youth volunteers came to the mall. The volunteers were dressed in

Islamic clothing so that they would be recognized as youth that follow Islam, which is considered an ideal role model in the Somali culture. (Anonymous, personal communication, Nov 17th, 2008).

In observation of the last few years, it was known that the Somali gang members and other mischievous youth gathered at the South food court after the movies. With this in mind, they decided to have three of the youth volunteers at the food court. After the 8 o'clock movies, over 100 Somali youth gathered at that location. The volunteers stopped 10 separate confrontations. There were two major interventions that were observed by the security captain. A security officer noticed a possible gang member who was banned from the MOA for six months. He approached him for identification. While the officer looked at his identification, the gang members started gathering around the officer. The Somali volunteer noticed this and immediately walked through the crowd. He greeted the individual with the greeting, "Asalaamu alaikum wa rahmatullah wa barakatuhu (May peace and blessings of Allah be upon you)." He shook his hand and shared a hug. He explained that the officer was trying to verify his identification and that it was in his best interest to remain patient. The officer confirmed that the individual/gang member was no longer on no-trespassing restrictions and was allowed to be at the mall. (Anonymous, personal communication, Nov 17th, 2008).

Another incident that was observed by one of the volunteers was at the food court. A tall Somali youth quickly stood up from his chair with an upset expression on his face. Four police officers and three security officers were watching closely and were approaching him. One of the youth volunteers initiated an interaction with the upset

individual. Again he greeted him, shook his hand, and whispered something in his ear. The upset Somali youth nodded his head in agreement, buttoned up his shirt, and sat back down in the chair. The security and police officers appeared surprised and asked the volunteer what he said to him. He said, "I told him to fear Allah."

The Mall of America Security Supervisor expressed gratitude and being impressed with the outcomes that day. The supervisor stated that he wants to keep the volunteers longer into the night. He explained that when the volunteers were at the mall, there were not any arrests; however, as soon as they left, they had two large altercations and four arrests. (Anonymous, personal communication, Nov 17th, 2008).

#### Community Denial & Consequences

The first community meeting to address Somali gang activity that I attended was in 2006. It was in a Muslim Community Center in a highly populated Somali area. In addition to the Somali community, there were other organizations present. During this first meeting, I observed many Somalis that would comment only in the Somali language. Initially I was under the assumption that they didn't speak English; however, two community members stated that they do speak English but chose to speak in Somali. The explanation given was that those individuals say they don't have anything to say to the outside communities. From this observation it has become apparent that there is a stronger need for continuous dialog. I went to three community meetings in 2006 and 2007. At these meetings, members of the community openly denied problems of gang issues in the Somali community.

Since December 2007, seven Somali youths have been killed. One Somali was killed the day before the end of

Islamic holy month, Ramadan. (Chanen, 2008) In 2008 the meetings had been shifting to more awareness of the growing gang activity. After loosing youth in gang shootings, committed by other Somali youth, the police department, and the other larger communities having open and productive conversations in these meetings. There is a flowing dialog to discuss possible solutions to the Somali gangs. (Anonymous, personal communication, Nov 17th, 2008).

### Community Acceptance and Outreach

The community seems sincerely shocked by the severity of the problem being addressed at these meetings. There have been attempts by the Somali and Muslim community to stop the violence. Somali community meeting, at Abu Baker Masjid, a Minneapolis Police Officer and a non-Somali, Muslim Civil Rights group was present to show support and to brain-storm ideas to build bridges. There is a common interest to work together. Members talked about using all Muslim community locations to assist the youth. This included the Islamic University of Minnesota offering classes and transportation for the youth. (Anonymous, personal communication, Nov 22nd, 2008)

I observed one community member mention that the community could also start an organization that offers scholarships for Somali youth. To this comment another community member stated, "It's great to give incentives like scholarships to our youth, but we have to be aware that many of our youth have been incarcerated and have drug addictions and other addictions. If we want to give out scholarships, then perhaps it should be in the fields that will empower the Somali youth and put them in the fields, to better assist our youth that are left behind. By

observing other minority communities, it seems that the problem needs to be fixed from within the community." (Anonymous, personal communication, Nov 22nd, 2008).

