



State of American Muslim Youth: *Research & Recommendations*

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ISPU & The FYI

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Executive Summary

American Muslim youth are a heterogeneous group, with varying backgrounds, experiences, and needs. Families, schools, and communities can benefit from research on American Muslim youth to improve current approaches in youth programming and development. This report identifies the nuances and complexities of American Muslim youth's developmental context and environments. It highlights research on underserved Muslim youth populations—namely young Muslim women, African-American Muslim youth, convert Muslim youth, and refugee Muslim youth. Risk factors and behaviors are also highlighted. Finally, eight youth programming recommendations that can be implemented around three developmental contexts (families, schools, and communities) are provided.

The differences in developmental outcomes for American Muslim youth are a result of multiple, interacting personal and social developmental contexts (e.g., family, school, and community). Individuals interested in American Muslim youth development must consider the interaction of 1) the young person's specific characteristics and experiences, 2) fluidity of his or her development, and 3) the varying environments the person is embedded within.

American Muslim youth contain many subgroups that are considered underserved that are highlighted in the present report. Young American Muslim women may struggle with the culturally determined narrative of women in Islam and religious spaces, issues related to the observance of hijab, and the internalization of beauty standards. African-American Muslim youth often live in diverse social and structural contexts that are highly influenced by race. Young Muslim converts are susceptible to experiencing negative outcomes due to the loss of support from parents and former friends, resulting in a critical unmet social need. Finally, understanding the migratory process of refugee Muslim youth and its impact on development, identifying potential risks, and developing appropriate interventions is critical to better support these youth.

As we consider the developmental contexts of American Muslim youth subgroups, we must 1) identify the potential risk factors, as well as 2) acknowledge the evidence of growing numbers of Muslim youth engaging in risk behaviors. Studies focusing exclusively on risk factors impacting Muslim youth development are limited. Known risk factors include mental health (acculturative stress, depression, etc.) and degree of educational

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engagement. Despite an increase in availability of culturally competent mental health services, Muslim youth who experience depressive symptoms and report a high level of religious involvement are often hesitant to seek appropriate mental health treatment due to the social stigma associated with seeking professional psychological help. Similarly, poor or unsafe (physically or emotionally) educational contexts, where young people do not feel supported, can decrease motivation for academic achievement. Despite the potential negative impact of risk behaviors, almost half the Muslim youth studied reported alcohol use, a quarter reported illicit drug use, and over a third used tobacco. Over half the Muslim youth also reported engaging in pre-marital sexual activity. Perception of American Muslim youth risk behaviors among mosque congregants and ethnic organization members is low, which has resulted in a lack of awareness among much of the American Muslim community.

In order to address risk behaviors and promote American Muslim youth development, interventions must be in place. Youth programming may exist in mosques, but often lacks direction, is underfunded and under-resourced, lacks appropriate training and understanding of American Muslim youth, and rarely addresses risk behaviors. There are national organizations focused on youth development that interact directly with youth—or indirectly through parents, youth workers, and mosques—and attempt to strengthen families; however, these organizations often lack funding, capacity-building training to maintain growth, and reach within the community, despite enjoying local success.

The report outlines eight areas of recommendations for youth programming. Effective components should include (1) collaboration between groups serving youth; (2) youth empowering programs in environments that are strength-based, youth-generated, and address their identified needs; (3) a positive relational experience with peers, mentors and adults; (4) clear programmatic objectives and goals that inform and direct their activities; (5) a multi-method, multimodal approach to achieve programmatic goals; (6) opportunities for flexible levels of participation due to varying factors in each individual's life that may inhibit their full commitment; (7) integration of social media and technology; and (8) financial sustainability.

Furthermore, just as it is important to incorporate certain elements in youth programming, engaging critical developmental contexts also impacts the effectiveness of youth programming. The report makes recommendations around three developmental contexts (family, school, and the Muslim community) that must play a role in enhancing American Muslim youth development. Finally, it is believed that a more nuanced understanding of American Muslim youth developmental contexts, along with research findings and programmatic recommendations, will enhance current youth development efforts.

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Introduction

American Muslim youth are a heterogeneous group, with varying backgrounds, experiences, and needs. Families, schools, and communities can benefit from research on American Muslim youth to improve current approaches in youth programming and development. This report begins by identifying the nuances and complexities of American Muslim youth’s developmental context and environments. Recent research on underserved Muslim youth populations—namely young Muslim women, African-American Muslim youth, convert Muslim youth, and refugee Muslim youth—is highlighted in Section II. Risk factors and behaviors are then presented in Section III. Given the current research on American Muslim youth, we provide youth programming recommendations to be implemented by families, schools, and communities in Section IV. As young people navigate the complex world of adolescence and emerging adulthood, awareness of their unique realities and challenges will help caring individuals (i.e., parents, teachers, and youth mentors) and institutions (i.e., academic, religious, cultural, and community-based organizations) more effectively promote positive youth development among American Muslim youth.

Developmental Context

Human development unfolds over time—with predictable biological, cognitive, and social changes within varying environments—and interacts with, influences, and shapes young people as they develop (Lerner and Kaufman 1985). The differences in developmental outcomes for American Muslim youth are a result of multiple, interacting, personal, and social developmental contexts (e.g., family, school, and community). Thus, individuals interested in American Muslim youth development must consider the interaction of 1) the young person's specific characteristics and experiences, 2) the fluidity of development, and 3) varying environments the person is embedded within, in order to account for the diversity in developmental outcomes of American Muslim youth (Abo-Zena and Ahmed 2014).

Person-Centered

Ignoring the individual attributes, circumstances, and experiences of a young Muslim may result in missing critical components in their development. Thus, interventions must consider the individual's characteristics (e.g., health, personality, self-esteem, coping skills, etc.) and how they interact with his or her varying contexts (e.g., family, school, community, and society) resulting in a specific developmental outcome. For example, two young people may be impacted by an Islamophobic incident. One adolescent may be sociable and feel confident enough to raise awareness about Islam and Muslims through school presentations and discussions with peers, teachers, and school administrators; this could in turn result in a decrease of Islamophobia at school, a sense of personal agency, and a positive developmental experience. Alternatively, a young person with an undiagnosed learning disability, negative educational experience, and who is shy by nature may not have the same sense of confidence or agency. This person may choose to remain silent about these Islamophobic experiences at school, which could potentially lead to a negative development experience. However, if the young person were to be coached by mentors to build his or her self-confidence and to channel his or her experiences into poetry, the experiences could be transformative and reaffirming.

An example of how a person-centered approach impacts developmental outcomes can be understood by examining the process of religious socialization, i.e., the process of instilling religious values and beliefs in American Muslim youth. A young person's individual attributes may impact what they seek in their religious experience (e.g., spiritual connection, companionship, intellectual fulfillment, and lifestyle). They may prefer to focus on their internal development or focus their efforts on changing their environment. Similarly, his or her preference in religious understanding may vary along a continuum of preferring a literal or metaphorical understanding and application of Islam. The relative fit between the individual's ability to seek resources and experiences that meet his or her spiritual needs, as well as the community's ability to provide for such needs, may impact the young person's religious development, practice, and degree of commitment.

Fluid

Youth development is also fluid, fluctuating depending on individual and contextual factors (Abo-Zena and Ahmed 2014). Certain time periods or events may impact the individual's development more, such as in the case of religious commitment or connection to the Muslim community. It is important to realize that the same time period or event may impact young people differently. For example, a young person's religious identity and practice may be stronger during Ramadan compared to other months due to fasting, communal Iftars, or voluntary night prayers (*tarawih*). On the other hand, for those lacking social support systems—such as convert youth, youth engaging in risk behaviors, or young people who have relocated for college or work—Ramadan can highlight their isolation or marginalization from the Muslim community. Similarly, sociopolitical situations, such as indiscriminate attacks by individuals identifying as Muslims, may result in heightened awareness of religious or ethnic identity and practice.

American Muslim youth's religious identity and practice are closely linked and influenced by other sources, such as peers, ethnicity, gender, and culture. The degree of influence on development can vary over time, location, and circumstances. For example, on college campuses, where peer influence may be greater than parental or religious community influence, American Muslim youth may choose to adopt an “everything goes” approach to faith that integrates a wide range of spiritual beliefs and practices that cut across religious and/or ideological traditions, as observed in young people of other faiths (Smith and Snell 2009). These youth may identify with Islam, but they may also identify with and practice beliefs of other faith groups. Similarly, immersion in a co-ethnic or co-racial congregation may contribute to an overlap and/or conflation of culture and religion, resulting in specific ideological and/or cultural interpretations and practice of Islam. These practices may influence an individual's developmental outcomes through both direct and indirect messages, including those about gender and age. For example, some American Muslim youth may perceive differing levels of empowerment of males and females within religious settings, due to a developmental context that may afford different opportunities and responsibilities based on gender. For some, such gendered messages may facilitate involvement and feelings of empowerment. In other cases, they may give rise to feelings of self-doubt, marginalization, a lack of personal agency, or disillusionment in religious settings.

Contextually Grounded

While we recognize the role of the individual's personality and attributes, as well as the fluidity of development, it is also important to acknowledge that development occurs within multiple overlapping contexts. Each context has multiple sources of variation, creating unique developmental niches (Abo-Zena and Ahmed 2014). The degree to which the individual is able to fit into his or her varying environments or contexts, feels accepted, and is supported by his or her contexts impacts the young person's sense of self, as well as how the individual interacts with his or her environment.

