

A new research on Somali young people in the UK [Part 2]

**By
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Jidhaan's story

All names of individuals reported in this research are pseudonyms. Once again, I am grateful to all these young people who took the time to share their stories with me, often with many hours and in some cases as many as three times (both on the phone and face-to-face). They demanded no financial recompense for their troubles. What I can offer by way of restitution, therefore, is that I tried, to the best of my limited abilities, to get their stories right. With that proviso, here is the first story, the story of Jidhaan.

I first met Jidhaan through a friend who helped him out when he came to the mosque, 'down-and-out in need of a meal'. The friend was surprised at how amiable and polite the young man had seemed, but also how his life was ruined by addiction, hopelessness and despair. His conclusion was that Jidhaan was a 'victim of circumstance'. When I saw Jidhaan the following week, I found him to be a pleasant and likeable young man. He agreed to my request for an interview. He was in fact far too friendly and has agreed to come to my place for the interviewing.

On the evening of March 10th 2009, I collected Jidhaan along with the friend who arranged our meeting from a Somali Coffee Shop in Tottenham. I took them both to my place where the interview was conducted. The session was tape-recorded and lasted for about 42 minutes. Unlike most other young people interviewed, Jidhaan elected to speak Somali throughout. Despite living most of his life in the UK, he was clearly more at ease in his native tongue than English.

While he had made himself clear, I thought some of the details about his resume didn't entirely add up. Also statements he made about criminal convictions and terms of imprisonment he served weren't very clear at all. Therefore, I met Jidhaan again briefly on the 3rd of December 2009 partly to ask him to clear these up, but also to update myself on his situation. In interviews, Jidhaan spoke mostly in the third person. This does not, in any way, devalue his contribution. Merely that his account does not have a first person feel to it. One more observation I will make is that there was no one to

corroborate or contradict Jidhaan's statements because he declined my request to contact his family for their side of the story. What follows is a unified account of the information he gave me on both occasions.

At 25 years of age, Jidhaan is neither working nor learning. He got involved in street life shortly after arrival when he fell in with a wrong crowd of friends at school. He then led a life of alcohol, drugs and crime, he says, but he now learned from the mistakes of the past.

Jidhaan arrived in London at the age of 9 in 1993. He was brought over by an older sister who already had residence status in the UK. He says he never saw his mum or dad, and was initially (before the age of 9) raised by his grandmother. Because of the incessant wars in Somalia, the grandmother later fled to Kenya where she 'died of natural causes'.

Within 6 months of arrival, Jidhaan became disillusioned with school and dropped out altogether. Just idly walking the streets and selling drugs became his social vocation. Here is Jidhaan on his rejection of school and the starting point of his involvement in street crime: "After we arrived, I went to school. Very soon I started having problems ... [Somali] children will find it difficult to learn because English is not their language. Their first language is Somali, and they learn English at school. ... There was no one at home to help me with homework. My sister couldn't help because she was never schooled herself. Also there was some misunderstanding with my sister. Having been at school for six months, I found it very difficult and decided to give up. I liked to play truant, hang in the streets, rob people, smoke hashish, and drink alcohol."

It all started when he fell in with some friends at school, and got involved in street life. They'd meet at school, and then do a bunk: hanging out, selling drugs and smoking cannabis. Speaking in the third person, Jidhaan recounts how his life of alcohol, drugs and crime started: "If your mum can't give you £5 or £3 to buy a meal, sweets or other things after school, you get angry. You see other children having some spending money. Someone may even have £20 spending money. That child, let's call him Tom or Jamie, says to you then 'Mohamed, come with me 'cause I've got £20. Let me buy you lunch today'. Tomorrow, you've no money. You talk to your mum and say 'mum, could I have some pocket money' and she says 'I have no money to spare. I've got this little *Ceyr* (benefit money) and I have nothing to give you'. She will then say to you, 'it is up to you if you want to go to school or not. It is up to you if you want to learn or not, but I have no money to give you'. The child goes to school feeling really pissed at his mum's

refusal to give him money. He then sees another child with even more money, and who is also truanting from school. This other child is also known to Mohamed so he says to Mohamed: 'Hey Mohamed: what are you doing at school today?' He gives Mohamed £20 and tells 'to get a meal'. The boy also invites Mohamed to come with him, saying 'if you come with me, I give you £30 and we can also have girls. You won't do anything; you just come with me'. The boy then takes Mohamed along; he gives him £30 or so and they go together for the rest of the day in what Mohamed thinks would be an afternoon of joy and pleasure. It won't be a joy and pleasure; rather it spells the end of Mohamed's school career. Tomorrow, they do the same. Mohamed gets hooked on this, and starts asking for money. Then the boy says to Mohamed: "well, I can't just give you money. I work for it by robbing people. You do it, and you'll get the money". Mohamed starts robbing people; gets caught, and then ends up in prison."

