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What Explains the Escalating Gun Violence among Somali Canadian Youth in Toronto?

Introduction

In the last decade, the Somali community in Canada witnessed an alarming rate of gun violence among Somali-Canadian young males. Since 2006 the media reported more than 50 cases in which Somali young men were murdered through gun violence in Calgary and Toronto (Livingstone, 2013). In the last three years, there was an escalating shootings and killings among Somali Canadian youth in Greater Toronto Area (Duncan, 2013). For example, in the summer of 2012, six Somali young men were killed in the 33 homicide shootings that happened in Toronto (Duncan, 2013). Moreover, in this year alone, four Somali Canadian young males were murdered in Toronto. In this research paper, I critically examine the sociological factors that may explain the escalating gun violence among Somali Canadian youth in Toronto.

There is no contemporary theory that can offer good explanation about the high rate of crime within ethnic communities in Canada (Ngo, et al., 2011). However, social-disorganization theory developed by the Chicago School's Shaw and McKay can explain the correlation between crime and community structure in urban areas (Sampson &

Groves, 1989). Social disorganization can be defined as the lack of community structure that can develop strategies to deal with social problems such as crime and youth violence (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Unlike other theories that explain the psychological conditions of young males who commit crime in urban areas, social disorganization theory posits that community structures and cultures explain the “differential rates of crime” among youth ethnic groups in urban areas (Sampson & Wilson, 1995, p.178).

Further, in their classical study to test social disorganization theory, Sampson and Groves (1989), found that “low socio economic status, ethnic heterogeneity, residential mobility, and family disruption” are the main variables that can be used to measure the level of social disorganization among communities in urban areas (p.774). Moreover, community disorganization caused by the socioeconomic context also mediate crime and youth violence among disorganized communities in urban areas because the lack of structural mechanisms and “formal and informal ties that promote to solve common problems” (Sampson & Groves, p.777, 1989). Whereas social disorganization theory is classic theory that was developed in 1950s to explain the link between crime and community structure, there are contemporary studies that tested its validity. For example, Lowenkamp, Cullen and Pratt (2003) replicated Sampson and Groves’ (1989) test of social disorganization theory and they found that “the findings of the initial classic study were not artifactual but illuminated an underlying empirical pattern that has persisted over time” (p.351).

Using Social disorganization theory as a framework, the general hypotheses of this research paper is that there is high level of social disorganization among the Somali community in Toronto due to systematic barriers and cultural challenges the community faces. These include, economic hardships like high rate of unemployment; social exclusion such as racism and discrimination; and lack of social cohesion due to mistrust and clan divisions within the community. Most of these challenges are beyond the control of the community, while some are internal factors, for instance cultural such as clan division. Thus, the existing social disorganization of the Somali community in Toronto may mediate gun violence among Somali young males.

Methodology

The methodology of this research paper is systematic literature review (Cronin et al., 2008). Since the resources for empirical study are not available, effective literature review is the starting point to create knowledge and “uncover areas where research is needed” (Webster & Watson, 2002, p. 1). In this systematic literature review, my purpose is to read Statistics Canada census data, research papers and academic articles that focus on the settlement experiences, and integration process of the Somali community in Toronto in the last two decades. From the literature review, I will examine studies that shed light on the socioeconomic status of the Somalia Diaspora in western countries to see if there is a pattern that shapes the experiences of the Somali diaspora in general. The selection criteria of my literature review is to focus on papers that were published in the

last two decades, which examine the socio economic status of Somali Community in Toronto. In particular, the main focus of this literature review would be the current socio-economic status of Somali community in Toronto that can be indicators of social disorganization, which may mediate the escalating gun violence among Somali Canadian young males.

To see if there is social disorganization exist among Somali community in Toronto, I will review literature that examine the economic disadvantage, social exclusion and lack of social cohesion as variables that may cause social disorganization. To examine these variables, I investigate through the literature review the following questions:

1. What is the unemployment rate in the Somali community in Toronto?
2. What are the types of racism and discrimination that the Somali community in Toronto face?
3. What are the community strategies that Somalis in Toronto use to overcome the challenges they face?

While this systematic literature reviewed highlights the socio economic situation of Somali community in Toronto in general, it has limitations to shed light on how the socio economic context of the community as structural barriers can cause social problems such as youth violence. Thus, empirical study to test the link between community structure, and Somali Canadian youth violence is needed in future.