Social and structural context

Social and structural contexts—which may include family, neighborhood, school, cultural, and religious communities—can have both direct and indirect impacts on a young person's development (Lerner 1995). Contextual influences may be specific, such as family, or be more general in the form of mass media. For example, mass media (e.g., television, movies, music, video games, and social media) has a significant socializing impact on youth and constitutes a pervasive influence on the lives of young Muslims. Media shapes how young Muslims see themselves, as well as how they may be viewed by their peers and mainstream society. For example, in a 2012 study, Saleem and Anderson found that young people playing anti-terrorist videogames reported higher anti-Arab sentiments, consistent with negative mass media images. Such experiences can result in feelings of exclusion or marginalization in American Muslim youth.

Direct impact of context may be structural, such as the physical location in which the young person resides. Changes in physical location—such as moving from an urban to a suburban community, closer to or further from other Muslim peers or same race/culture peers, or moving away for college or work—can alter a young person’s context and potentially their developmental outcome. Indirect contextual factors refer to those factors that indirectly impact a young person’s development, such as parental job stress. Work stress may impact parental irritability, resulting in the development of an estranged parent-child relationship. The teenager may then choose to seek affirmation and support from peers, who may engage in risk behaviors. Additionally, indirect factors, such as institutional racism, discrimination, oppression, and segregation, may have an impact on a young person and their family and, thus, should be explored (García Coll et al. 1996). To ignore such experiences—particularly within a congregational or youth programming setting—results in minimizing the realities of certain subgroups of American Muslim youth, such as African-American Muslim youth.

The varying contexts intersect and interact with each other to impact a young Muslim’s development. Social, religious, and cultural contexts may reinforce each other or may conflict with each other. In addition, socializing agents and agencies (e.g., parents, extended family, schools, and communities) may overlap and interact with each other and impact school, neighborhood, or mosque choice, which in turn may influence the developmental experience of young American Muslims. For example, we do not know if the observed developmental outcome of a young person who resides in a densely populated Muslim neighborhood and attends Islamic schools can be attributed to parental effort, living in a densely populated neighborhood of Muslims, Islamic school attendance, or living in proximity to a mosque. In addition, there may be regional cultural contexts that interact with other contexts (e.g., family, school, community) that alter the lived experiences of the young person. For example, the experience of an African-American Muslim youth growing up in Chicago will likely differ from another African-American Muslim youth living in Atlanta due to regional cultural norms.

Some contexts may conflict with each other, such as peers encouraging premarital sexual activity in opposition to religious values. However, peer groups may also encourage environmental and social justice involvement, which are integral to the young person’s religious values. How a young American Muslim chooses to navigate his or her multiple overlapping—and sometimes conflicting—contexts and engage in decision-making is in part related to his or her individual attributes, supports, and prior experiences within their developmental contexts.

Developmental niche

The developmental niche refers to the variations that exist within each context, such as the cultural values, practices, and normative behaviors of the varying subgroups. Understanding the developmental niche is integral to understanding the developmental outcome of a young person (Super and Harkness 1986). Such an approach would entail focusing on and understanding the physical context of the young person, the values of each socializing agent (e.g., parents, teachers, and mentors), and the behaviors that are promoted by the socializing agents (Abo-Zena and Ahmed 2014). In research studies examining domestic religious culture within other faith groups, parental support of religious behavior ranged from indifference to outward rejection of religion, including rejection of multiple religions within a household due to inter-religious marriage or conversion (Lambert and Dollahite 2010). This is theorized to be similar to American Muslim homes based on field experience. Parental involvement, parenting style, religious values and practices, and methods of religious socialization may result in unique developmental outcomes. Each niche is thus unique and interacts with other developmental niches, such as school context with its variations in staff, school culture, norms, and expectations. The degree of collaboration or conflict between the varying developmental niches can also result in diverse outcomes for American Muslim youth.

In addition to the variations and relative fit between niches, one must also consider the implicit hierarchies of privilege that exist within or between niches, particularly within religious community contexts. These hierarchies may be based on inter- and intra-ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic contexts that affect the experiences, opportunities, and support offered to Muslim youth. For example, camps and programs meant to enhance religious identity exist across the nation; however, many young Muslims in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities cannot afford to attend. Although scholarships may be provided to limited individuals, young people often choose not to participate due to concerns about not being able to fit in and not being accepted by the other participants because of their racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic background.

Religious Contexts

Religious contexts are a developmental niche of particular interest to American Muslims. These contexts can influence youth development through religious socialization by providing guidance, behavioral expectations, opportunities for socialization, social support, and mentors to emulate. They also serve as a potential source for individual and group identity development (Ahmed and Ezzedine 2009; Roehlkepartain and Patel 2006). Religious contexts may refer to the local masjid, Muslim youth or student group, or increasing numbers of “third spaces” that may consist of physical or virtual locations where young people may congregate to socialize, foster creative interactions, or grow spiritually. Young people may start off within a particular religious context and later identify with an alternative religious context that better fits their needs. Other young people may choose to remove themselves altogether from religious contexts. These shifts are due to varying factors, including, but not limited to, the process of normal adolescent identity development, as well as generational and cultural differences with parents and other experiences.

A young person’s experiences and needs, in relation to the relative fit with their religious context(s), often impact their developmental pathway and the role that religious communities may have on their daily life as they enter adulthood. However, these contexts are multifaceted and include variations in religious content, congregational culture, and the presence of mentors and peers. Religious congregations are socializing agents that impart the community’s textual interpretations of Islam based on cultural norms. Religious textual sources, the Quran and Sunnah, are constants but are often viewed through cultural lenses (ethnic, political, sociological realities, etc.), leading to a variety of interpretations. The lack of rooting interpretations through an American cultural lens may result in pushing some American Muslim youth away from their congregational community and even Islam. Congregations have internal cultures that range from promoting a monolithic and specific cultural interpretation and practice of Islam to providing a platform for multiple diverse cultures, values, interpretations, and applications of Islam. Congregational cultures also set normative behaviors and expectations that adherents often adopt in order to be integrated into the social life of the community. Studies with other faith groups have found that congregational culture was more predictive of behaviors, such as civic participation, than religious denomination (DiSalvo 2008). Field experience within the American Muslim community supports this notion. Thus, congregational culture is likely to have an impact on young people’s attitudes and behaviors. It is important to realize that congregations may have their own cliques and hierarchy that may encourage connection or marginalization of young Muslims. Young people who are unable to fit into the congregational culture often become “unmosqued,” that is, no longer connected to their religious community. However, as popularity of social media increases, congregational culture is no longer limited to the physical space of mosques but is now ever-present; varying online communities offer young people multiple platforms to facilitate social, spiritual, and religious exchange and develop friendships with individuals outside of their physical community.

Some religious congregations offer American Muslim youth opportunities to interact with same-faith peers and mentors. Research on young people of other faiths has previously found that positive relationships with mentors or peers can promote interdependence and social embeddedness, thereby promoting positive youth development (King and Furrow 2004). The type and quality of the relationships between a young person and a mentor may range from lectures and discussions aimed at strengthening the young person's faith, to more personal mentorship, such as helping the individual attempt to clarify their religious beliefs, make life decisions, and explore their purpose in life. Research with other faith groups—as well as field experience within the American Muslim community—has found that the presence of mentors results in decreased risk factors for at-risk youth, such as reducing dropout rates (Schwartz, Bukowski, and Aoki 2006). For some American Muslim youth, their relationships with mentors and peers are transformational. However, for other young Muslims, the lack of youth-affirming congregational cultures, mentors, and relevant religious discourse—in addition to hypocritical behaviors of religious role models—can contribute to confusion, negative experiences, feelings of disempowerment, and marginalization from the Muslim community and Islam as a religion.

Underserved American Muslim Youth Subgroups

Awareness of the varying factors impacting American Muslim youth development can serve to guide individuals interested in promoting youth development to more accurately assess the unique needs and points of intervention for the young people they serve. In addition, awareness of issues specific to underserved American Muslim youth subgroups can enhance effectiveness of youth programming. This section will highlight four underserved subgroups of Muslim youth, namely young Muslim women, African-American Muslim youth, convert Muslim youth, and refugee Muslim youth.

Young Muslim Women

The intersection of gender and numerous factors within their developmental context results in unique issues experienced by young American Muslim women. Some of these issues include: a culturally determined narrative of women in Islam and religious spaces, issues related to the observance of hijab, and the internalization and repercussions of beauty standards on body image among young American Muslim women.

As mentioned earlier in this report, religious context and socialization experiences can have a major positive or negative impact on a young person. For some young women, their homes or religious congregational experiences are reflective of imported cultural interpretations of Islam. Religious communities within the American Muslim context may propagate a limited view and understanding of women in Islam, which is in direct contrast to historical evidence during the periods of Quranic revelations and early Islamic history. Within the congregational discourse of many mosques, women are often discussed primarily in relation to others (i.e., as mothers, daughters, and wives) and not as independent beings serving God like their male peers. In addition, some young women are given mixed messages from their families and communities; they are encouraged to be outspoken about their rights within mainstream society but not to push the status quo within their religious and cultural communities (Basit 1997).

