

SOMALIS IN MINNESOTA

WHY SOMALIS COME TO MINNESOTA

The modern nation of Somalia gained its independence in 1960. For much of the next three decades, Somalia was entangled in Cold War politics. Civil war erupted while the Soviet Union was collapsing; atrocities and natural disasters—famine, flood, drought—forced more than a million Somalis to seek refuge in neighboring countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia. Somalia has not had a recognized government since 1991.

Most Somalis who now live in Minnesota came to the United States as refugees. About one-third of Minnesota's Somali residents came directly from refugee camps; others settled first in another state and then relocated to Minnesota. The reasons for this are many, but primarily (1) the existence of an established Somali -community, which meant that health care, educational, and other -systems were already prepared to address the particular needs of Somalis; and (2) the availability of unskilled jobs that don't require English fluency or literacy.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Minnesota is home to the country's largest population of Somali residents. Most Somalis live in the metro area, particularly in Minneapolis: nearly a third of Minnesota public school students who speak Somali at home attend Minneapolis public schools. Smaller numbers of Somalis have moved to Rochester, Owatonna, and other suburban and Greater Minnesota communities.

Some Somalis in Minnesota came from coastal, agricultural and/or nomadic regions in Somalia; others were urban residents.

ECONOMICS

Because resettlement of Somali refugees in Minnesota began as recently as the mid-1990s, the economic impact of this population is growing on a smaller scale than that of other, longer-established immigrant groups.

At present, Somali influence on Minnesota's economy primarily includes filling positions that don't require strong English skills, providing businesses and services to other Somali immigrants, and a variety of entrepreneurial efforts. Today more than 120 African-owned businesses can be found along Minneapolis' Lake Street -corridor.

Underutilization of professional skills is a problem for many African immigrants. Professional licensure obtained abroad is often not recognized in the U.S. As a result, many former doctors, nurses, engineers, teachers, and lawyers are earning a living through manual labor, which, while providing an important service, prevents Minnesota from benefiting from their professional skills.

LIFE IN MINNESOTA: CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Worship Accommodations

Most Somalis are Sunni Muslims. In Minnesota—especially at school and in the workplace—Somalis find

they must negotiate for time and space to pray (at five -predetermined times a day, facing Mecca), for permission to wear the hijab (a head covering, a religious observance of modesty for Muslim women), and for understanding as they fast from dawn to dusk during the month of Ramadan (a lunar month near the end of the calendar year). Islam also prohibits charging or paying -interest, which makes it difficult to purchase homes or otherwise participate in Western economic life.

Community Diversity

While Minnesotans may view Somali -immigrants as a monolithic group, Somali society is actually -composed of multiple groups, affiliated by language, culture, -geography, or other commonalities. Mental and Emotional Health—In addition to learning a new -language, a new culture, and otherwise wrestling with the ordinary challenges of life in a new country, they must confront the physical and emotional effects of their experiences in Somalia and refugee camps. A number of self-help organizations have been established by recent immigrants to assuage the effects of these experiences.