
Will You Count? Middle Eastern and North African Americans (MENA) in the 2020 Census

Why is the 2020 Census important?

The decennial census is the most inclusive civic activity in our country, covering every person in every household. The U.S. Constitution requires an accurate count of the nation's population every 10 years. Moreover, the census is integral to our democracy. The data collected affects our nation's ability to ensure equal representation and equal access to important governmental and private sector resources for all Americans, including across racial and ethnic lines. Census results are used to allocate seats and draw district lines for the U.S. House of Representatives, state legislatures, and local boards; to target more than \$800 billion¹ annually in federal assistance to states, localities, and families; and to guide community decision-making affecting schools, housing, health care services, business investment, and much more. These functions depend on a fair and accurate census.

Unfortunately, certain population groups—referred to as “hard-to-count”—are at a higher risk of not being fully counted in the decennial census. Some of these groups have been historically underrepresented in the decennial census for decades; some may experience new or increased vulnerability due to major changes in methodology, such as relying on the internet as the primary way for households to respond to the 2020 Census; and some may be reluctant to respond due to concerns about data confidentiality.² Being hard-to-count can lead to unequal political representation and unequal access to vital public and private resources for these groups and their communities.

What are the hard-to-count characteristics of the MENA community?

In past censuses, the MENA identity has only been listed as an example under the “white” racial category, if at all.³ Because of this, the full breadth of the MENA community is unknown and likely undercounted.⁴ Arab Americans comprise the majority of the projected MENA population.⁵ For the purposes of this factsheet, data on Arab Americans from the 2016 ACS 1-Year Estimates are used as a rough proxy for the MENA community.

Arab Americans often share characteristics that compound their risk of being undercounted, including:

- **Language Barriers:** Areas with low rates of English proficiency have historically been undercounted,⁶ and more than one in five Arab Americans speak English less than “very well.”⁷
- **Poverty:** Households in poverty are traditionally hard to count.⁸ While the national poverty rate in the United States is 13 percent,⁹ 23 percent of Arab Americans face poverty.¹⁰
- **Age:** Young people of color can be hard-to-count, especially young children and young adults.¹¹ Compared to the general U.S. population, a higher proportion of Arab Americans are under 5 or aged 18-24.¹² In addition, older individuals are more likely to be overcounted,¹³ but a smaller share of Arab Americans are seniors compared to the overall U.S. population.¹⁴
- **Gender:** Men, especially men of color, have a higher undercount rate than women.¹⁵ Fifty-four percent of the Arab American population is male,¹⁶ compared to 49 percent nationally.¹⁷ Knowledge and sensitivity to cultural and religious norms is important to increase response rate and accurate count of households with women who may lack internet access and/or reside in hard-to-count or rural areas.
- **Housing Instability:** Renters are harder to count because of their relative transitory status and the types of housing in which they live.¹⁸ Half of Arab Americans (50 percent) are renters¹⁹ compared to 37 percent of the general U.S. population.²⁰
- **Surveillance:** Compared to barely 1 percent of the total U.S. population,²¹ 25-30 percent of Arab Americans are Muslim.²² Muslims are also the fastest growing part of the Arab American

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population.²³ Although Census Bureau employees are trained and obligated to maintain respondents' confidentiality and anonymity,²⁴ the recent increase in negative political rhetoric,²⁵ as well as government surveillance actions post 9/11,²⁶ may chill Muslim and Arab response rates in the 2020 Census.²⁷ Indeed, the Arab and Muslim communities have expressed such fears about the confidentiality of their personal information during the 2010 Census.²⁸ Both Arab Christians and Muslims continue to express fears of responding to the 2020 Census because of anti-immigrant policies targeting the Arab community.²⁹

Do official race and ethnicity questions include the MENA community?

In past censuses, the MENA identity option has only been listed as an example under the "White" racial category, if at all, which has led to a suspected undercount of the population since many MENA respondents are counted as "White."³⁰ After receiving extensive input from the MENA community,³¹ which has advocated for this change for more than 30 years,³² and observing positive reception and higher data quality from MENA category testing in 2015,³³ the Bureau formally recommended to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which sets the standards for maintaining, collecting, and presenting federal data on race and ethnicity,³⁴ that the category be added to the 2020 Census. In January 2018, the Bureau reversed its stance, announcing that it would not add a separate MENA category, as the OMB did not officially revise its standards.³⁵ However, the Bureau will offer space for people selecting the White and Black race groups to write in a subgroup (an option that already exists for the Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and American Indian or Alaska Native race groups).³⁶

What are the consequences of undercounting the MENA community?