Congregational narratives that are developed outside the American cultural context often result in the lack of adequate appropriation of physical space for women (i.e., women's entrances, prayer areas, etc.), as well as a lack of suitable programming for women. These circumstances often result in young women feeling unimportant or unwelcome in mosques. In a study exploring women's participation in U.S. mosques, the majority of mosques (86 percent) were rated as "fair" to "poor" in terms of being female-friendly, and only 4 percent of mosques in America reported programming for women as a priority (Sayeed, Al-Adawiya and Bagby 2013). While some young women are able to differentiate between Islamic principles and their congregation's specific interpretation of Islam, many are unable to do so, resulting in feelings of frustration, community and spiritual disconnection, disempowerment, and alienation. Given the developmental importance of having a sense of belonging during adolescence and early adulthood (Erickson 1968), the lack of inclusion often results in young women seeking support and a sense of belonging elsewhere.

The intersection of gender, religion, and physical and spiritual maturity during adolescence is also associated with the religious requirement of wearing hijab. For many, hijab has become a symbol for, as well as a motivator to ponder and develop, their American Muslim identity (Williams and Vashi 2007). While some young Muslim women do not wear hijab for varying reasons (i.e., lack of interest or belief in religious mandate, fear of alienation, waiting to be psychologically "ready," etc.) (Haddad, Smith, and Moore 2006), adolescence is the period when young women may first consider wearing hijab. The decision to wear or not to wear hijab has differing implications depending on a young woman's developmental context. A young woman may decide to wear hijab per religious mandate and report the experience as empowering, but her decision may result in parental or congregational objections (Ali 2005). However, a young woman may also choose not to wear hijab, which may result in experiencing marginalization by her community. Some young women report disliking societal association of hijab as a symbol of oppression (Williams and Vashi 2007) and express feeling overwhelmed by the implicit responsibility of being an ambassador of Islam to society. In addition, some young women may worry about their ability to obtain a job if they wear hijab or report fear of random physical or emotional harm (Riley 2011; Hamdani 2006; Zine 2008). This sentiment has likely increased following the Chapel Hill, NC shootings of Yusor and Razan Abu-Salha in February 2015.

Gender also interacts with society in the form of mass media messages of beauty, which are often internalized by young American Muslim women. These messages can be reinforced or diminished by messages within their developmental context, impacting a young woman's sense of self. Young Muslim women—even those wearing hijab—are not immune to the internalization of mainstream cultural standards of beauty (Tolaymat and Moradi 2011). Experiences of sexual objectification were found to indirectly increase young Muslim women's body surveillance, body shame, and eating disorder symptoms, through the process of internalization (Tolaymat and Moradi 2011). While evidence suggests that young Muslim women who wore hijab experienced less sexual objectification, they reported similar body image perceptions as non-hijab wearing women (Tolaymat and Moradi 2011). However, wearing some form of hijab was associated with a more positive body image, lower internalization of mass media beauty standards, and less focus on physical appearance in a study among women in the UK (Swami et al. 2014).

Some young women are asserting themselves, trying to change the current narrative through organizational cultural changes, becoming increasingly involved in leadership, as and advocating for increased programming and space within mosques and religious organizations. Other young women are empowering themselves through the use of social media as a platform to connect with other young women, give voice to their experiences, and push for community conversations. Such activism has resulted in triggering conversations with parents and congregational communities regarding discrepancies between religious and cultural practices (Haddad, Smith, and Moore 2006).

African-American Muslim Youth

African-American Muslims are considered the largest percentage of native-born Muslims in the United States (Pew 2011). African-American Muslim youth are heterogeneous, live in diverse social and structural contexts, and have varying experiences depending on a number of factors, such as: whether they were born Muslim or converted, live in an urban or suburban environment, attend an immigrant or African-American religious community, and what the congregation's ideological understanding and practice of Islam is within their religious congregation. Further, our preliminary research suggests that African-American Muslim youth as a subgroup have a unique developmental context that differs from their Muslim peers of other backgrounds, which must be considered in order to promote their development.

African American Muslim youth's social context is highly influenced by race (Ahmed, Sharrief, and Arfken 2006). As one young person noted:

I walk around every day, black, you know. So how the world interacts with me on a day-to-day basis first actually is black—unless they see my name first, then it's Muslim, or... no, most of the time then it's still black, just with a funny name.

Institutional racism is evidenced by African-American youth being disproportionately profiled, policed, arrested, and incarcerated (Kerby 2012), as well as reports of higher rates of juvenile incarceration, where one in three African-American men can expect to go to prison in their lifetime (The Sentencing Project 2009). Anecdotal evidence indicates that African-American Muslim youth are not immune to these experiences. Societal influence—by way of images of African-Americans in the media and entertainment industries—reinforces negative stereotypes and continues to have an impact on African-American Muslim youth's identity (Ahmed et al. 2009). Similarly, racism experienced by immigrant American Muslims, directly in the form of name-calling (“abeed” or “slaves”) or indirectly, such as assuming the person has limited knowledge of Islam based on their skin color, is demeaning and hurtful.

Continued institutional racism has also resulted in a disproportionate number of African Americans experiencing poverty. The latest census results found that the median family income for African-American families was \$39,988 compared to \$67,892 for white families (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). Socioeconomic factors may directly or indirectly have a profound impact on the developmental context of African-American Muslim youth. For example, financial stability, parental stress, housing and neighborhood options, and quality of education are all factors related to socioeconomic status and impact the developmental outcomes of young people. In addition, the social mobility that immigrant Muslim business owners in African-American neighborhoods sometimes enjoy—at the expense of neighborhood residents—may add to resentment or mistrust of immigrant Muslims. The difference between socioeconomic conditions of African-American and immigrant Muslim communities' lived experience, intra-community racism, and notions of cultural supremacy often results in differing community conditions and opportunities for young people. This also contributes to diverging norms and expectations, limited opportunities for interaction and support, and poor developmental outcomes.

The shared history, racial struggles, societal experiences, and socioeconomic conditions may result in African-American Muslim youth identifying with their non-Muslim African-American peers more than their immigrant Muslim peers (Khan and Ahmed 2010). As one participant described,

I can relate but I don't feel like we can still relate [Muslim peers] on a certain level. I don't still feel like... I mean... I feel okay they're my brother and sisters in Islam, but at the same time, like, they don't know the struggles that I face as an African American.

Thus, African-American Muslim youth experience stigmatization due to both religious and racial identification on multiple levels. Ignoring or failing to integrate awareness of racial realities can result in overlooking the needs and realities of African-American Muslim youth.

Convert Muslim Youth

There has been a rise in interest regarding adolescent conversion in America due to the existing global political climate and concerns of radicalization (Schanzer, Kurzman, and Moosa 2010). However, adolescence and emerging adulthood is a period often associated with the process of self-exploration. This process may serve as a catalyst for change and may inspire a young person to convert to Islam (Ahmed 2011). Reasons for conversion can range from dissatisfaction with their former religion to an enhanced sense of identity that aligns with Islam's family values, sense of morality, social justice, and/or sense of community and fellowship (Maslim and Bjorck 2009; Suleiman-Hill 2007; Lakhdar et al. 2007; Spalek and El-Hassan 2007). Unlike older Muslim converts, young converts may be more susceptible to experiencing negative outcomes due to the loss of support from parents or former friends, resulting in unmet social support needs (Coleman 2009; Bowen 2009).

Unfortunately, very little is known about the impact of conversion during adolescence and early adulthood on the young person's developmental context and the transition they experience. Our current research suggests developmental issues unique to this subgroup include: disruption within family context, lack of social support or mentorship, and challenges integrating into the Muslim community.

Our preliminary findings suggest that the decision to convert often results in the disruption of the parent-child relationship. Parents are often surprised, concerned, and in a state of disbelief regarding their child's conversion to Islam. Their reaction may range from lukewarm support to forcible removal from the parent's house. As one young person recounts:

One day the arguing had just gotten enough, and my mom was like 'Well..., then just leave' and I was like 'Fine, I'll leave.' So I left and it was late at night. And then I called somebody... I had already talked to this person before and her relative who was also like my halaqa (study circle) teacher... And they were like, you know, 'Feel free to come and live with us if you need to.'

The changes in belief system, dress, and lifestyle may cause tension, resulting in a loss of support from some parents and former friends (Rehman and Dziegisiwski 2003; Haddad 2006; Bowen 2009). Unlike older converts, many adolescents and emerging adults are still physically, emotionally, and financially dependent on their parents. Hence, the impact of this loss of support is much greater and deeper than with older converts. As one participant states about his parents:

They don't know (about conversion)... Because I still live with my mom and I understand that there's like this misconception to what it means to be Muslim... And I don't want my message to have negative impacts on either our lives based on stuff that she thinks she knows... Now if I had my own place, I wouldn't care. Like the repercussions would probably be less severe, and time would heal.

The disruption of the parent-child relationship and loss of social support that converts may experience is particularly salient given that adolescence and emerging adulthood is a period when young people are traditionally seeking a sense of belonging and group membership, while being anchored within their family context. As a result, new social support networks, a sense of belonging, integration, and re-creation of a family bond becomes particularly critical for convert Muslim youth.

