

**Community Development and Prevention Program  
Children's Aid Society of Toronto**

***Needs assessment:  
Somali adolescents in the process of adjustment: Toronto 2001***

**August 2001**

**Prepared by  
Katrina Reitsma**

# CONTENTS

<b>1. BACKGROUND: The Somali Community: Arrival and Settlement in Canada.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3. DEFINITION OF A NEEDS ASSESSMENT.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4. GOALS OF THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>5. LIMITATIONS.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>6. METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>8</b>
• Individual interviews.....	8
• Focus groups with Somali youth.....	9
<b>7. THEMES: INTERVIEWS WITH RESPONDENTS</b>	
<b>7.A Pre-migration stressors.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>7.B Racism/Discrimination.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>7.C Education.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>7.D Poverty/Unemployment.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>7.E. Negotiating identities.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>7.F Intergenerational conflict.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>7.G Post-migration stressors.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>7.H View of government &amp; authority.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>7.I Gender-related issues.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>7.J Local vs. city-wide issues.....</b>	<b>19</b>

7.K Religion.....	21
7.L Strengths brought to the acculturation process.....	21
<b>8. THEMES FROM FOCUS GROUPS WITH SOMALI YOUTH (AGES 13-18)</b>	
8.A Harrassment.....	22
8.B Discrimination/Racism.....	23
8.C Relationship with school staff.....	24
8.D School/neighborhood safety concerns.....	25
8.E Free-time activities.....	25
8.F Religion.....	26
8.G Life at home.....	27
8.H Career goals.....	27
8.I Dealing with things that are upsetting.....	27
8.J Being Somali in year 2001.....	27
8.K Recommendations for Programming.....	28
<b>9. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>APPENDIX I.....List of those interviewed.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>APPENDIX II.....Current members of Somali Youth Coalition...</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>APPENDIX III.....Sample questions for respondents interviewed..</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>APPENDIX IV.....Sample questions for focus group participants..</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>APPENDIX V.....Bridging Child Welfare Services to the Somali...</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Community Project summary</b>	
<b>AKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>36</b>

## **1. BACKGROUND: The Somali Community: Arrival and Settlement in Canada**

The following background information is taken directly from a report titled “A study on the mental health needs of the Somali community in Toronto”, prepared by Abdullahi S. Ellmi, York Community Services and Rexdale Community Health Centre, (September 1999). Information for this section was also extracted from the Encyclopedia of Canada’s Peoples, edited by Robert Magocsi, published for the Multicultural History Society of Toronto, University of Toronto Press: Toronto (1998).

The Somalis in Canada originate from the eastern region known as the Horn of Africa. Recent Somali history has been tragic. A military regime led by General Said Barre took power in Somalia in October 1969 and ruled the country for 21 years. The difficult sociopolitical conditions created by the regime and repression against opponents forced many to flee the country. From the late 1970s through the 1980s armed groups fighting to oust the regime were founded. The struggle gained strength and culminated in January, 1991 with the overthrow of the Barre regime. Unfortunately, the clan-based factions who succeeded Barre were unable to form a government of national unity. The country disintegrated into anarchy and civil war. Over one million Somalis fled the country seeking protection in countries around the world. Most ended up in refugee camps but a significant portion were accepted as refugees in countries outside the region particular in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. Hundreds of thousands died as consequence of the war. Somalia has been without a recognized national government until very recently.

In Canada, the majority of Somali-Canadians arrived and settled during the last 12 years. Only a few hundred Somalis lived in Toronto in 1987; this number went up to 22,500 by June 1991. The peak influx of Somali refugees was reached in 1994-95. Somalia was the source of the second largest number of refugee claimants in Canada in 1991 and 1993. Today, the size of the Somali community is estimated at between 50,000 to 70,000.

Many Somali-Canadians have lived through horrible trauma, physical atrocity and have seen the loss of loved ones in the civil war. Overnight, a great number lost whatever properties or wealth they had. Many spent prolonged periods of harsh life in refugee camps in Africa before coming to Canada.

Somalis are almost one hundred percent Muslims. Islam plays an important role in their culture and way of life. In contrast to most African states, Somalia is a more or less homogeneous in terms of ethnicity and language.

## **2. INTRODUCTION**

Several individuals in the mental health and child welfare field, and Somali community members working with Somali youth, began discussing their concerns regarding challenges confronting Somali youth in Toronto today (ages 13-18). Questions and concerns all revolve around the question **“Are all Somali youth adapting and adjusting successfully, or are some youth not successfully meeting the adaptation challenge?”** Many of the challenges facing Somali youth are similar to those challenges faced by all youth in Toronto, but challenges are unique to youth who have come to Canada as refugees from a war-torn country. It was felt that Somali newcomers experience what has been described as varying degrees of discrimination and marginalization in Canadian society.

To date, the Somali Youth Coalition has met three or four times. The membership is open to others who may wish to join. During discussions it was noted that while it's important to address challenges facing youth, celebrating the positive contributions of youth is equally important.

It was determined that before developing an action plan a needs assessment should be conducted in order to ask other community members and the youth themselves what they see as the most important needs in reference to Somali youth. The lead task for this project was assigned to one member of the Coalition an M.S.W. student completing an internship with the Community Development and Prevention Program of the Children's Aid Society of Toronto (see Appendix II. for a listing of other current members of the Coalition).

Members of the Somali Youth Coalition identified the following issues and questions concerning Somali youth:

- *Due to the many problems suffered in the civil war in their homeland; the refugee experience ( if relevant), difficulties encountered in settling in Canada, Somali newcomers are felt to be at high risk of developing emotional and psychological disturbances. What is the range of experiences of Somali youth in terms of the impact of relocation, given the fact that a majority of Somali youth came to Canada as young children? What is the range of experiences of Somali youth in their process of adapting to the Ontario education system in Toronto?*

Discussion regarding the challenge of accessing mental health services for Somalis (and others from war-torn countries); many Somali parents and some youth) have personally experienced or witnessed violence or other war-related activities; a growing concern regarding youth at-risk for attempting suicide and a perceived increase in youth committing suicide (no statistics available);. questions raised regarding reports that some Somali youth are becoming involved

in the juvenile justice system and concerns expressed regarding what is happening there.

Discussion of the reduced supports required by some Somali youth to succeed academically, lack of sufficient resources to assist those who are struggling academically; some youth are described as having “problem behavior” by some school personal; systemic issues of discrimination in many parts of society; some youth expressing anger, frustration and aggression;

- *How are individual Somali youth dealing with cultural differences? What are the different ways in which Somali youth are learning about and adapting to Canadian culture? How are family members helping each other deal with cultural differences and conflicts?*

Discussion of insufficient positive Somali role models for the youth; youth faced with handling new freedoms in this country and the challenge of figuring out how to maintain their own culture, identity and religion while joining Canadian society/culture.

- *What are some examples of successful programs or activities, which support Somali youth in Toronto? How can we celebrate the accomplishments and positive contributions of Somali youth?*  
Discussion of the lack of resources for youth leadership development.

### **3. DEFINITION OF A NEEDS ASSESSMENT** (taken from The Community Toolbox)

- The methodology consists of what actually **happens** as part of the needs assessment i.e.: **who** is interviewed and **what** questions are asked.
- A pre-set list of questions to be answered is developed. There is a pre-determined sample of types of people to answer those questions, either by personal interview, phone or written response.
- The results of the survey are summarized, distributed and discussed in order for future action to be determined. Generally, the most important needs are the ones that get addressed. A needs assessment can take many forms, depending on resources.

In this case, one M.S.W. student intern conducted the needs assessment; while being provided consultation by several members of the Somali Youth Coalition; working under the supervision of staff at the Community Development and Prevention Program of the Children’s Aid Society of Toronto.

### **4. GOALS OF THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

- To provide some preliminary responses to the questions raised by the Somali Youth Coalition (see above)
- To invite the participation on the Somali Youth Coalition of other individuals and organizations who are concerned/involved in working with Somali youth in order to develop a coordinated approach
- To document needs related to Somali youth
- To ensure that any actions taken by the Somali Youth Coalition are consistent with and responsive to needs that are expressed by the Somali community, especially Somali youth
- To highlight topics that would benefit from further study

Given the fact that the student intern conducting the needs assessment is an outsider to the African and Somali culture, an on-going consultation with several members of the Somali Youth Coalition was essential to:

- Identify key members in the community to be interviewed.
- Provide direction and feed-back regarding the needs assessment process.
- Highlight and identifying cultural considerations.
- Organize focus groups with Somali youth.