When the MENA community is undercounted, political boundaries may not accurately reflect reality. Undercounting results in Middle Eastern and North African Americans being denied a full voice in policy decision-making. As a result, their community's different needs may not be represented or prioritized according to their real share of the population.

If MENA Americans had been granted their own category in the census, they could have gained "language minority group" status under Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act.³⁷ This designation requires that language assistance in a group's first language be provided throughout the electoral process and would have helped to ensure that all MENA Americans of voting age could participate in elections.³⁸

Undercounting the MENA community in the 2020 Census could also impact how federal funding is allocated to states and localities. Many programs that impact the MENA community are funded based in whole or in part on census-derived data, including:³⁹

- **Special Education Grants – \$11.2 billion.** To help schools comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Special Education Grants are used to provide resources to students with a disability, tailored to their individual needs.⁴⁰ Some studies suggest that about 17 percent (at least 23,400) of all Arab Americans under 18 have a disability.⁴¹
- **Title I Grants to Local Education Agencies – \$13.9 billion.** Title I provides financial assistance to local educational agencies and schools with high numbers of low-income children to help ensure that all children are meeting state academic standards.⁴² In school year 2014-15, Title I served more than 24 million children in the United States.⁴³
- **SNAP – \$69.5 billion.** SNAP is the most important tool to prevent hunger and malnutrition among families nationally.⁴⁴ About 16 percent of Arab Americans receive SNAP benefits.⁴⁵

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- **Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers Program – \$19.1 billion.** Section 8 vouchers are the nation’s leading source of housing assistance for low-income seniors, people with disabilities, and families with children, helping them secure affordable rental housing in the private market.⁴⁶ Since Arab Americans are disproportionately likely to be renters and have a significantly higher poverty rate, they may be more likely to participate in housing assistance programs.⁴⁷
- **Medicaid – \$312 billion.** Medicaid provides health coverage to families and individuals with low incomes, children, parents, seniors, and people with disabilities.⁴⁸ Almost 2 in 5 Arab Americans are enrolled in public insurance programs like Medicaid.⁴⁹
- **Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) – \$6.3 billion.** WIC provides nutritious foods, education, and referrals to services to new mothers with low incomes and young children at nutritional risk.⁵⁰ In 2015, WIC served 8 million people.⁵¹

You can help – right now.

There are many ways in which stakeholders, including advocates, funders, and civic leaders, can improve the count of all MENA households in the 2020 Census. There are opportunities to join or support work on policy development, community organizing, and “Get Out the Count” campaigns for the 2020 Census. Here are some ideas:

- **Help your members of Congress understand why it’s important to support adequate resources for the Census Bureau to conduct the 2020 Census in a way that will count all in the MENA community.** The Census Bureau needs a major funding ramp up several years before a decennial census to perform critical tests and build out a massive infrastructure. Already – due to funding constraints – important activities needed for a fair and accurate 2020 Census have been postponed or canceled, putting the MENA community at risk of severely undercounted. Without a sufficient increase in the Census Bureau’s budget, a complete count will be in jeopardy, and census costs could increase by billions of dollars.
- **Stay informed about key census policy and operational developments.** The Census Project (<https://thecensusproject.org/>) provides regular updates of census-related activities in Congress and the administration. The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights also publishes many helpful resources at <https://civilrights.org/census/>.
- **Educate state and local leaders about the issues the MENA community faces in the census.** As the 2020 Census approaches, advocates can join Complete Count Committees that will be established to help ensure a complete census.⁵² It is important that Complete Count Committees include voices for the MENA community to remind leaders and local census staff of this critical constituency.
- **Become a Census Bureau partner and help ensure that the Census Bureau’s partnership program gets the resources it needs.** Budget shortfalls are also putting this important program at risk. Partners (organizations, associations, institutions, and the like) get timely updates from the Census Bureau as well as promotional material.⁵³

If you would like to learn more about these or other ways you and your organization can be involved, contact Samer Khalaf, National President, American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, at khalaf@adc.org, or Sonum Nerurkar, Get Out the Count Coordinator, at nerurkar@civilrights.org.

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