Unfortunately, most converts in our study reported limited social support from their Muslim community. Ramadan, Eid, and former religious holidays were reported as being a lonely time, resulting in feelings of marginalization. Those who received community support indicated they were “adopted” by families. These “family connections” served as a major source of support and helped with social integration and connection within the Muslim congregational community. Opportunities to develop a new social support system that is culturally syntonic were limited, which also had an impact on their community connection. Many young converts reported a need for mentors who understood their intersecting social identities to help support them with their life challenges. Young converts also encountered issues with their personal lives that can be difficult to overcome without the proper support group. Many convert youth report struggling as they try to channel their sexual energy after conversion. Converts may attempt to alter their previous behaviors, such as gender interaction, dating, and sexual activity before marriage. Converts also report difficulties with the marriage process due to lack of opportunities or venues to meet potential mates, lack of support systems to aid in the marital search, and potential spouses’ family objections due to concerns regarding the impact or implications of marrying a convert. As one person noted:

I felt like I was closer to, to start dating girls. And I hate to say that, uhm... because it's not what a Muslim does. But you reach this point where like you're 25 years old, you can't even find a Muslim girl to talk to. And you want somebody in your life. It's not even like a sexual thing, it's like... you know, that might be part of it, but more than anything you just want... to be with somebody. You know, uhm, and...you know, I, I look at myself as someone who's trying pretty hard to be a good Muslim.

Converts who may be in a relationship at the time of conversion may also feel pressure to marry quickly in order to avoid sexual intercourse outside of marriage. In these situations, marriage readiness, compatibility, verification of potential spouse’s background and motivation for marriage must be considered (especially in the cases of convert women who may be pursued for citizenship purposes).

Differing experiences of integration into religious congregational contexts may occur, based on the individual’s cultural background and the community they are attempting to integrate into (Hashem et al. 2015). Haddad (2006) reports that African-American converts believed white converts received preferential treatment. This may be experienced as greater interest and attention or serving as a community trophy. As one white convert shared:

I think more than anything you're kinda like a mascot, uhm... people are proud to like parade you around as a white convert or show you off, uhm, and, without ever really getting to know you.

White convert youth often report realizing the extent of “white privilege” only after their conversion. While some are still able to maintain their privileged status, others such as women who choose to wear hijab may experience greater difficulty transitioning.

Convert youth from other cultural communities, such as African Americans, Latinos, and South Asians, may report differing experiences depending on their context (Hashem et al. 2015). The relative ease of integration within the Muslim community is often influenced by the community makeup. Young converts attempting to integrate into monocultural, immigrant-dominant communities experience greater difficulty compared to more culturally diverse, convert, or racial/ethnic communities (e.g., African-American and Latino religious cultural

centers). Negative experiences due to lack of cultural awareness or racism were reported by some young converts when trying to integrate into the Muslim community. The response of reintegration into their own cultural community is often mixed. While Islam may be more positively viewed within African-American culture due to cultural icons, such as Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali, sociocultural and historical factors may negatively influence the response convert youth from Latino or South Asian cultural communities experience.

Refugee Muslim Youth

As ethnic, tribal, religious, sectarian, and political conflicts continue throughout the world, increasing numbers of refugees from predominately Muslim countries are arriving in the United States. Refugee Muslim youth experience unique developmental contexts with differing intersecting cultural, sectarian, tribal, and racialized implications as they attempt to integrate into the U.S. Understanding their individual and family experiences during the migratory process (i.e., pre-migration, asylum-seeking, and resettlement stages) will be critical in assessing the impact on the individual's development, identifying potential risk, and developing appropriate interventions (Ahmed and Aboul-Fatouh 2011). In addition, the impact of mental health and disruption in social connections, as well as educational challenges, should be explored when trying to promote youth development in this subgroup.

American Muslim refugee youth who have observed violence may report problems processing traumatic events (Snyder et al. 2005) impacting their mental health and wellbeing. Their refugee/migratory experiences may result in developmental delays, difficulties managing emotions, or poor academic performance (O'Shea et al. 2000). They may experience higher incidence of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, and are more likely to report survivor's guilt, a pessimistic outlook on life, and suicidal ideation (Snyder et al. 2005). Similarly, they may regress developmentally and have problems such as nocturnal enuresis (Snyder et al. 2005), or they may report difficulty concentrating in classroom settings (El-Habir et al. 1994). In addition, violence and traumatic experiences may result in the formation of negative thoughts and expectations about themselves, others, the world, and their future. These negative cognitions, coupled with the experience of war and the resulting breakdown of social trust, including the presence of warring factions within the resettlement communities, can impact the young person's ability to form meaningful attachments and develop a social support network to help navigate their transition to adulthood (McMichael and Manderson 2004).

The lack of trust in institutions and in the future also complicates young refugees' educational experiences. Many dwell in areas with poor school districts with overcrowded classrooms that are strapped for resources. Refugee Muslim youth sometimes report feeling marginalized due to the peripheral placement of classrooms, inadequate funding of language acquisition programs, segregation, and xenophobic beliefs reported by other students (Gitlin, Buendía, Crosland, and Doumbia 2003).

Difficulties with social adjustment may manifest as risk behaviors (Snyder et al. 2005). Refugee youth that have experienced multiple losses (e.g., extended family members, friends, and familiar contexts), financial stress, lack of parental availability and/or monitoring, lack of social support network, and untreated psychological wounds may experience an increased propensity to engage in risk behaviors. In addition, they may be challenged with issues of identity related to their religious or ethnic identity, which may include frustration due to lack of memories of their home country, attachment to their country of origin at the expense of connecting with peers, or detachment from ethnic culture in attempts to avoid emotional triggers (Berman et al. 2001). Parents may also pressure children to maintain cultural norms of their country of origin, to which children may respond with appeasement, rebellion, or formation of dual identities (Whittaker et al. 2005). Unfortunately, the needs of this subgroup often go unnoticed and are therefore minimally supported by their developmental context.

Risk Factors and Behaviors

As we consider the developmental contexts of American Muslim youth in general and subgroups in particular, we must also 1) identify the potential risk factors as well as 2) acknowledge the evidence of growing number of Muslim youth engaging in risk behaviors.

Risk Factors

Youth risk factors refer to the factors that increase the chances that a young person may engage in behaviors that can negatively impact their positive development. These factors may be person-centered (e.g., medical condition, personality trait, etc.) or may be related to the individual's developmental context (e.g., neighborhood crime, lack of school engagement, etc.). Knowledge of factors that may increase a young person's risk may enable parents, teachers, youth workers, and community organizers to better meet the needs of American Muslim youth through nuanced youth preventative programming efforts.

Studies focusing exclusively on risk factors impacting Muslim youth development are limited. However, a few studies have highlighted the important role of parental behavior and relationship (Abu Ras, Ahmed, and Arfken 2010; Arfken, Abu-Ras, and Ahmed 2014; Aroian et al. 2009), peer norm influence (Islam and Johnson 2003), neighborhood context (Arfken, Ahmed, and Abu-Ras 2013), and unhealthy cultural norms (Islam and Johnson 2003) in influencing youth development. It is assumed that risk factors in youth development, such as family dysfunction, mental illness, poverty, and community violence, (O'Connell, Boat, and Warner 2009) impact American Muslim youth in a similar manner as youth of other faiths or no faith. Limited research on mental health and educational engagement has been conducted, which can help inform those working with American Muslim youth and is presented below.

Mental health

Despite the growing number of American Muslims in the United States, there is a scarcity of research on Muslim mental health risks, in particular on adolescents and emerging adults. Although American Muslims come from varying cultural backgrounds, much of the past research on American Muslims and mental health has focused on the attitudes of immigrant populations. These studies have focused on the role of acculturative stress and individuals' psychosocial adaptation, such as lower levels of self-esteem, reported happiness, sense of identity, and health (Al-Krenawi and Graham 2000; Amer 2005; Portes and Zhou 1993; Rumbaut 1994).

While multiple acculturation strategies exist (e.g., assimilation, integration, marginalization, rejection), research shows that assimilation—the process whereby individuals replace their cultural norms with norms of the majority culture—can negatively impact the emotional wellbeing of Muslim youth (Tirmazi 2008). For instance, Muslim youth who replace their cultural collectivist, or family-oriented, values with individualism may experience higher depressive symptoms than those who do not (Tirmazi 2008).

Similar to acculturative stress, depressive symptoms amongst immigrant Muslim youth may be related to religious context and involvement. Research on Muslim populations has traditionally indicated a positive correlation between religiosity and mental health (Abdel-Khalek 2006, 2007; Abdel-Khalek and Naceur 2007; Jamal and Badawi 1993; Suhail and Chaudhry 2004) and a negative correlation between religiosity and depression (Abdel-Khalek 2007; Abdel-Khalek and Naceur 2007). Although religiosity will not prevent depression, religious involvement may serve as both a moral compass during a period of exploration, as well as a venue to obtain social support for Muslim youth. Through this process, their connection to their faith may help them to overcome challenges, thus buffering depressive symptoms and promoting positive wellbeing (Tirmazi 2008). Despite these findings, one study (Berry 2012) showed that Muslim college students experienced higher levels of depression compared to their non-Muslim peers with lower levels of religious involvement.

