

## **A Profile of Somali Refugees in the United States**

### **Introduction**

Prior to 1991 very few people of Somali decent resided in the United States. However, with the onset of the 1991 Somali civil war this situation was to rapidly change (Pagliacolo 2004). Since that time tens of thousands of Somali refugees have relocated to the United States, making them the largest African refugee group in this country and one of the most unique sets of newcomers to ever enter this nation. As relatively little is known about this disadvantaged and growing group, this paper will discuss why it is important to carefully examine their situation. It will also trace the rapid recent increase of Somalis in the US, as well as their contribution to the rapidly growing population of US residents born in Africa. The main focus of this study will then document their socioeconomic situation as captured by the 2000 US Census of Population.

### **The Somali Arrival to the United States**

African immigration to the United States has increased dramatically over the past three decades rising from 80,779 during the 1971-80 period, to 176,893 from 1981-90, and to over 354,000 between 1991 and 2000 (INS 2002). Consequently, the 2000 Census registered approximately 881,300 people born in Africa, the majority entering between 1990 and 2000. This upsurge was due to several factors including: (1) the passage of favorable immigration legislation (e.g., the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act and the Immigration Act of 1990), (2) the political and socioeconomic turmoil that has besieged many African countries over the past few decades forcing many Africans to emigrate to or seek refuge in other countries including the US, and (3) the increased movement of thousands of African students attending American colleges and universities over the last three decades.

The Somali contribution to the flow of Africans began as a slow trickle in the mid-1980s. The 1990 US Census of Population counted only 2,070 people born in Somalia. Data from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) reveal that in 1985 139 Somalis were admitted as

immigrants. While these and other earlier arrivals comprised part of categories 1 and 3 mentioned above, most of those to follow would constitute part of category 2—those fleeing political and socioeconomic turmoil in their homeland. Table 1 reveals that the first Somali refugee was admitted in 1986 and that this number would soon grow to nearly 6,500 refugees being admitted in 1996. By 2003, the last year for which data are available, over 43,000 Somalis had entered the US as refugees. Similarly, the number of Somalis who entered the US as immigrants from 1985 to 2003 also steadily increased, totaling more than 31,000 individuals. Many of those admitted as immigrants were highly skilled and able to take advantage of the opportunities made available by the favorable immigration legislation mentioned above. Because of continued social turmoil and political and economic uncertainties in Somalia the number of Somalis in the US continues to grow. While many continue to arrive as either convention refugees or asylum seekers, still others are sponsored by their next of kin who are either US passport holders or permanent residents. As such, this already sizeable population will likely continue to increase as long as there is turmoil in the Horn of Africa and perhaps long after that. Furthermore, the uniqueness of these newcomers, and the fact that relatively little is known about them make it imperative that we study their situation, especially since any knowledge we acquire may well be directly applicable to other similarly disadvantaged refugee and immigrant populations that may arrive in the future.

[Table 1 about here]

### **Why Study Somali Residents of the United States?**

As discussed above, this relatively new population is already rather large and likely to grow for some time. Furthermore, like most refugees before them, Somalis are extremely disadvantaged as a consequence of their forced migration. By definition, refugees flee to escape persecution and willingly relocate wherever the odds of survival are better than those encountered in their homeland at time of departure (Shacknové 1985; Hein 1993). However, because of their unanticipated relocation refugees oftentimes find themselves in an extremely disadvantaged

position (Richmond 1988, 1993). In the case of Somalis this disadvantage occurs for many reasons. First, as refugees they may well have already experienced severe psychological trauma that will remain with them for the rest of their lives. The fact that they are alive is because they have managed to relocate to a safer location. Still, refugees frequently have little say in where they are ultimately resettled (Portes and Borocz 1989). Oftentimes they are relocated within a nation where they do not speak the language or where they are unfamiliar with societal norms and customs (Kunz 1981). Also, when relocating from a less to a more developed country refugees must frequently adapt to a level of technical sophistication for which they are completely unprepared (Stein 1981). Second, as a racial minority in the United States Somalis may be disadvantaged because of prejudice and discrimination (Yelaja 2001; Berry and Kalin 2000; Richmond 2001). Such negative attitudes and behaviors can severely affect access to opportunity and reward structures (Simmons and Plaza 1998). Third, Somalis may also be in a disadvantaged position because they are Muslims residing in a predominantly Christian nation in a post-9/11 world. This drawback may be especially pronounced for the easily identifiable Somali women who frequently continue to wear their distinctive head-to-toe burqas (Ibrahim 1991). Fourth, Somalis are at a pronounced cultural disadvantage as many are unable to read or write in their own language, much less English. Furthermore, many adults have never had any formal education and they now find themselves in a society that is extremely different from their homeland in almost every regard. Upon arrival many refugees almost completely lacked the tools required to cope socially or to effectively compete in the labor force. This in turn has affected their ability to improve upon their socioeconomic condition. Finally, even the small minority of Somalis who did possess advanced degrees and high levels of education prior to relocating still find themselves in a professionally disadvantaged situation as their degrees and educational qualifications are oftentimes not recognized in the US. As such, they must decide whether to accept a position beneath their skill level or to return to school as part of the lengthy process of becoming recertified in their professional field. In sum, this extremely disadvantaged group warrants

detailed study as any lessons learned from it may be applicable to other similarly deprived groups that may eventually arrive in the US (e.g., Sudanese refugees in Darfur).

### **An Overview of the 2000 US Census of Population Data on Somalis**

In an effort to learn as much as possible about all Somali residents of the US three distinct subgroups were created from the 2000 census data. The first consists of those born in Somalia—the first generation immigrants. The second consists of those who indicated that they were not born in Somalia but that their ancestry was Somali. This subgroup likely consists primarily of second generation immigrants. The third subgroup is comprised of those who indicated their primary language was Somali, but were not born in Somalia nor of Somali ancestry. This subgroup is somewhat enigmatic as over 85% were born in either Ethiopia or Kenya. Perhaps these individuals lived in areas historically considered part of Somalia, but because of colonial political demarcations found themselves residing within the political boundaries of other East African nations. This possibility will be explored in additional detail below.

Table 2 shows that the 2000 US Census of Population counted approximately 36,600 people born in Somalia, over 8,300 people with Somali ancestry not born in Somalia, and over 5,600 Somali speakers not born in Somalia nor of Somali ancestry. When summed together these three subgroups total more than 50,000 individuals.

[Table 2 about here]

Before discussing the situation of those included in the census it is important to note that many Somalis residing in the US were missed by this census. This information is based on numerous interviews I have conducted with Somali community leaders throughout the state of Ohio. There are many reasons for the Somali undercount. Sometimes they were mistaken for African Americans.