

Middle Eastern and North African Americans (MENA) Count in the 2020 Decennial Census

Why the Decennial Census is Important

The U.S. Constitution requires an accurate count of the nation's population every 10 years, and the decennial census seeks to count every person in every household. An integral part of our nation's democracy, census data affects the ability of our government to ensure equal representation and equal access to important federal and private sector resources for all Americans. Census data is used to allocate seats and draw district lines for the U.S. House of Representatives, state legislatures, and local governing boards; to target at least \$800 billion annually in federal assistance to states, localities, and families; and to guide community decision-making affecting schools, housing, health care services, business investments, and much more.

"Hard-to-count" population groups are at higher risk of not being fully counted in the decennial census. While some groups have been underrepresented for decades; some may experience new or increased vulnerability due to major changes in census methodology: Using the Internet as the primary point of contact for the 2020 Census, or a reluctance to respond given concerns about data confidentiality. An undercount of the hard-to-count populations can lead to unequal political representation as well as unequal access to vital public and private resources for the people in greatest need.

Hard-to-count characteristics of the MENA community

In the past, the MENA identity has been only listed as an example under the "white" racial category. Therefore, the full breadth of the MENA community is unknown and likely undercounted. Arab Americans comprise the majority of the projected MENA population.

Hard-to-count characteristics of the MENA community

- **Language Barriers:** Areas with low English proficiency have typically been undercounted; more than one in five Arab Americans speak English less than "very well."
- **Poverty:** While the national poverty rate in the U.S. is 13 percent, it is 23 percent for Arab Americans. Households in poverty are typically hard to count.
- **Age:** Young people of color, especially young children and young adults, can be hard-to-count. Compared to the general U.S. population, a higher proportion of Arab Americans are under age five or between ages 18-24.
- **Gender:** Men, especially men of color, have a higher undercount rate than children, and 54 percent of Arab Americans are male, compared to 49 percent of the general U.S. population. Knowledge of and sensitivity to cultural and religious norms is important to increase the response rate, especially in households with women who may lack Internet access and/or reside in hard-to-count or rural areas.
- **Housing Instability:** Half of Arab Americans are renters, and renters are typically harder to count due to their relatively transitory status and the types of housing in which they live.
- **Surveillance:** Compared to barely 1 percent of the U.S. population, 25-30 percent of Arab Americans are Muslim. Muslims are the fastest growing part of the Arab American population in the U.S. The recent increase in negative political rhetoric and anti-immigrant policies, as well as government surveillance actions post 9/11, may lower Muslim and Arab American response rates in the 2020 Census.

The MENA community and official race and ethnicity questions

For the 2020 Census, the Census Bureau will offer a space for people selecting the White and Black race groups to write-in a subgroup, which is where Arab Americans can add the MENA subgroup.

Consequences of undercounting the MENA community

An undercount of the MENA community will result in Arab Americans being denied a full voice in policy decision-making because political boundaries and congressional reapportionments most likely will not be based on real numbers. As a result, this hard-to-count community stands to lose important representation guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.

Undercounting Arab Americans in the 2020 Census could also impact how federal funding is allocated to states and localities. Many programs that provide financial security for low-income families and economic development for the MENA community are funded based, primarily, on census-driven data, including:

- **Special Education Grants – \$11.2 billion**
- **Title I Grants to Local Education Agencies – \$13.9 billion**
- **SNAP – \$69.5 billion**
- **Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers Program – \$19.1 billion**
- **Medicaid – \$312 billion**
- **Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) – \$6.3 billion**

You can help – right now

Stakeholders (advocates, funders, and civic leaders) can improve the count of the MENA community in the 2020 Census by joining or supporting work on policy development, community organizing, and the “Get Out the Count” campaign for the 2020 Census:

- **Show members of Congress why they need to support adequate resources for the Census Bureau to conduct the 2020 Census and accurately count all members of the MENA community.** Several years prior to a decennial census, the Census Bureau needs a major annual funding ramp up to perform critical tests and build out a massive program infrastructure. Due to financial constraints, important activities crucial to ensure a fair and accurate census have been postponed or canceled, putting members of the MENA community at risk of a severe undercount.
- **Stay informed about key census policy and operational developments.** [The Census Project](#) provides regular updates on census-related activities in Congress and the administration. [The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights](#) also publishes many helpful resources.
- **Educate state and local leaders about the challenges the MENA community faces in the census.** Advocates can join Complete Count Committees to help ensure a complete census and include voices from the MENA community.
- **Become a Census Bureau partner to help ensure the Census Bureau’s partnership program gets the resources it needs.** This important program is at risk due to budget shortfalls. Partners (organizations, associations, institution, etc.) get timely updates and promotional material from the Census Bureau.

If you would like to learn more about these or other ways you and your organization can be involved, contact Andrew Aurand, Vice President for Research of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, at AAurand@nlihc.org or Chris Harley, Census Counts Campaign Director, at harley@censucounts.org.