## **5. LIMITATIONS**

The informal needs assessment occurred within a time frame of three months with the human resources of one individual and a small budget made available by the Children's Aid Society of Toronto.

This was not a formal research project. Rather, it was the gathering of anecdotal information from a variety of sources . It is recognized that all factors are part of a complex process involving multiple systems and issues, which are part of an on-going process.

Due to time restraints, a survey of relevant literature was initiated but not completed. Only some of the gathered information was read. A completed literature review would have added depth to this report. It is recommended that another member of the Somali Youth Coalition complete a comprehensive literature review.

It should be noted that a focus group with parents of Somali youth would have added an important dimension to this report. Due to time limitations, such a focus group was not organized.

Finally, it is noteworthy to mention that only a minimal amount of time was spent going beyond identifying needs to also identifying community assets (the skills, interests, capacities and other resources that can be found in any community). As such, this report should be considered part of a process that is not complete.

## **6. METHODOLOGY**

This report is not a formal research project. It is important to clarify that this was not a methodologically rigorous survey. The data and comments nonetheless provide an overview of what a sample of group/community members perceives or experience to be the most important needs of Somali adolescents (ages 13-18).

### ***Individual and Group Interviews***

Members of the Somali Youth Coalition identified key informants. When contacting individuals to schedule an interview the nature and goals of the needs assessment was explained, as well as what information would be asked during the interview. A written summary of the goals of needs assessment was forwarded to interested individuals to review before being contacted a second time to schedule an interview.

Ten group interviews were conducted with a total of thirty-five people. Sixteen individual interviews were conducted. Six additional people were interviewed over the telephone. In total, fifty-seven key informants were interviewed. (See Appendix I. for a complete listing of all individuals interviewed).

All interviews took place in the work environment of the individual being interviewed. Interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes to an hour. It is noteworthy to mention that in many of the schools visited, an interview was scheduled with only individual staff, but upon arriving at the school, several other school staff members joined the interview. This seemed to indicate a strong interest and desire to dialogue.

Interviewees were informed that they would receive a copy of the final paper written, summarizing the needs assessment. Interviewees were also given an invitation to attend a public presentation to discuss the needs assessment. Details regarding the time and place of the presentation were given at the time of the interview, and followed up with a letter in the mail.

Interviewees were asked for permission to list their name as part of an appendix at the end of the paper. Interviewees were informed that no one would be identified by name

in the content of the report, as only common patterns and themes were to be identified. Interviewees were asked to identify other potential key informants to be interviewed.

Questions asked during the interview were open ended to gain a depth of understanding of the issues as experienced by those being interviewed. The discussion and questions asked varied, depending on the area of knowledge and expertise of the interviewee. A sample list of questions posed during interviews is attached (See Appendix III )

All questions were variations of " **Are all Somali youth adapting and adjusting successfully, or are some youth not successfully meeting the adaptation challenge?**" and "**How are different Somali youth learning about and adapting to Canadian culture differently?**". Other questions asked stemmed from the original issues raised by members of the Somali Youth Coalition.

Although the questions were subjective, it was believed that the interviewees would provide the breadth and depth of information that would lead to common patterns and themes.

### **Focus Groups with Somali Youth**

Youth participants for two focus group sessions were recruited by the staff of the Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT) Potential youth participants were known to SOYAT through their current or prior involvement in SOYAT activities or programs. SOYAT was asked to invite youth from different segments of the Somali youth population. SOYAT staff spoke with each individual youth and their parent to discuss the purpose of the focus group session and its connection to a needs assessment being conducted by the Somali Youth Coalition. Verbal permission was obtained from parents regarding participation of their son or daughter in the focus group.

The first focus group session was composed of seven Somali girls between the ages of 13 and 16.

The second focus group was composed of four Somali boys between the ages of 14 and 17. The majority of the youth in the first two focus groups reside in Etobicoke.

The third focus group was composed of thirteen Somali youth, both boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 17. Staff of the East African Health Project, Regent Park Community Health Center coordinated this group. Youth were known to staff based on their current involvement in youth programs at the health center. All of the youth that participated in the third focus group reside in Regent Park area of Toronto.

A total of twenty-four Somali youth participated in the three focus groups. Youth participants were assured that no record of their names would be kept. In addition, youth

participants were told that they could choose to not respond to a question which they did not wish to discuss.

Questions asked during the focus group sessions were open ended. (See Appendix IV. for a listing of sample questions asked during focus groups). The topics raised were general in nature. Questions were posed to the group in general, for volunteer responses. Quieter members were encouraged to reply, but could choose to not respond.

In order to gain some understanding of the various places Somali youth have resided, youth were asked to give their place of birth, date of arrival in Canada and/or other countries of residence.

Lunch and refreshments were served to all participants of all three focus groups at the end of each session.

## **7. THEMES: INTERVIEWS WITH RESPONDENTS**

### **A. PRE-MIGRATION STRESSORS**

Respondents working in the mental health field estimate that approximately 70% of Somali youth living in Toronto have spent a period of time living in a refugee camp prior to migrating to Canada. It is estimated that the average age in which the Somali adolescent of today migrated to Canada was 5-8 years of age; typically after living in an average of two to four other countries before arriving in Canada. Somali families have come to Canada primarily via other East African countries (Ethiopia and Kenya), the Middle East (Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Syria), or Europe (Germany and Italy ) The remaining estimated 30% of Somali youth were born in Canada.

One respondent from the mental health field indicated that it's very important to know what percentage of the youth population has spent part of their life in a refugee camp, as that has implications for the type of survival skills that are developed. The same survival described as being necessary to survive in a refugee camp (i.e.: lying to protect identity for safety) can be seen as appropriate in that context, but as being inappropriate or problematic for managing life in Canada.

Several respondents from the mental health field indicated that most people in the Somali community do not talk about the horrors witnessed in Somalia prior to and during the migration period. Specifically, it was identified that many were victims of traumatic and/or violent conditions and experiences. For example suffering from human rights abuses related to any or all of the following: incarceration, combat, torture, physical and/or sexual abuse, and the murder of family and friends with no ability to prevent or control these events. One respondent shared the story of a teenage Somali boy describing how he would need to climb over dead bodies when going outside to play as a young

boy. Conditions in the refugee camps are described as harsh: unsafe and unsanitary and lacking in humane treatment.

## **B. RACISM/DISCRMINATION**

Somali community members shared what they believe to be the existence of negative stereotypes of Somalis in Canada. One respondent stated that in the Canadian context, “Somalis have three strikes against them - being black, a Muslim, and a newcomer”. As another respondent stated, “Somalis come from a socioculture that is very different from the way things are here in Canada” and “Canadians seem bewildered and threatened by large numbers of people who are very different with different and strange customs”. In areas where larger number of Somalis have concentrated, there have been what is described as “on-going tensions with neighbors”. In particular, others seem threatened by “groups of Somalis gathering and talking”. One person stated that “often security is called because there are a group of young black men hanging out”. Another respondent felt that it seemed that “there is a disproportionate police presence in neighborhoods with Somali residents”.

One respondent shared that Somali youth gathering is reflective of the “ traditional Somali love of freedom and self-expression - to speak their minds - Somali is an expressive language and Somalis love to use it.....talking a favorite past-time!”

One respondent felt that “multi-culturalism in Canada is forced and the Somali community has remained marginalized”. Many respondents shared that Somalis experience varying degrees of discrimination based on color, dress and mannerisms.

A frequent comment from respondents relates to negative reactions experienced by Somalis for following religious teachings, particularly choices of dress and head-coverings for Somali girls/ women. Experiencing discrimination based on dress was described as occurring in many contexts: employment interviews, housing and neighborhood experiences and school settings.

For youth, experiencing the demoralizing experiences of racism results in a “lowered self-esteem” as they “feel they don’t have a place in this culture”.

One respondent shared that Somalis “have no previous experience of racial discrimination and so are unprepared to deal with it” coming from a relatively homogeneous culture. It was also stated by one respondent that “the Canadian government puts more resources and efforts into the integration of refugees from certain parts of the world, like Eastern Europe, vs. Africans, who are consistently marginalized.”