Another Somali community member, an attorney and an immigration advocate, stated in the meeting, "A key problem is (the) lack of cultural educational programs for the Somali youth. They can feel isolated and might form or join a gang to fulfill their needs... Lack of government funding for immigrant youth programs also is a problem... More money is allocated for how to deal with crime, instead of preventing it." (Anonymous, personal communication, Nov 22nd, 2008).

### Conclusion

As community started to accept the issue of gangs, one major difference I observed was the participation of the youth. There were three youth organizations present at this meeting. One of the group members was a main speaker. Another youth member works with an organization that resides in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood and was urging Somali youths to volunteer. He explained that the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood has the largest concentration of Somali families, and there are only three youth workers who serve more the 300 families. At the end of the meeting, one of the youth groups added, "In this meeting we didn't talk about any solutions, because this meeting was to come together to acknowledge a problem and for the community to talk. Next meeting we will talk about actual program establishment and solutions." (Anonymous, personal communication, Nov 22nd, 2008).

In collecting information, I found that there is not enough research or published literature to completely cover the

vast issues surrounding the Somali youth and gang activity. This is likely due to the fact that Somali youth gangs are still new and are small in numbers. A review of the literature has shown the history of the Somali refugees, some of the main challenges they faced, and then the formation of criminal gangs as a social support but it's missing the voices of gang members to better understand the issue. Therefore I decided to interview gang members to understand this issue and to get their voices out.

## Method

The participants of my study consisted of six Somali males, who are all actively in a gang. Their respective family heritages are all Somali. All of the participant gang members were over the age of 16. The Cedar-Riverside high rise has predominately Somali population and is a known area of gang members. A resident at the Cedar-Riverside high rise knew a few gang members, and he introduced me to all of the 6-gang members. They were all interviewed in privacy and separate. Prior to soliciting the study participants, a research proposal was submitted to and approved by the Human Subject Review Board. The data for this study was collected through a total of six face-to-face interviews with the participants. These interviews were conducted at a location chosen by the participants. The interviews were semi-structured. A copy of the interview questions is attached in the appendix. The participants were provided with a copy of the interview questions prior to giving consent. With the permission of the participants, the interviews were audio recorded. After the interviews were recorded, they were downloaded to a password-secured laptop, and then deleted from the audio recorder. After all of the data was collected, I transcribed the interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of the participants. After the transcription was complete, the data was analyzed for emerging themes through the use of conceptually created categories.



## Findings

All of the participants have been given a pseudonym 'G' plus a number, so the readers can easily understand the findings. I interviewed total of 7 participants. Participant G3 asked me to not include his interview; therefore, G3's interview is not used for this paper or the findings.

### Age & ethnicity

All of the participants were male and their ethnicity is Somali. G2, G4, G5, & G7 were born in Somalia. G1 & G6 were born in Kenya. G1 & G6 moved to the United States in the year 1996, G5 & G7 in the year 2002, G4 in the year 2004, and G2 in the year 2006. At the time of the interview, G1 & G2 were both 18 years old, G4 was 17 years old, G7 was 19 years old, and G5 & G6 did not disclosed their ages.

### Ages, gang participation, and years in gang life

G1, G5, & G6 stated that they were the original founders of their gangs, while G2 & G7 stated that the gang was already in place when they joined their gang. G4 stated that he was one of the founders along with his other friends. At the time of gang initiation, G1 was 14 years old, G2 was 16 years old, G4 was 11 years old, G5 & G6 did not disclose this information, and G7 was 15 years of age. G1 has been participating in a gang for four years, G2 for two years, G4 for seven years, G5 for four years, G6 for four years, and G7 for four years.