Background of Somali Community in Toronto

Somalia became an independent country in 1960 after the unification of British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland. The political system of the country in the first decade after its independence was democratic which was based on multi-party system (Lewis, 1988). In 1969, a military coup led by Siyad Barre overthrew the civilian government and ruled the country for twenty one years. During the time of military rule in Somalia, there was no freedom where people can exercise their political rights. Lack of freedom and political participation in Somalia led to the creation of many opposition groups based on clan membership to take up arms and fight against the military regime (Lewis, 2008). The opposition groups overthrew Siyad Barre in 1991, but anarchy and civil war started after the central government collapsed. During the civil war, thousands of Somali civilians died and millions fled the country as refugees to different parts of the world such as Canada.

The first wave of Somali refugees to Canada arrived in the early 1990s. The current population of Somali Canadians is estimated roughly 70,000 and 23,000 of them live in Toronto (Kusow, 2006). According to the census of 2011, the number of Somalis who live in Greater Toronto Area is 22,685 (Statistics Canada, 2011). Most of adult members of the Somali ethnic group in Toronto, who came to Canada as refugees in early 1990s had full time employment in Somalia (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995). Many of them worked in industries such as finance, education and health before they immigrated to Canada (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995). For example, Opoku-Dapaah noted in *Somali Refugee in*

Toronto: A profile that “more than half (52 percent)” of Somali refugees in Toronto “were employed in white collar occupations” in Somalia (p 47). In addition, a small number of early Somali refugees in Toronto, “were employed in occupations such as retailing, low-skilled vocational trades, and also in manual skill trades” (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995, p.47). Thus, most early Somali refugees in Toronto were middle class in Somalia before the civil war started. .

Galabuzi (2006) argues that racialized immigrant communities in Canada face job discrimination in the labor market despite their high levels of education and extensive experience. For example, most early Somali refugees in Canada had the cultural capital to succeed in Job market such as high education and experience, yet they face systemic barriers to participate in labour force (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995). In 1995, the unemployment rate of Somali refugees in Toronto was 56 percent, while those who had employment worked in low paying jobs and only 6 percent of Somalis were self-employed (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995). According to Opoku-Dapaah (1995) the economic disadvantage of early Somali refugees in Toronto was mainly based on discrimination such as non-recognition of their academic qualifications and demand for having Canadian experience. Moreover, lack of legal documentation and delay of work permits also contributed to economic hardships among early Somali refugees in Toronto (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995).

Furthermore, early Somali refugees who came to Toronto in the 1990s encountered social racism and discrimination such as social prejudice because of their

sociocultural background that is different from the mainstream culture of Canadian society (Opoku-Daapah, 1995). In 1995, fifty percent of Somalis in Toronto reported that they experienced discrimination and racism based on their distinctive cultural appearances such as their “accent, dress, complexion and mannerism” (Opoku-Daapah, 1995, p.70). The nature of racial discrimination early Somali refugees in Toronto encountered appears in housing and employment. For example, 25 percent of Somalis report that they experienced “discrimination related to housing and accommodation” such as being refused to rent a room by landlords because of their color (Opoku-Daapah, 1995, p. 70). Moreover, since most Somali families have several children, landlords refused to rent them an apartment because of the large size of Somali family (Murdie, 2002). Similarly, low income and high rate of unemployment led more than half of Somali community in Toronto to live in social housing (Opoku-Daapah, 1995).

Several nongovernmental organizations emerged in early 90s to facilitate settlement services to “major influx of Somali refugee- claimants into Metropolitan Toronto” (Opoku- Daapah, 1995). The main services included translation assistance at refugee hearings, advice and guidance for refugee case processes and referrals to the government institutions (Opoku-Daapah, 1995). To complicate matters, the structure of Somali organizations in Toronto is based on both formal and informal systems in the provision of their services. (Opoku-Daapah, 1995). For example, most Somali organizations use informal procedures based on African traditional values such as greeting and talking to clients in Somali language because “the communal atmosphere

that pervades the encounter between staff and clients alleviates the clients uneasiness, tension and feeling of insecurity” (Opoku-Daapah, 1995, p. 77). Thus, the main focus of Somali organizations in Toronto is providing settlement services for Somali refugees.

Although Somali community in Toronto was small community in the early 90s, more than twenty Somali organizations emerged in the Greater Toronto Area between 1988 and 1995 (Opoku-Daapah, 1995). One of the main reasons behind the increase of Somali organizations Toronto is clan division among Somali diaspora, which is also the cause of civil war in Somalia (Opoku-Daapah, 1995). Hopkins (2006) argues that there is lack of collaboration and unified voice among Somali organisations in diaspora because there is “underlying divisions which remain among Somalis in the diaspora” (p.368). Hopkins (2006) found that most Somali community organisations in London and Toronto suffer limited resources, lack of effective organisational capacity, and absence of “unity and communication within their membership” (368). For example, lack of unity among Somali organisations in Toronto due to clan divisions is a main cause of competition against each other to secure funding and resources from government agencies (Hopkins, 2006).