One respondent noted that “the way that the images war and famine in Somalia were portrayed in media in the early 1990’s resulted in further negative stereotyping of Somalis in Canada.”

## C. EDUCATION

Education related difficulties was a topic brought up frequently by respondents. In general, it was felt that Somali students are at a disadvantage in an educational system, which does not take their background into account when making placement decisions. Respondents shared that there are several factors which often lead to a Somali student's inappropriate placement: some children receiving little or no schooling before their arrival in Canada; the circumstances of flight disrupted the education process; in addition, a child's date of birth is often approximated. One respondent described the experience of many youth in school like "being thrown in the ocean without even a life-jacket". For example, taking a boy who appears to look age 14 (although the age can't be verified) and placing him in grade eight, because "that's the most logical grade for someone his age" with "no understanding of where he might have come from or what might be appropriate for him academically".

Respondents familiar with Somalia shared that Somali only became the language of education in 1972 in that country, when the government developed the official writing system for the language. It was reported that the education system in Somali collapsed in the early 1990's along with the rest of Somalia's infrastructure. Respondents shared that many parents are unable to offer the educational support their children and youth need as they feel baffled by the Canadian education system. For example, teacher-parent interviews, report cards, supervising homework and expectations of parental participation in school activities are new concepts, unfamiliar to experiences of many Somali parents. Somali children and youth often lack the protection of parents as advocates, especially often single mothers, particularly when it comes to the process of educational assessments.

For those Somali students who began the Ontario education system in kindergarten, one respondent shared that the "kids arrive at a disadvantage to start...not knowing a word of English and having spent most of their time primarily within four walls of an apartment". One respondent estimated that two-thirds of Somali students arrive in kindergarten without any knowledge of the English language. Many Somali children are described as "never going outside to play" because parents are "scared and restrictive" due to "safety concerns" and "fears of losing kids to mainstream values at the loss of Somali traditional values".

Several respondents shared that the learning difficulties and behavioral problems of some Somali students could be attributed to confusion of youth by the "dual culture" which they live at in at home and outside the home in schools. Several respondents observed that for Somali youth, going to school is like "being in a playground" where they are "experimenting with freedoms". In particular for girls, "school is a place to experiment with the freedom to express themselves". School was also described as being a "social outlet" for Somali youth. One respondent noted that while students who skip school

usually leave the school property, Somali students who skip will “skip classes in large groups and stay around the school”.

Schools describe some Somali youth as “having a short fuse”, or “quick to become confrontational”, “fighting the rules” and “not willing to back down”. Concerns were expressed regarding what was described as “the first resort being aggression - physical aggression by boys, verbal aggression by girls”.

Respondents from within the Somali community shared concerns that some Somali students are quickly labeled with “problem-behaviors” or as “hyper-active”. The reasons for what is perceived to be “poor conflict resolution skills” on the part of some Somali students is something that has not yet been explained or studied. Community perceptions are that many Somali youth are “expelled quickly” and “pushed out of school”. Some schools describe a frustration working with Somali parents, not knowing how to help parents engage with the educational system. Somali parents have expressed their confusion and frustration regarding the school system.

Several high schools with a high concentration of Somali students reported that only an estimated 30% of Somali youth are graduating from their schools. Possible reasons for this were not explained. Somali students were described as being “isolated from other students”. In contrast, Somali students were described as being “quite well integrated” in schools where the Somali student population is a small group within the over-all student population. At those schools, Somali students were described as “achieving academically” and “graduating at the same rate as other students.”

Respondents described how the educational system has faced significant amount of cuts over the past several years in all areas, including ESL staff, special resources educators, library and custodial services. This was seen as having an impact on the abilities of the educational system to respond to challenges and needs in the student population. Another major issue discussed was the fact that there were no extra-curricular activities this year for at all Toronto District School Board schools for all students. In summary, as one respondent stated, “Mike Harris has abandoned the youth of this province!”.

At the same time many respondents felt that the educational system needs to use available resources to better address the pre-migration stresses of Somali youth. One respondent shared that “If it doesn’t, the level of frustration by Somali youth will only increase”. Another key issue that several respondents were concerned about was what is seen as “the low expectations of refugee youth to succeed.”

## **D. POVERTY/UNEMPLOYMENT**

Respondents describe the Somali community as still being “a newcomer community struggling through the first stages of settlement and integration” and currently remaining in “survival mode”. Specifically, issues of unemployment and poverty continue to affect a high percentage of members of the community. This was felt to be the number one topic of concern that is effecting everyone in the community, including youth. There are many barriers that Somalis encounter, such as: lack of Canadian work experience, barriers to educational upgrading and lack of English language proficiency. Even those Somalis with professional degrees have difficulty obtaining employment for the same reasons, despite previous training and qualifications. This was seen as being due to problematic Canadian regulations.

The inability of an estimated 10,000 Somalis in Toronto who fled conditions of total war in their homeland, and who are not able to provide the documents required by the Canadian government’s immigration regulations to prove their status and obtain permanent residence, has implications for all members of the community. Respondents described Canadian immigration policies as problematic to their community, leaving many families in limbo for years. In terms of the youth, it was felt that parents who are not available emotionally for youth may be struggling with significant personal stresses. The experience of parents being in limbo about their legal status impacts youth because Canada is not experienced as a permanent place to live. Many talk about going back to Somalia. While this may not be realistic, the ensuing feeling of belonging nowhere is reality for many youth.

## **E. NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES**

Somali adolescents were pictured as “creating their own framework” pictured. One respondent described youth as “having one foot in each door” with a “traditional mother at home” while “following the same music, dress and behaviors of other Canadian youth”. Adolescents were depicted as being “confused about how to behave” as they are working to develop their own identity in a “static state” of a the gap between two very different cultures. This results in a feeling of “not belonging anywhere”.

Respondents indicated that one of the causes of confusion for youth is to understand what it means “to be an individual in the collective”. Specifically, the Western concept of the primacy of the individual is in conflict with a cultural tradition in which the individual is identified first as part of a group.

While some Somali adults perceive that youth are rejecting Somali culture, respondents from outside the Somali community observe that youth themselves strongly identify themselves first and foremost as Somali.

Somali youth were seen as “seeing themselves as part of a distinct group” which is “in competition with European and Afro-Caribbean youth groups.” At the same time, Somali youth are seen as “integrating themselves into other youth cultures such as Afro-Centro and hip-hop”.

Respondents from outside the Somali culture describe Somali youth as having a strong “group identity in connection with each other”. Another respondent shared that Somali youth “gather in groups for protection”.

Somali adults expressed concern that the Somali language will soon be lost because many youth are choosing to communicate in English only. One respondent stated “while there is pressure at home to speak Somali, the pressure out there to conform is stronger”. Another respondent stated “youth behave one way at home and another way at school” which results in a “double identity”.

## **F. INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT**

One common issue identified by participants was intergenerational conflict. Somali adolescents are described as integrating into Canadian culture and society at a much faster rate than many parents. This has resulted in what was seen as “parents and youth clashing.”

Somali adolescents have a strong urge to integrate as well as demonstrating through words and actions that they know their rights. Somali parents are described as “expecting obedience” and struggling with figuring out how to respond to disobedience. Several respondents depicted “a loss in terms of the way children/youth in Somalia used to respect all authority.”

It was reported that often adolescents are more fluent in English than their parents and have a greater knowledge of how the Canadian system works. Consequently, youth are perceived to be running the household and there is a “role-reversal”.

Adolescents were viewed as being very “Canadianized”. They are described as “watching the same TV shows and movies as other kids” and “hanging out at the malls like other kids and being exposed to all of the same things as everyone else.”

Respondents described Somali teenagers as “dating and staying up late, just like other adolescents” and emphasized the fact that Somali youth face all the same pressures that other teenagers face. A very common comment by respondents was that “parents are not aware of the pressures their kids face at school” and they are “naïve about what’s out there ” and are “assuming that their kids are doing well, when in reality their kids are

doing things they have no idea about.” This problem was described as being compounded because “youth and parents don’t talk”.

The significant differences between traditional Somali values of family life and Muslim religious values vs. mainstream Canadian values results in what was depicted as a “widening gap between Somali adolescents and their parents”.