### Why the gang?

When I asked the participants, “Why did you decide to join the gang,” their reply to the question echoed a universal tone that goes back to the identity theory that I found in some literature reviews regarding different youth gangs or as to why youth join gangs. G1 stated that he “wanted to be part of something.” G6 wanted “to fit in.” G4 stated, “Gang is like, when you have nothing, like family, you need respect. And I join the gang, because I kind a wanted to get respect from the street.” G7 stated, “I was fifteen, and so because of the street and public school.” G5 declined to answer this question. The rest of his responses were very short in answer. G7 elaborated. He stated, “When you got no one to defend for you anywhere, you gotta start or join gang, man. You just gotta cuz in school, on the street, you gonna find trouble, if you live in this city of Minneapolis. So you gotta do something when you got no one.” As Interviews went further, I noticed similar expressions by other gang members as well.

### Why the gang: WITH probing questions

I followed up with probing questions to collect additional information as to why the participants started or joined gangs. G1, who formed his gang stated, “I did it, because I wanted to take over the other gangs, city, and other things. There were other gangs, so we were trying to survive.” G2 stated, “There were other gangs, like African American gangs and Mexican gangs, and so we were trying to be like them. And so they were jumping some of us, and so we wanted to protect each other.” G4 gave similar explanation. He stated, “We kind a felt like we left out, and we kind a be like the Mexican or African American, or the American, like the white. Because they were all

protected, and they respect and so we wanted respect. And they got from the street, and we wanted to get that too.”

#### Initiation to the gang and the benefits

When I asked the participants about the process of becoming a gang member, they all correlated it to proving oneself to the gang. Examples were to do something “stupid” and “earning the stripes.” Some of the proving activities they did was jump (attack) someone or to steal money from a store, actions intimidating a rival non-Somali gang. When asked about the benefits, all of them mentioned brotherhood, money, and protection. None of the participants mentioned any type of ceremony or any traditions specific to their individual gang or other gangs.

#### Gangs and family

When I asked the participants if anyone else in the family or close friends were gangs, G2, G4, G5, & G6 stated that they did not. G1 & G7 did have family members in the gang. It was not clarified whether the family members were in the same gang. G7 declined to answer any further probing questions on this subject. G1 stated:

Yeah, cousins, some of them, but they did not influence me to join the gang. I make the choice myself. I am my own role model. I made the decision early in life. I know that one of my cousin did not join, because his mother was in college, and she took good care of him, and there were not a lot of mothers in college. I check up on her every now and then, and she just finished her bachelors. Something like medical lab.

As the interview progressed with G1, he mentioned some comparisons between his cousin’s life and his life. He

described how they turned out different. He correlated this his cousin having a mother who care, and G1 did not having anyone that cared for him. I have put those findings under “growing up”.

### Growing up

My next question was, “Where did you spend your childhood/teenage years?” G1 spoke about his cousin and his mother. G1 stated, “My childhood basically a loner. I had no mom or sisters like my cousin. And his mother was also working and his sister was always in college, but like that was his key to know what’s up. I did not have that. I know that everyone is an individual like most of them, like me did not have a father in my life, or father figure or parents or someone that can put their foot down... that is like already a bad start.” G2 shared that he grew up playing sports, but he was not very good at school. He described that the area he lived in forced one to join gangs. He stated, “I don’t remember much of my childhood. I remember playing sports with friends. I was bad at school. And even one of my friends join this program, in which they help immigrants go to college, and they did ask me about it. But I knew I was no good in school, so I told them, ‘No’.” All of the participants avoid speaking about their families or guardians. They shared a common appreciation for sports and school in their younger years, until they became older and were faced with worries. G6 stated, “I had to go to school, and I liked it. But like, as I grew up, I had to go to school. Because it was the law, so I did. I started my gang at my neighborhood and also school. Teachers didn’t care about us, so like, we had to find respect, you know.” In all of their replies, each participant commented their roles as Somali kids in school and on the streets, but not their roles within family dynamics.