Discussion: Current Socio-economic Status of Somali Community in Toronto.

Unemployment.

The economic disadvantages early Somali refugees in Toronto faced in their settlement period still exists among the community after more than two decades of living in Canada. For example, a study conducted by the Wellesley Institute (2013) found that, only 33 percent of Somalis in Toronto had full time work. Compared to the labor participation of Bangladesh, Chinese, and Somali Communities in Toronto, Somali respondents had the lowest job opportunities despite their high level of education (Akter et al., 2013). According to this study 73 percent of Somali respondents in Toronto, who are educated completed their postsecondary education in Canada because “the Somali population was the most likely to have been educated in Canada” (Akter et al., 2013, p 15). Comparing the economic survival strategies that Bangladeshi, Chinese and Somali communities adopt as newcomers to Canada, “Somali respondents were six times as likely as Chinese Language or Bangladeshi respondents to report working as a taxi driver” (Akter et al., 2013 p. 31). The findings of the Wellesley Institute on the labor participation and the economic disadvantage of Somali community in Toronto are similar to the findings Opoku-Dapaah (1995) reported twenty years ago.

Many studies confirm that low socio economic status mediate social disorganization within community. Social disorganization theory developed by Shaw and Mckay (1942) can be used to explain much the high rate of crime within many communities characterized by low socio economic status because crime is the effect of

social disorganization caused by low socio economic status (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Moreover, young men from communities that are disorganized socially are susceptible to crime because the inability of the community to develop effective control mechanisms (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Similarly, deindustrialization and lack of jobs among minority groups in urban areas is the leading factor why young adults join gangs as a survival method (Hagedorn, 1991). As Wilson (2011) argues, there are more devastating social problems in the neighborhoods with poor people who are jobless than in neighborhoods with poor people who have jobs. Examples of social problems in neighborhoods with high level of poverty caused by unemployment include, social disorganization, youth violence, family disruption, and dependency on welfare (Wilson, 2011).

Thus, the economic hardship that exists among racialized communities in Ontario is among the root causes of youth violence in urban cities in the province because “the lack of opportunities for many families and communities has left many youth with a limited view of the role of adulthood” (McMurtry & Curling, 2008, p. 72). Furthermore, lack of meaningful source of income is the leading factor of risk behaviours such as gun violence for youth in Ontario (McMurtry & Curling, 2008). The Institute of Research on Public Policy (IRPP) found that Somali young adults in Toronto encounter major roadblocks in employment such as racism and discrimination (McGown, 2013). According to the IRPP study, after three decades of immigrating, many Somalis in Canada live in public housing communities and work in low paying jobs. McGown

(2012) adds that Somali young males fall into criminal and antisocial behaviours because they are frustrated about the socio economic status of their community and lack of opportunities in the wider society. These observations reveal how systematic barriers such as economic hardships facing Somali community in Toronto led to social disorganization in the last three decades and may partly explain the escalating gun violence among young Somali Canadian males in Toronto.

Racism and discrimination

As noted above, early Somali refugees encountered racism in employment. Opoku-Daapah (1995) found that, 17 percent of Somalis in Toronto reported that they were denied job opportunities because of their race. In Canada, racialized groups experience racism and discrimination on a daily basis (Li, 2008). However, members of the Somali community in Toronto faced more blatant form of racism and discrimination in the last two decades because they “have three strikes against them- being black, Muslim, and newcomer” (Reitsma, 2001, p. 11). As Black Muslim immigrants, Somali newcomers in Canada were not aware that skin color such as “blackness” is a fundamental category of social stratification in North America (Kusow, 2006). In Somalia, social stratification and categories is based on clanism, which “is a system of social differentiation where membership is determined through shared mythical ancestors.” (Kusow, 2006, p. 541). Somali refugees in Canada were therefore not prepared psychologically to understand and deal properly racial discrimination based on skin color because “Somalis have no previous experience of racial discrimination” (as

quoted in Reitsma, p. 11, 2001). In addition Opoku-Daapah (1995) noted that, a majority of Somali respondents who had encountered “racial discrimination took no action” (p.71).

