

## Factors Related to Motivating Adult Somalis with Refugee Status to Volunteer for 4-H

### Abstract

Focus group interviews were held with adult Somali immigrants to assess their likelihood of volunteering for 4-H in Maine. This qualitative study was undertaken to identify best practices for engaging the growing Somali-Mainer population as a volunteer base. Results of the study demonstrate that Somali immigrant adults are willing to volunteer for 4-H when the outcome will be higher academic achievement for their children and when volunteering matches their cultural expectation of helping others. Additionally, Somali adults reported limitations related to their ability to volunteer, particularly language barriers and child-care commitments.

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### Introduction and Background

Families of Somali descent have been immigrating to the United States since at least the 1920s, but significant numbers of refugees and asylum seekers from Somalia began coming to the United States only after civil war broke out in Somalia in the 1990s. Somali immigrants can be of ethnic Somali descent or Somali Bantu, an ethnic minority group.

The population of immigrants from Somalia has grown rapidly in Maine since 1990 and has become the second largest minority group in the state. As of 2012, there were about 6,000 immigrants from Somalia in Maine. The vast majority of Somali residents in Maine came as secondary refugees (i.e., they moved from Somalia or another foreign country to another U.S. state and then moved to Maine). Immigration to Maine from the continent of Africa increased over 2,200% between 1990 and 2010 (Migration Policy Institute, 2012).

Somali culture is family centered (Lewis, 1996), and Somali household sizes are large compared to others in the United States (Dischinger, 2009). These two factors complement the framework of the 4-H program, which relies on place-based learning, with the family unit being the primary gateway to participation. Also, informal educational programs such as 4-H have been shown to expose immigrant adolescents to problem solving and help them manage anger, anxiety, and stress (Hansen, Reed, & Dworkin, 2003; Van Offelen,

Sherman, May, & Rhodes, 2011). Many immigrant youths of African descent experienced trauma in their home countries or in refugee camps and are in need of strategies that will help them cope with their experiences (Halcón et al., 2004; Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, & Greenslade, 2008). 4-H and Cooperative Extension in general are in unique positions to engage the new population from Somalia in positive youth development.

Research on Extension programming for Somali audiences deals primarily with Extension nutrition programs (Van Offelen, 2011) or new American farmers (Koff, Pitchay, & Joshua, 2012). General research on positive youth development with East African refugee youths is limited (Gale, 2011). The research on immigrant involvement in 4-H programming tends to focus on other immigrant groups, such as Latinos (Hobbs, 2004). The 4-H program has long relied on trained volunteers to deliver the majority of its informal education. However, there has been a struggle to recruit, train, and retain volunteers from nontraditional backgrounds (Hobbs, 2004). Research shows that to successfully recruit and retain a diverse volunteer base, there is a need to build relationships, use cultural competencies, and invest time and staff to reach new audiences (Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration, 2010; Van Offelen et al., 2011).

There has been little progress made by 4-H educators to engage the parents of Somali youth as active volunteers.

The study reported here examined factors related to motivating Somali parents to commit as volunteers for youth programs in Lewiston and Portland, Maine. The findings were based on four focus group interviews conducted during the winter of 2013. In addition to factors related to motivating Somali parents to volunteer, their perceived barriers to committing as volunteers and their perceptions of 4-H and positive youth development in the Maine Somali immigrant community are reported.

## Methods

The grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was chosen due to the lack of previous relevant research. Grounded theory is an approach for developing theory that is "grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). Initial use of the grounded theory approach was conducted in the target community through 4-H youth development programming, allowing researchers to be participant observers.

## Interview Instrument

To identify the most effective assessment tool for measuring factors related to motivating adults of Somali descent to engage in volunteer roles, informal conversations were conducted with community partners, prior literature was reviewed, and prior knowledge was accessed. Focus group interviews were used for several reasons:

- The participants most likely would be illiterate in English, Somali, and Arabic.
- The Somali culture has a strong oral tradition.
- Participants would feel more comfortable with neighbors present.
- Participants could "feed off each other" when processing and replying to questions.

- The difficulty of coordinating individual interviews in the face of a lack of interpreters would be minimized.

Previous studies have shown that focus group interviews are an effective assessment tool for researchers seeking to work in communities of English language learners (Newman & Yang, 2007) and build trust among participants (Van Offelen, 2011). An interview instrument was developed, reviewed for validity by two key community partners and a faculty member, and refined. The questions from the instrument are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
Focus Group Questions

<b>Initial focus group question</b>	<b>Follow-up question</b>
Have you ever volunteered in one of the local youth activities?	If yes, can you tell me about that experience?
If you haven't volunteered in a local youth activity before, has anyone ever asked you to volunteer at a local youth activity?	Who are the different people (if any) who have asked you to volunteer? (for example, teacher, coach, imam)
What are some reasons that adults in your community would volunteer to help at a local youth activity?	What are some reasons that adults in your community would not volunteer?
Can you tell me a reason why it would NOT be a good thing for parents and elders to volunteer in youth activities?	
What would motivate you personally to spend time helping at a youth activity in your community?	
Have you ever heard of 4-H? [show a picture of the 4-H Clover]	
Based on the goals of 4-H (belonging, independence, generosity, mastery; to be sent to interviewees with a confirmation letter), is this an activity that you would want your children/children in your community to join?	
Based on what you know, would you volunteer to help a 4-H activity?	

