

ERIN GALBALLY: Owatonna is bordered by factories and farmland, a modest southeastern Minnesota city that according to state demographers is now home to Minnesota's fourth largest Somali population. Data on specific ethnic groups won't be released until fall at the earliest. But even current estimates of Minnesota's Somali population are the subject of debate. State figures estimate there are close to 500 Somalis in Owatonna, while city officials and local Somali leaders believe the number falls just short of 1,500, three times higher.

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

Abdul Aziz Ahmed who moved to Owatonna in 1997 now works as a cultural liaison at the high school. Ahmed says it's unlikely the results of census 2000 will clear up the discrepancy since he knows many Somalis who chose not to fill out their census forms.

ABDUL AZIZ AHMED: They don't really trust the government. And that's one thing they have in their mind because what government tells you in third-world countries is not always the true thing. So you're kind of afraid. Nobody trusts the government, period.

ERIN GALBALLY: Beyond a lingering fear of the government, there are other concerns. Many Somali families have eight or nine children, which means housing codes are invariably broken when families live together under one roof. That prompted concerns that full census disclosure could translate into eviction.

The 2000 census was designed to gather more precise ethnic data, allowing respondents to designate more than one race. But the changes may not be enough to pick up small minority populations, like the Somalis. It's not clear, for instance, whether Somalis who completed a census form check the black racial category or wrote in their nation of origin in a category designated other. Owatonna mayor Peter Connor says, Somalis started migrating to the city in the mid 1990s. And while Connor would like to believe in census accuracy, he agrees with the city's Somali leaders who say that's unlikely.

PETER CONNOR: The great PR campaign of the census people was count everyone. The importance, just the literally the economic importance of having an accurate census was critical or is critical. I could be prophetic and say that all Somali were counted, I doubt that.

ERIN GALBALLY: While this is the first census form to offer Minnesota's Somali-born residents a chance to be counted, the population is not new to state demographers. That office has estimated the Somali population by taking the number of public school children who speak Somali at home and multiplying that number by 2. The resulting estimate shows Minnesota is home to 6,000 Somalis, give or take 1,500. Somali leaders have scoffed at that number, and some in the Twin Cities say the real figure looks more like 60,000. Barbara Ronningen crunches immigration numbers for the state demographer and says that nationwide total, along with the estimation of 500 Somalis in Owatonna is right on track.

BARBARA RONNINGEN: I think it's easy to overestimate a population that looks different and when it's easy to pick out people. And Somalis are very unique and beautiful people, and they wear beautiful clothing. And it's-- and it's easy to see them. And so we tend, as the majority population, to overestimate what we see.

ERIN Ronningen says, in addition, immigrant groups, in general, often overestimate their population. Despite the numbers, Owatonna officials are creating a series of workforce development programs to provide English and job skills. Abdul Aziz Ahmed says that through word of mouth, Somalis will continue to flock to Owatonna.

GALBALLY:

ABDUL AZIZ Somali is an oral society. People always talk instead of reading newspapers and find out where the economy is.

AHMED: You always believe when folks from Europe will tell you Minnesota is a good place to live.

ERIN As for the 2000 census, Owatonna city officials and its Somali leaders anticipate a significant undercount. That information should be available this fall when data on Minnesota's smaller ethnic populations is released. Erin Galbally, Minnesota Public Radio, Rochester.

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