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Issue Brief: Middle Eastern Americans and Social Welfare

Key Words:

Middle Eastern Americans, Arab Americans, Social Welfare, Poverty, Immigration, Cultural Barriers

Description:

This issue brief focuses on the relationship between Americans of Middle Eastern decent and social welfare, primarily as indicated by country of origin, education, and socioeconomic status. This brief considers the vast number of countries Middle Easterners come from and the complexities of their different cultures and languages in easing the assimilation process for immigrants, as well as accessing social welfare programs.

Key Points:

- Middle Eastern immigration has grown rapidly in recent years.
- Overall Middle Eastern immigrants tend to be doing pretty well as compared to other groups. In 2000, a higher percentage of Middle Easterners held a bachelor's degree than did natives, and they made more money by individual household than did natives.
- In 2000 nearly one in five Middle Eastern Americans lived in poverty, compared to about one in 10 natives. Almost 23 percent of households headed by a Middle Eastern immigrant used at least one major welfare program, compared to 15 percent of natives

Background:

Immigration of people from Middle Eastern countries to America has grown rapidly in recent years. Interest in immigrants of Middle Eastern descent has also grown as a result of 9/11 and the recognition of Arab-Americans as a prevalent minority group in the United States (Camarota, 2002). As Najeh M. Ahmad notes in his 2004 article entitled *Arab-American Culture and Health Care*: “Arab Americans are one of the most diverse ethnic groups in the United States in their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, political and religious beliefs, family structures and values, and acculturation to Western society.”

People of Middle Eastern descent are said to be those who are of Arab ancestry, as well as from a number of non-Arab Middle Eastern countries. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Arab ancestry is classified as people who are Algerian, Bahraini, Egyptian, Emirati, Iraqi, Jordanian, Kuwaiti, Lebanese, Libyan, Moroccan, Omani, Palestinian, Qatari, Saudi Arabian, Syrian, Tunisian, and Yemeni (<http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/acsbr10-20.pdf>). People who are from Middle Eastern countries considered to be non-Arab are from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Turkey, and Israel (Camarota, 2002). According to the 2011 American Community Survey, the U.S. Census bureau reported that there were close to 3.5 million Arab Americans living within the United States, an increase of about 47% since the 2000 census.

Socioeconomic Status and Education:

Because of the vast diversity of Middle Eastern Americans, their socioeconomic status varies greatly depending on country of origin as cultural values vary amongst each group. Education is a key indicator of how well groups are doing in America. Table 5 (below) shows that overall, Middle Eastern immigrants tend to be doing pretty well as compared to other groups. In 2000, 49% of Middle Eastern Americans held a bachelor's degree, compared to 28% of natives. Middle eastern Americans also earn more annually than natives and are more self-employed. However, only 54% of Mideast immigrants are homeowners compared to 70% of natives, and almost 18% live in poverty with 23% using major welfare programs, numbers much higher than the national average (Camarota, 2002).

Table 5. Socio-Economic Characteristics of Natives and Middle Eastern Immigrants, 2000

	% U.S. Citizens	% College or Grad. Degree ^a	Average Annual Earnings ^b	% Self-Employed ^c	% Home-owners ^d	% in Poverty ^e	% Using Maj. Welfare Programs ^f
Natives	-----	28.2%	\$38,000	10.8%	69.8%	10.5%	15.0%
Mideast Immigrants	49.3%	48.7%	\$39,000	18.5%	53.8%	17.8%	22.8%
Iran	51.0%	60.9%	\$60,000	18.9%	69.3%	11.5%	18.1%
Pakistan	39.3%	56.1%	\$35,000	24.8%	40.0%	15.4%	27.0%
All Arab Countries ^g	55.3%	43.6%	\$36,826	15.1%	54.5%	20.1%	25.3%
Egypt	55.4%	63.4%	\$45,000	21.1%	56.2%	9.8%	14.9%
Lebanon	57.6%	48.7%	\$50,000	21.5%	71.9%	25.1%	20.7%
All Immigrants	37.8%	27.7%	\$27,040	9.9%	48.8%	17.7%	22.1%

^a Persons 25 to 64 years of age.
^b Earnings figures are for men 25 to 64 years of age employed full-time for at least part of the year.
^c Employed persons 25 to 64 years of age.
^d Based on country of birth of household head.
^e Figures for immigrants, including those from the Middle East. Includes U.S.-born children under 18 years old of immigrant mothers. Figures for natives exclude these U.S.-born children.
^f Major welfare programs include TANF/General Assistance, SSI, Food Stamps, public housing, and Medicaid. Welfare use rates reflect use of welfare by any member of the household based on country of birth of household head.
^g Arab countries include Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, UAE, Yemen, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, Mauritania, and all persons who did not report a country but were born in the region and gave an Arab ancestry, primarily Palestinians.
Source: Center for Immigration Studies analysis of combined two-year sample from the March 2000 and 2001 Current Population Survey.

(<http://www.cis.org/articles/2002/back902.html>)

Social Welfare:

While Middle Eastern Americans are one of the most educated immigrant populations, a significant portion of Middle Eastern Americans is reliant on social welfare and lives in poverty. Reasons for this may be a result of cultural differences and difficulty assimilating into American society, as well as those groups who immigrated as refugees (mostly from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Sudan) (Camarota, 2002).

