

"Our Blood Is Not Cheap": A Photovoice Project on Being Arab in a Racialized United States

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Abstract

The Arab American community has faced a history of racialization dating back to the late 19th century. The events of 9/11 and the heightened rhetoric of hate during the Trump presidency encouraged anti-Muslim sentiment and increased racial profiling and harassment. This community-based participatory research (CBPR) project uses Photovoice as a methodology to better understand the lived experiences and narratives of Arab Americans in the post-Trump¹ era and as a tool for advocacy. The findings from the photo sharing sessions underscore the continued challenge of identity and representation, (in)visibility, and pushing back against anti-Arab/Muslim racism. The findings also highlight religion as a protective factor against structural and systemic racism. Overall, the participants in this study demonstrated their community resilience and navigational capital as they survived and thrived amid racializing experiences and microaggressions. Implications of this work include the need for increased consciousness raising about the lived experiences of the Arab American community and opportunities for allyship and advocacy.

The Arab American community in the United States dates to the 1880s when Arab immigrants began arriving in sizable numbers.² Today, an estimated 3.7 million Arab Americans live across all U.S. states, with two-thirds of the population living in 10 states (Arab American Institute, 2021). Illinois, the site of this study, is ranked 5th among those top 10 states (Yalla Count Me In, 2019). The number of people who claim Arab ancestry in Illinois has more than doubled since the 1980s, reaching approximately 143,000 by 2017 (Yalla Count Me In, 2019). The majority of new Arab immigrants in Illinois come from Iraq, Jordan, and Syria³ but claim various identities such as Lebanese, Jordanian, Palestinian, Moroccan, or pan-ethnic Arab (Yalla Count Me In, 2019).

In 2010, a coalition of Arab American organizations facilitated by the Arab American Institute Foundation (AAIF), a national civil rights organization focused on strengthening democracy, protecting civil rights, and promoting human rights, initiated a campaign called "Check It Right:

You Ain't White" to advocate for change in how Arabs are classified according to the U.S. Census (Stephan, 2021). This campaign urged individuals who identify as Arab or Arab American not to select the White classification on the census and rather opt into the "Other" category and write in "Arab." The goal was to encourage the U.S. Census Bureau to add a distinct "Arab" category. By selecting "White" without identifying their ethnic origin, Arabs lose representation as a race/ethnicity and are unable to receive federal funding for minoritized groups. Furthermore, the AAIF and the coalition authored a historic letter to the U.S. Census Bureau requesting a Middle East and North Africa (MENA) category. Hopes for such a category and fair representation in the U.S. Census were shattered when the 2020 census failed to provide a MENA category, thereby continuing to contribute to the underrepresentation of Arabs living in the United States. A brief review of census data and the demographics of the Arab American community speaks to the tension between

¹ This study was conducted during and after Donald J. Trump's first presidential campaign and term.

² Although U.S. popular culture conflates Arab and Muslim, the six countries with the largest Muslim populations for example, include countries not considered Arab such as Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Who is considered to be Arab is contested and shifting partly because the Arab community includes a diversity of religious, language, and ethnic groups. For a thorough review of the debates and history regarding the category in the United States, see Jamal and Naber (2022).

³ Middle Eastern or North Africans (MENA) represent approximately 21 countries.

visibility and invisibility. In a 2023 report entitled “Beyond Erasure and Profiling: Cultivating Strong and Vibrant Arab American Communities in Chicagoland,” Naber and colleagues further endorsed the creation of a MENA category to dehomogenize the various lived experiences of Arab Americans and promote civic participation (Naber et al., 2023).

Invisibility is detrimental to the Arab community on many levels. On a micro level, misrepresentation of the Arab community and invisibility in national demographics results in a general lack of awareness of a population whose presence in the United States dates to the early 1800s. In a pluralist society, and one that is increasingly diverse, U.S. society must acknowledge social and group identities to promote a sense of belonging and inclusivity. On a mezzo level, social service providers overlook the unique linguistic and cultural identities of the Arab American community resulting neglecting the respective needs of communities and failing to allocate of resources for the appropriate level of care. On a macro level, invisibility causes losses in federal funding and less representation in the policy-making process.

The Arab community must be counted and visible in order to access services and ensure their needs are met. Census Bureau data is an important consideration related to the distribution of federal funds in one of three ways: the Census data results play a role in determining population needs, eligibility, and selection or restriction of funds; allocation of funds to the selected or identified groups; and assessment/monitoring of program performance to ensure that funds are being utilized to serve the communities identified. Once a community is properly identified and categorized, it may be eligible to receive funds that would support creating programs to meet community needs. Federal funding is disbursed to states who, in turn, can allocate the funding to the Arab community whose needs are visible in the Census data.

