



## **Pathway to Belonging 2013:**

**An Assessment of the Somali-Canadian Community in Calgary**

Community Report

Project Consultant: *Abdullah A. Omar*

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With Support From:



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For the full report "Pathway to Belonging: An Assessment of the Canadian-Somali Community in Calgary" please visit the website <http://www.ecccalgary.com/>

## Contents

Message from the Advisory Committee .....	4
Updates from the Community.....	4
Introduction .....	5
Research and Engagement Methods .....	6
The Somali-Canadian Community in Calgary .....	7
A Vision for the Community.....	8
Education .....	9
Employment.....	10
Housing.....	11
Safety .....	12
Sense of Belonging.....	13
Changing Family Dynamics.....	14
Somali-Canadian Community Organizations in Calgary .....	14
Recommendations.....	15
Action Plan.....	17
Acknowledgements.....	18

## Message from the Advisory Committee

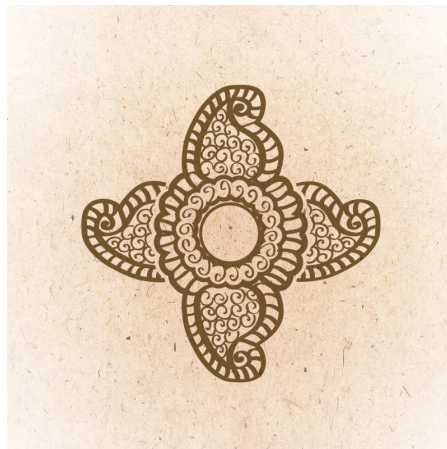
We are pleased to present the report *Pathway to Belonging: An Assessment of the Canadian-Somali Community in Calgary*. It is hoped that learnings from this report will assist in the continued successful settlement of the Somali-Canadian community in Calgary.

We want to thank all the people who helped with this project, the community members who so willingly shared their stories, the research assistants who helped gather vital information, the service providers for their support, the funders of this project and all those who participated in our gatherings. THANK YOU!

## Updates from the Community

While the work on the assessment took place, many of the project partners were actively working with the Somali-Canadian community. New partnerships were formed, programs were started and a greater awareness of the Somali-Canadian community in Calgary was built. A few examples include:

- The Somali International Youth Board (SIYB) programs have grown and have tremendous success with the youth;
- Immigrant Services Calgary is working in partnership with the SYIB;
- Centre for Newcomers received funding for and started a program for Somali-Canadian youth;
- Homework clubs expanded with the help of Big Brothers and Big Sisters and the Bridge Foundation for Youth;
- Big Brothers and Big Sisters is working with the community to develop youth mentoring programs.



## Introduction

In February 2011, the Somali-Canadian community approached social service agencies, government representatives, funders and concerned individuals to present about a number of issues that are cause of concern related to Somali-Canadian youth specifically around gang violence and disengagement from education and culture. Other issues as identified by the Somali-Canadian community groups included: family conflict, migration and integration stressors, Canadian immigration policies that impact economic participation, credential recognition, low rates of post-secondary education and poverty. These issues both individually and collectively affect the ability of the Somali-Canadian community to fully contribute and participate in the greater Calgary community.

In response, a collaborative group was formed primarily of representatives from the Somali-Canadian community, Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary (ECCC), United Way of Calgary and Area, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) and Social Policy and Planning of the City of Calgary, Big Brothers and Big Sisters to look into these issues. A series of consultations led to the creation of the Somali-Canadian Community Assessment Report Project funded by United Way, FCSS and Big Brothers and Big Sisters. The ECCC hosted the project.

The goals of this project were:

- 1) Bring the Somali-Canadian community in Calgary together and develop collaboration between the diverse Somali groups and mainstream organizations;
- 2) Identify the strengths in the Somali-Canadian community and build individual and community capacity;
- 3) Understand the needs of this community and identify gaps with existing organization's programs/services;
- 4) Build a service model that answers the Somali-Canadian needs and use the model for other emerging ethno-specific communities in Calgary.