Post 9/11 events, Islam became another main category to construct otherness in Canada and U.S.A, because Islam is depicted negatively by the media (Iqbal, 2003). Further, since Islam is represented negatively in the public, it became a distinct feature that is used for exclusion and inclusion purposes, for those of different skin color (Ajrouch & Kusow, 2006). A common experience for the Somali community in Toronto is discrimination based on “following religious teachings particularly choices of dress and head-covering for Somali girls/women” which mostly occur in “employment interviews, housing and neighborhood experiences and school setting” (Reitsma, p. 11, 2001). Furthermore, conflict or misunderstanding between cultural norms and values of Somali people and the mainstream Canadian culture may cause discrimination and criminalization against Canadian Somali Youth. For example, one of the socialization practices of Canadian Somali youth is to gather in groups and talk in public areas due to their “ traditional love of freedom and self-expression” (Reitsma, 2001. p11). Such socialization practices often cause criminalization against Canadian Somali Youth. For example, in many neighborhoods in Toronto “security is called because there are a group of young black men hanging out” (Reitsma, 2001, p.11).

Subsequently, Martin, et al. (2011) found that perceived discrimination is one of the factors that mediate black youth in America to engage violence activities in urban

areas. Similarly, Burt, et al. (2012) found that racial discrimination against African American male has positive correlation with increased crime committed by black youth. A report on the root causes of youth violence in Ontario found that the racism African Canadians experience mediate the high representation of Canadian black youth in crime rate. The authors of this report write that:

As we were advised in England, there are well-documented circumstances that produce alienation and the other immediate risk factors, and the sad reality is that a disproportionate number of racialized groups are subjected to those circumstances. It is because of that subjection, and not their race, that they are disproportionately present in the groups we are concerned about (McMurtry & Curling, 2008, p 42).

Most of Somali community in Toronto live in low-income neighborhoods such as black creek neighborhood, ranked as the least livable of 140 neighborhoods in Toronto (McKnight, *March 13, 2014, p. 2*). According to Statistics Canada (2006) visible minorities account 78.1 % of residents in Black Creek neighborhood, making it the neighborhood with the highest concentrated area of racialized and immigrants in Toronto (Wilson, et al., 2011). Teixeira (2008) found that black people in Toronto face racism in rental house searching process to secure affordable housing in their desired neighborhoods. Thus, perceived or real racism in Toronto create social exclusion and housing segregation for low income visible minorities (Teixeira, 2008). Similarly, Dhalmann, H. (2013) examined the residential preferences of Somali and Russian

immigrants in Oslo, Norway and, found that “the local context, in which immigrants find themselves in the new society, shapes their behavior, perceptions and, consequently, ethnic residential preferences” (p.404).

Accordingly, one of the factors that contribute social disorganization of community is ethnic and racial heterogeneity because residents in heterogeneous neighborhoods lack the ability to achieve consensus (Sampson & Groves 1989). Furthermore, social disorganization caused by ethnic and racial heterogeneity mediate the increase of delinquency and crime because of variation of ethnic groups makes difficult to reach consensus on social control methods to solve social problems such as youth violence (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Thus, the multiple layers of discrimination and the racism that young Somali males in Toronto experience for being both black and Muslim, and the social disorganization that exists because of heterogeneous neighborhoods that most Somali community in Toronto live may explain the escalating gun violence among Somali youth in Toronto.

Social Cohesion and Community Strategies.

Social cohesion and the ability to develop sustainable community strategies such as economic opportunities for youth are among the primary factors that prevent youth from ethno cultural community to commit crime in a multi-cultural society (Ngo, et al., 2011). As noted above, several Somali nongovernmental organizations emerged in early 90s to facilitate settlement services to “major influx of Somali refugee- claimants into Metropolitan Toronto” (Opoku- Daapah, 1995). However, in the last two decades,

community based organizations that can develop communal strategies to overcome integration challenges such as economic hardships, social exclusion and social disorganization have not yet emerged among Somali community in Toronto. Fuglerud and Engebrigtsen, (2006) examined the cultural difference between Somali and Tamil immigrant communities in Norway in terms of their capacity to build social organizations that can deal with social problems such as housing. Fuglerud and Engebrigtsen, (2006) found two different methods these communities use to build social organizations. For example, the Somali community use disperse method to manage long distance social networking, while the Tamil community are more centric oriented to build community institutions that maintain the social order within the community. According to Fuglerud, and Engebrigtsen, (2006) the reason for two distinct methods among Somali and Tamil communities in Norway lies between the two traditions that exist in their homeland. For example, the Somali tradition is predominantly nomadic, while the Tamil tradition is based on sedentary life. As Hopkins (2006) found, lack of social cohesion among Somali community originations in Toronto is due to clan division and the civil war that is going on in Somalia.