Family ties were described as being very important for Somalis, as family ties are what traditionally provided a comprehensive support system. Currently, a high percentage of Somali families are reported to be formed on the basis of single mothers with children. This is a result of many men being separated from their families during the civil war in Somalia.

Many single parent homes led by women with male teenager sons were seen as having “teenage boys who are in control of the household”. Several interviewees described single mothers as “scared and isolated”. Several respondents reported their concerns that there are adolescents who choosing to leave home and finding their own way, living elsewhere. It was discussed that traditionally, Somali family members do not break ties with each other. The existence of some youth running away is reported to be indicative of the high level of stress and challenges facing all members of the family.

## **G. POST MIGRATION STRESSORS**

While Somali parents are coping with grieving the loss of homeland, culture, role, status and/or material possessions, the most significant issue for adolescents is the loss of family members. One respondent shared the story of a 12-year-old Somali boy pleading with her to help him to find a way to help sponsor his mother to come to Canada. Descriptions given point to a picture of many Somali youth at an older age finding out the person they thought was their parent is actually an extended family member or older sibling. The resulting identity confusion was described as being “painful for the youth to experience”.

One respondent described the Somali culture as having no previous experience of single-mother led homes or family life without the support of the extended family. Although single-parent homes existed in Somalia, the extended family always took a role in raising children. The experiences of isolation and grief around losses were described as having a significant impact on the experience of youth in family life. Lack of role models was the one factor identified by all respondents as being a key issue in relation to understanding the challenges of youth in their process of acculturation.

Some indicators of the multiple stresses on family life were described by respondents as being an increase in the abuse of street drugs by some adolescents; some teenagers choosing to run away from home; an increase in youth at-risk for committing suicide; and the involvement of some adolescents in varying types of minor criminal activity.

Respondents from outside the Somali community did not perceive substance abuse to be an issue of concern in relation to most Somali youth. Respondents from outside the

community felt that most youth are respecting Muslim religious teachings, which do not allow for the abuse of substances.

However, some respondents from within the community indicated that one of their primary concerns in relation to Somali adolescents is an increase in the abuse of street drugs. It was pointed out that most parents “are not aware of the pressures out there in regards to drugs and so don’t talk about it with their kids.” One respondent indicated their feeling that the Somali community is “in denial that this is an issue”. Several respondents from within the community indicated that one of their greatest concerns is a potential increase in the abuse of street drugs by adolescents if the causes of frustration and alienation are not addressed.

Some respondents indicated that one of their concerns was adolescents choosing to leave home. One respondent indicated that what is needed is mediation services, not an advocacy approach. This was based on observations that “at the end, Somali youth will go back to their families if the right attention is given at the right time with a mediation approach.” Lack of safe places and counselors with an understanding of Somali cultural traditions was cited as compounding the problem and leaving some youth “floundering on their own for years, when they need their families”.

Respondents described their concerns regarding many Somali youth who are “frustrated and alienated” because “no one is listening to them”. While there are no statistics available, several respondents indicated that they were concerned about the occurrence of suicide in the youth population of their community. One respondent noted that suicide is rare in Somalia. As such, it was felt that “the actual numbers are not important....even the fact that this is now an issue in our community indicates that something is seriously wrong.”

Respondents indicated that the level of frustration experienced by some Somali youth leads them to be concerned regarding the potential eruption of violence. While it was reported to be “fairly peaceful right now”, the level of frustration was seen as “increasing”. Frustration was described as stemming from a variety of sources: lack of support to deal with academic difficulties, lack of opportunities for recreational activities, insufficient parental involvement and lack of role models.

Respondents indicated that only a few Somali youth are involved in some minor criminal activity. Over all, respondents did not identify youth becoming involved in the criminal justice system as a major area of concern.

## **H. VIEW OF GOVERNMENT & AUTHORITY**

Both the rights and responsibilities of the extended family system were described as being “lost”. Relying on the Canadian system to solve family problems is depicted as being unacceptable in Somali culture. Parents are seen to have a high level of anxiety around the existence of the Children’s Aid Society (C.A.S.) and its potential involvement in their family life. One respondent identified the number one topic of conversation between parents is their concerns about the involvement of C.A.S. or police in family life.

Several respondents described Somali parents as “doing whatever children want in order to avoid the involvement of the C.A.S”. While some respondents were aware that there have been some efforts to build trust and understanding between the Somali community and the C.A.S., it was reported that the level of fear and anxiety by parent remains very high. One respondent shared that a common feeling by Somali parents would be “over my dead body will my child talk to a social worker”.

The lack of parental understanding regarding their rights is reported to have a negative impact on their ability to respond to challenges in parenting teenagers. Respondents see some Somali youth as “playing the adults” because they “know how the systems work”.

## **I. GENDER-RELATED ISSUES**

Many respondents shared that they felt that Somali boys were at higher risk than girls because many “boys have nothing to connect to...they are lost, - they need something to identify with.”

Respondents shared that boys are given a lot more freedom than girls, coming from a culture that was described as primarily patriarchal. Based on the greater freedoms given boys, they were seen to be more likely to be experiencing peer pressure and the pressures of the streets. In contrast, girls were described as “being kept at home” “not facing as many pressures and “helping out with house-work, and childcare of siblings.”

The absence of a male father figure in many Somali homes was seen as being a “huge gap”, as traditionally, a father would be the primary role model for a son. Boys were described as being less likely to talk about feelings, and therefore “more likely to feel alone in their confusion”.

Respondents stated that when the Somali state collapsed, the husbands of many Somali women were killed in the fighting, stayed in Somalia when families fled the country, or stayed in another country where the family had initially relocated. Single-parent homes with a mother and teenage sons were seen as experiencing the greatest challenges. One respondent stated that “at age 14, the boys are in control over mom”.

Several respondents shared that boys seem to do better with male authorities/male teachers, and were more likely to challenge female teachers/authority figures

Some respondents described boys as under-achieving, while girls were seen as more likely to have ambition for university.

Respondents discussed the importance of understanding cultural/religious considerations in program planning, particularly recreational activities. For example, the type and amount of interaction between boys and girls in a social context permitted by religious teaching. Program planning requires an awareness and creativity that allows for program activity appropriate in a Canadian context while at the same time sensitive to Somali culture. This poses unique challenges that are not easily resolved.

Several respondents suggested that they thought Somali girls would benefit from participating in small discussion groups led by a Somali adult female to discuss gender issues specific to their culture.

One respondent shared “how fast the world is changing around us and how difficult it is for teenagers, particularly coming from a home where values are very different than mainstream Canadian values.”

## **J. LOCAL VS. CITY-WIDE ISSUES**

The Somali community has settled primarily in the community council districts of Etobicoke, North York, Scarborough, and Toronto. While most issues discussed here are reflective of many of the experiences of the Somali population in general, respondents indicated that certain issues relate primarily to the experiences of youth living in Etobicoke or West Toronto. The highest concentration of Somalis live in the Dixon/Kipling/Islington Rd. area, the West/East Mall area, the Jane-Finch area, downtown Toronto including Regent Park area. There are also Somali families scattered throughout parts of Scarborough.

Although resources for youth are scarce in all parts of the city, Etobicoke was described as having even scarcer resources (in contrast to the downtown core of Toronto and York.)

Although West Toronto is no longer the one area with a concentration of Somali residents, the history of the Somali community relation with the neighborhood has impacted the experiences of Somali adolescents to the present. Specifically, Somalis are one of the largest ethnic groups living in a group of condominium buildings by the Dixon Rd and Islington Avenue area of Etobicoke. Respondents described how Somalis initially

chose to concentrate in this area to provide a sense of community. It was stated that it is not uncommon for single individuals with limited incomes to share apartments. This was perceived by non-Somalis as overcrowding and led to complaints from building managers and property owners in disputes that have been seen as “flaring up off and on over the past decade”. Security guards are hired by condo owners to patrol the condo premises with dogs and bulletproof vests with the threat of trespass charges. One respondent stated that on any given day, there are a number of Somali youth at the East Mall courthouse for minor charges. Several respondents indicated that the most common charge is “trespassing” (leaving one building and traveling to another).