Research shows a significant underuse of mental health services by ethnic minority group members (Wang et al. 2005; Sue et al. 2012; Ball 1995). Barriers to treatment that American Muslims face include a perceived lack of culturally competent professionals (Basit and Hamid 2010). Despite an increase in availability of culturally competent mental health services in most major U.S. cities, Muslim youth who experience depressive symptoms and report high levels of religious involvement are often hesitant to seek appropriate mental health treatment due to social stigma associated with seeking professional psychological help (Haque 2008; Raja 2005). Emerging research shows that Muslim youth can utilize religious coping strategies outside of traditional service settings, thus avoiding the stigma associated with receiving professional mental health services (Herzig et al. 2013). The research found that religious coping strategies (e.g., praying for strength and receiving help from religious leaders) promotes the likelihood of adopting active coping strategies (e.g., creating a plan of action, focusing one's efforts on overcoming a challenge), which are developed in traditional service settings and necessary to overcome mental health issues (Herzig et al. 2013). The effectiveness of this strategy in addressing more intense and difficult challenges is unknown.

Educational engagement

The quality of educational environments is critical to promoting American Muslim youth development. Physically or emotionally poor or unsafe educational contexts—where young people do not feel supported—can decrease motivation for academic achievement, and increase the likelihood of young people engaging in risk behaviors, such as truancy, not completing high school, and developing negative peer groups. Despite the increasing number of American Muslim youth in public schools, the scarcity of research capturing their experiences highlights the necessity to further explore the narratives of Muslim youth. In a study that surveyed Muslim high school students across ninety New York City public high schools, a majority of Muslim students in public schools (56 percent) believed that they experienced more stress in their lives than their non-Muslim teenage peers (Cristillo 2008). Specifically, one in four Muslim students reported that they often or always experience stress at school, while three in four students described having been “really stressed out” at some time in the past twelve months (Cristillo 2008). The exact source and nature of stress was not identified in the study.

One source of stress for American Muslim youth in public schools may be related to attempts to exercise their religious rights. Literature suggests that Muslim youth face misunderstanding and at times hostility in public schools (Abo-Zena, Sahli, and Tobias-Nahi 2009). Schools vary in their interpretations of separation of church and state and sometimes prohibit necessary religious obligations, such as daily prayers, Friday prayer, and girls wearing the hijab, due to lack of religious and cultural awareness (Al-Romi 2000; Khan 2004). In middle and high school, parents and children may feel uncomfortable with co-educational gym classes, which may be required for graduation. Unfortunately, teachers may also contribute to the stressful experience due to lack of religious or cultural awareness. Some teachers may show little sensitivity to the distinct religious and cultural identity

of American Muslim children (Ahmed and Szpara 2003), while others may have negative perceptions about Islam (Mastrilli and Sardo-Brown 2002). Mastrilli and Sardo-Brown (2002) highlighted concerns that teachers may perpetuate negative associations to their students, thereby potentially creating a hostile environment for Muslim students in public schools, while also impeding academic achievement. In addition, refugee Muslim youth in particular, identified bullying, name-calling, social isolation, and physical assault by peers as a source of stress (McBrien 2008), which may contribute to lowered self-esteem and increased risk behaviors (Kirova 2001). These students may avoid peer taunting and stereotypes by dropping out of school (Birman, Trickett, and Bacchus 2001). Refugee students do not always get the support they need from the school in order to address these issues. They may even encounter discrimination from teachers and administrators who do not understand their culture, the refugee experience, or their parents' lack of involvement (Birman et al. 2001). Unsafe educational contexts, such as the one experienced by refugee Muslim youth, increase their likelihood of engaging in risk behaviors (Snyder et al. 2005).

These findings are concerning because stressful educational environments can lead to depression, anger, alienation, or withdrawal—which can interfere with a child's or young adult's well-being (Cristillo 2008). Consequently, some youth attempt to explain their faith to teachers and peers, while others may choose to disassociate themselves from the generalized blame attributed to Islam and Muslims by attempting to conceal their Muslim identity. When young people do not feel peers and teachers support their beliefs and practices, they may develop separate identities at school and at home, potentially leading to confusion and dissonance among Muslim youth (Zine 2001).

Parents with financial resources may choose to send their children to private Islamic schools with the expectation that Islamic schools will instill Islamic values in their children (Khan 2004). However, teachers acknowledge that practices such as dating and drug use do occur among some students within full time Islamic schools. Yet, they indicate they make a concerted effort to openly condemn these practices through school rules and policies, contrary to public schools (Khan 2004). While Islamic schools strive to cultivate a culture rooted in Islamic morals, some graduates of Islamic schools reported difficulty adjusting to social aspects of college life, due to their limited interactions with non-Muslim peers and broader society (Khan 2004). Consequently, these students struggle to negotiate their religious identities and selectively participate in broader aspects of non-Muslim college culture (Khan 2004), which may impact their connections and sense of belonging with their peers. Furthermore, the lack of infrastructure and resources within many Islamic schools may negatively impact student learning. One study found that the majority of Islamic schools have been in operation for less than 10 years (Keyworth 2011). New schools may need time to develop organizational stability. The lack of infrastructure within newer schools may result in higher teacher turnover rates and a lack of processes, policies, and institutional building, which negatively impacts student learning. Furthermore, the study also reported that the majority of Islamic schools lack the appropriate space and facilities, possibly hindering student learning, engagement, and development (Keyworth 2011). Finally, the study reported that only 10 percent of Islamic schools have all of their teachers certified. It is known that teacher quality impacts instruction, student learning, and engagement. The lack of certified teachers may negatively impact student motivation and academic achievement, contributing to educational risk factors. In recent years, an increasing number of parents are choosing to homeschool their children due to varying reasons. There is currently no known research study assessing the prevalence and motivations for homeschooling or the long-term impacts on Muslim youth who are homeschooled.

On college campuses, research indicates that racial and ethnic minority students are more likely to experience problems of alienation, marginalization, loneliness, institutional bias, negative stereotypes, and cultural insensitivity than white students (Swail, Redd, and Perna 2003). Furthermore, evidence also suggests that these

and other challenges on campus may have either a direct or indirect impact on both their academic performance and social development (Swail, Redd, and Perna 2003). These students continue to be disadvantaged, relative to white students, in terms of persistence rates, academic achievement levels, enrollment in advanced degree programs, and overall psychological adjustments (Swail, Redd, and Perna 2003). Similarly, American Muslim youth in higher education reported experiencing hostility and isolation on their college campuses (Shalabi 2013). In fact, some students reported that their professors negatively misrepresented Muslim practices in the classroom. While the precise impact of such experiences on the social development and academic performance of American Muslim youth is unknown, they may experience similar negative academic and social outcomes reported by other racial and ethnic minority students.

Risk Behaviors

Risk behaviors are those actions that can negatively impact successful youth development (Jessor 1991). Examples of risk behaviors include alcohol and drug use, resulting in adverse mental health outcomes for the individual, as well as a long-term negative impact on public health (Glied and Pine 2002; Lawrence et al. 2010; Mokdad et al. 2004). Despite the potential negative impact of risk behaviors, it is theorized that engaging in such behaviors is often purposive and may serve a number of functions such as increasing peer acceptance, assisting in individuation from family as well as community, and coping with anxiety (Jessor 1991). In addition, behaviors considered normative by society may be considered risky by Muslims due to violation of religious teachings, such as dating and alcohol consumption. Engaging in risk behavior is rarely an isolated incident and is usually associated with engaging in multiple risk behaviors that are thought to be functional and interrelated, highlighting the need for prevention efforts to focus on lifestyle rather than individual risk behavior (Jessor 1991). In a recent study of Muslim college students, approximately 59 percent reported having engaged in at least one risk behavior (alcohol use, illicit drug use, tobacco use, or gambling), of whom 78 percent engaged in two or more risk behaviors within the past year (Ahmed, Abu-Ras, and Arfken 2014). This section will highlight the current research on risk behaviors of American Muslim youth, namely alcohol, drug, and tobacco use and pre-marital sexual activity. It is hoped that this information will build awareness and inform preventative programs for American Muslim youth.

Alcohol Use

Alcohol use is prevalent in the U.S. with 63 percent of full time U.S. college students reporting use in the past month (SAMSHA 2010). However, alcohol use is prohibited in Islam and any use would be considered risky for American Muslim youth. Our previous work has explored alcohol use in three different sample populations. Our initial data was obtained from a national sample of publicly available data. The data analysis revealed that 47 percent of Muslim college students reported having consumed alcohol in the past year, with no significant difference by gender (Abu-Ras, Ahmed, and Arfken 2010). In a significantly smaller study on African-American Muslim youth within one Midwest metropolitan city, 71 percent of the sample reported having ever consumed alcohol and a majority consumed alcohol with both Muslim and non-Muslim peers (Ahmed et al. 2010). Of those who had used alcohol, 74 percent reported being moderately to very religious. In our third study, surveying Muslim college students at one university, 9 percent reported lifetime alcohol use. The differences in alcohol use prevalence rates are likely due to a combination of sampling methods, population, and contextual factors. Data from the initial study was obtained from a larger study targeting students regardless of their religious background across the U.S. and did not rely on religious institutional support. The second study targeted a specific subgroup of Muslims and asked participants if they had ever consumed alcohol, instead of past year use, which could explain higher reported use. The final study recruited individuals from religious and cultural student organizations and undergraduate classes on Islam and Muslims, which likely contributed to lower reported prevalence of use.