To provide guidance to the project, an advisory committee was established. The 18 member Advisory Committee had representation from the Somali-Canadian community (12 individuals from the 6 Somali-specific organizations); 1 representative from each level of government; a person from United Way; two staff members from Big Brothers and Big Sisters of, and one person from Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary. A community assessment, using a community-based research action approach, was used to address issues brought forward by the Somali-Canadian community.

The assessment focused on the strengths and needs of the community. In addition, the assessment also formed the basis for building a community action plan for the Somali-Canadian community to feel a greater sense of belonging in Calgary and be empowered to participate fully and equally in Calgary.



## Research and Engagement Methods

The Somali-Canadian Community Assessment was a one year action-research project and consisted of the following six phases:

- 1) Painting a picture of the Somali-Canadian Community in Calgary;
- 2) Survey of Somali-Canadian Community in Calgary;
- 3) Individual and face-to-face interviews;
- 4) Roundtable of discussions with the Somali-Canadian Community;
- 5) Report on the Finding and
- 6) Building of a Community Action Plan.

The research and engagement activities were led by Dr. Omar Abdullah (Consultant), Debbie Belgrave (Social Policy and Planning representative) and 11 trained community research assistants. They were able to conduct 209 surveys getting information from 590 individuals, 25 interviews, and one roundtable discussion with 55 community members attending.

The quotes used in this document are taken from the Somali-Canadian community members who participated in the surveys, interviews and roundtable discussions.



## The Somali-Canadian Community in Calgary

The Somali-Canadian Community in Calgary started in the early 1980s, when a small number of mostly Somali men settled in Calgary. Few stayed as a result of difficult economic times and the harsh climate.

Over the last decade the community has been growing significantly in Calgary. A strong economy and good job prospects attracted many young Somali-Canadians to Calgary. Migration is mainly from other parts of Canada, primarily Toronto, Ottawa, Winnipeg and Vancouver. There is no reliable, current data on the size of the community in Calgary. Estimates vary between 2,000 and 4,000 people.

This project focused on assessing the strengths and needs of the Somali community in Calgary. Great efforts were made to reach out to as many community members as possible. The information presented below reflects the information from respondents to the surveys.

The Canadian-Somali community in Calgary is:

- Young; 39% of the community is under the age of 18 and less than 1% over the age of 66.

0 -6 years	12.8%
7-17 years	26.6%
18 - 24 years	12.5%
25 - 44 years	32.8%
45 - 65 years	14.8%
66 years and older	0.5%

- Dispersed; the community is spread out over all parts of Calgary but with the largest concentration in the Southwest part of the City.

Northwest	11%
Northeast	26%
Southeast	11%
Southwest	52%

- Diverse: Families with children represent the largest household group, but a significant number of families are led by single parents.

Couple with Children at Home	31%
Living Alone	29%
Single Parent Household	22%
Living with Roommate	11%
Couple without Children at home	6%
Living with Extended Family	1%

- Low income; More than half of the respondents indicated that their annual household income is currently less than \$30,000, another third reported a household income between \$30,000 and \$60,000. By comparison, the median household income in Calgary in 2010 was \$89,450.

\* Statistics Canada: Median total income, by family type, by census metropolitan area  
<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/famil107a-eng.htm>

## A Vision for the Community

Cultural pride, strong community ties and resourcefulness were identified by members of the Canadian-Somali Community members as great strengths. The responses were consistent for all ages, levels of income and gender and form a great source of resilience in challenging times.

Community Members expressed their vision for the community:

*“A united, integrated community that is known for its excellence in education and civic contributions.”*

– Community member

*“...work together to build a better future for themselves and the future generations.”*

– Community member

Education is considered a key to the future success of the community. Parents have high hopes and aspirations for their children, and youth themselves also expressed a high level of ambition.

Parents voiced a strong wish for their children to be “fully integrated members of the Canadian society with full rights and responsibilities” while at the same time maintaining their religion and culture. They want their children to access all opportunities that Canada has to offer, and do better than them. Contributing back to the Canadian community is an important aspect for this community.

