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GOVERNMENT

Middle Eastern Communities Say Census Whitewashes Their Numbers, Needs

by Maya Srikrishnan
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Ramah Awad says community organizations like hers that serve Arab Americans struggle with funding and other issues because her community is often grouped with White people in data. / Photo by Adriana Heldiz

San Diego, which has long been one of the largest refugee resettlement communities in California, has large populations of people from the

Middle East, North Africa and South Asia.

But it's nearly impossible to gauge just how large those populations actually are – and not knowing those numbers has meant fewer resources going to those communities and the organizations that support them.

That's because the census, which helps the federal government determine everything from the number of congressional seats to how the federal budget is distributed to local communities, classifies many people in these communities as White.

"Being hidden in the data has historically furthered communities being left out," said Jeanine Erikat, a community organizer with the Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans, an organization that advocates for refugees and immigrants in the San Diego region. "An undercount is extremely harmful."

Erikat's organization, PANA, describes these populations with the acronym AMEMSA, which refers to Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim and South Asian. Others use MENA, which indicates individuals who have roots in the Middle East and North Africa.

Not having more specific data on how many people fall into these groups can limit the government resources that go toward their needs, from providing Arabic translation on forms or in public hearings to funding for community organizations that work on issues like socioeconomic development and mental health. If new immigrants from these regions who have lower incomes and limited English proficiency are lumped in with more affluent, White English-speakers in data, it doesn't just mean the government likely won't meet their needs – it can mean they won't even know about them.

Not having this information can especially impact language access, said Ramah Awad, a community organizer and steering committee chair of the Majdal Center, an Arab resource and community center in El Cajon.

"At the most basic level, local government doesn't have a sense of how many Arabic speakers or coming from the MENA region who are residing in their local city or county," Awad said. "In terms of the things our communities are losing out on – public funding when it comes to the schooling system and basic services. They're an invisible population."

El Cajon, for example, is one of the main refugee resettlement communities in the county and thus, likely has a large AMEMSA or MENA population. But while 43.5 percent of the city's population speaks a language other than English at home and 29 percent of the city is foreign born, according to census data, 58.5 percent of the city is **ethnically classified as White**.

"As a small and emerging community center in El Cajon, it's really important that we know our community so we know what resources to provide," Awad said. "We're relying on informal surveying, rather than being able to know that there are X number of Arabs, this is their median-income, their education level, etc. We're just getting a sample size."

The misclassification of these communities means many have faced roadblocks during the pandemic while seeking assistance. For example, Awad's organization has had to step in to assist community organizations with translation to dole out rental assistance, when other communities receive that assistance directly through organizations that regularly work with them.

"We have had to be that link between the community and services," Awad said. "In an ideal world, the needs of this population would exist when it comes to cultural relevance and accessibility. In short, we're facing a lot of under-resourcing because we're not visible in the data."

Erikat says that many people in these communities work in service jobs, including in restaurants or as app-based drivers, and thus have been disproportionately impacted economically by the pandemic. But there is

no data to show that, which limits the support people in the community may have access to.

"Now in a pandemic, we don't show up in research even though we have different risks and there may be health disparities," Erikat said.

Additionally, many people who came as refugees already grapple with post-traumatic stress disorder, Erikat said. A lack of meaningful data capturing their numbers also means inadequate funding for mental health support, which is even more concerning now as depression rates have **increased across demographics during the pandemic**.

In the early 1900s, many immigrant groups arriving to the United States tried to be considered White, said Loubna Qutami, a professor at UCLA. Being White meant access to jobs, housing, voting rights and more.

But after the Civil Rights movement, oppressed communities in the 1970 began to see census data as a way to redistribute government funding and resources to close racial inequities. Since the 1980s, Arab Americans and people of Middle Eastern descent have been advocating to change the way they were classified, Qutami said.

There have been multiple attempts nationally to add a MENA – Middle Eastern and North African – category to the census and other federal agencies' efforts to collect race and ethnicity data, in general.

The Obama administration proposed changing the standards so that all **federal agencies ask about MENA** as a distinct race or ethnicity from White. In a 2015 **report**, census bureau researchers noted "it is optimal to use a dedicated 'Middle Eastern or North African' response category" on the 2020 census questionnaires. The census bureau under the Trump administration, however, decided in 2018 **not to include the category**.

"Without a MENA category, White statistics increase," Qutami said. "It hurts all communities of color because it increases the White majority

statistic, while continuing to deny MENA-based community organizations access to public resources and funds for things like youth education, domestic violence intervention and more because it erases any statistical data analysis of social, health or economic issues that these communities face."

The implications of this discrepancy have become even starker since the War on Terror began in 2001. Not only did the government enact policies that targeted Muslims, Quatami said, but it increased Islamophobia more generally throughout the United States.

Awad also noted that it can sometimes be difficult to report hate crimes against people in these communities because the government views them as White.

Other data provides a limited window into these communities. The American Community Survey – a demographic survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau between census years – probably has the most comprehensive data, since it collects information on languages spoken at home and location of birth, but mostly counts new immigrants and refugees and excludes generations born in the United States. The data available, however, indicates that there has been a significant increase in these communities in San Diego since the last census in 2010.

A June 2020 **report** by UC San Diego and the city of San Diego found that the fastest growing foreign-born population in the city came from Syria, with a growth of 866.3 percent over the past five years. Another fast-growing population come from Iraq, with a 278.7 percent increase over the past five years.

According to a 2011, county refugee fact sheet, Iraq, Somalia, Iran, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan were among **the most predominant countries of birth** of refugees resettling in San Diego County. They largely resettled to places in the city of San Diego, El Cajon and Spring Valley. San Diego County **refugee arrival reports** for the past few years

indicate that Afghanistan and Iraq remain some of the top countries of origin for newly arriving refugees.

Many of the people in these communities in San Diego are refugees and immigrants who have resettled here in the past 10 years, said Awad.

In addition to federal, state and local governments not having a separate category for AMEMSA or MENA communities, Awad said there are other data barriers.

Language and digital literacy barriers can make it difficult for people from these communities to fill out census questionnaires, Awad said.

Although the census was offered in Arabic in 2020, for example, the hard copies mailed to people were always in English, with a sheet explaining in different languages how to complete the census in Arabic or other languages. Even the extra step of calling a phone number or being directed to a website in order to access the appropriate language can be a deterrent, Awad said.

Sometimes communities are also simply hesitant to provide information about themselves to the government because of past experiences in their home countries.

"Maybe back in their homeland there wasn't this level of state bureaucracy or a centralized system for these things," Awad said. "There maybe wasn't a sense of trust or belief in the government running their home country, and some of that may carry into their new lives here."

This year, PANA, the Majdal Center and other organizations that work with AMEMSA and MENA communities throughout the country did extensive census outreach to try and ensure they were counted. Rather than select "White," they encouraged people to select "Other" and write in their nationality, like Syrian, Iranian, etc. There was a similar effort nationwide in 2010.

Not having an accurate population count can also impact community representation, Awad and Erikat said.

"When we don't know how many people are in our communities and where they live, we can't think about a way to give our communities more political leverage so we can vote people in who represent our interests," Awad said. "Political representation is a huge issue because we can't prove where our communities are."

That's one of the big reasons why organizations like PANA and the Majdal Center are now pushing community members to participate in redistricting processes. It's one way they can try to distinguish their community in the government's eyes and could have big results when it comes to voting rights and political representation.

"There are other ways to show up in redistricting aside from data," Erikat said. "Redistricting commissions have to take into account communities of interest and you're not required to say, 'I'm this percent of the community.' We can have community members call in and show there is a need that they stay together in a district. You can define yourself."

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