### Before entering the United States

I asked the participants about their lives before arriving to the United States. G1, G2, G6, & G7 stated that they were too young to remember. G2 said that in 1991, he was two years old, when the civil war caused them to move to a refugee camp. G4 gave a short reply, "It was okay, okay life." He did not want to reply to any probing questions. G5 also gave a short reply by stating, "...laid back, just living life, and that's it."

### How others react

All of the participants provided a lot of information to the question, "How do others react when they find out you are in a gang?" They shared information that relates to family, how the participants view themselves, how they deal with being gang members. G1 went back to his previous example. He said, "No one cares, because no one is there. My friend I told you about, the one whose mom is in college, he tried being a gangsta, because I did. And he got his ass whooped, and he couldn't come out no more from the house. He was watched like a hawk by his mom and like even school. He got put in charter school, and like I was left in the public school. He was gone, and I stayed. And like no body looked for me."

G2 did not answer the question directly. He stated, "When I am with my gang, I feel like I am in control." In response to the question about the reactions of others, G4 described himself as two people. He described, "Other people just react different, like you're good kid at home, but you're not. Because when you're outside, you're like two people." I asked him if his family did not know about his gang activity, but he did not want to reply. G5 gave a

very short answer similar to his other replies. He told me, "It's good and bad, and that's that." He did not want to reply to probing questions. G6's response seemed to shed light on his thoughts about why some people become gang members. He stated, "I know some parents that their kid is going gang. They would probably send them back home, or send them to a father figure-dude or something... Only way they can deal with you is to get you out of this place. And those that don't get out of this place are the one that became gang members." G7's expressed that nobody is there for him. He stated, "No one is around, man. Shit, if I had them, I would not have been in this shit."

### Gang and Affects

I asked the participants some questions about gang life and how it has affected their lifestyle and daily interactions with people. G1 & G7 are the only two participants who replied to these questions. It was not suggested as to why others declined to comment on this topic. They simply stated they did not want to reply. G1 gave an elaborate reply to this question. G1 stated:

It became a way of life. And I was forgotten. And then I got caught up with everything. After a while though things did not stay the same, because it was not legal. Remember, I talked about the consequences I did not know about when I was young? Well, after a while my friends started to get locked up. If my mother would have done it, it be good. Because it be contained, and I would be saved. But...you are now forced into stay, even when you get out, because like, now you have a record. And so what are you going to do? You go to jail, and my friend went to his mom. I went to the streets, and he went to school and his room. Eventually he forgot, and he did not have drugs, or

record, or streets to remind him, while I did.

G7 echoed what G1 had stated. G7 explained “Record and reps. Funny, huh? I mean record and reps. Like, that’s what I noticed people have for going to college. Like, my resume is record and reps. Record is my resume, and reps are my reference. Shit, man, it’s all the same, just one is acceptable by the society of the rulers.”

#### Thoughts on gangs by the gang members

When asked what they thought of gangs now, all of the participants had short negative replies towards the gang lifestyle; however, they also explained that this is their only remaining option. G1 gave a reply that reflected the other responses. He exclaimed, “Most of my friends who were my gang buddy are now 15 to life. Bullets injure some, and now I just see it as stupid, man. Wasted my time. I wish I had done something better with my life. Man, it’s too late. I got record and got no skills, but streets skills. And like, who gonna give me the time of day, huh? You? Man, like, even drugs. Man, I do it so much that I do it everyday, and like alcohol and like no way out.” G1 continued his reply to the same question. He shared his explanation as to how glamorizing gang life plays part in youth joining gangs. He related, “Man, look at the society. I don’t really blame the society for everything, but like, look at it. Everyone makes their own choices. But when you’re young, it does have an affect on you, like listening to music with bad words and watching music videos with stupid stuff. And then it falls into place and you start living that life.”

“What if?”

One of the closing topics I asked about was, “If you had to do it all over again, would you do anything different?”

