

About Arab Americans

The Arab American population reflects two major waves of migration from the Arabic-speaking regions of Southwest Asia and North Africa to the United States. The first wave took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and involved mainly Christian Arabs from Mount Lebanon. The second wave has taken place since the liberalization of immigration laws in 1965, and has been far more diverse than the previous wave in terms of Arab immigrants' countries of origin, religion, and socio-economic status. While Lebanon continues to be an important source for Arab immigrants, Egypt is the main source of immigrants from the Arab world today (see Table 1).

Table 1: Foreign-born of major Arab nationalities in the US, 2000
Source: US Census 2000

Egypt	113,396
Iraq	89,892
Jordan	46,794
Lebanon	105,910
Syria	54,561
Total	410,553

While Arab American activists have been unsuccessful in their attempts to add an Arab category to the US census, it is clear that federal agencies view Arab Americans as a 'group of interest' in the wake of 9/11 (Kayyali, 2006), and the US Census Bureau has issued official reports outlining the main characteristics of the Arab-origin population. One recent Census Bureau report by Angela Brittingham and G. Patricia de la Cruz (2006) builds a profile of Arab Americans based on the 850,000 individuals who reported *only* Arab ancestries in response to the 2000 census 'ancestry question'¹ (a further 340,000 reported an Arab and a non-Arab ancestry).

Forty-six percent of those claiming Arab ancestry were native US citizens, and the remainder were foreign-born citizens or residents. The largest segment of this population—about one-quarter—identified themselves as Lebanese, pointing both to the numerical importance of the descendents of late 19th century Christian immigrants from Mount Lebanon (almost two-thirds of those with Lebanese ancestry are native-born) and to the growth of the Lebanese population during the Lebanese civil war in the 1970s and 1980s. The next largest specified group, according to the Brittingham and de la Cruz report, were Egyptians, followed by Syrians, Palestinians, Jordanians, Moroccans, and Iraqis. About 20 percent identified themselves simply as Arab or Arabic, signifying perhaps the continued relevance of pan-Arabism for many Arab Americans.

The Arab population identified through the ancestry question was more likely to be male and working age than the population-at-large—not an uncommon pattern among immigrant groups (recalling that over half of this group were foreign-born).

¹ The 'ancestry question', introduced in the 1980 census, allows respondents to claim up to two ancestries, using whatever terms they choose (e.g. country of origin, region of origin, ethnicity, and so on). This question is present only on the long-form of the census, which is distributed to one-sixth of US households

Of the foreign born, more than half had become naturalized citizens by the 2000 Census. This, the report's authors note, was a higher proportion than in the foreign-born population overall, of whom only 40 percent had naturalized. The relatively high uptake of US citizenship likely reflects a combination of factors and sentiments expressed by many of our interviewees, including the inability to participate in the political systems of their countries of birth; disenchantment and frustration with home country politics; and/or a desire to participate in and to enjoy the protections of a stable democratic system.

A final point emerging from these data relates to the relatively high economic status of Arab Americans. Brittingham and de la Cruz report that the proportion of people with Arab ancestry with at least a bachelor's degree was 41 percent compared with 24 percent in the population as a whole. The best educated of Arabs were the Egyptians, 64 percent of whom had at least a bachelor's degree. Not surprisingly, Arabs were more represented in management and professional categories than the population at large (42 percent of Arabs, versus 34 percent in the population as a whole), and that they earned more than the population at large (the median earnings for Arab men in full-time work was \$41,700 compared with the national median of \$37,100). But it is important to recognize the many disparities that exist within the Arab population in America—disparities described by many of our interviewees working in the social service sector. For instance, while half of Egyptian workers were in management and professional occupations, less than a third of Moroccan workers were. And while Lebanese men enjoyed a median income of over \$49,000, Moroccan and Iraqi men were earning under the national median. There were also significant gaps between Arab women and Arab men. While Arab women earned a higher median income than American women as a whole, the earnings gap was between Arab men and women was around \$10,000, which is roughly commensurate with the earnings gap in the population as a whole. Arab women, however, have a lower participation rate in the labour force (46 percent) than American women as a whole (58 percent).

The Brittingham and de la Cruz report provides many insights into the Arab American population. But some analysis, like James Zogby of the Arab American Institute, have argued that by relying on the ancestry question, the census counted only one in three people of Arab-origin in the United States. Some speculate that many people of Arab origins, perhaps out of fear of government surveillance, placed themselves in the White category and did not specify any ancestry. Conversely, in assigning an Arab ethnicity to people based on their affinity with Arabic-speaking countries like Morocco, Iraq, and Egypt, the census undoubtedly included individuals who may not regard themselves unequivocally as Arab. But while quantitative studies gloss over the politics of being Arab, they do give us an indication of the variability that exists among Arab Americans and provide some basis for understanding the problems and issues relating to Arab-origin communities that were identified by our study respondents.

Sources

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