The misunderstandings and long-time tensions in West Toronto are specific to this part of the city. The Somali community was depicted by one respondent as needing to “band together to protect themselves from neighbors who rejected them”. Other factors specific to West Toronto were described as being the high concentration of Somali students in certain schools in the area, concerns about a high -drop out rate of Somali students from those schools, and concerns about some Somali youth becoming involved in criminal gang activity. In addition, it was pointed out by one respondent that there are a higher number of Somalis living in West Toronto who have not yet been able to obtain the necessary documents to prove their status and obtain permanent residence.

Several respondents indicated that there are no major concerns related to the dropout by Somali youth in the other areas of the city. At the same time, frustration with an educational system, which was seen as not “placing kids properly” and not “understanding the refugee/immigrant experience”, was common to all areas of the city.

The main issue related to Scarborough was felt to be the isolation experienced by the community, which is scattered throughout that part of the city. One respondent indicated that there were a higher number of two-parent families living in Scarborough. In addition, based on the fact that there is a very high percentage of a variety of immigrant groups living in Scarborough, the Somali residents there have “not experienced the same negative reaction as in West Toronto”.

Parents of Somali youth living in North York and downtown Toronto were also described as “isolated”. Over the spring and summer of 2001 there was a “spate of unsolved Toronto homicides of young black men” (18 murders since March 1, 2001). One homicide reportedly involved someone from the Somali community. Somali parents in these parts of the city are seen as “withdrawing further because of fear”.

## **K. RELIGION**

One respondent indicated that while many adolescents respect and listen to Muslim religious leaders in the community, this does not apply to all youth. At the same time,

most respondents stated that religious leaders are the one voice in the community which is heard and respected.

Religion was described by several respondents as being a major source of conflict between adolescents and their parents. On the other hand, youth who participate regularly in mosque activities were seen as having a stronger sense of identity and demonstrating positive adjustment and participation in school and elsewhere.

The mosques were described as having a lot of similarities with a community center, existing as a resource for all Somali community members

In terms of the youth, one respondent felt that the mosques as becoming “more open and more accommodating to the youth”. In addition to providing religious teachings and religious services, it is recognized that youth need recreation as well as role models and mentors. It was noted that there is a basketball court in the parking lot of one of the mosques which is available for any teenagers to use. One respondent indicated that there are currently many adult members of the mosque who are willing and able to become volunteer mentors for adolescents. However, youth need to either voluntarily choose to be matched with a mentor, or receive a mandate from a parent to do so. It was reported that some youth are referred to mosques as part of a probation requirement to do community work.

## **L. STRENGTHS BROUGHT TO THE ACCULTURATION PROCESS**

Despite the enormous challenges facing adolescents in the process of adaptation and acculturation, all respondents described the fact that many Somali adolescents are handling the pressures well “against all odds”. The most common description of Somali youth was that many are persistent. One respondent indicated that most youth are interested and willing to participate in potential programs. Another respondent shared feeling that youth are “patient and eager to seek knowledge”. Other descriptions included “gregarious and fun”, “enthusiastic, eager to learn, eater to try new things, positive and interested in others”.

Several respondents felt that it is exciting to work with youth because of the “possibilities that they hold”. Several respondents noted that “youth are free from clan lines” which “holds promise for our community”.

The most common description of Somali youth was their ability to become advocates for themselves which was seen as a “great positive”. Based on the fact that the Somali culture has been depicted as primarily an “oral culture”, this was seen as part of an ability to “articulate themselves well” and an “ability to get resources”.

Several respondents indicated that Somali youth “stick up for each other and support each other” and “call family at home, well networked to use own supports”.

In reference to Somali girls who chose to wear a hijab it was noted that “it takes a lot of strength to ignore what other people say”.

## **8. THEMES from Focus groups with Somali adolescents (ages 13-18)**

### **A. HARASSMENT**

- Many Somali youth spoke of being asked by school staff to ‘disperse’ and separate when they are hanging out in groups of just Somali youth at their high school. It was stated that this happens in the hallways of the school and on the school property on a regular basis. One girl stated ‘I try not to hang out with other Somalis so I won’t get in trouble....but, if I sit with white or Indian students, staff ask me -why are you here? - it feels like they think I will contaminate the others..’
- Several girls reported being kicked out of their local library on a regular basis by library security. The girls report that although they may be too loud sometimes, there are other groups of girls from other cultural backgrounds who are equally if not louder, and who are not kicked out. The girls report that they go to the library to do home-work, but that it also one of the only places that their parents allow them to go outside of the home.
- Several boys reported being angry about the fact that the security guards hired for a local school will not allow them to play basketball on the school court in the evenings and weekends and that they have no-where else to go.
- Youth who go to schools where there are many kids of another ethnic background said that other groups are also asked to disperse when they congregate and are speaking their own non-English language

### **B. DISCRIMINATION/RACISM**

- In general, the Somali youth in schools where there is a high concentration of Somali students described a high degree of discrimination. The comments below reflect their experience. In contrast, Somali students in schools where there are small numbers of Somali students for the most part did not describe experiences of discrimination to the same degree of intensity and described liking the fact that the school is multi-cultural
- It was strongly expressed by several girls that they feel that many teachers are shocked when a Somali student does well academically. It was stated that many teachers seem to assume that a Somali student has cheated in order to do well.
- Several girls reported that if one Somali youth skips school or does something ‘bad’, teachers expect that other Somali youth will do the same. The girls reported that they feel that all Somalis are assumed to be ‘stupid’.

- One girl stated that to be Somali seems to equal an “F” and to equal “bad”.
- Almost all of the girls in the focus groups discussed the fact that they felt they were negatively stereotyped by teachers and other students because of wearing a hijab. Several girls discussed that others seem to think that they “didn’t speak English and are not smart” because of what they wear. One girl shared a story of someone telling her “why do you wear a head covering – you look so pretty without it!”. She stated that “there is a lot of pressure not wear a hijab”.
- Several girls shared that they feel that they are ‘hated’ and ‘not liked’ in their school by others. One girl stated that “even the bi-sexual and lesbian students are not treated differently like we are.” Another girl stated that she felt that lesbians were treated very well in her school, and she didn’t understand why other differences such as her own culture are not accepted. One girl stated that “even though the Koran does not approve of some things (like lesbians), we know that this is Canada, and people can do what they want.” Another girl stated that she feels that ‘no-one seems to care about those boys who wear long black trench-coats and sun-glasses in school - how do they get away with that, and how come we get so noticed for the way we dress and the way we are?’.
- Several girls stated that if a Somali student talks back to a student, or is suspended even once, there is a bad ‘association’ permanently afterwards in the minds of the teachers.
- One girl reported that she feels that school staff *expect* the Somali youth to get into trouble....for example, asking a student just standing in the hallway “are you getting into trouble?”
- Several girls reported that it seems that many teachers assume that all Somali youth are part of gangs, and make statements such as “you Somali girls”. The girls report that this seems to “lump” all Somalis together in any particular situation.
- One girl reported that she has heard a school staff call Somalis ‘idiots’ and ‘low-life’.
- The boys who were part of the focus groups reported that the only place that they have experienced discrimination is in local stores. The boys did not report any experiences on discrimination in their schools or elsewhere. At the same time, the boys stated that they feel that adults often over-react when there are several ‘bad’ kids, and assume every-one is ‘bad’. One boy stated ‘many of us are doing fine. I don’t want to be stereotyped as bad.’
- While most youth reported that their schools do accommodate for their Muslim faith, two youth from two different school stated that their “prayer rooms had been taken away from them this year”. One girl stated that this “made her very upset”.
- All youth in all focus group, both boys and girls, report that they are automatically followed in stores by store clerks who seem to assume that the youth have no intention of buying or paying.
- Youth who live in Regent Park reported that they felt that teachers expect less from them because of where they live and they feel like they have to “prove themselves” to teachers
- One girl shared that she felt that Somalis were treated worse here in Canada after all the media reports of Somalis retaliating against UN forces in Somalia in the early 1990’s