Individuals reporting alcohol use indicated they drank primarily for social reasons and 60 percent reported they began regular use at age 18 or older (Abu-Ras, Arfken, and Ahmed 2010; Ahmed et al. 2014; Arfken, Ahmed, and Abu-Ras 2013). Other studies attributed social reasons, peer pressure, and lack of responsibility to alcohol consumption (Arfken, Owen, and Said 2012). Drinking is often hidden from parents by either secretly drinking at home or traveling to other cities to consume, to prevent being observed by older community members (Arfken, Owen, and Said 2012). American Muslim youth who drank were less likely to report religious activities as ‘important’; however, 26 percent of students who rated participation in religious activities as ‘very important’ also reported alcohol use (Abu Ras et al. 2010). Evidence for the role of developmental context in youth behavior was supported by the fact that students who used alcohol were more likely to report parental use of alcohol, perceive more of their peers using alcohol, and report fewer Muslims in their high school and neighborhood, compared to Muslim college students who abstained from alcohol use (Arfken, Ahmed, and Abu-Ras 2013). In another study, maintaining family honor, shame, and religious prohibition served to prevent alcohol consumption (Arfken, Owen, and Said 2012).

Illicit Drugs

Much less is known about American Muslim illicit drug use. Our preliminary work found that past year prevalence of American Muslim illicit drug use was 25 percent with no significant gender difference (Ahmed, Abu-Ras, and Arfken 2014). These rates are similar to non-Muslim U.S. college students’ usage of illicit drugs (22 percent) (SAMHSA 2010). In particular, past year marijuana use among American Muslim youth was found to be 24 percent, with no significant gender differences observed. Muslim students reporting marijuana use indicated that 52 percent had first used marijuana prior to turning 18 (Ahmed et al. 2014). In a smaller study on African-American Muslim youth, almost a quarter of participants did not answer questions about illicit drug use for unknown reasons. Of those who answered, a majority of males and almost half of females reported having ever used marijuana (Ahmed, Sharrief, and Arfken 2009). In addition, American Muslim youth reporting drug use indicated use was most often with both Muslim and non-Muslim peers (Ahmed, Sharrief, and Arfken 2009).

Tobacco Use

Tobacco use is considered risky behavior given the negative health outcomes for the individual. Muslim religious scholarly opinion on the permissibility of tobacco use range from prohibited to strongly disliked (*makruh*). In a national study of college students, past year tobacco usage among Muslim college students was 37 percent, a similar rate compared to non-Muslim college students (41 percent) in the same study (Ahmed et al. 2014). However, in a pilot study of U.S. Muslim college students at one university, we found 50 percent had ever consumed tobacco in some form, including cigarettes and waterpipe (Arfken, Abu-Ras, and Ahmed 2014). In both studies, gender differences were observed, with males reporting greater use than females. More than half (56 percent) of tobacco users reported their first experience was prior to 18 years of age, contrary to their non-Muslim peers who reported first time use after 18 years of age (Ahmed et al. 2014). The elevated rates of tobacco use found in Abu-Ras et al. (2012) may be attributed to the specific mention of waterpipe or hookah use, which is increasingly becoming common among American Muslim youth. In our pilot study of American Muslim students in one Midwest university, 44 percent of respondents reported waterpipe use (Arfken, Abu-Ras, and Ahmed 2014). Of the study participants, only 26 percent of Muslim students reported waterpipe smoking was prohibited in Islam, similar to the 29 percent of students who reported cigarette smoking was prohibited in Islam (Arfken et al. 2014). Motivation for hookah use was primarily social, as well as the perception that usage was less harmful compared to other forms of tobacco. Surprisingly, cultural norms or identity did not appear to be a motivation for use (Arfken, Abu-Ras, and Ahmed 2014). Risk factors for waterpipe use included prior alcohol and tobacco use, providing support to the notion that risk behavior is rarely an isolated behavior (Jessor 1991). Additional risk factors include being male, living at home, and perceptions that “most or all”

of one's friends and peers use waterpipe, thereby providing additional support for the role of developmental context on behavior. Surprisingly, believing that waterpipe smoking was prohibited in Islam alone was not a protective factor against lifetime waterpipe use; however, both parents discouraging waterpipe smoking was a protective factor.

Pre-Marital Sexual Behaviors

Dating is considered normative behavior for most young people in America, as has become sexual intercourse prior to marriage. Although there are few studies on this topic, one study of American college students found the lifetime prevalence of non-marital sexual intercourse was 76 percent (Higgins et al. 2011). While Islamic beliefs prohibit dating or pre-marital sexual intercourse, it is an issue many Muslim youth struggle with (Ahmed and Akhter 2006). In one sample of Muslim youth, 85 percent reported having ever dated and the vast majority of these individuals described themselves as very or moderately religious (Ahmed, Sharrief, and Arfken 2009). In a national sample of college students, the lifetime prevalence of sexual intercourse among never married Muslim college students was 54 percent, with no significant gender difference observed (Ahmed et al. 2014). Among Muslim youth reporting sexual activity, 66 percent indicated that they 'never' to 'sometimes' use condoms during sexual intercourse, potentially exposing the individuals to the risk of sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancy.

Services and Interventions

Awareness of American Muslim youth risk behaviors among mosque congregants and ethnic organization members is low, which has resulted in a lack of attention. Youth programming may exist in mosques, but most lack direction, are underfunded and under-resourced, lack appropriate training and understanding of American Muslim youth, and rarely address risk behaviors. National organizations focusing on youth development that interact directly with youth or indirectly through parents, youth workers, and mosques to strengthen families exist. However, they often lack funding, capacity-building training to maintain growth, and the ability to reach the varying subgroups, despite enjoying local success. Muslim youth helplines and online platforms are emerging, but also struggle with staffing, ongoing professional training, capacity-building, funding, and marketing their efforts to reach a wider audience. In most cases, religious-based organizations have focused on responding to immediate needs through services, but they must now begin to transition to preventative work in order to support American Muslim youth development.

Ethnic organizations and government agencies that serve underserved or high risk populations—primarily refugee and urban youth—may have funding, but often lack credibility with religious institutions and community leaders. The lack of trust often results in underuse of services and difficulty reaching the target population. However, the most effective agencies are able to: engage community leaders; empower young people and their parents to define their issues within their cultural and religious belief system; form active advisory committees to provide community feedback on efforts; and hire and train members from within the target community (National Center for Mental Health Promotion 2011). However, these programs are often limited to neighborhoods and cities with a high concentration of a specific ethnic/racial subgroup and are unable to meet the needs of individuals living in suburban and rural settings.

Recommendations: Strengthening Muslim Youth

Given the information provided in the previous sections, this section will focus on providing key recommendations for organizations and agencies to adopt in youth programming, as well as key developmental contexts that can help promote American Muslim youth development. While a series of recommendations will be made, not all solutions apply to all situations. The needs and circumstances of American youth vary; thus organizations, communities and mosques will need to carefully select the solutions that best fit their circumstances. As the community and youth develop, the solutions will also need to evolve and change. Hence, community and youth needs should be continually re-assessed, modifying their solutions according to circumstances.

Effective Components of Youth Programming

Collaboration

There is no single effort or organization that can independently address the varying needs of the diverse population of American Muslim youth. Organizations differ in their function, resources, and capacity to help young people. It is therefore recommended that groups serving youth partner with each other in order to reach a greater number of young people. A collaborative environment can result in the formation of specialty projects and the ability to connect with young people with unique interests (e.g., creative arts), circumstances (e.g., convert youth), sociocultural-historical realities (e.g., convert and African American Muslim youth), and intensity (e.g., varying degrees of religious practice). Organizations may have an impact in differing arenas (e.g., city-wide, national, social media, etc.), or may simply serve as a platform for other organizations to provide content and engage with young people. When organizations serving youth partner with each other, it is recommended that roles be clearly defined and agreed to, in order to avoid misunderstandings in the long run.

Youth Empowering Programs and Environment

Youth programming should be strength-based and youth-generated and should address the identified needs of young people. While active youth leadership is encouraged, age-appropriate adult monitoring of structure, activities, and behaviors should be present to promote positive youth development (Eccles and Gootman 2002). As young people mature and exhibit greater competence and skills, adults should decrease their involvement and serve in a supportive capacity.

Programs should enable American Muslim youth to enhance their skills and interest through varying outlets (e.g., arts, sports, entertainment, etc.) in order to help channel their talents and develop confidence in their ability to create, produce, and express their thoughts (Ahmed and Ezzedine 2009). American Muslim youth should be supported to enhance their cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual competence, as well as acquire life skills (e.g., sexual education, financial literacy, resume building, etc.) so that the young person feels that he

or she is personally growing and benefitting from his or her involvement (Ahmed and Ezzedine 2009). Mentors should help American Muslim youth create opportunities to apply their skills in meaningful ways through projects serving their peers, religious community, neighborhood, or the wider community. These projects can be used to develop life skills, such as obtaining funds for their activities (e.g., grants, donations, sponsorship, crowdfunding, etc.), as well as planning, executing, and assessing the effectiveness of their activities. Youth-led initiatives help to build a sense of agency and self-confidence and leadership skills and can help foster social responsibility. Treating young people as adults, who are capable of such activities, often results in young people rising to the occasion and surprising themselves with their abilities. In isolated or depressed economic communities, specific programs aimed at horizon building should be developed to expose young people to different opportunities beyond their neighborhood setting, as well as to provide alternative role models and possibilities for their long-term development in order to help them see the possibilities that lie beyond their current context.

