

The Economic and Cultural Impacts of Somali Immigration to Minnesota

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When disputes over immigration enforcement shook the United States earlier this year, it is no surprise that the epicenter was Minnesota. Once a peaceful, egalitarian place that Time magazine described as “a state that works,” Minnesota has been transformed by rapid immigration. Among the most prominent of the new immigrants are Somalis, whose arrival in Minnesota has created one of the starkest economic and cultural contrasts between immigrants and natives in the Western world.

There were virtually no Somalis in Minnesota in 1990, but over 10,000 appeared over the following decade, largely as refugees from Somalia’s clan wars.¹ The Somali-ancestry population in Minnesota would triple by 2010 and continue to grow. In 2024, in the wake of the immigration surge of the preceding four years, over 75,000 people in Minnesota described their ancestry as Somali. The population has become especially visible because of its concentration in Minneapolis, where tension between rival Somali clans is rumored to have influenced the city’s recent mayoral election.²

As noted above, the contrast between Somalis and native Minnesotans could hardly be greater. Start with economics. The human development index -- a composite indicator of health, income, and education -- routinely ranks Minnesota among the top states in the U.S., comparable to the Scandinavian countries from which a large share of Minnesotans derive their ancestry.³ Consequently, the arrival of impoverished Somalis has created large economic disparities. The numbers cited below come from a recent report I wrote for the Center for Immigration Studies.⁴

In Minnesota, 38 percent of adult Somali immigrants live below the official poverty line, compared to just 7 percent of adult natives. Even more concerning is the status of Somali children. More than half (52 percent) of children in Somali immigrant homes live in poverty, while only 8 percent of children in native-headed homes are in poverty.

Among the strongest predictors of poverty are low education and lack of English-language ability. Somali immigrants experience both of these problems at dramatically higher rates than native Minnesotans. Virtually all native Minnesotans speak English very well, for example, but 58 percent of working-age Somalis do not. Meanwhile, 39 percent of working-age Somalis have no high school diploma, compared to just 5 percent of natives.

Even Somali immigrants who are long-term U.S. residents continue to struggle. For example, 49 percent of working-age Somalis with more than 10 years of residency still speak English less than “very well” -- only a small improvement over the 58 percent among the full Somali population. Similarly, 47 percent of children in long-term Somali immigrant households are still living in poverty, compared to 52 percent in all Somali households. Even these marginal improvements in the long-term data should be interpreted cautiously, since adaptation is not the only possible explanation for them. It’s also possible that newer waves of Somali immigrants have lower initial skill levels than the older waves.

The Somali community is small relative to Minnesota’s full population. Nevertheless, because the economic disparities are so large, some of the state’s poverty-related problems still have a pronounced Somali component. For example, Somali immigrant households account for 2.5 percent of children in Minnesota but 13 percent of the state’s child poverty.

Then there is household overcrowding. Health authorities have identified overcrowding as a major contributor to the spread of communicable diseases, including Covid-19.⁵ One in 10 overcrowded households in Minnesota is headed by a Somali immigrant, even though less than 1 percent of the state’s households overall are Somali. These disproportionate burdens imposed by immigration have upended a state once lauded for its low rate of social problems.

Somali immigrants are also major consumers of means-tested anti-poverty benefits. While just 6 percent of native households in Minnesota receive cash welfare, 27 percent of Somali immigrant households do. The disparities are even greater for food and medical care, with over half of Somali immigrant households receiving food assistance and nearly three quarters using Medicaid, the free government healthcare program for the poor. Altogether, 81 percent of Somali immigrant households consume some form of welfare, compared to 21 percent of native households.

Households with children are especially likely to use welfare. Even Minnesota's native-headed households with children consume Medicaid at a high rate of 28 percent. The contrast with Somalis is still clear, however, as nearly all (86 percent) of the Somali households with children are on Medicaid.

Any population with poverty rates as high as Somali immigrants will legally qualify for extensive means-tested aid, either directly for themselves or indirectly through their U.S.-born dependents. Recently, however, some Somalis in Minnesota have been caught accessing even more social services through fraud. The New York Times described one scheme involving the theft of children's food aid during the pandemic as "staggering in its scale and brazenness."⁶

Over \$1 billion has been reported stolen so far, but the scandal goes beyond money. Minnesota's social services have roots in the Scandinavian model, which assumes that civic-minded residents will treat aid as a safety net, not as money free for the taking.⁷ Fraud cases like these illustrate the broader clash between the highly individualist culture of native Minnesotans with the highly collectivist culture of Somalis.