*“I want my children to be successful people who achieve their goals and aspirations. I want them to be contributing members of society without sacrificing their religion and identity. I am very hopeful. Out of five, three of my children are attending university. The other two are at the high school and they aspire also to attend university.”*

– Community member





## Education

Many of the Somali-Canadian community came to Calgary as a result of political conflict in Somalia. Due to the civil war many spent significant time, or were born, in refugee camps. Families were greatly affected by the war; many lost relatives or were split up and landed in different countries around the world.

Educational opportunities were difficult or non-existent during the two decades that many spent displaced or in refugee camps. As a result, 53% of the Somali-Canadian community in Calgary over 18 years old have less than a Grade 9 education.

The Somali-Canadian community considers education the key factor for the success of future generations. More education means more opportunities and better chances in life. Community members not only want future generations to succeed, they also aspire to contribute significantly to the larger Calgary community.

Parents make a considerable effort to ensure that their children achieve educational success and feel that the academic achievement of the Canadian-Somali youth in Calgary is improving. Somali youth are noticeably starting to gain academic success; however, parents face various challenges in their attempts to support their children's education. Some of the challenges stem from parents' struggle with life while other are described as unfamiliarity with the education system.

- **Busy Parents:** many parents work in survival jobs, often more than one job, to meet the basic needs of their families. Attending to children's education or spending time with family may seem like a luxury.
- **Lack of Positive Role Models:** high levels of underemployment and limited number of successful adults in the socially valued professions is affecting the younger generation.
- **Single Parenting:** 22.5% of families are headed by a single parent, mostly a mother. The absence of fathers in families is especially difficult for the young males.
- **Low Expectations in the School System:** parents' expectations of their children's education are high but find that the school system does not always match these expectations.
- **Lack of Adequate Support and Resources:** some parents have limited education and knowledge of the Canadian education system and culture to fully support their children in school. Financial resources to hire tutors are limited.
- **Cultural factors:** parents are hesitant in disciplining their children in fear of being accused of child abuse resulting in a loss of their children to the foster system.

## Employment

Despite the community's optimism and high aspirations, employment is a significant problem. 50% of working age respondents (15 years and over) report being underemployed or unemployed.

Service industry (40%), healthcare (22%) and manufacturing (11%) are the main employers for members of this community.

The lack of success in employment greatly affects the families:

- Low income: Over half (53%) of the families have a household income of less than \$30,000.
- Multiple jobs: in order to make ends meet many of the parents have to take on additional jobs; this severely impacts the time they can spend with their family.
- Frustration: being underemployed or unemployed creates a high level of frustration and affects the family.

Lack or recognition of foreign credential, low education levels, limited job/skills training and discrimination are often mentioned as the main reasons for the high level of un- and underemployment.

*"I came to this country as a professional with a university degree. I was not able to upgrade my education because I have to support my family as a taxi driver. It is frustrating."*

– Community member



## Housing

Housing is a significant problem for the community, with large family sizes and limited income, finding adequate and affordable housing is one of the most pressing issues facing the community. Only 3 percent of the community owns their own home. The vast majority of the respondents reported that they rent.

Type of housing by survey participants:

Rent	69%
Own	3%
Subsidized	28%

Many families end up living in cramped housing conditions adding to their stress levels. The overcrowded homes lack adequate space for studying and doing homework for young children.

*“Calgary Housing gave me three bedrooms, but I have seven children, one of them has a serious disability and she needs a room for herself. After several months of waiting for a reasonable housing, I ended up moving out and renting a house with my very limited income.” – Community member*



