



What Cities Can Learn from the Divergent Experiences of Somali Newcomers in Columbus, Ohio, and Minnesota's Twin Cities

Stefanie Chambers, Trinity College

Columbus, Ohio, and Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota (known as the Twin Cities) are home to the largest Somali communities in the United States. Despite the fact that these cities are both in the Midwest and have many other similarities, Somali immigrants in the Twin Cities are more fully integrated into the political, economic, and social life of their community than Somalis in Columbus.

Why this difference? For local policymakers, Americans across the country, and immigrant groups themselves, it is important to understand why these two groups of Somalis have had different experiences of incorporation into American society. In my new book, I combine observations, interviews, and other data gathered from Somali communities in the Twin Cities and Columbus to explore the factors that contribute to successful or limited integration. Greater Somali integration benefits the community as a whole and my research shows that there are a number of things American communities can do to further successful immigration integration.

Political, Economic, and Social Incorporation

A comprehensive picture of immigrant integration must include the political, economic, and social aspects of the immigrants' lives and community ties. It is important to study all three dimensions together because they are interrelated and mutually reinforcing; progress in any one of the areas can produce associated improvements in the two other areas.

Several factors have facilitated political incorporation of Somali immigrants in the Twin Cities. The structure of electoral districts matters, and in the Twin Cities the structure of districts made it possible for several Somali-Americans to get elected to local elective offices. In addition, the Twin Cities' main political party, the Democratic Farm Labor Party, has worked hard to recruit Somali candidates and voters; and local labor unions have also created leadership opportunities and smoothed pathways into government positions for Somali-Americans.

In contrast, Columbus has electoral arrangements known to decrease the likelihood of underrepresented groups winning office. The major political parties have not engaged with the Somali community and Somali union membership is virtually non-existent. By restructuring electoral districts and increasing Somali participation in unions and government, leaders in Columbus could encourage political incorporation for Somalis.

When it comes to economic incorporation, both regions have significant room for improvement – and could make much needed progress if they had more educational and employment programs targeted at impoverished and cultural-minority communities. In both the Twin Cities and Columbus, the likelihood that Somalis will be living below the poverty line is higher than most other ethnic groups; and home ownership rates among Somalis are alarmingly low. Employment levels are slightly more promising, particularly in Minneapolis, where Somali employment exceeds rates of employment among other racial and ethnic minorities. However, in both St. Paul, Minnesota, and Columbus, employment for Somalis is at a lower level than for Latinos or other African Americans. On a more promising note, the Twin Cities area is home to the African Development Center, a private lending agency that funds hundreds of small business loans to Somalis and other Africans in Minnesota, making efforts to treat Muslims equally.

Social outreach to Somali newcomers, finally, has gone much further in the Twin Cities, thanks to prior experiences with immigration and strong local philanthropic institutions. Although improvements can always be made, prior, the Twin Cities' history with refugee communities created an infrastructure that responded

more efficiently when large numbers of Somalis arrived. Importantly, Somalis serve in the police forces of the Twin Cities, which furthers perceptions of acceptance among Somali residents. The broader community supports Somali incorporation with financial support from both public- and private-sector organizations.

In Columbus, the arrival of Somali refugees in large numbers was met with ad hoc efforts to create a complex, new resettlement infrastructure. Even now, Somali police officers are not to be found, an important absence compared to the Twin Cities. Similarly, there is little local philanthropic support for Somali outreach, leaving the community with a sense of neglect. Strengthening refugee resettlement efforts, recruiting more Somali immigrants into the local police department, and creating philanthropic programs that target new immigrant communities would drastically improve Somali social incorporation in Columbus.

Best Practices for Immigrant Incorporation

As experiences in the Twin Cities and Columbus suggest, policymakers, civic leaders, and citizens in any community can take constructive steps to encourage immigrant integration:

- Structure elections so that minorities, newcomers, and underrepresented groups have a chance to elect members to public offices; and make sure political parties and unions do outreach and create pathways to office that include new immigrants.
- Create financial institutions, housing types, and job opportunities that serve the specific needs of immigrant communities.
- Learn from successes in other cities by opening the police force to immigrant officers and encouraging philanthropic support for local immigrant communities.

Taking these steps together opens doors to newcomers, giving them a sense of belonging and opportunity. The larger community benefits, too, as newcomers join mainstream American society in ways that boost economic growth, civic participation, and public safety for all.

Read more in Stephanie Chambers, *Somalis in the Twin Cities and Columbus: Immigrant Incorporation in New Destinations* (Temple University Press 2017).