According to the 2000 Census Special Report, in 2000 nearly one in five Middle Eastern Americans lived in poverty, compared to about one in 10 natives. In addition, almost 23 percent of households headed by a Middle Eastern immigrant used at least one major welfare program, compared to 15 percent of natives (Camarota). Reasons for these numbers, in light of the relatively high education of many Middle Eastern Americans, can be the number refugees and asylum seekers that make up a portion of the impoverished Middle Eastern community. However, if refugees are excluded, numbers show that poverty is “at least as high among the non-refugee population as among refugees” (Camarota).

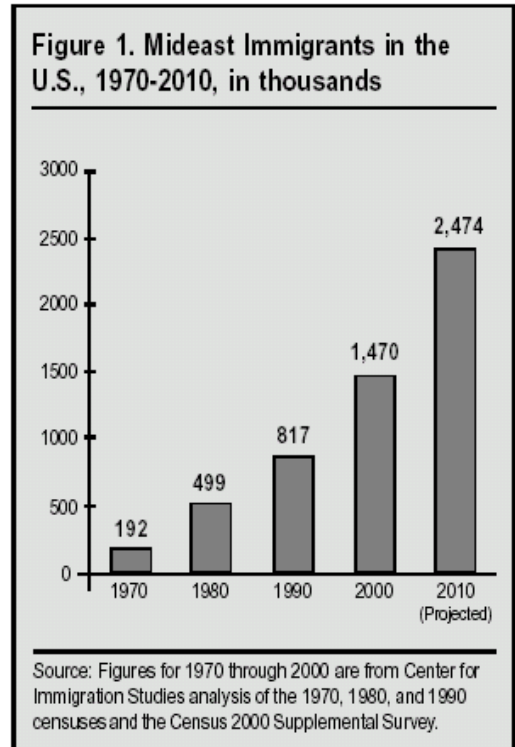
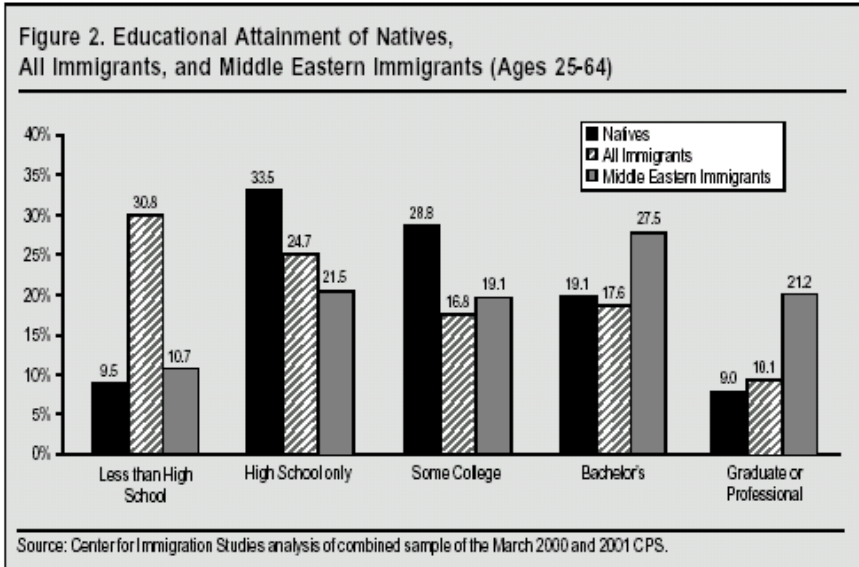
Cultural and language barriers may also have an impact on the ways in which Middle Easterners adapt to social welfare problems, which can affect the percentage of the population that uses welfare services. For example, Najeh M. Ahmad notes that cultural communalities which may have an impact on health care delivery include: preferring to be treated by a medical provider of the same sex, being unaccustomed to the profession of social workers (gaining support from family and friends instead), fasting

during the holy month of Ramadan (among devout Muslims), and lack of access to social welfare because of language and cultural barriers.

Projections:

Overall, Middle Eastern Americans seem to be a successful minority community, yet this does not mean that there is no progress to be made. Groups from different countries seem to be assimilating at different rates, as education and median income vary depending on country of origin. The Arab American Institute has issued statements on comprehensive immigration reform, putting emphasis on family reunification and undocumented immigration status. The blurry lines indicating who is a Middle Eastern American present the problem of ancestry as an accurate indicator of socioeconomic status in the United States. Perhaps social welfare programs in the United States need to take on a more culturally sensitive tone so as to best care for immigrant communities.

Tables/Graphs:



(<http://www.cis.org/articles/2002/back902.html>)

Table 1. Middle Eastern Countries with the Largest Immigrant Populations in the United States, 2000

Country	Total 2000	1990-2000	1980-1989	pre-1980
Iran	279,062	70,648	90,437	117,977
Pakistan	269,831	143,125	88,530	38,176
Israel	123,695	44,456	39,577	39,662
Iraq	112,586	68,414	7,470	36,702
Bangladesh	103,341	86,885	13,149	3,307
Turkey	91,178	49,264	13,603	28,311
Egypt	87,266	44,632	15,518	27,116
Lebanon	83,396	21,731	29,841	31,824
All Others	319,492	162,794	86,162	70,536
Total	1,469,847	691,949	384,078	393,611
All Arab Countries*	583,846	291,357	130,176	162,313

* Arab countries include Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, UAE, Yemen, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, Mauritania, and all persons who did not report a country but were born in the region and gave an Arab ancestry, primarily Palestinians.

Source: Center for Immigration Studies analysis of public use file of Census 2000 Supplemental Survey.

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Relevant Websites:

1. Center For Immigration Studies: <http://www.cis.org/articles/2002/back902.html>
2. US Census Bureau: <https://www.census.gov/>
3. Arab American Institute: <http://www.aaiusa.org/>