Politics of homeland and national identity are among the factors that determine the survival strategies that diaspora communities employ to overcome socio economic challenges in a host country (Sheffe, 2003). For example, the Sri Lanka Tamil community in Toronto demonstrated a high rate of social cohesion that is shaped by the politics of homeland (Kalyani, 2010). In 2009, more than 100000 Tamils in Toronto

participated in Tamil protests around the world in efforts aimed at bringing attention to the civil war in Sri Lanka (Kalyani, 2010). Such high level of Tamil community mobilization in Toronto shows that “there is cohesion within this diaspora, and an ability to be united for a common goal” (Kalyani, 2010). On the other hand, the Somali community in Toronto are not homogeneous contrary to media and scholarly representation because there are cultural and language differences between refugees from northern and southern part of Somalia (Berns-MacGown, 2007). Accordingly, Berns-MacGown (2007) observes that one of the cultural challenges that makes it difficult for the Somali community in Toronto to form a strong community are the inter clan fights that caused the civil in Somalia. Whether Somali community in Western countries is large or small, social cohesion is absent because of clan divisions and the civil war that is going in Somalia. For example, Voyer (2015) found a lack of social cohesion, and infighting among small Somali community in Lewiston, Maine caused by pre-existing clan and political divisions in Somalia.

Family and community based support such as literacy and cultural programs are among the secondary prevention measures for youth who commit crime in multicultural society such as Canada (Ngo, et al., 2011). Similarly, Knoester and Haynie (2005) found that youth who live in neighborhoods with low single parent families commit less crime than youth who live in neighborhoods with high number of single parent families because there is no effective deterring mechanisms to commit crime for youth who live in neighborhoods with high number of single parents. The Somali communities in Canada

encounter family disruption caused by civil war, economic hardships and immigration process. For example, Somali Canadians have the highest rate of lone parenthood families among visible minorities in Canada (Mata, 2011). The findings of a cohort study by the Toronto District School Board to examine the overall performance and the success of students of Somali Descent in Toronto, report that the rate of dropout from high school among Somali Canadian students in Toronto is 24 %, while the overall dropout of all TDSB is 14 %. (Toronto District School Board, 2014). Thus, both the primary and the secondary prevention strategies for youth crime among a community in multicultural society such as social cohesion, family and community based support in youth education are absent in Somali community in Toronto. As Ngo, et al. (2011) found “strategies focused on support for families, support for children and youth, access of ethno cultural community members to educational and economic opportunities” are among the main protective mechanism for youth violence in urban cities (p, 36).

Conclusion

Community disorganization caused by the socioeconomic disadvantages mediate crime and youth violence among disorganized communities in urban areas because the lack of structural mechanisms and “formal and informal ties that promote to solve common problems” (Sampson & Groves, 1989, p.777). Using social-disorganization theory as a framework, this study suggested that there is a high level of social

disorganization among Somali community in Toronto due to the systematic barriers and cultural challenges members of the community face. These systematic and cultural challenges include, economic hardships like high rate of unemployment; social exclusion such as racism and discrimination; and lack of social cohesion due to mistrust and clan divisions within the Somali community in Toronto. Further, I hypothesize that the existing social disorganization of Somali community in Toronto may mediate the escalating gun violence among Somali young males.

In addition, using systematic literature review as a methodology, I focused on research and academic papers that were published in the last two decades and examine the socio economic status of the Somali Community in Toronto and Somali Diaspora in general. The literature reviewed confirmed that, there is high unemployment rate of Somali community in Toronto, which has not changed in the last two decades (Akter et al., 2013). Moreover members of the Somali community in Toronto are disadvantaged because they “have three strikes against them namely; being black, a Muslim, and a newcomer” (Reitsma, 2001, p. 11). Furthermore as result of clan divisions and mistrust that exist within the community, there is lack of social cohesion and collaboration among Somali organizations in Toronto (Hopkins, 2006).

This systematic literature review highlights the relationship between social disorganization caused by socio economic disadvantage and youth violence in urban areas. However, this research paper suffers from limitations to shed light on how the social disorganization of Somali community in Toronto caused by economic hardships

like high rate of unemployment; social exclusion such as racism and discrimination; and lack of social cohesion may cause the escalating gun violence among Somali youth. For future research, empirical studies are required to test the relationship between Somali community structure and Somali Canadian youth violence. Additionally, research addressing structural barriers and cultural challenges the Somali community in Toronto faces are required to address the importance of community strategies and social cohesion to cope in a multicultural society to solve social problems such as gun violence. Another issue that calls for further investigation is whether a strong ethnic identity among Somalis in Canada promotes positive or negative immigrant experience.

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