

Countering Myths about American Muslims (Part 2)

This is part of an open-ended series that will address some of the prevalent misconceptions about Islam and Muslims in America. Read about the motivation behind the series in the [first installment](#).

Each sets of misconceptions will be followed by the reality, references, footnotes, and recommendations for further reading.

Misconception: The United States is home to a very large Muslim population.

Reality: The best estimate of the number of American Muslims is about [1% of the total population, or about 3 million people](#).

You might see [different estimates](#) of the number of American Muslims cited in articles because the US census does not track religious affiliation. By comparison, [Jews are estimated to make about 2% of the US population](#). The Pew Forum estimates that [by 2030](#) the number of American Muslims will be about the same or even slightly higher than the number of American Jews.

Misconception: Arabs make up the vast majority of Muslims in the United States.

Reality: American Muslims are an extremely diverse population.

The only religious group in the United States with [greater diversity](#) is Seventh Day Adventists. [According the Pew forum](#), about 37% are native-born Americans while about 63% were born abroad. Of those born abroad, 41% are of Middle Eastern or North African origin, 26% are of South Asian origin, 5% are Iranian, 11% are sub-Saharan African, 7% are European and 10% are of other origins. 13% of American-born Muslims are African-American.

Misconception: Most Muslims in the United States are not US Citizens.

Reality: 81% of Muslims in the United States are US citizens, including 70% of those who were born abroad.

By comparison, 47% of all foreign-born US residents eventually become American citizens.

Misconception: Most African-Americans who call themselves Muslims are affiliated with the Nation of Islam.

Reality: [Today most African-American Muslims are Sunni Muslims](#).

After the death of the founder of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, his son W. D. Muhammad inherited leadership of the group. He had studied the beliefs Sunni Islam for many years before becoming the leader of the Nation. Most members of the Nation followed him as he transformed the organization and began to practice Islam according to mainstream Sunni teachings (1).

Misconception: Muslims are primarily concentrated in large cities on the East or West coast.

Reality: Muslim Americans are [fairly evenly distributed across the country](#), with 31% residing in the Northeast, 23% in the Midwest, 26% in the South and 20% in the West.

Though many of the first Muslim immigrants in the early 20th century did indeed settle in large and cosmopolitan cities like New York, a significant number also made their way to small

midwestern towns (2). There are competing claims between North Dakota and Iowa as to which was home to the first official mosque in America (3).

References

Bukhari, Zahid H. et al (ed). *Muslims' Place in the American Public Square: Hope, Fears, and Aspirations*. Walnut Creek: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004.

Curtis, Edward E. IV. *Muslims in America: A Short History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck. *The Muslims of America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Footnotes

(1) Bukhari 252

(2) Curtis 49

(3) Haddad 12; Curtis 53

Further Reading:

Pew Forum Reports and Articles

- [2014 American Religious Landscape Survey](#)
- [The Future of the Global Muslim Population](#)
- [The Most and Least Racially Diverse U.S. Religious Groups](#)
- [Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism](#)
- [Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the U.S. and around the world](#)