

The Top Ten Myths About Somalis And Why They Are Wrong

By Ismail Ahmed, Catherine Besteman, and Rilwan Osman

A set of myths about Somalis has been circulating in Lewiston over the past decade. We spent the past several months investigating the facts behind these myths. Here is what we learned.

Myth #1: Somalis are draining the welfare coffers.

Fact: In 2008-9, refugees accounted for 15.76% of the General Assistance budget for the city of Lewiston. In 2009, noncitizens (who are mostly refugees) received 6.8% of TANF expenditures in Lewiston/Auburn, and 5.4% of TANF expenditures in Androscoggin County. In 2009, noncitizens accounted for 3% of the food stamp budget in Lewiston/Auburn and 2.1% of the food stamp budget for Androscoggin County. The percentage of funds going to noncitizens has been steadily dropping in all these areas. Most Somalis are not on welfare. Most adult Somalis have a job and pay taxes.

Myth #2: Somalis don't want to work.

Fact: The evidence against Myth #1 clearly shows that Somalis are working. Some work in social services (as translators, case managers, and tutors) but most work in a wide range of jobs including catering, accounting, nursing, farming, as pharmacists, butchers, childcare providers, business owners, truck drivers, home care attendants, at Walmart, Tambrands, in dining services at the area colleges, at hotels and hospitals in laundry, housekeeping, and custodial services, and in local shops. In addition to those who already have full time, part-time and seasonal jobs and/or have started businesses, Somalis have eagerly sought job opportunities. For example, 180 refugees with limited English completed 144 hours of work ready training since 2007. This winter 150 signed up to work at Worcester Wreath before the company decided not to come to Lewiston.

Myth #3: Somalis don't want to learn English.

Fact: Almost 1000 ELL students attend Lewiston schools, working hard every single day to improve their English. They flock to afterschool homework help programs at Trinity Jubilee, the public library, Hillview, or in the schools. Somali elders run academic summer camps so their kids can continue to study English during the summer break. So many adults are enrolled in ELL classes at Lewiston Adult Ed that the program is full and has a waiting list. In a recent survey conducted for THRIVE and the New Mainers Community Collaborative, 100% of Somali respondents said learning English was their top priority. Many Franco-Americans recall that their parents and grandparents struggled with English, even as their children were learning English in

school. So why is there a rush to judgment about the older Somali generation, who are also struggling hard to develop English language skills?

Myth #4: Somalis don't want to become citizens.

Fact: The demand for citizenship classes is so great that three different organizations now offer them at four different locations in Lewiston. Lewiston Adult Ed offers afternoon classes, Catholic Charities offers morning classes at Hillview and Tall Pines, and the Somali Bantu Youth Association offers weekend classes at B Street. (It is an expensive process: applicants pay \$675 for the naturalization tests.)

Myth #5: Somalis get free apartments.

Fact: Somalis who live in subsidized or public housing pay rent at the same scale as everyone else. At any given time perhaps two dozen families in Lewiston pay the minimum rent requirement, and this is usually only temporary and the result of the loss of a wage in the family. This support structure exists for any family in need. Of the 437 units administered by Lewiston Housing Authority, Somalis occupy about 15% of the available units. Of the 1100 housing vouchers currently available in Lewiston, Somalis receive about a quarter of them. This support structure is funded by the federal government. There is no available information about the number of Somalis who live in project-based Section 8 housing, which is administered by private landlords who receive rent subsidies from the federal government. But whereas many of these buildings had vacancies a decade ago, now most are at capacity, which means more money flowing into Lewiston.

Myth #6: Somalis get free cars.

Fact: Seriously? [The following text was added by Catholic Charities Maine: Free cars are not given to every refugee as part of their resettlement. In the past, if the resettlement program had been donated a car, which occurred about once or twice a year, they might give it to a client involved in an employment incentive program as a means to increase the client's ability to secure and maintain employment, however the agency no longer does even these infrequent donations. No clients are given cars.]

Myth #7: Somalis keep live chickens in their kitchen cupboards.

Fact: In hundreds of home visits we have never seen a live chicken in the cupboard.

Myth #8: Somalis are responsible for a rise in crime.

Fact: Crime rates have been falling in Lewiston. Somalis were .007% of those listed in the Sun Journal's reports of Androscoggin grand jury indictments from February through June 2010. Somalis were 1.5% of the cases heard in Lewiston District Court during May and June 2010. There are no child custody cases involving Somalis. Somali parents meet regularly with Lewiston's Community Resource Officers to ensure they and their children understand the American legal system.

Myth #9: Somalis don't integrate and don't want to be part of the community.

Fact: To demonstrate their desire to be seen as part of Lewiston's community, members of the Somali community worked in collaboration with Museum LA on its new exhibit about the history of immigration to Lewiston. Somalis volunteer on city and state committees, respond to requests for presentations by hospitals, schools, social services agencies, and civic organizations, donating their time in order to make connections within the Lewiston community. The Somali Bantu Community association logged highest number of volunteer hours with Bates Clean Sweep program last spring.

Myth #10: Somalis got a free ride to America.

Fact: The Somalis who came to the US as refugees spent almost a decade living in refugee camps in Kenya. To protect their families and in search of peace, they fled a war in Somalia, where many suffered terrible abuses. Before coming to the US they were screened multiple times by the UN, the Office of International Migration, the State Department, and the Department of Homeland Security. They paid for their airfare to come here. They were not resettled in Lewiston by Catholic Charities but rather chose to move here from the dangerous cities like Atlanta and St. Louis where they were first resettled. They chose Maine for its quiet lifestyle and its promise of safety for their children. They are here because they are committed to peace and justice.

Every community has some people who are superstars and some who are lazy; some who work hard and some who cannot; some who strive to adapt and some for whom life is a daily struggle. Somalis are no different than the rest of us. These myths must die because they are a discredit not only to Somalis, but also to Lewiston and to Maine.

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