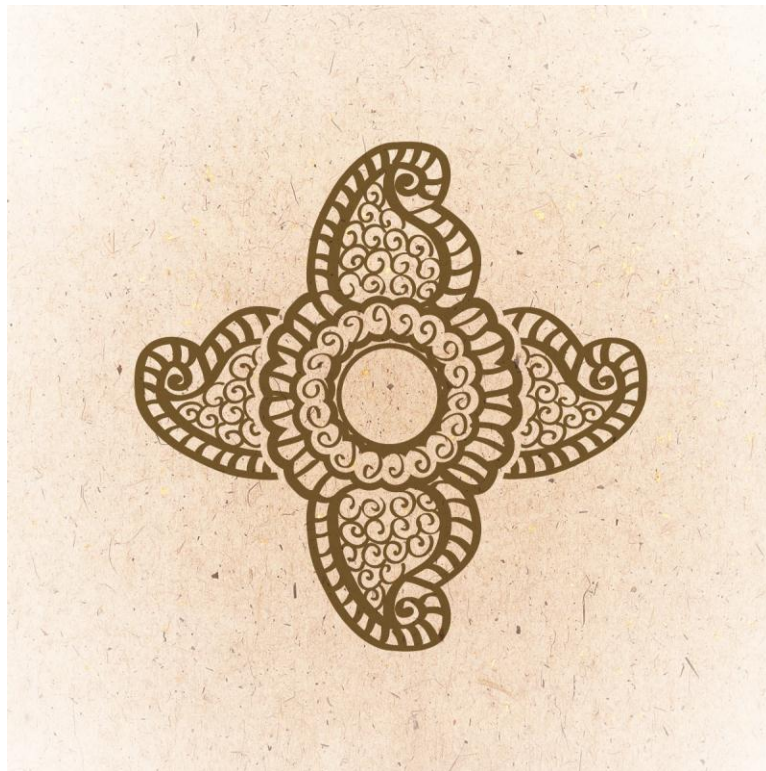
## Safety

Across all age groups and between the genders, participants said they feel safe in Calgary. Although the youth reported feeling safe, many of the adults expressed concern for the youth in the community. The death of over 35 Canadian-Somali youth in Alberta over the past 6 years has raised the level of concern among the adults.

Parents expressed concerns about:

- Negative behaviour among the youth: parents mentioned the poor educational outcomes, delinquent behaviour such as use of violence, drug use and gang affiliation.
- Lack of effective programs and services: parents often work long hours and can not adequately supervise their children. Affordable and accessible sports and leisure programs are hard to find.
- Conflicting values: the youth have to navigate between their family culture and Canadian society which is often stressful.

The youth themselves did not share many of the parents concerns and feel safe in Calgary. Some youth reported negative experiences but do not feel these are anything out of the ordinary. Many of the youth expressed pride in their Canadian identity and are very happy to be in Canada. They do see some challenges navigating between cultures but are confident in their ability to overcome these issues.



## Sense of Belonging

A significant number of adults interviewed for this study said that they fully belong to the Canadian Society and are very proud Calgarians. They want to maintain their own culture and traditions within the Canadian Mosaic.

*“I need to find a proper place for my culture and religion within the Canadian family.”*

– Community member

Not everyone shares this positive outlook. Disillusion over lack of success in employment and loss of economic and social status are important factors. Some interviewees believe that no matter their efforts, the Canadian society will not accept them.

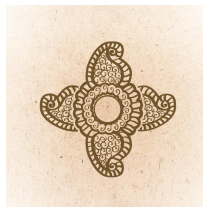
*“I don’t feel I belong to the Canadian society. I failed to integrate my skills and career.”*

– Community member

Many of the young people show a much weaker sense of belonging to the larger Canadian community. Despite coming to Canada at a very young age or being born in Canada they are still seen as immigrants and outsiders of the Canadian community. Some of the young men expressed frustration about not finding the right employment and blame a negative stereotype of Somali men by employers.

*“I belong to the Canadian society, but I am treated like an outsider. I am tired of the questions: Where are you from? Where did you learn English?”*

– Community member



## Changing Family Dynamics

Traditionally, Somali families belong to a network of relationships supported by kinship and in-laws, fenced by clan-based structure and society. Somali marriages are often arranged by family and friends, but with consent of the couple. A marriage creates a new network of relationships that play an important role as safety net for conflict and crises. Men are expected to solve family problems and keep the family together. They are seen as the undisputed leader of the family and sole providers.