Jidhaan runs away from home 'because of problems with his sister'. He doesn't say what these problems were, but hints at issues such as 'cultural conflict', his failing or dropping out of school and the lack of help from her at home as the main reasons for his leaving: "The Somali parent has to do his own things to be able to survive. Their own problems got the better of them, so they can't help anyone. Besides, these children don't share a culture with them. The mother has no money even if she wanted to help the child with extra lessons. ... The child is angered by this turn of events. He then runs away from school and ends up in the street."

I asked Jidhaan about the issue of 'culture conflict' which he raised, and this is what he said: "Alcohol is *haram* (forbidden) from a Somali and Muslim perspective. When I came into this country, I thought hashish was good because every culture was using it, be it Jamaicans, White people or others. I was warned about alcohol from a religious side when I was young and I knew about that, but nobody said anything about hashish to me so I started smoking it. When my sister saw me smoke it, she started saying to me that I should stop it because it is not good. At that point, I left my sister."

We've only got Jidhaan's version of course, and it is difficult to say without talking to the sister! But could it also be that he was kicked out by the sister trying to protect her children? I understand that she had younger children of her own at the time. Would she not be concerned about the inevitable flow of drugs from Jidhaan to her children? And would that not constitute grounds for expelling him? This doesn't explain what happened. It is just a thought.

At the age of 13, Jidhaan was removed from his sister's care and was placed with foster parents by social services. This was a Jamaican household headed by a female which, as Jidhaan himself claims, was broad-minded and tolerant of his drug taking. He stayed with this family until he reached the age of 19 at which time he 'stopped taking drugs'. The latter was inspired by a friend's sudden death. I have put 'stopped taking drugs' in inverted commas because although he claims to have stopped using drugs, I am still inclined to refuse to accept his statement as truthful.

Jidhaan had too many problems to be turned around by foster parents. Even as he lived in their care, he committed street robberies and sold drugs for money. There was no going back to education. He has been stabbed once on the butt when a fight broke out because he and friends were in another gang's territory. The picture painted is that of glorified and glamorised idle youth culture with their daily struggles, daily fears, the constant looking over your shoulder because of gang fights, and a life of alcohol, *Khat*, drugs and crime. Here is Jidhaan narrating his own experience of Somali young people's lives, and talking in the third person perhaps to obscure his role in it: "Somali kids don't get up in the morning; they are asleep. They don't go to school or college. They are called 'hasslers' (sic). Each one of them is a vagrant. When he wakes up from asleep, he starts wandering from place to place. Each person is thinking how can they can get or make some money. I know all of them by sight. They're divided into groups, and I used to belong to one of their groups. I know what they are all up to, but I no longer take part in what they do now. ... Every night after 9 p.m., groups of rowdy Somali youths, behaving like vampires, fill up the streets. They consume a lot of alcohol causing trouble and disorder in the streets. They harass or attack people, and then the police have to act because it is their job to keep the peace. Somali children are too much of a problem for the police, especially at night. ... Some of them sell drugs in the city. Others are into credit cards; tickets; and things like that. They all act illegally. They are the main group trading in these things, all the thieving throughout the city, and so on. The Somalis are the people doing them, especially those under 25 are engaged in this. They work for other people, big people. ... West London, it is only Somalis who do it (selling drugs). North London, the Jamaicans are here in big numbers but soon, in a year or two down the road, the Somalis will outdo them. ... There are Somali girls who are procured by pimps as prostitutes. In south London, girls are mixed with the boys who sell drugs. And all of them, 100%, consume *Khat*. And in the night time, they drink ENJ brandy."

Jidhaan sees the gang fights his Somali friends get involved as a way of building status, gaining a reputation, and earning respect from other ethnic groups: "I remember a time

when anyone who sees me in the street, black or white, would go after me simply because I am Somali. The black boys would set about young Somali people. Nobody knew where we came from, Europe or Africa. So we had to introduce ourselves to the world, hit back and beat these people, including the blacks. Now we are respected by the blacks here in North London more than anywhere else in London. In other areas of London, you (as a Somali young person) will be robbed by other groups. But in here, north London, you will not be because of what the Somalis did in here. Many black and Turkish people were attacked, and some of them even knifed, by Somali boys so they know that we can fight them and that is why they respect us. We are doing this so that we can all live in peace. We have a saying in Somali: 'you make war to get peace'."

But the story takes a strange twist when the Somalis fight it out among themselves. Somali on Somali gang fighting hit the headlines recently when a boy was murdered in Camden. It was said that the boy, Mahir Osman - an 18-year-old mechanical engineering Somali student who was not known to be a gang member, was stabbed to death during an attack by 40 youths. How would Jidhaan explain this phenomenon? His answer: "The Somalis fight each other. They don't like and are hostile to each other. The reason for this is because of the drugs trade that they're involved. Each group wants to carve out its own territory and if another group violates their territory, then they'll fight them. The fights between the Camden kids and those from Tottenham was all about drugs (with the unwritten code), "you can't sell drugs in my own area because I am here to sell it". These fights had nothing to do with clans or any other Somali-to-Somali issues."