Each of the participants except for G7 stated that they would not join gangs; however, they also voiced their frustration again, with lack of family support, society’s role, and the area in which they were raised. G1 stated, “I would have never moved to U.S. Maybe in suburb, or a different state, but not this fucking, Minneapolis city.” G2 gave a very short answer that he would not join gang and did not want to say anything further. G4 stated, “I would go to school and become an athlete.” G5 offered a quick reply with, “Something else, and that’s it.” Similar to G1, G6 commented, “I would have not moved in this city. I would have chosen another state or suburb. Because like, not much out there, you know. But I didn’t have that choice.” G7 appeared upset with this question and stated, “Well, shit, might have joined the rulers to rule with school. Like Somali came to America took a route, I took a route. My route had cops in the way, and that’s all, man. It’s done and over with now. What kind of question is that anyways? It’s like shooting me in the back, man.”



## Discussion

While interviewing the gang members, I noticed that they were willing to talk to me about their story and appeared comfortable with me. However, there were questions that some participants hesitated and/or declined to reply. Their body language expressed negative feelings. Perhaps some questions were hard topics to express their feelings. This is supported by their willingness to openly share their experiences with other questions. For the most part, all of the participants seemed uncomfortable with questions relating to their families, considering where they'd be had they not joined gangs, and lack of resources to detach from the gang life with a criminal record. They voiced frustration with the atmosphere they grew up in Minneapolis contributing to their decisions to join gangs. In my opinion the participants appeared intelligent and understood their circumstances very well. I was a bit surprised that all participants express gang life as negative while also acknowledging how they are stuck with no way out.

Perhaps my lack of exposure to such youth is a factor in my surprise.

I did not ask questions about their religious background or current faith, nor did they bring the topic up themselves/ Looking back at these interviews now; I believe it would be good to add questions about past and present feelings and/or practices. It could add to the findings to see what kind of replies they would share in regards to the role of Islam and the Somali community. Think this would be important because Islam is a big part of the Somali community in Minnesota and working with the Somali youth over the years I have never met any Somali youth that rejected Islam or blamed Islam or the Muslim community for anything. It would be good questions to ask and see

what they think of Islam and the Muslim community. I also would like to interview gang members in jail and those that have already left gang life. The questions that the 6-gang members were not able to answer could be the missing data that would shed light to more information and perhaps those Somali gang members in jail or those that have left gang life might be able to produce such data.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview Questions

Where were you born? What's your heritage?

When did you move to the United States and to Minnesota?

At what age did you decide to join the gang?

Why did you decide to join the gang?

How long have you been in a gang?

What is the name of your gang?

When was your gang formed?

Why was your gang formed?

Is any one else in your family or your close friend in the gang? Did they become gang members due to your conversation?

Where did you spend your childhood/teenage years?

- Did you have certain things that your family did together?
- Did you participate in sports or extra curricular activities at school?
- 

Describe your life before you came to the United States?

Describe your life before you came to Minnesota?

Describe your life before the gang?

- Lifestyle, hobbies, activities
- Relationship with parents, siblings, family, friends and at work/school.
- Religious or spiritual beliefs
- Life goals etc
- Dating

- School
- Religion

What did you think about gangs before you joined one?

- Were they good/bad?
- Did you have any opinion/ stereotypes
- On individual basis when you saw a gang member
- From political or media stance

How did you come to gang life?

- Was it friends?
- Some one in family became a gang member?
- Something to do with your prior experience?
- Something happened that made you want to join?

Please tell me about the process of becoming a gang member

- Ceremony?
- Things you need to do?

Tell me about the benefits of being in your gang?

- Are there benefits?

How did becoming a gang member affect your lifestyle?

How do others react when they find out your in a gang?

- Family and friends?
- Peers at school or work?
- People on the street?

How do you feel after observing the reaction of you being in a gang?

- Do you feel stronger or does it affect you?
- Is it even a thought in your mind?

Please tell me how being in a gang effected daily interactions with others?

- Do you avoid certain people or friends etc?
- Do you avoid certain places that you didn't before?
- Have you found new places to hangout and new things to do?

If you had to do it all over again, would you do anything different?

Would you like to add anything else regarding this experience?