



***Restoring the Dignity  
of the Human Spirit***

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## **Alarming Rates of Torture Found in Minnesota's African Community**

*documents new study published in American Journal of Public Health*

The number of Minnesotans who have survived horrific acts of torture in their native African countries is in some cases double what researchers previously held to be true.

“We always knew that many of our neighbors and community residents had fled countries where torture was a common practice. We didn't know that nearly half of them experienced it personally,” said Douglas A. Johnson, executive director of the Center for Victims of Torture.

The results were published in the just released April issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*. The article, “Somali and Oromo Refugees: Correlates of Torture and Trauma History,” documents the need to recognize torture in African refugees, especially in women.

The study represents the largest refugee community sample conducted in a resettlement country. Researchers performed an extensive, community-based study of the Somali and Oromo communities in Minnesota. They found torture prevalence in these communities ranged from 25% to 69% by ethnicity and gender – much higher than the most commonly cited numbers of 5% to 35% in refugee populations. Based on their data, there may be more than 30,000 survivors of torture living in Minnesota.

“This first phase of our research, in addition to the extremely high prevalence of torture in these East African communities, reports for the first time a nearly equal prevalence of torture in men and women without respect for socio-economic status or educational background. What is unfortunate is that less than 1% of those interviewed either requested or followed up referral to mental health services, even though many more were identified as needing help,” said Dr. James Jaranson.

The publication is a culmination of a five-year study where Somali and Oromo professionals, with experience in health care and interviewing, did extensive interviews with a sample of 1,134 individuals from their respective communities. The principal investigator for the study was Dr. Jim Jaranson, one of the original founders and former Medical Director for the Minnesota-based Center for Victims of Torture. Jaranson recently moved to the San Diego area where he serves as a consultant to Survivors of Torture International. Dr. David R. Johnson, unit director for medicine at CVT, was on the research team and met bi-weekly with the interviewers.

Of the 1,134 people interviewed, 622 were Somali and 512 Oromo. The number of men interviewed was 605 and women, 529. The study targeted social, psychological and physical problems most often encountered by refugee populations.

Torture history was found to vary by gender and ethnicity. Men (45%) and women (43%) had approximately equal exposure to torture. Among ethnic/gender groups, those most often exposed to torture were Oromo men (69%) and Somali women (37%), followed by Oromo women (37%) and Somali men (25%). Torture survivors reported significantly more symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than refugees who had suffered equal trauma of other kinds (war, death of family members, e.g.) but had not been tortured. Twenty five percent of torture survivors met the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, compared to only 4 percent of those who had not been tortured. Torture survivors also had more physical and psychological problems.

The full article can be found on-line at <http://www.ajph.org/cgi/content/full/94/4/591>.

The Center for Victims of Torture works locally, nationally and internationally to heal the wounds of torture on individuals, their families and their communities and to stop torture worldwide. CVT provides hope and healing to more than 250 Minnesotans each year in our multi-disciplinary care healing centers in Minneapolis and St. Paul. CVT also provides training for healthcare, social service and educational professionals who work with these traumatized populations. For more information on these programs, visit [www.cvt.org](http://www.cvt.org).

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