### **C. RELATIONSHIP WITH SCHOOL STAFF**

- Several youth identified their school guidance counselor as a “nice” person who they felt that they could “go and talk to”, and as being someone who is a good “mediator”.
- Most of the youth described that there are “good” teachers and “bad” teachers. In general, it was felt that a good teacher who is “some-one who understands where we are coming from” and someone who “likes all the students the same, regardless of who they are or where they come from.” One youth stated that her favorite teacher was someone who was also a newcomer to this country because she “understands us”.
- All youth, both boys and girls, described the vice-principal at their school as some-one who “does not respect us”. One girl stated “how can we respect them (vice-principal), if they disk you?”. Another girl stated “the vice-principal always believes that the teacher is right, and does not listen to me”.
- One girl stated “yes, I yell, at them (school staff), but that’s because they don’t respect us.”
- One girl reported feeling that she feels that she is not seen as an individual, but as one of ‘them’ (ie: the Somalis). She stated that it does not seem to make a difference whether you are a boy or a girl, or what the personal differences there are between her and others...she is just one of “the Somalis”.
- The boys discussed the fact that they felt teachers are “more lenient with girls” and “harsher with us”.
- The girls reported that in their school, there are a lot of Somali youth being kicked out of school and suspended. One girl stated that it seems that “every Somali seems to be getting suspended at least once”. All of the girls in one of the focus groups reported that they had been suspended one or more times from school.
- One girl reported that although she has never been in a fight before, on one occasion, she said one thing in a somewhat insulting way to a non-Somali girl, which sparked a big fight in which many youth (both Somali and non-Somali)joined in. She reported being subsequently suspended, but said she “learned her lesson and it won’t happen again”.

### **D. SCHOOL or NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY CONCERNS**

- Not all of the youth reported concerns about school violence. Many stated that they felt safe in their schools and their greater concern is safety in their neighborhood. In general, youth from Etobicoke were mainly concerned about school safety, while youth from Regent Park were more concerned about neighborhood safety (in particular, drug dealers around and street pressures).
- It was reported that a Somali youth (male) was stabbed by a Jamaican youth (male) January 2001 on the grounds of the school that many of the youth currently attend. This was described as being something everyone was concerned about.
- Several girls reported feeling fearful that the boys in their school who wear ‘long-black coats’ are hiding weapons in their coats. One girl called the boys with long black coats “the haters” and said that some-day she is fearful they will turn to a “killer”. Another girl stated that she disagrees as she feels that it is all only a “show”
- One girl stated “we know who has weapons (even if the teachers don’t know)”.

- Several girls reported feeling that their high-school ‘could be the next Columbine’.
- Several of the girls reported feeling that if there was to be more violence in their school, they feel they would be the targets of the violence because they are black.
- The boys reported that they don’t feel that there is any pressure to be a part of gangs that are involved in violence in their school. Several boys stated ‘you just need to be smart, know when to walk away, which people to stay clear of.’
- Some youth reported concerned with weapons at school, especially small knives,
- Most of youth in Regent Park described having heard gunshots in the community

#### **F. FREE TIME ACTIVITIES**

- All girls identified basketball as their favorite sports activity. All boys identified soccer and/or basket-ball as their favorite sports activity.
- The girls reported that their favorite things to do when not in school is to talk with friends on the phone, watch television or to go out to a movie.
- The boys stated that in their spare time they watch movies, play on the computer, hang out with friends and listen to music. One boy reported that “in our religion, we’re not supposed to listen to music, but I listen when my parents aren’t there.” Another boy stated “my parents don’t like the baggy clothes I wear, but I don’t want to wear what they want me to wear”. Another boy stated “I don’t always tell my parents where I am going.”
- Some of the youth shared that they are volunteering as tutors for other youth, or volunteering at the mosque.
- All of the boys and girls ages 16-18 are working part-time during the summer.

#### **G. RELIGION**

- At several points, most youth made reference to what they called “our religion” in the context of discussing issues of concern to them. One girl stated “we base our life around religion” in reference to the Muslim faith. One girl stated “Somalis are the only ones not changing (other Muslims are changing).”
- Most, but not all, of the girls wore a head covering and indicated that it was their choice to wear it. One girl stated “It is a choice I make myself.”
- Several girls stated that in their faith, we “don’t do drugs, don’t kill others, don’t drink alcohol and don’t cheat (male or female).
- One boy stated that although he does not go to the mosque, if he has children, he would want them to go because “Toronto is a mult-religious city and we need to make sure our religion remains”.
- Another boy stated that his parents “sit him down for lectures on our religion” so that he knows “what he can and can’t do”.
- One girl who volunteers with youth at the mosque with young kids stated that “there are not many young kids attending the mosque anymore.”

## **H. LIFE AT HOME**

- Several youth described parents as being very protective and mostly strict.
- Another youth stated that “there’s a whole range of how strict parents are – it depends on how religious they are”
- Another youth stated “here, it’s not safe like in Somalia..there are murderers and kidnappers...here, can’t trust people...if I go out, I always tell my mother where I am”
- Others described the fact that they want more independence than parents will allow
- Youth discussed that they feel parents need to accept this new and different culture, but parents tend to ignore this culture and “don’t understand things”
- One youth stated that a parents view is that if a kid does something wrong, the youth is “corrupt” – but youth just see it as making a mistake
- Some youth shared that they rarely talk with a parent, and that if something is bothering them, would talk either with a sibling, a friend, or just deal with it themselves. Quite a number of youth shared that they would just “think about it on their own” and not talk to anybody.”
- Three of the boys in one focus group stated that the first person they would talk to if something was bothering them would be their father. None of the boys in the other focus group mentioned a father

## **I.CAREER GOALS**

- Sample reports by girls in the focus group regarding career plans: law school, pharmacist, teacher, nutritionist, medical school, fashion designer, nurse, optometrist, dentist, surgical assistant, optometrist, psychiatrist, journalist, raising a family.
- All of the boys reported an interest in either computer engineering, computer programming. One boy was interest in aviation.

## **J. DEALING WITH THINGS THAT ARE UPSETTING**

- Listen to music (girls and boys), talk to older siblings (girls and boys), scream (girl), hold it in (girls and boys), go to sleep (boy), talk to friends (boy), guidance office (mainly boy, one girl?), talk to teacher, if doesn’t work go to principal, if doesn’t work go to police...(boy)
- If personal issues i.e. if someone is bothering them they go to staff at school, parents/siblings, friends (depends on the problem)
- Dealing with sadness: cry, talk to yourself, go to mosque and pray, read the Koran
- Quite a number of youth reported that they would deal with problems on their own and not talk to any one else.

## **K. BEING SOMALI IN YEAR 2001**

- All youth reported that they are “proud to be Somali” and feel that it is important to associate with own people/culture – understand why parents want them to have friends from their own culture and participate in programs for Somalis
- One girl stated “it feels good to be a Somali female in year 2001 – we are in control – women can do what we want, we aren’t forced to do anything”
- Another girl said “even though we can do what we want, we respect ourselves” (ie: don’t wear slinky clothes, dress respectfully)
- One girl stated that her parents describe Somalia as beautiful, but she doesn’t want to go there because it’s too hot. Another girl stated “I don’t understand why they are killing their own people, from the same religion. When I’m older and become President, I’ll go there and ask them to stop (the killing).”
- Most stated they want to move back to Somalia when things get better. Feel they are Somalian first and Canadian second “I AM Somali – would not say I AM Canadian”
- This is their new home but temporary – could leave
- Several state that they listen to Somali radio to find out what is happening there.

