

Countering Myths about American Muslims: Mosques

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 set of misconceptions is followed by the reality. References, footnotes, recommendations for further reading, and links to previous installments in this series appear at the end of this article.

Misconception: American Mosques are breeding grounds for extremism.

Reality: Mosques help to integrate their congregants into the larger community and are a bulwark against extreme and violent religious beliefs.

The number of mosques in the United States has increased rapidly in the last few decades, with the number of mosques [growing by 74% between 1994 and 2011](#). As of [2011, there were approximately 2106 \(and counting\) mosques in the country](#).

Multiple studies, dating back decades, indicate that mosques are an important means through which immigrants and the Muslim community generally become more integrated into their communities. A 1959 study found that mosque attendance correlated with greater degrees of assimilation and tolerance amongst Muslim immigrants (1). The tendency of Muslim places of worship to be community centers rather than just religious establishments increases their role in community building. Newer Islamic centers are often based on the Christian mega-church model, incorporating worship, education, charity, and even recreational activities, all under one roof (2).

According to a 2011 survey of American mosques, a vast majority of mosque leaders believe Muslims should be involved in American society and politics [\(98% and 91% respectively\)](#). The percentage of mosque leaders who responded positively to Muslim

social and political integration [actually rose slightly](#) in the decade after 9/11. The rate at which mosques have participated in community organizing rose from 18% in 2000 to 44% in 2011. These community organizing activities include, but are not limited to, programs addressing crime, drugs, health care, and food deserts. The number of voter registration and educational programs sponsored by mosques also rose during the same period, with 36% of mosques sponsoring such programs in 2011 versus 24% in 2000. Mosques are involved in [interfaith activities at much higher rates](#) than most Christian religious establishments, with only Reform and Conservative Jewish congregations participating at comparable rates. [More than 79%](#) of mosques were involved in an interfaith activity of some kind during the previous twelve months according to the 2011 survey. This response rate rose more than 13 percentage points from the previous survey conducted in 2000.

Studies also indicate that mosques discourage rather than encourage extreme beliefs among Muslim congregants. [Most often, those Muslims who go on to commit acts of violence are not active mosque members](#). Instead, they develop their particular modes of belief [individually or with small groups](#) of friends and/or relatives that have gathered outside the purview of the local Muslim community.

Despite claims to the contrary, individual American Muslims, Muslim leaders, and national Muslim organizations have consistently denounced terrorism, whether committed by Muslims or otherwise. This includes the leadership of mosques that are associated with the attackers. Recent notable examples include the [Riverside, California](#) mosque, which was attended at one point in the past by both the San Bernardino shooters and [one of their victims](#). It also includes the [Chattanooga, Tennessee](#) mosque, which denounced the action of its congregant, who opened fire at [both a military recruiting and a naval reserve center, killing five members of the military](#). In the wake of the shooting, members of the mosque showed up in droves to an interfaith service [memorial service in memory of the victims, and raised thousands of dollars for the victims' families](#).

According to a 2010 study examining the anti-radicalization efforts of American mosque, these denouncements of violence and the disowning of radical congregants are not only for public consumption, but was also echoed in [internal literature, statements, and lectures at these mosques](#). Congregations self-police members for signs of extreme beliefs and vehemently debate, [banish](#), or even [call the authorities](#) if they believe there is a real threat of violence from a member.

In short, there is every indication that mosques are actively working to identify, root out, and counter potentially violent individuals.

References

- Biondo, Vincent. "Between Tribalism and Pluralism in the U.S. and Britain." *The Muslim World* 98 (October 2008): 475-484.
- Curtis, Edward E. IV. *Muslims in America: A Short History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Footnotes

(1) Curtis 59

(2) Biondo

Further Reading

[The American Mosque 2011: Part 1](#)

[The American Mosque 2011: Part 2](#)

[Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans](#)

Previous Installments in this Series

[Part 1: The First Muslim-Americans](#)

[Part 2: Demographics](#)

[Part 3: The “American-ness” of Muslims](#)