Coming to Canada, family dynamics change dramatically for the Somali-Canadian families. The family loses their traditional extended family and with it the support these networks provide in family crises and prevention of family breakdown. Family conflict rises as a result of changing roles, responsibilities and expectations of family members.

Counseling services available often lack the cultural sensitivity to be effective for the community therefore family breakdowns are occurring often.

In addition to the changing family dynamics, financial pressures play an equally important role and can aggravate problems. Large families, limited income and an obligation to support an extended family beyond Canada create enormous pressure on the families.

## Somali-Canadian Community Organizations in Calgary

There are six Canadian-Somali community organizations operating in Calgary. They provide some of the much needed support for the community such as home work clubs, family support and cultural activities.

The organizations have fairly similar objectives and include:

- Providing support for families, children and youth
- Promoting integration and cultural exchange
- Protecting and maintaining Somali identity and heritage
- Conducting communal gatherings and celebrations
- Advocating for the needs of the community

Despite the community organizations focus on needed service in the community much skepticism and mistrust exist within the community about the Somali-specific organizations. Subsequently, the organizations receive little support from community members. Lack of accountability and limited transparent governance may be a factor in the lack of trust among the community.

A desire for better collaboration between the organizations was expressed and the need for an umbrella organization was repeatedly mentioned. A group of the Somali community organizations did collaborate for this project.

## Recommendations

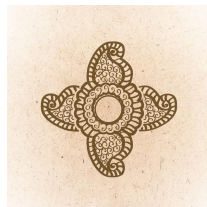
Participants of the Somali-Canadian community who participated in this project clearly articulated their aspirations. The recommendations here stem from the interviews and roundtable discussions and offer suggestions for a “pathway to belonging”:

### *Recommendations for Youth*

- Provide academic support for youth. This includes both remedial and enrichment programs.
- Establish an academic advice centre. The centre would provide guidance at the high school level related to courses needed for university. It would also provide information about educational financial assistance – i.e. how to get grants/ bursaries /scholarships
- Establish effective mentorship programs. This would include finding and enlisting the services of successful educated and skilled Somalis, who will act as role models for the youth. It would also include designing and delivering effective life and leadership skills, which cater to the needs of the youth.
- Encourage, showcase and empower successful and talented Somali youth.
- Provide career and life skills training for youth i.e. employment services, help with resume writing.

### *Recommendations for Families*

- Provide counseling service for families. The service should be known to the community. It should also be accessible both linguistically and logistically.
- Facilitate gender specific activities. The activities should be designed in ways that are congruent with cultural and religious codes. Enlisting the services and advice of the imam/mosque would be beneficial.
- Provide career support information about language learning, upgrading, foreign credentials, career options, resources for newcomers etc.
- Build capacity. This includes providing targeted workshops and seminars in Somali; i.e. dealing with the school system, parenting skills, communications, conflict management, time management, financial management, etc.
- Allocating a family friendly facility, where adults, youth and children can come to spend time, or what the youth group suggested in the round table discussion, a “hangout centre.”
- Support with housing problems.



### *Recommendations for Community Organizations*

- Establish an effective community organization that is transparent and accountable to the community.
- Establish one super organization with different specializations. Example: a Mega Somali Organization that branches into youth sector, women, education, career etc.
- Get young people involved in issues such as voting rights for youth, and also involved in administration and day-to-day operations.
- Have qualified people that can represent the community. Community leaders need to be aware of all resources, programs and services available.
- Rather than blaming, the community needs to find a mechanism to build, monitor, protect and support its organizations.

### *Recommendations for Further Research*

- What is the academic achievement of the Canadian-Somali youth of Calgary?
- In what ways are Somali youth engaging and disengaging with the school system in Calgary and what factors are influencing such engagement and disengagement?
- How are culture, identity and belonging located in the spaces between family, community and schooling for Somali Youth?
- How can educational institutions and families support the educational success of Somali youth in Calgary?