The individualist-collectivist dichotomy is "the most fruitful way of making sense of many cultural differences in psychological processes," according to one academic review.⁸ Broadly speaking, individualists tend to value personal freedom, achievement, and innovation, while collectivists are more inclined to rely upon and defer to established authority.⁹ Although it may seem counter-intuitive, individualist societies tend to have greater "social capital" than collectivist ones. The reason is that individualists seek cooperation through voluntary associations among friends and community members, creating complex networks of mutual trust in the process. By contrast, collectivists tend to rely on natural alliances such as the extended family or clan, which encourages in-group loyalty and suspicion of outsiders.

As Minnesota is now discovering, societies built around an individualist culture will struggle to incorporate collectivist peoples. Clan-based loyalties present the temptation – perhaps sometimes even a sense of *obligation* – to take actions that benefit the in-group, even when those actions come at the expense of the broader polity. Defrauding social services is a prime example.

Will Somali immigrants eventually adopt the individualist culture of their hosts? Unfortunately, the power of assimilation is limited. Researchers have demonstrated a remarkable intergenerational persistence in some cultural values.¹⁰ The degree to which groups value trust, frugality, civic commitment, economic freedom, public integrity, and environmental stewardship tends to get passed down from parents to children, even when the parents have immigrated to a new country.

For example, a recent paper in the *Journal of Politics* finds that tolerance for political corruption among second-generation immigrants in Europe correlates with the average corruption tolerance in the countries that their mothers came from. The paper further shows that expressing tolerance for corruption is associated with actually experiencing corruption – either offering a bribe or (more often) being asked to give one.¹¹ The results imply that accepting immigrants from corruption-tolerant nations could increase corruption in receiving countries.

The preference for redistribution can also be tracked over generations. A 2025 study links the preferences of individual Americans in the General Social Survey with the preferences they may have inherited from their ancestral countries in Europe. It finds a positive relationship even when limiting the sample to

respondents who are fourth-generation and higher Americans.¹² The implication is that accepting immigrants who favor more (or less) redistribution than the average American will change political preferences in the U.S. over the long term.

The reality of cultural persistence is a powerful reason for the countries of the Western world to rethink their high-immigration policies. Taxes go up and down, regulations come and go, but the consequences of immigration will extend beyond our lifetimes.

¹ Nayla Rush, "[Resettlement Agencies Decide Where Refugees Are Initially Placed in the United States](#)," Center for Immigration Studies, July 16, 2020.

² Dahir Alasow, "[Somali Clan Divisions Surface as Jacob Frey Wins Third Term in Minneapolis Mayoral Race](#)," Suna Times, November 6, 2025.

³ Subnational HDI v8.4, [Global Data Lab](#).

⁴ Jason Richwine, "[Somali Immigrants in Minnesota](#)," Center for Immigration Studies, December 10, 2025.

⁵ Jason Richwine, Steven A. Camarota, and Karen Zeigler, "[Household Overcrowding Facilitates the Spread of Covid-19](#)," Center for Immigration Studies, October 8, 2020.

⁶ Ernesto Londoño, "[How Fraud Swamped Minnesota's Social Services System on Tim Walz's Watch](#)," New York Times, November 29, 2025.

⁷ Rochelle Olson, "[U.S. Attorney Joe Thompson: Fraud Is Stealing Minnesota's Way of Life](#)," Minneapolis Star Tribune, September 13, 2025.

⁸ Steven J. Heine, "Cultural Psychology", in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, Susan T. Fiske, Daniel T. Gilbert and Gardner Lindzey, Eds., Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., ed. 5th, 2010, vol. 2.

⁹ Yuriy Gorodnichenko and Gerard Roland, "Culture, Institutions, and the Wealth of Nations", *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 99 (2017), pp. 402-416.

¹⁰ Jason Richwine, "[More Evidence for Cultural Persistence](#)," Center for Immigration Studies, January 17, 2023.

¹¹ Alberto Simpser, "[The Culture of Corruption across Generations: An Empirical Study of Bribery Attitudes and Behavior](#)", *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 82 (2020), pp. 1373-1389.

¹² Jason Richwine, "Cultural Preference for Redistribution in the United States: An Epidemiological Approach", *Atlantic Economic Journal*, Vol. 53 (2025), pp. 231-244.