

ARAB AMERICAN INSTITUTE

ADDING A MENA CATEGORY TO THE U.S. CENSUS

Background

Currently, there is no ethnic category for Arab Americans on the U.S. Census. This has led to a significant undercount of the community, creating barriers to many basic rights and services. While the Census Bureau estimates the number of Arab Americans in the United States at 1.8 million, the Arab American Institute Foundation estimates that the total is actually closer to 3.7 million. Federal data on Arab Americans is obtained through ancestry data from the American Community Survey, a yearly survey that collects economic, social, demographic and housing information from a small sample of the population.

The Problem

The creation of a coherent ethnic category for the MENA region will have a positive impact on the treatment and services available to members of the Arab American community. The undercounting of Arab Americans has served as a barrier to representation, education, health, and employment for the community in the following ways:

Language Assistance and Voting Rights

Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act protects minority language populations by ensuring the availability of foreign language ballots and translation services at polling places. The groups included are determined by the Census, excluding Arab Americans from protection under Section 203.

Education

Inclusion in the Census will allow for more accurate allocations of grants to school districts with larger populations of children with limited English proficiency for assisted learning as well as funding for cultural competency training for educators working directly with Arab Americans. A correct count of MENA populations will better show need for English language programs and adult literacy courses.

Health

Because data about the majority of persons with MENA origin are not currently able to be disaggregated from the white race, it is impossible for researchers to address diseases that are ethnic-specific, such as lactose intolerance, or the prevalence of diabetes among Arab Americans. Inclusion on the Census will create greater access to nutrition as well as funding for services for the elderly and disabled.

Employment

Census data are used for monitoring and enforcing equal employment opportunities, and the new ethnic category will be used to protect Arab Americans from discrimination in hiring practices. The category will allow for the provision of Employment Assistance to the often undercounted lower-income and newly immigrated populations through funding to private and public nonprofits.

Moving Forward

Efforts are underway to support the addition of a MENA question on the 2020 Census. A letter on behalf of a broad coalition of advocates and scholars was sent to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Chief Statistician, Dr. Katherine Wallman, in July 2013. A meeting was held with Director of the U.S. Census, Dr. John Thompson, in March 2014.

- Add a new MENA category before the 2020 Census to allow individuals to identify as being of Middle Eastern or North African descent and offer a space to further specify their ethnic origin. One example is the existing category for Hispanic origin communities (example below).
- Raise awareness of the importance of Census data in various education, health and employment policies. The creation of a new ethnic category on the Census for persons of Middle East and North African descent, similar to the existing category for Hispanic origin communities, would allow for more complete data about the MENA communities to be collected.

8. Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, Spanish origin or Middle Eastern or North African origin?

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> No , not of Hispanic, Latino, Spanish origin. | <input type="checkbox"/> No , not of Middle Eastern or North African origin. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes , Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes , of Middle Eastern or North African origin. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes , Puerto Rican | <i>Print Origin, for example, Lebanese, Egyptian,</i> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes , Cuban | <i>Iranian, Assyrian, Somali, and so on.</i> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes , another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish | |
| Origin. | |
| <i>Print Origin, for example, Argentinian,</i> | |
| <i>Colombian, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran,</i> | |
| <i>Spaniard, and so on.</i> | |