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Bruce Corrie: Amid disturbing news about Somalis in America, an encouraging insight

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Recent news reports about Somali youth being recruited to fight in Somalia are very disturbing. By contrast, I had the opportunity recently to interact with the community, and that interaction provided an insight worth exploring.

I was responsible for the Minnesota component of a national consumer study on African immigrants. Apart from consumer preferences, we also asked participants questions about life in America and their attitudes toward a wide range of issues. The study consisted of a sample of 393 African immigrants in Los Angeles, New York, Washington, D.C., and the Twin Cities. The study was conducted by New American Dimensions of Los Angeles on behalf of the U.S. African Chamber of Commerce and was funded by the Minneapolis Foundation.

The Somali sample was 75 respondents who spoke English well and were recent immigrants. We used Somali youth and young adults to administer the survey and surveyed people at the Karmel Mall in Minneapolis and other places. On a typical weekend the mall is bustling with people shopping, visiting the mosque or socializing.

The interesting insight was that we found positive Somali attitudes on life in America coexisting with strong religious and traditional beliefs.

Almost 80 percent of the Somalis surveyed agreed strongly with the statement, "America is the land of freedom, opportunity and possibilities for a better life." This was higher than the response rate of all African immigrants surveyed.

A majority of the Somali respondents (62 percent) agreed strongly that their skills and talents were appreciated in the workplace. Somali respondents had the lowest percentage of the national sample (17 percent) who agreed strongly that they have often experienced racism in the country. They also had the lowest percentage of respondents who agreed strongly that Africans are portrayed negatively in the media. Meanwhile, 45 percent strongly agreed that they found it easy to adjust to the American way of life.

These positive attitudes coexisted with religious beliefs and values that were relatively higher than among other African immigrant respondents in the survey. For instance, close to 90 percent felt very strongly about observing religious holidays and rituals. A majority (62 percent) of the Somali respondents strongly agreed on the importance of marrying or dating someone from their own culture. And 77 percent felt strongly that they would buy products that agreed with their religious values.

What we observed was the coexistence of traditional values with positive attitudes toward the American dream and their life here. I think the environment in Minnesota played an important role in the development of these positive attitudes. Something good is happening in Minnesota.

This state, with early October snow showers, is also one that is warm and open to the stranger and newcomer. One can easily witness the openness of Minnesota's institutions and people to the Somali immigrant community - whether it is a local school or university, bank or workplace, legislature or

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foundation — the Somali footprint is very visible. They have found access as well as a voice in Minnesota, and it is showing in their attitudes toward life in America.

It is here we have to engage with the community in positive ways, as they have a lot to offer Minnesota and the nation.

One has just to visit the Somali "Souks" or bazaars in Minneapolis to witness the entrepreneurial energy of this community. Their economic potential is illustrated in their buying power, which I estimate to be more than \$200 million locally and \$700 million nationally.

The Hmong experience can also illustrate the process of change that occurs in the lives of new immigrants in this country. The Hmong came to Minnesota with their unique culture, language and traditions. There has been tremendous change and progress in this community, which lived largely in poverty in the 1980s. Today one can find an American veteran, doctor, lawyer, legislator or professor who is of Hmong origin. Every summer hundreds of children of Hmong origin attend a summer camp at Concordia University to learn about the Hmong language and culture. They are now part of the American mosaic.

Yes - when I look at the data on Somali respondents in this survey it gives me hope for the future. We need to engage this community in an active manner and, through this dialogue, both parties will help each other realize the American dream.

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