Through a local organization, certified Somali interpreters were identified, contracted, and scheduled to be at the focus group interviews. However, the certified interpreters canceled for three of the four focus group interviews. Local interpreters (living in the same housing complexes as the participants), recommended by community partners, were recruited for those three interviews.

## Participant Selection and Characteristics

Two public housing sites in Lewiston and Portland were selected as locations for holding the interviews. Each site was purposefully selected on the basis of a large Somali population from which to sample, accessibility of the interview location for residents, and a history of 4-H youth programs being conducted at the site.

Community partners were contacted at the two public housing sites for assistance in identifying the initial interviewees. Potential participants were defined as any adult who (a) was legal guardian to a youth aged 5–17 in the state of Maine, (b) had come to the United States from another country, and (c) self-identified as being from Somalia. Community partner organizations recruited 14 residents who participated in two initial focus group interviews. Using the snowball sampling method, the original focus group participants ( $n = 14$ ) identified and recruited additional adults who participated in two additional focus group interviews ( $n = 15$ ). Snowball sampling has been shown to be effective in collecting qualitative data from a predetermined community, especially when there are language and cultural barriers to more traditional surveying methods (Perez, Nie, Ardern, Radhu, & Ritvo, 2011). A letter explaining the study was translated to Somali, although community partners and several participants expressed that they could speak, but not read, their native Somali language (many participants also spoke Arabic). Participation in the focus groups was voluntary. Each participant, upon completion, received a \$35 gift card for a local grocery store. All participants signed a letter of consent to participate in the study.

Focus group interviews were held in a common meeting space housed by a community partner. Participants were greeted by the facilitator, a community partner staff member, and the interpreter. All focus group interviews were recorded, causing stress among some participants; two candidates decided not to participate because they did not want to be recorded. All willing participants were included in the study.

Twenty-nine adults participated in the four focus group interviews during a 3-week span in 2013. All participants were provided a letter of explanation of the study in Somali, and an interpreter verbally explained the study and the informed consent form.

- The first interview group included nine individuals (six females and three males) who were aged 23–56 ( $M = 38.10$ ,  $SD = 10.90$ ), had immigrated from Somalia or Burundi, had one or more children aged 5–17 ( $M = 5.10$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ), and lived in Maine.
- The second interview group included six individuals (all females) who were aged 36–50 ( $M = 44.20$ ,  $SD = 4.57$ ), had immigrated from Somalia, had one or more children aged 5–17 ( $M = 7.50$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ), and lived in Maine.
- The third interview group included seven individuals (all females) who were aged 20–48 ( $M = 37$ ,  $SD = 9.62$ ), had immigrated from Somalia, had one or more children under the age of 17 ( $M = 5.42$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ), and lived in Maine.
- The fourth interview group included seven individuals (all females) who were aged 18–50 ( $M = 37.14$ ,  $SD = 11.02$ ), had immigrated from Somalia, had one or more children under the age of 17 ( $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 2.69$ ), and lived in Maine.

## Data Analysis

Recorded interviews were transcribed in Microsoft Word, and irrelevant and duplicate content was eliminated, cleaning the data. Data were then imported into NVivo, qualitative research software, for subsequent coding. An open-coding process (Van Offelen et al., 2011) was used to identify categories.

Data analysis was accomplished through the process of constant comparison, a technique established by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Data from the initial focus group interview were analyzed, common categories of responses were developed, and further sampling was conducted. Focus group interviews were held until saturation was met, which occurred after the fourth interview. The resulting categories and subcategories were analyzed to abstract findings. Categories for coding were applied on the basis of the items in the focus group interview instrument. Responses to demographic questions about gender, age, and number of children were summarized but were not delineated by responder. Subcategories were created on the basis of participant responses and then were coded, creating a weighted value for each subcategory. Categories were given collective weighted values based on the percentage of the overall conversation (after cleaning) related to each category. Data were analyzed for standard deviation for variability. The resulting data yielded findings related to youth activities that are important to the Somali parents in Portland and Lewiston and some fundamental volunteer preferences of the adult participants.

## Findings

On the basis of the interview responses, participant comments were coded into two categories: motivations for volunteering outside the home with youths and barriers to volunteering with youth programs. Table 2 indicates the frequency with which these reasons came up in conversation. Subcategories that garnered greater than 1% of the conversation were chosen for inclusion; this threshold was identified as the saturation point of the data collection process.