Youth empowering programs should also provide physically and emotionally safe places to socialize and engage in meaningful activities. Safe physical places for youth to gather, interact, and form healthy and meaningful relationships can serve to promote youth development (Ahmed and Ezzedine 2009). Young people most often engage in risky behaviors during unsupervised leisure time. As such, supervised, structured, and high quality after school, weekend, and summer programs should be offered, particularly for working parents and families in economically depressed communities.

Positive Relational Experience

Youth programming efforts must create opportunities for young people to develop and cultivate positive, meaningful, and healthy relationships with peers, mentors, and adults. The ability to identify and connect with others helps to strengthen a sense of group membership, self-concept, and self-esteem of the individual (Hogg and Abrams 2007). In addition, healthy and positive group identification can help promote youth development by promoting identity formation and the ability to cope with normative developmental issues (Eccles and Gootman 2002).

Research suggests that concerns regarding acceptance can be a major deterrent to involvement in youth activities (Larson 1994). As such, organizations should strive to develop an internal culture that is welcoming, inclusive, and empowering for young people of varying levels of religiosity, ethnicity/race, gender, and socioeconomic background. Programs should promote shared experiences, a sense of belonging, and in-depth relationships through positive peer and intergenerational interactions resulting in a strong support network that can counteract negative influences (Ahmed and Ezzedine 2009). American Muslim youth—who experience positive peer relationships and an empowering organizational culture—are more likely to engage in behavior change and reach out to their peers so that they may enjoy and benefit from these changes as well. Such positive influence can lead to an increased sense of ownership and encourage greater American Muslim youth participation.

Caring adults must be actively involved in guiding and mentoring American Muslim youth. Research within the general population has highlighted the positive impact of adult involvement in youth development (Busseri et al. 2006). It is believed that adults, who help nurture positive assets in young people, also help to strengthen adolescent sense of self-worth and promote identity development (Cook 2000). These individuals should be caring and responsive, as well as be able to provide mentorship and guidance considered useful to the young person (Eccles and Gootman 2002). Furthermore, longer relationships between an adult and a young person were associated with more positive youth outcomes (Grossman and Rhodes 2002).

Individuals working with young people should be trained in youth issues, such as understanding the varying developmental contexts, challenges, and subgroup issues as well as awareness of risk behaviors. In addition, they must accept American Muslim youth wherever they are in their religious and cultural development and help to build their sense of self.

Mentors that are close in age to American Muslim youth are often able to better relate and engage young people compared to older adult volunteers. Young mentors can serve as role models and a resource to young people as they navigate their intersecting developmental contexts. These mentors can help to create safe spaces for young people to explore their religious questions and concerns, model behavioral expectations, and provide moral direction when appropriate. As such, youth mentors should be empathetic, acquire basic youth mentoring/counseling skills, and develop a network of counseling professionals in order to support them when mental health issues among young people arise. However, given the transient life stage that many younger mentors may be in, there is often a high turnover rate. In order to maintain stability in youth programs, it is important to provide incentives to youth mentors, such as internships, opportunities for professional development, growth and skill acquisition, as well as paid employment.

Older adult volunteers are also integral to promoting youth. These individuals can help support and guide younger mentors. Older mentors can also develop positive relationships with young people, given that the presence of another adult who is invested in their future can be empowering to a young person. Engaged adults who are trusted and respected by young people—as well as their greater community—can help build community support and trust, support youth efforts by serving as chaperones and youth advocates, and facilitate addressing sensitive topics (e.g., sexual education, substance use, mental health). These individuals may serve as an alternate parental model and help the young person see different approaches to addressing common struggles related to gender, religious practice, parenting style, marital relationships, family life, etc. In addition, alternative models allow the young person to choose from a variety of models to later emulate, which may result in an altered developmental trajectory. Older mentors may also be used to help build lines of communication between parents and their children who may be struggling with their relationship. Finally, they can also serve as a resource for young people and mentors through their life experience and social and professional networks.

Program Goals & Evaluation

Organizations serving American Muslim youth— particularly those that are mosque-based—often do not have clear programmatic objectives and goals that inform and direct their activities. Youth serving agencies and organization should strive to cultivate an organizational culture of reporting and accountability in order to ensure long-term growth and development. It is recommended that youth programs should have SMART goals, i.e., goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, result-oriented, and time-bound. The chosen goals should incorporate elements in programming that researchers have identified as effective with the target audience. In addition, these goals should be evaluated regularly to determine the success of the program.

Multi-method, Multimodal Approach to Achieve Programmatic Goals

Given the diversity of American Muslim youth, young people will vary in their needs, interest, abilities, and level of commitment. As such, programs should be diverse in content, (e.g., religious content, current events, pop culture), timings offered (e.g., after school, weekends, summer, etc.), age range, and locations offered (mosques, third space, outdoor, libraries, etc.). Youth programs should integrate different modes of learning, such as auditory, visual, and kinesthetic. In addition, varying methods of delivery to reach programmatic goals, such as lectures, mentoring, workshop, service projects, networking, camps, and nature activities, should be offered. Research has found that youth involved in multiple types of activities (e.g., sports, creative arts, community

service projects, extra-curricular activities, etc.) promote differing skills and values, which help to better promote holistic youth development (Busseri et al. 2006). For example, community service projects are more likely to cultivate a sense of social responsibility, whereas participating in sports or the arts have been found to develop a greater degree of initiative (McIntosh, Metz, and Youniss 2005). Utilizing such diverse methods to engage young people is also more likely to result in reaching different types of American Muslim youth.

Flexible Participation

Levels of interest, abilities, and circumstances differ, resulting in varying degrees of participation of American Muslim youth. In order to accommodate these differences, it is important that organizations create multiple entry points for involvement in youth programs. Easily accessible activities help young people who are not committed to the organization experience programs in a non-threatening way. This may occur through their online presence or by attending events that attract a wider audience (e.g., sports tournaments, entertainment events, etc.). These events are safe for curious or cautious individuals or those who may have multiple work, family, or educational commitments preventing them from more regular attendance. Such events and programs can help to attract non-traditional audiences, create a positive first experience that may plant the seed for increased future involvement, and provide young people with needed mentors and resources to help navigate their environment. Similarly, youth programs should have opportunities for young people seeking deeper engagement with increasing intensity through regular weekly programs, weekend programs or retreats, camps, intensive mentorship/leadership, etc. Organizers must acknowledge and plan for youth participant attendance to range from sporadic to serial, as well as participant involvement ranging from bystander or attendee to organizer and leader. In addition, different locations of program participation (neighborhood-based, citywide, statewide, national, and international) may have differing impacts on the young person's development. The length and intensity of involvement will also determine the potential impact of the youth program. The longer and more regular the program is, the deeper the expected impact on the young person.

Integration of Social Media & Technology

The Pew Internet & American Life Project (2011) reported that 95 percent of young people between ages twelve to seventeen are online, of which 80 percent use social media network sites, and that 77 percent of American teens also have a cell phone (Duggan and Brenner 2013). American Muslim youth are likely no different. Given this reality, organizations should incorporate the use of technology and social media in their youth programming. Social media can help recruit and advertise in creative ways. In addition, online platforms provide young people an opportunity to network, learn, and interact with each other within and beyond their geographical communities. These connections can help strengthen feelings of belonging and a sense that they are part of something larger. Young people can also be encouraged to maintain blogs, where they give voice to their experiences, share their ideas, and have an impact on their cybercommunity. Technology and social media can be used to enhance efficiency and effectiveness in activism, by helping it have a wider impact on society. In turn, these experiences can help young people develop a greater sense of purpose and empowerment, as well as increase their belief that they can make a difference in the world.

Financial Sustainability

In order for youth programming to be effective, organizations must have a financially sound business plan to sustain and grow youth programming over time. As such, organizations should consider diversifying sources of funding beyond private donations, revenues from activities, and sponsorship from local businesses. Organizations should build capacity to apply, obtain, and maintain grants at the city, county, state, and federal levels, as well as from community foundations. This may require capacity-building training and mentorship for youth-serving organizations.

Engaging Critical Developmental Contexts

Just as it is important to incorporate certain elements in youth programming, the context of the programming may also impact its effectiveness. Young people and their families need easy access to programs. Once trust and connection is established, young people and their families may be more willing to further invest their time and energy into additional programs. This section will focus on key developmental contexts that can enhance American Muslim youth development: family, school, and the Muslim community.

Family

Healthy families have repeatedly been found to be the best predictor of decreased risk and increased positive youth development, and thus serve as a critical point of intervention (Eccles and Gootman 2002). Parents have an important role in prevention and intervention. Parents that model healthy behavior (Jessor, Turbin, and Costa 1998) and monitor their children have been associated with a decrease in risk behaviors (Windle 2000). In addition, emotionally positive, consistent, supportive, open, and receptive parent-child communication, as well as family cohesion and connectedness, have also been found to be associated with increased wellbeing and decreased risk behaviors among young people (Eccles and Gootman 2002).

