



THE ISLAMIC SOCIETY
OF AKRON AND KENT

State of Muslim-Americans' Civic Engagement in Summit County

Developed by The Islamic Society of Akron and Kent (ISAK)
& Asian Services In Action, Inc. (ASIA)

Muslim-Americans are a vibrant and important community in the United States. In the aftermath of 9/11, Muslim-Americans are targeted for hate crimes and discriminated against at work, school, and public settings. A community forum was held in December 2009 to better understand the Muslim-American population in Summit County, and the challenges and opportunities in terms of their local civic engagement.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS:

- ◆ Ages 18-60
- ◆ Countries of origin:
Burma, North Africa, Palestine, Yemen, United States
- ◆ Years in the United States:
 - 58% have been here 10 years+
 - 9% have been here for 5 years+
 - 33% were born in the United States

MUSLIM-AMERICAN COMMUNITY'S CHALLENGES

Glass-ceiling:

Participants expressed frustration about limited professional upward mobility due to their religious beliefs, ethnicity, and/or country of origin (e.g. one person referenced "triple jeopardy" as a person who is Muslim, Arabic, and from a place like Pakistan or Iran).

Generalized negative stereotype of Muslim-Americans:

Muslim-Americans are sometimes put into a single category and are associated with a very small minority of radical Muslims and extremism.

Expressed concerns about media's role in perpetuating negative stereotypes:

Mass media sometimes amplify negative stereotypes by explicitly pointing out one was a Muslim who caused the trouble, while not doing the same for people with other religions (e.g. Oklahoma bombing).

Mental/emotional state of Muslim-Americans:

Many participants stated discrimination and unequal treatment making them feel like "second class citizens" and that they are not Americans.

Equal treatment of social/religious observances:

A participant mentioned that mass media and other influential entities do not treat Islam equally with other religions (e.g. Google changed their website for Hanukkah but nothing for the Muslim day's of observance).

Muslim-American youth and bullying:

A participant mentioned that her daughter, a high school student, recently decided not to cover her hair anymore because of the consistent peer pressure. There have also been incidents of hate crime and bullying.

Muslim-American community in Summit County is smaller than other parts of the country:

Muslim-American ethnic enclaves in larger U.S. metropolitan areas offer strong support system and resources. The Muslim-American population in Summit County is relatively smaller and also geographically fragmented. This leads to difficulty for the community to organize civic engagement activities in public, at the workplace, and in schools.

MUSLIM-AMERICAN COMMUNITY'S ASSETS

- ◆ The community has actively and selectively outreached to the broader community to emphasize Islam as a non-violent faith which mirrors the values of Christianity and other religious practices. Presentations and talks have taken place in schools, with government officials, and inter-faith dialogue and activities. Muslim-Americans from ISAK have given more than 30 presentations annually.
- ◆ ISAK actively welcomes visitors to come and experience the Muslim people, rituals, practices, and observances. Through engagement, there is an opportunity to break down walls of prejudice and misinformation.



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Continued...

OTHER RELEVANT INFORMATION

- ♦ Muslim-Americans in Summit County are extremely diverse. There are Muslims who are of Asian, African, and European descents. The community represents several different non-English languages and is socio-economically varied.
- ♦ For every formal civil right grievance, there are a dozen others, where victims do not pursue for fear of a backlash in light of a heightened negative public perception of Muslim Americans today. A member mentioned reluctance by other members of ISAK not to make donations for fear that their names will be published in association with a Muslim-based organization.
- ♦ There are also an increasing number of younger Muslim-Americans who are not interested in civic engagement. Due to peer pressure, fear of hate-crimes and discrimination, there is great inclination toward acculturating.

CONCLUSION

One very strong sentiment the participants shared was they all felt that the American society in general did not have enough understanding of their religion and that the American society had an unfounded basis for stereotyping Muslims as terrorists. The participants also explained that this type of stereotype sometimes manifested itself into the form of unequal treatment in job promotions, unequal treatment of the Muslim religious holidays, peer pressure on Hijab-wearing Muslim women, etc. Another thing worth observing is the great progress and the effect of the community outreaches that the Muslim community is making.



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(Transcriptions and summary prepared by ASIA's Eunice Park and Yoon Kim)