**Table 2.**

Frequencies of Participant Responses Concerning  
Motivations for and Barriers to Volunteering

<b>Factor affecting volunteering</b>	<b>Frequency of response<sup>a</sup></b>
<b>Factors motivating Somali adults to volunteer with youth</b>	
Religious or cultural values	9.48%
Cooking	1.52%
Some role that does not require English language skills	1.33%
Cleaning and/or maintenance role	1.11%
<b>Barriers to Somali adults' volunteering with youth</b>	
Lack of awareness of opportunities	3.95%

Not enough time 2.72%

<sup>a</sup>Frequency of response given as percentage of overall conversation.

A major motivator that Somali participants shared relates to their religious and cultural values. Participants consistently and repeatedly responded that their faith directs them to perform "sadaqah"; *sadaqah* is an Islamic term referring to voluntary charity. Several participants stated that helping others was a part of their lives growing up in Somalia and that it was important for them to carry on that tradition.

In two of the interviews, participants identified inability to communicate effectively as a barrier to volunteering. One participant said, "The language barrier is going to prevent us from helping other kids because even most of the kids [in the housing community] are not going to be able to understand what we say. And vice versa." Parents indicated that if there were something they could do that did not require communication, they would be willing to do it. Cooking, cleaning, and maintenance were mentioned as tasks that they had done before and would be willing to do again in regard to volunteering for 4-H or other youth programs. When asked to clarify why they did not have time to volunteer, interviewees identified jobs and child-care issues.

It was also important to identify the types of youth activities and programming being conducted for Somali children to provide context relative to the barriers to and motivations for volunteering. Table 3 highlights the frequencies with which certain out-of-school-time activities came up in all four interviews.

**Table 3.**

Frequencies of Participant Responses Concerning Youth Activities Done Outside of School

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Frequency of response<sup>a</sup></b>
Homework	3.64%
Recreation	2.46%
Islamic school	1.46%
Community service	1.03%

<sup>a</sup>Frequency of response given as percentage of overall conversation.

Participants disclosed that helping their children with homework was tremendously difficult for them but said that they encourage their children to complete their homework. One participant said, "[I] can't help with the homework because [I] don't know the language, and so [I] tell them to do the homework, and [I] watch them while [they are] doing the homework."

None of the interview participants could recognize the word *4-H* or a picture of the 4-H Clover. Five participants could identify 4-H activities in which their children had participated after being prompted with a reminder (e.g., "the 4-H sewing project" or "the 4-H summer science activities"). When the participants were given a description of 4-H and its goals, they stated that they would like their youth to participate in 4-

H.

## Limitations to the Study

There were some limitations to this study. Follow-up questions were limited due to the nature of using an English language interpreter. Although questions were asked focusing on adults' motivations for volunteering for 4-H, no follow-up questions occurred after the initial question from the instrument. We identified themes in data across the venues and interpreters, leading us to infer that the data were reliable.

Another limitation was the use of noncertified interpreters, which related to shortcomings in terms of accurate data collection; many times interpreters had to be reminded not to paraphrase or summarize and to include all responses from participants. The use of noncertified interpreters was the result of a lack of interpreter availability, a common challenge in the Portland and Lewiston communities. All participants were residents in subsidized housing, so families living outside the housing complexes were not included.

## Recommendations

To include parents of Somali background as 4-H volunteers, Extension staff might focus on the following strategies:

- building on factors that motivate Somali parents to volunteer, as identified in the study reported here;
- addressing barriers common to Somali families;
- working to mitigate socioeconomic factors affecting the ability to volunteer (such as access to child care);
- increasing marketing of 4-H to Somali/refugee families;
- modifying volunteer orientation and training as needed; and
- pursuing professional development opportunities related to Somali culture and religion.

Building on factors that motivate Somali parents to volunteer, Extension might emphasize community service and the family-centric aspect of its programs. Because their children's academics are a priority for Somali parents (above recreation and religious school, according to our participants), Extension should demonstrate how 4-H improves academic performance (through 4-H records, public speaking, project books, etc.).

Extension staff involved with 4-H might identify roles that would motivate Somali adults to be involved but not put them in uncomfortable situations. Extension staff need to ask Somali parents to volunteer. Although the study reported here focused on volunteerism in 4-H youth development programming, the findings are applicable to any community-based educational programs conducted across Extension disciplines.

Extension also could address barriers that keep Somali parents from volunteering. Bilingual staff or volunteers may be needed (to verbally communicate with parents). Including children up to age 5 would increase parents' availability to participate in their older children's 4-H activities. Socioeconomic challenges are endemic among families who are refugees and represent a barrier if there are expectations that volunteers purchase materials, food, or other supplies. Therefore, such requirements should be minimized.

The study described herein was exploratory and could lay the foundation for other research to be done with refugee parents. A critical question to be answered is whether the results would be consistent with findings related to other refugee communities (e.g., Burmese, Latino). Future research might examine barriers to academic success for school-age children, examine barriers to education for adults with refugee status (in particular around food systems), and evaluate whether the findings reported here apply when studying a larger sample. The research discussed herein could be further modified with a similar sample size by factoring in participants' lengths of residency in their local communities or in the United States as a whole.

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