Jidhaan says that he had been imprisoned twice. On the first occasion, he was arrested for his involvement in a fight 'while carrying a knife'. He doesn't say whether a stabbing had occurred in the fight or not, but tells me that he was sentenced to 4 years imprisonment. He was jailed at Her Majesty's Young Offender Institution (HMYOI) Feltham where he spent two years of his 4 year sentence, and was released on licence. On the second occasion, he says he was arrested for vehicle theft. He then goes on to say that he was a passenger in the vehicle when it was stopped by the police. He was given a 3 month jail term, and was sent to Her Majesty's Young Offender Institution (HMYOI) Aylesbury. He says he can't remember the dates of these custodial sentences but the last time he was in prison was in 2001, when he got arrested for the vehicle theft.

Here is Jidhaan talking about his experiences in prison, how young Somali people become hooked on crime following their detention and the consequent damage to their

lives: “If a young Somali person gets into prison, the black youth in the cell next to yours will ask you ‘why are you here?’. In the prison, you only survive if you act like or pretend to be tough, and young Somali people like to brag. So the Somali, who may be in there for a petty crime, would boast to say ‘me, I know so and so. I know this; I know that. So and so did this; so and so did that, and the blahs’. Truth is, he doesn’t know any of that; he’s merely boasting. So the real person, a black boy involved in these things or his brother who is sitting in the cell next to him, hears this and hails the Somali boy. He then asks him if the Somali boy can do few things when he gets out. The Somali boy then says ‘okay, I’ll do them’. Then the black boy says to him ‘when you get out of here; go to my brother/friend; his name is so and so, and tell him that I sent you’. So when the Somali boy comes out, he calls his friend – his partner in crime that wasn’t arrested, and says to him “you man; I have got a line for us. I met Dwain or Leon in prison and he asked me to get in touch with this guy. Can we go to see him?”. His friend then says “What do you mean ‘can we go see him’ man? Let us go get the stuff from the man’. They go to the man and get the stuff (drugs) from him. They sell and won’t even share the proceeds with the owner (the man from whom they collected) for a starter. The Somali boy, the bigger crook who didn’t go down last time, tells his other Somali friend: “don’t be a chicken man; we’re not going to give him nothing, and if he says a word I am gonna beat him up’. That is why you’ve more Somali boys doing this (selling drugs) in South London than the other black boys.”

According to Jidhaan, young Somali people face many problems when they come out of prison and there is no help available to them. He contrasts this with other community groups who, he says, provide much needed help to rehabilitate their troubled young people after leaving prison: “Let us take the case of other (non-Somali) people. If a child runs away from school and ends up in the street or goes to prison and comes out, he’ll get help. This help will be in the form of accommodation, going back to school or college, help with job search, and with his overall getting back into the community again. If a Somali young person comes out of prison, there is no one helping him. There is no community organized to help with his learning or gaining qualifications, skills or jobs. In the prison, you gain qualifications. Once they come out, Somali young people have no way of utilizing those qualifications they gained from prison. They have no social clubs to join. After a few days being out of prison, he forgets all about it and then gets back to the same old problems. ... They’ve no help in terms of community resources and the parents are ignorant so they can’t help anyone. The system they knew back home in Somalia and the system in this country are two different ones. That was Somalia and this is England, one of the most complex societies in the world.”

One of Jidhaan's other comments had to do with young Somali people, including some old friends, increasingly becoming mentally ill and being sectioned under the Mental Health Act. These mental illnesses, in his view, 'are thought to have been drug induced': "I know of many young males, at least 10-15 here in North London alone and all aged under 30, who were hospitalized for mental health problems arising from their drug and alcohol addictions."

Jidhaan makes these claims about educational qualifications and employment history. He says that he has 'GNVQ qualifications in Maths, English and IT'. He also tells me that he had worked three times: once at McDonald's; another time in a warehouse; and the last time at a Tesco store in Brent. I asked him what was the job in Tesco, for how long did he do it, and why did he leave? He said he worked at 'Tesco Customer Services' for three years. His answer for leaving: "I got sick and tired of the job, but I am now looking for a job as a driver". I asked him if he has a driving licence, and he replied 'yes'. I must say here that there is no way of corroborating these claims because Jidhaan wouldn't let me talk to those who knew him up-close.

When I first met Jidhaan at the beginning of March 2009, he was unemployed and told me that he was looking for a job. He said the same thing again when I saw him last week, 3rd of Dec. 2009. I have a hunch, and the friend at the mosque agrees that Jidhaan had remained disengaged and unemployed ever since he left care at the age of 19. He is in fact of no fixed abode. I am not optimistic his position is likely to change in the foreseeable future.