## **L. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING**

- Want a place to hang out without harassment – not a structured place or program, just a place to hang
- Feel that a fairer process needs to be found at schools for discipline – one girl stated “we might as well be suspended right in the classroom, what is the point of being sent to the office when the teachers side is always believed” “there needs to be a way that a students side of the story is listened to and taken into consideration”
- Home-work clubs suggested by several girls
- Programs should be for anyone, debates and discussion groups on current events and things that affect the youth eg. Drugs, school, neighbourhood, not with parents – only youth.
- Leaving Toronto: swimming, day/summer camps, b-ball, Canada’s Wonderland, Ontario caves, Niagara, canoeing, Six Flags
- One youth stated that summer camps that SOYAT has are good
- One youth recommended a one hr. TV program just for Somali youth – to find out what is happening in our community (often we don’t know what is happening)
- Some stated that they think adults are “over-reacting” – we are doing fine.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS for FUTURE ACTION:**

It is recommended that the Somali Youth Coalition:

- **Promote youth involvement in the decision making process of the Coalition in order to involve youth in framing the issues and developing and implementing action plans.**

Making the best use of available resources could include:

- Inviting participation on the Coalition from the Somali youth who have recently graduated from a pilot project “Leadership Training Program” organized by the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (contact person on staff is Eta Wolead 416-322-4950 ex.224). Ms.Wolead has indicated an interest in directing the Somali youth graduates of their program toward involvement in the Coalition.
- Contacting the Urban Alliance on Race Relations which has developed and used a model for youth leadership. (contact person on staff is Barry Thomas 416-703-6607)

- **Broaden participation in the Coalition to include Muslim religious leaders, other Somali community leaders, as well as representatives from other community youth serving agencies (both Somali and non-Somali)**

- **Highlight the positive contributions made by Somali youth.**

For example:

- organizing a forum with the media
- developing an annual youth conference
- organizing celebration events

- **Conduct a comprehensive review of relevant literature regarding :**
  - **“Best practices” in developing support services for youth from war-torn countries**
  - **Relevant reports related to the acculturation process of the Somali community in Ontario.**

Making the best use of available resources could include:

- Asking the graduate student completing an internship with the Community Development and Prevention Program during the fall of 2001 to undertake this task.

- **Assist under-resourced agencies which have a mandate to work with the Somali youth population to access additional resources**

For example, asking the Community Workers from the Community Development Program of Children’s Aid to assist in identifying funding sources and applying for funding.

- **Explore how the Somali community, Somali parents and systems such as the Toronto Board of Education, social services, child welfare, Parks and Recreation, the criminal justice system etc. can work together to support Somali youth.**

For example:

- Those working in the various systems need to develop a greater awareness and understanding regarding the refugee experience and the resulting impact on youth from war-torn countries.
- Suggestions regarding encouraging the involvement of parents in the education system include the development of a video lending library with videos describing and introducing parents to the Ontario system; more ways for Somali parents from within schools to initiate dialogue with the school staff to allow for information and knowledge to be shared between parents and the school
- Advocating for Child & Youth workers to be hired by the Toronto Board of Education or social service agencies to provide culturally appropriate mediation services between family and youth.

Making the best use of available resources could include:

- Developing a way of making school administrators aware of the fact that that they can suggest to parents the option of a parent mandating their adolescent to meet with an adult volunteer mentor from a Muslim mosque (as appropriate).
  - Exploring a way to determine how resources can be brought together. For example, it was learned that there is one organization with a homework club for Somali youth operating without the support of volunteers, and another organization with volunteers interested in tutoring, but no space available.
  - Assist Parks and Recreation staff in identifying and developing culturally appropriate recreation activities and giving concrete suggestions for ways to increase outreach to the Somali community by Parks and Recreation.
- **Additional study is required to gain a better understanding of the impact on youth of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders on the acculturation process**  
More studies specific to the experience of Somali youth would assist in the planning of support services. Mental health respondents indicated that the impact of acculturation to a new culture after experiencing war at a young age is an area that is under-researched, particularly youth from the continent of Africa (majority of studies focus on SE Asians and Europeans)
  - **Develop an action plan, which works to reduce risk factors and develops protective factors by taking an early-prevention approach.**
    - Boys identified as being at a higher risk than girls.
    - Crime prevention efforts to focus on youth ages 11 &12 (age when youth are recruited to be part of gangs).
    - Support programs seeking to find volunteers to help Somali families registering their children in kindergarten to get prepared to be a part of and understand the Ontario education system.
    - Explore with the Board of Education ways of identifying which youth are struggling academically, and develop an intensive course that is summer-long for youth
    - Focus limited resources on the areas of the city in which there are a greater number of issues identified i.e.: exploring ways to support youth and mediate conflicts in North Etobicoke between housing management/other community residents and Somali youth. (Specifically, the Kipling/Dixon area of Kingsview Village)

## **APPENDIX I.**

Somali Youth Community Needs Assessment interviews began June 5, 2001. Since that date, the following people were interviewed:

1. Susan Hemsworth, Head of Student Services, Kipling Collegiate Institute, Etobicoke  
Cynthia Abernthy, Vice-Principal, Kipling Collegiate Institute, Etobicoke  
Jennie Hood, Vice-Principal, Kipling Collegiate Institute
2. Ruth Derwood, Vice-Principal, Central Etobicoke High School, Etobicoke  
Guidance Department, Central Etobicoke High School  
Kim Sutherland, Teacher/Guidance Counselor, Central Etobicoke High School  
Colleen Clancy, ESL Teacher, Central Etobicoke High School
3. Colin Fleming, Vice-Principal, Dixon Grove Junior Middle School, Etobicoke  
Anne MacIlroy, Guidance Counselor, Dixon Grove J.M. School
4. Lynn Farquharson, Vice-Principal, Scarlett Heights Entrepreneurial Academy, Etobicoke  
Diane McCafery, Guidance Counselor, Scarlett Heights E.A.  
Dave Oliver, Science Teacher, Scarlett Heights E.A.
5. Pat Campbell, Vice-Principal, Silverthorn Collegiate Institute, Etobicoke  
Lynn Dennis, Head of Guidance, Silverthorne C.I.

6. Karl Sprogis, Principal, North Albion Collegiate Institute
7. David Hampton, Vice-Principal, Kingsview Village Elementary School, Etobicoke  
Dan Taylor, Teacher, Kingsview Village Elementary School
8. Dequa Farah, Community Mental Health Consultant, Community Resources Consultants of Toronto
9. Abdullah Sid Ahmed, Settlement Worker (Settlement and Education Partnerships in Toronto or SEPT) Rexdale Women's Centre, Etobicoke
10. Faduma Awow Mohamed, SEPT Coordinator; Board of Directors, Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT)
11. Sylvia Child, Executive Director, Canadian Refugee & Immigrant Counseling Services, Toronto
12. Asha Tifow, Somali Immigrant Aid Organization; Community Worker with the "Bridging Child Welfare Services to the Somali Community" Project
13. Mussa M. Nasir, Board of Directors, Council for the Advancement of Sports and Education (CASE)  
Abdullahi Hasan Salah, Board of Directors, CASE  
Mohamed Farah, Board of Directors, CASE  
Yusuf Mohamed, Board of Directors, CASE  
Abdimasin Mohamed, Board of Directors, CASE
13. Amina Hassan, Coordinator of Youth Programs at Somali Youth Association of Toronto, Etobicoke
14. A.A. Sabriye, Community Worker, Family Service Association of Toronto, Toronto
15. Kathy Duncan, Supervisor, Children's Aid Society, North York Tri-Team  
Pam Pasquil, Social Worker, Children's Aid Society, North York Tri-Team  
Amina Nyamwang, Social Worker, " "  
Darlaine Mathews, Social Worker, " "  
Yvonne Della-Matia, Social Worker " "  
Gabbi Silverberg, Social Worker " "  
Sherrie-Ann Alexandra, Social Worker " "
16. Abdi Rashid Mohamed, Administrator, Khalid Bin Walid Mosque, Etobicoke
17. Said Dirie, Social Worker, Children's Aid Society, Etobicoke
18. Ambaro Guled, Community Health Worker, East African Project, Regent Park Community Centre, Toronto
19. Dr.Mohamed Ali, Somali-Immigrant Aid Organization, Health Program; Somali Medical Association, President
20. Sherry Phillips, Programme Director, Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre, North York  
Hawa Abdi, Case Coordinator, Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre; Board of Directors, Somali Youth Organization of Toronto (SOYAT)
21. Mohamed Ahmed, Counselor, Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture, Toronto
22. Abdullahi S. Elmi, Substance Abuse Program Coordinator, Rexdale Health Centre, Rexdale
23. Mike Matyjiw, Coordinator, Parks and Recreation (Kingsview Village), Etobicoke. Five summer staff (students) working with Mr.Matyjiw for Parks and

Recreation at Kingsview Village also interviewed. Three of the five summer staff are Somali high school students.