## Action Plan

An important part of the report was to develop an action plan based on the outcomes of the assessment. A group of community members and organizations came together to build an Action Plan for the community. The plan not only identified what needed to be done, but also who would be involved. This is a brief overview of the action plan:

### EDUCATION:

1. Provide workshops, orientation and presentations to Somali families.
2. Promote awareness of awards and scholarships among Somali students.
3. Hold career fair

### CIVIC ENGAGEMENT:

Provide tools to empower Somali-Canadian youth to be successfully integrated into society through civic participation.

1. Hold workshops within the community on the importance of engaging politically and contributing to the community.
2. Organize events to meet political candidates and representatives.
3. Host an event to connect Somali-Canadian youth to existing volunteer opportunities.

### HEALTH:

Help improve overall well-being of the Somali-Canadian youth in the community.

1. Hold meetings that will bring together youth and youth groups who are interested in addressing the issues faced by youth.
2. Conduct a dialogue between parents (father and mother) and the youth to address the factors that breeds unhealthy relationships and affects the youth well-being.

### HOUSING:

Improve housing conditions and increase Somali-Canadian home ownership.

1. Educate the Somali-Canadian community on various housing options from interest-free loans for home ownership, to providing material about various affordable housing options other than Calgary Housing, while also educating the community about their tenant rights.
2. Hold an event for young Somali-Canadian professionals to educate them about home ownership options.

### JUSTICE:

Create a healthy relationship based in trust between the Calgary Police Service and the Somali-Canadian community.

1. Empower the community through an understanding of their rights. Also. Open lines of communication between the law enforcement and the Somali-Canadian community, to introduce to and build a healthy relationship between the Somali youth and the police.
2. Educate the police on the Somali community. Diversity training for Calgary Police Service members where a member of the community would speak about the Somali Canadian community.

## Acknowledgements

The research project was made possible by the joint effort of the Somali-Canadian Advisory Committee composed of representatives of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Calgary and Area, Calgary Somali Women's Social Services Centre, Calgary Somaliland Community, Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary, Somali Canadian Information Centre, Somali Canadian Society of Calgary, Somali International Youth Board, Somali Youth League Society, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Alberta Government, City of Calgary, and United Way of Calgary and Area in collaboration with Calgary Canadian Somali community members, immigrant serving agencies and service providers in Calgary. The project also received tremendous support from many individuals, community members, and organizations who have contributed in different capacities in different phases of the initiative.

### Project Consultant

Abdullah A. Omar

### Project Research

Debbie Belgrave - Social Research Analyst Social Planning and Policy, City of Calgary

### Project Partners

United Way of Calgary and Area  
Big Brothers Big Sisters of Calgary and Area  
Community & Neighbourhood Services, Social Policy and Planning, City of Calgary  
Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary

### Community Research Assistants

Ayaan Ismail  
Hanan Yusuf  
Mohamed Jama  
Nafissa Ahmed  
Nasra Yusuf  
Safia Hussein  
Suad Mohamed  
Tufaax Sayid  
Zeinab Farah

### Action Planning Participants

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Calgary and Area  
Calgary Board of Education  
Calgary Bridge Foundation for Youth  
Calgary Police Service, Diversity Resource Unit, African Portfolio  
Centre for Newcomers  
City of Calgary, Social Policy and Planning  
Immigrant Services Calgary  
Somali Canadian Society of Calgary  
Somali Canadian youths  
Somali International Youth Board  
Somali Canadian youth leaders  
United Way of Calgary and Area

**Editor**

Elizabeth Chatten

**Other Contributors**

AIDS Calgary

Alberta Government, Child and Family Services

Alberta Health Services, Prenatal Community Program

Alberta Somali Community Centre

Boys and Girls Club of Calgary

Calgary and Area Child and Family Services

Calgary Board of Education, ENCORE Program

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The Calgary Foundation

University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work

**Reviewers**

ECCC Research and Policy Committee

Project Partners

Somali Canadian Advisory Committee

**Design, Layout and Production**

United Way of Calgary and Area



