

Recovery from terrorism: Testimony from survivors of Garissa and lessons learned for supporting resilience (0289)

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On 2 April 2015, Somali-based al-Shabaab terrorists began an assault on the campus of Garissa University College in Kenya, killing 147 people, almost all of them students. The attack began at 5:30 a.m., and was not contained until nearly dusk (Gettleman, Kushkush, & Callimachi, 2015).

As researchers in higher education, and African specialists, we wanted to know the sources of resilience and support for those students who elected to continue their educations. There has been a considerable amount of research in the West about resilience and trauma (e.g., Agaibi & Wilson, 2005; Banyard & Cantor, 2004; Galatzer-Levy, Burton, & Bonanno, 2012). But far less research has been done about persistence in higher education among those who experience extreme trauma, and not in the contexts of African cultures.

We entered this research looking for lessons that might be of greatest aid to the recovery and persistence toward goals for individuals such as these, in the belief that this knowledge may be of utility in the future. History and modern circumstances suggest that we have not seen the last of such heinous attacks or the selection of concentrations of people as targets. While prevention is, of course, the preferable route, the problem with terrorism is that it works, driving fear and hesitation into hearts and minds. We need to know more about how best to support survivors, and in our focus, that of university students.

We conducted our research on the campus of Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya, one year after the terrorist attack. Moi is the sponsoring institution of Garissa University College. While Garissa is 200 kilometers from the Somali border, Eldoret is in western Kenya, near the Uganda border. Surviving students of Garissa were afforded the chance to transfer to Moi or its other constituent campuses. Most have chosen not to return to Garissa, even though the campus reopened in January 2016.

Our research protocol was reviewed and approved both in Kenya and the United States. We interviewed 13 survivors now enrolled at Moi, with assurances of confidentiality

and that no one was compelled to be interviewed, and could stop the interview at any time. Indeed, two individuals who had agreed to be interviewed did not come to scheduled appointments.

While a recounting of personal experience on that day was not the focus of our research, we quickly learned that it was an essential context for our, and the students', framing of what has happened since. The stories were heart-stopping. We interviewed students who survived being shot three times. Another student witnessed all five of her roommates executed. Another hid in the upper cabinet of a wardrobe, and heard the terrorists enter her room, shoot a roommate, and search for others, missing the upper cabinet. One young man was shot so badly in the leg that he tore part of it away, so as not to be hindered in it in crawling away.

We conducted the individual interviews, in English, over two days. On occasion, some things were translated into Swahili for clearest communication. Students volunteered that this interview was the first time that anyone had allowed them to speak at length about their experiences, and expressed thanks.

At the end of the second day, most of the students, all known to one another, met with us a group so that we could summarize for them what we thought we had heard and learned. Our findings reflect the affirmation we found in this group discussion.

These are among the major things we heard:

Counseling should be a process, not an event. It needs to be ongoing. All students reported having gotten some counseling, but most had received none in recent months, or it was available only for a fee. Most students reported a need for it now, as they had many unresolved issues, and new issues that have emerged. They wanted to be counseled as well on offering some basic counseling to other students, particularly those who eschewed such assistance from authorities.

Faith-based counseling helped many, but it is not in itself enough. Several of the students, all Christians, were in chapel at morning prayers when the terrorists entered with a grenade and gunfire about 5:30 a.m. These most devout students tended to find comfort and future purpose in their faith, but others wondered aloud why God would allow such a thing. Counseling needs to be more than the advice to "trust God."

There should be transparency and equity in financial support. The students all knew that many millions of shillings had been donated for their support and continuation in university. Most had received nothing. When inquiries were made of officials about this, the students reported being directly or indirectly threatened with expulsion. They wanted an advocate who could represent them to power.

Social integration at a new campus has been difficult. A minority of students reported developing a new network of friends and connections at Moi. Most did not. Some associated with old friends from Garissa. Others characterized themselves, essentially, of having withdrawn from the social world. They felt that the university should have more active in promoting this sense of belonging and community. Many wished for opportunities to tell their stories.

References

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