24. Glen Paproski, Superintendent, Toronto Police Service (23 Division), Rexdale

---

Telephone interviews were conducted with the following individuals:

- Intake Coordinator, George Hull Centre for Children, Etobicoke
- Paula Adams, Housing Coordinator, George Hull Centre for Children
- Mohamed Jilao, Community Development Worker, Dijinta Beesha-Somali Multiservice Centre, Rexdale
- Irene Altimira, Supervisor, Yorktown Child & Family Centre, North York
- P.C. Spratt, Street Crime Division, Toronto Police Services (Division 23), Rexdale
- Abdi Musa, Job Development, Career Foundation, Toronto

Attempts were made to schedule an interview with the following individuals. However, due to vacation schedules, logistical difficulties or time constraints, unfortunately an interview did not occur with:

- Zahra Adam-Elmi, Community Worker, Somaliland Women's Organization of Metro Toronto, Scarborough
- Ahmed Samateur, Housing Worker, Metro Toronto Housing
- Hawa Jilao, Executive Director, Somali Immigrant Women's Association
- Mrs. Mohamed, Vice Principal, Mahdinatol Uloom Islamic School, Scarborough
- Staff, Ontario Coalition Against Poverty

## **APPENDIX II**

Currently, members of the Somali Youth Coalition include:

- Sharron Richards, Manager, Community Development and Prevention Program, Children's Aid Society of Toronto
- Ibrahim Absiye, Executive Director, Midaynta (Association of Somali Service Agencies), Toronto
- Faduma Awow Mohamed, President, Board of Directors, Somali Youth Association of Toronto and Settlement Coordinator for S.E.P.T. (Settlement & Education Partnerships in Toronto), Rexdale Women's Centre.
- Amina Nyamwang, Social Worker, Children's Aid Society, North York Branch
- A.A. Sabriye, Community Worker, Family Service Association of Toronto
- Sylvia Child, Executive Director, Canadian Refugee & Immigrant Counseling Services
- Katrina Reitsma, M.S.W. student intern, Community Development and Prevention

Program, Children's Aid Society of Toronto \*

\* Katrina Reitsma is currently a graduate student at Salem State College, Graduate School of Social Work located in Salem, Massachusetts (USA). Ms. Reitsma is originally from Ontario and obtained her Bachelor of Social Work in 1993. As an under-graduate student, she participated in an exchange program and attended a small college located in Nairobi, Kenya for four months. Ms. Reitsma worked for three years in Toronto as the Coordinator of Volunteer Services at the Lighthouse Community Centre, a non-governmental agency with support services for refugees and new immigrants (primarily from South-East Asia and Latin America). She moved to Massachusetts in 1997, and has been working for the past four years as a social worker in the Massachusetts state child protection services agency (equivalent of the Children's Aid Society in Ontario). She has taken an educational leave of absence from her job, and is completing her graduate degree by participating in a three and a half month placement with the Community Development and Prevention Program of the Children's Aid Society of Toronto (CAST). Her placement with the Community Development and Prevention Program (CDPP) began May 16, 2001 and ended August 31, 2001.

### APPENDIX III.

#### **Sample questions for respondents surveyed:**

- Describe briefly the types of programs and activities that your agency/organization organizes specifically for Somali youth ages 12-18.
- **Are all Somali youth adapting and adjusting successfully, or are some youth not successfully meeting the adaptation challenge?** What are stresses faced by Somali youth? What issues may be specific to Somali youth living in your neighborhood and location? What other issues may be shared by youth from other war-torn countries?
- What additional program activities and/or outreach would be helpful to address the above issues specific to Somali youth?\*
- How do different Somali youth learn about and adapt to Canadian culture differently? How are family members helping each other deal with cultural differences and conflicts? \*
- What is the experience of Somali youth in the schools of your community? How are different Somali youth coping/adapting differently within the educational system in Toronto? What are the key factors of those students who are doing well?
- Do you have knowledge or impressions of what percentage of Somali youth living in Toronto have lived for a period of time in a refugee camp prior to coming to Canada? What are the types of war trauma that are specific to Somalia and how might that have impacted different Somali youth?

- What is the role of the common religion (Islam) in the culture and family life? How does this role interact with culture to shape the experience of youth in family life?\*
- Through your observations, with whom do different Somali youth identify?
- What are some of the personality strengths about Somali youth today (year 2001) that you have observed? How can the accomplishments and positive contributions of different Somali youth be celebrated?

\* note: questions with \* from “Daryeelka Qoyska: Learnings from the Development of a Family Education Program with the Somali Community: Summary Report”. Prepared for the Yorktown Child and Family Centre and Parenting Alliance, January 2001, by Beth Hoen.

Sample additional questions relevant to school staff:

- Are Somali youth in your school using the services of your guidance office?
- Describe Somali parental involvement in the education system.
- Are children used as interpreters by school staff to communicate with their parents?
- How does your school adapt to allow Somali youth to practice their Muslim faith?
- Do you use the services of the Settlement & Education Partnerships Project? What other support services do you use in reaching out to work with the Somali community?

## APPENDIX IV.

### Focus groups with adolescents: sample questions posed :

- Where were you born? (if not born in Canada, when did you come here? What other countries have you lived in?) How old are you? Where do you go to school now? What area of Toronto do you live in?
- How would you describe your school experience? What do you enjoy about school? Are there things about school that frustrate you?
- Does your school accommodate for your Muslim faith?
- Where do you hang out with your friends? What kind of things do you do with your friends? Are there differences between the experiences of Somali boys and girls in the kinds of things youth do in their spare time?
- Are you concerned about your safety in your school? in your neighbourhood?
- What things do you do well? What do you enjoy doing? Are you working part-time this summer?
- Who do you talk with if something is bothering you?
- What kinds of things make you angry? How do you express your anger?
- If something really sad has happened to you or someone you know, how do you grieve a loss?
- What do you want to do when you graduate from high school?
- How do Toronto norms mesh with your own culture?
- Do you speak the Somali language? Where and with whom do you speak Somali?

- What does it mean to be a Somali female/male in year 2001 in Canada?
- What aspects of your culture do you appreciate the most?
- What additional types of programs/activities do you think need to be developed for teenagers your age?
- What do you want the adults who are creating activities to know about youth from your culture?

## APPENDIX V.

### **Bridging Child Welfare Services with the Somali Community**

One project that the CDPP has played an active part in developing is the “Bridging Child Welfare Services with the Somali Community”, a Somali-Children’s Aid Society Partnership Project. This is managed by a Project Management Committee, with active participation by management staff from all branches of the Children’s Aid Society and from Somali partner agencies. Three part-time Somali case workers were hired to coordinate activity with Somali partner agencies and CAST, link Somali parents to appropriate community resources, provide support and referral services regarding child welfare services and assist with translation of CAST child welfare materials. The Project Management Committee also coordinates community outreach, including developing radio “spots” explaining CAS to the community on a Somali radio program. Other efforts of the project include recruitment of Somali foster homes, presentations and discussions in the Somali community regarding the role of CAST. The primary role of the project is to open the lines of communication between CAST and the Somali community by focusing first on building trust and understanding.

## **Acknowledgements**

Many individuals contributed to this project. Sincere appreciation is extended to members of the Somali Youth Coalition who provided consultation and support along the way. In particular, thanks goes to Ibrahim Absiye (Midaynta – Association of Somali Service Agencies), Faduma Awow Mohamed (Somali Youth Association of Toronto) and to Sylvia Child (Canadian Refugee & Immigrant Counseling). Their wisdom and contributions were invaluable.

Sincere appreciation and thanks also goes out to:

- staff at SOYAT (Amina Hassan, Youth Program Coordinator and summer students Nira and Mohad Ali) for recruiting youth and organizing and assisting in facilitating the first two focus groups
- Ambara Guled (Community Health Worker, East African Health Project, Regent Park Community Health Centre) for recruiting youth and organizing the third focus group

- Ekua Walcott (MSW York University student completing an internship at the Community Development and Prevention Program of the Children’s Aid Society of Toronto) for leading the first focus group
- Selma Darcy (Guelph University student completing her internship with the Community Development and Prevention Program) for assisting in leading the third focus group
- Sharron Richards and Cindy Himmelstein, Community Development and Prevention Program, Children’s Aid Society of Toronto, for providing excellent supervision
- Dr. Barbara Nicholson (Salem State College, Graduate School of Social Work) for providing access to her unpublished research “Stressors and Coping in Adolescence: a Qualitative Study” relating to the experience of South-East Asian refugees. Her work assisted in framing some of the issues outlined in this paper.

**And finally, thanks and appreciation is extended to the youth who participated in the focus groups for sharing their thoughts and experiences.**