Families should seek to improve their functioning by pursuing family life education, developing family strengthening skills, and engaging in experiences that promote family connection. Parents need to educate themselves regarding normative stages and stressors associated with child, family, and marital development. For example, if couples are aware that the impending birth of a child is associated with decreased marital satisfaction, they can choose to address these challenges proactively. In addition, families should seek out knowledge through reading articles and books, watching and listening to videos, or attending informational sessions on topics relevant to their family needs, such as awareness of mental health issues, prevalence and indicators of risk behaviors, impact of technology on families, etc. Similarly, parents should explore their parenting style and understand how it may impact the long-term developmental outcome of their child. It is also important for parents to monitor and be aware of the influence of other developmental contexts having an impact on their child's development. This may include attending and assisting in school activities to assess school culture and norms, as well as modeling integration and community involvement. It may also include monitoring peer influence by spending time with your children's friends and their influences.

Prior research has found that parental support strengthens a young person's ability to navigate developmental challenges (Eccles and Gootman 2002). As such, parents and families must learn how to better support their children by acquiring evidence-based family strengthening skills, such as emotional regulation, effective communication, strengthening interpersonal relationships (within marriages, between parent and child, between siblings, and with extended family members). In addition, creating regular family strengthening rituals and activities are important to increase family connectedness and bonding and serve as a protective factor. Experiences should be positive for all family members and help to enhance family cohesion. Examples of family strengthening activities may include: family meals, walks, playing sports or games together, reading and sharing stories, creating art together, family outings to parks, museums, bonfires, or simply laughing with one another. In addition, communities and organizations should offer pre-marriage workshops and educational material to inform and engage young people prior to them starting a family. This would preemptively help to develop stronger families and, thus, the environment for their children's development. These preventative intervention changes in family dynamics will help to enhance the family environment, strengthen family connection and relationships, and improve family cohesion, which all serves to build the foundation for positive youth development.

Educational Setting

The majority of American Muslim youth attend public schools and universities. Thus, school settings are an important developmental context in promoting American Muslim youth development. Research has shown that youth who are in a classroom environment where students are engaged and feel valued are more likely to do well in school (Eccles and Gootman 2002). This will likely result in young people feeling more connected to school, which in turn decreases the likelihood of engaging in risk behaviors. As suggested in Ahmed and Ezzedine (2009), professional trainings for teachers in areas with a high density of Muslim students can increase awareness of Islam, Muslims, and the needs of Muslim students. In addition, online resources for teachers in both high- and low-density areas should be made available. Professional training can address the misconception of civilization clashes that is often presented in classrooms and can promote the integration of Muslim contributions to the humanities and science into classroom curricula. Teachers should be supported in their efforts to develop a culturally responsive classroom by shifting the focus of discussion from group difference to increasing understanding (El-Haj 2006).

Similarly, parents, mosques, and community organizations can reach out to schools through activities such as teacher appreciation banquets and guest speakers, or they can serve as sites for school field trips when discussing world religions or cultures. Parental involvement as volunteers in school activities and participation in parent-teacher organizations, school boards, and district-wide committees and activities are also imperative. These opportunities enable parents to develop relationships and understanding with other parents, teachers, and administrators and have an impact on school culture. In addition, these opportunities afford parents the chance to create partnerships and respect with like-minded individuals, thereby creating supportive learning environments for all children, regardless of their background and history. Such collaboration between parents and school administration can also create opportunities for suggesting ideas, research, and professional training for teachers and administrators.

Muslim students on college campuses need support through collaborative working relationships between student organizations, chaplains, and university staff. American Muslim college students and organizations must advocate for the university to recognize and honor the diversity of religions on campus by reflecting this in its course offerings, staff representation, student programming, etc. Muslim students can volunteer with offices that administer activities on campus, such as student life, multicultural centers, international affairs, and centers for religious life/chaplaincy. These opportunities may enable American Muslim college students to advocate for more inclusive activities and materials for individuals of varying backgrounds. In addition to administrative involvement, interaction with peers of other faiths is important. The extent to which American Muslim youth are involved in student life activities can assist in helping make their campus more inclusive to all (Cole & Ahmedi 2010).

Religious Community

American Muslim youth are often embedded in multiple religious communities, which can have a profound impact on their developmental outcomes. In order to promote positive youth development, Muslim communities need to address 1) religious content, 2) congregational culture, and 3) youth programming efforts, all of which are important contributors to American Muslim youth developmental environments.

- 1) **Religious Content.** Religious scholars, social scientists, and community activists must form working groups to collectively explore topics and issues from an authentic American Muslim cultural lens. In this process the nuances of subgroup realities (e.g., converts, urban environments, etc.) should also be

addressed. This process is most critical to the internalization of Islam for American Muslim youth. Secondly, it is imperative that the effectiveness of community-based religious socialization processes and practices (e.g., full time and weekend Islamic schools, study circles, educational institutes, madrassas, etc.) be evaluated in order to assist in the internalization of values and beliefs within an American context that helps to promote positive youth development. Religious educators are encouraged to impart knowledge through a variety of methods that are developmentally appropriate and engaging to American Muslim youth. Effective techniques for religious internalization include: enhancing critical thinking skills through problem-based learning, case studies, debates, and use of media, as well as integrating creative expression in the form of art, music, and drama (Ahmed and Ezzedine 2009). Matching the teaching style with the student's learning style and interests will be important to maintaining a young person's interest and engagement in religious content. In addition, educators that understand young people's spiritual needs and preferences—and provide them with relevant supports needed to navigate their environment—will be most successful. For example, college students lacking an adequate religious foundation may express a crisis in faith when exposed to philosophy classes due to a lack of knowledge about Islamic beliefs. Preparing students and addressing their predicted concerns and issues in advance can help to support Muslim college students throughout their exploration.

- 2) **Congregational Culture.** A transformation of congregational culture must take place in order to prevent the continued exodus of young people, who are often described as “unmosqued.” This process requires re-examining congregational culture, desired outcomes, and the needed congregational cultural changes to achieve such outcomes. This process would include organizing focus groups with underrepresented individuals, particularly American Muslim youth, as well as key community gatekeepers of change. These focus groups would address how to increase social connectedness and a sense of belonging, through programs and congregational culture changes. In addition, congregations should include young people in discussions of direction-setting, decision-making, and execution of programs to help foster intergenerational relationships and the transfer of knowledge and experience, as well as to empower young people to give them a sense of ownership of the congregational culture's future. In addition, mosques and Muslim organizations can use varying platforms (e.g., khutba, lectures, social media) to highlight the need for change, the negative impact resulting from lack of change, and how to change at the individual, family, and community level.
- 3) **Community Programming.** Change also requires that community programming be more reflective of the varying needs of adherents and that congregations consider having a youth advisory committee to guide mosque leadership and programming. Given the diverse needs of American Muslim youth, it is recommended that religious congregations begin by conducting a needs assessment of Muslim youth in their community or geography, taking care to consider the needs of youth who may reside in the area but have chosen to disassociate themselves from their religious congregation. The knowledge obtained from the needs assessment should be integrated into current research on Muslim youth and their developmental contexts, as well as guided by principles from positive youth development in order to provide developmentally and culturally appropriate (i.e., American) programs for Muslim youth.

In order to promote youth development, communities should also strive to offer programs for parents across developmental stages so that parents are educated regarding the developmental needs of their children. Communities can support youth development by collaborating with organizations to help provide preventative education and evidence-based skill training to strengthen young people and their families. In addition, communities can encourage the development of support groups for parents with children in different

developmental stages, family makeup (e.g., blended, single, and intergenerational families), or specific situations (e.g., intergenerational households, developmental or physical disability, mental illness). These groups could help promote a sense of community support and connectedness for families with similar experiences, as well as provide a space for families to share ideas on how to address challenges specific to their situation. Congregations can encourage family cohesion by organizing activities that encourage family bonding and interaction. Similarly, awareness of vulnerable youth and their families should in turn result in programming intended to better support their experiences within their religious context. Examples may include providing family advocates for new refugees or providing women with equal access to religious scholars, prayer spaces, and opportunities for empowerment, as well as eliminating patriarchal socialization practices in religious communities.

Congregations must also model and create opportunities for American Muslim youth to engage with mainstream society in order to help them formulate their American Muslim identity. Modeling can occur through civic engagement, community-wide social justice initiatives (e.g., institutionalized racism, educational and health disparity, gun violence, etc.), community service projects, and political involvement. Youth involvement in these types of activities can help young people develop a sense of social and civic responsibility, empower them to constructively improve America, increase their attachment to society, and decrease the risk of radicalization (Ahmed and Ezzedine 2009).

Conclusion

The field of research on American Muslim youth is still evolving, and there are many questions that need to be explored and answered. Continued research on American Muslim youth is needed in order to understand the varying subgroups, their challenges, and how to better meet their needs. Sustained efforts are needed to explore and understand risk and protective factors, motivations and pathways to risk behaviors, and the prevalence of risk behaviors among American Muslim youth. In addition, it is necessary to understand the mediators—sources of influence, situational factors, functional aspects of risk—and to understand the moderators of developmental context—family dynamics, peer relationship, neighborhood context, congregational culture, and societal context (e.g., group status, perceived discrimination). Research findings need to be disseminated to policy makers and government agencies in order to help inform their decision-making and program or policy development. Educational institutions can integrate the current findings into professional training, creating safe zones in school settings and promoting educational achievement. Information should also be tailored to integrate religiously, culturally, and developmentally relevant programs for young people, families, mentors, organizations, and mosques. Impact analyses should be conducted in order to evaluate the effectiveness of family, educational, and community-based programming for the purpose of continued improvement with the aim of promoting American Muslim youth development.

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