Our community partner and coauthor, Iteral Shalabi, and those at her organization, Arab American Family Services (AAFS), have been engaged in this struggle to be counted for some time. When Arab Americans were dying at high rates due to COVID-19—but there was no separate category to track this information and therefore no mechanism to obtain funds specifically to support the health of Arab communities—Illinois became the first state to count Arab Americans

when collecting public data (Ramirez, 2021). In February 2023, a bill was introduced in the Illinois State Legislature (HB3768) that would require state agencies to include a new MENA racial category when gathering any racial or ethnic demographic data (Assad & Tucker, 2023; LegisScan, n.d.). Currently, Arab Americans have no other option but to indicate they are “White” or “Other” on national census forms or local forms in other states. Without data, community agencies cannot get funding to provide needed services.

While being counted as a distinct racial category is important for the provision of ethnic/racial-specific services, it also symbolizes the dual problems of invisibility and hypervisibility due to anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism (Naber et al., 2023). U.S. society has a very limited understanding of the Arab American community, even as the community simultaneously experiences the realities and consequences of being racialized (Alsaïdi et al., 2021; Karaman & Christian, 2020). The lack of classification promotes the invisibility of Arabs and is manifested in social exclusion, stigma, and discrimination (Abboud et al., 2019). A limited understanding of the Arab community contributes to experiences of racialization. Racialization provides a framework for understanding how Arab Americans, regardless of internal diversity, are homogenized and targeted by Islamophobic narratives and actions in their day-to-day lives (Garner & Selod, 2015).

When considering the impact of the post-Trump era, the voices of those affected by the historical and contemporary struggles of navigating Arab identity in the United States are seldom represented in the discourse. Thus, the main objective of this research is to both understand the lived experiences of Arab Americans in the post-Trump era and use Photovoice as a tool for advocacy and promoting change. In the next section, the authors elaborate on the racialization processes for Arab Americans and Muslims, anti-Muslim racism, and the consequent impact on Arab Americans’ and Muslims’ well-being. In the sections that follow, the authors describe Photovoice, the methodology of the present study and a tool for advocacy, in further detail. They also present the study findings, including participants’ photos. Finally, the authors discuss the findings’ implications for policy, practice, and advocacy with and for the Arab American and Muslim community. Most importantly, the voices of the participants in this project continue to illuminate the resilience of the Arab American community as

well as bring to light the continued challenges and impact of anti-Muslim/anti-Arab racism.

Racialization of Arab Americans and Muslims

Consensus on the meaning of race as a social construct as opposed to a biological fact has opened doors of discussion regarding dynamic conceptualizations of race in the United States (Haney-López, 2006; D. Rodriguez, 1994; Feagin, 2010). Although race is still poorly defined (Baber, 2010), it is a social reality that has been utilized to perpetuate inequality, discrimination, and oppression by those who hold power in society. Political, social, and economic power created and maintained by Europeans (Whites) over non-Europeans (non-Whites) established a racial ideology (Fields, 1990) rooted in White supremacy (D. Rodriguez, 1994). For this work, we understand race as a social construct, with a focus on the impact of the categorization and how it is enacted rather than on what race is (Groothuis, 2020). Race as a social construct is not limited to biological differences; races can be constructed based on other social factors such as religion or culture (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Omi and Winant (1994), well known for the development of racial formation theory, stated that race is a concept rife with cultural and ideological meaning. Omi and Winant (1994) conceptualized racial formation as a sociohistorical creation that happens over time and is unstable and politically contested.

The present work is grounded in the concept of racialization to understand how the historical and contemporary social context has created Arab Americans and Muslims as a racialized group. While racial formation theory focuses on racial ontology and how racial groups are formed, the concept of racialization refers to the process through which a group is racialized (Hochman, 2019). Hochman (2019) argues for the use of the terms “racialization” and “racialized groups” rather than using “race” as a descriptive term, given that race is not “real” as a biological concept. Furthermore, using racialization as a framework supports the visibility of groups that are understood and treated as an inferior “race.”

Racialization can also happen on an individual level (i.e., how one racializes oneself), or it can be applied to social structures and institutions that are racialized, such as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) of higher education (Garcia,

2023; Vega et al., 2022). As certain characteristics are ascribed to an institution based on the HSI label, such as the view of a university as inferior or lower performing because of the students it serves, it can thus become racialized. Finally, other activities or phenomena can be racialized, such as clothing, hairstyles, dance, or other activities (Hochman, 2019). While racialization includes experiences of discrimination and conceptions of groups as inferior, racialized groups can leverage this imposed collective identity to drive advocacy and visibility of the issues they face, including the consequences of that racialization (Fernández, 2012; Hernández et al., 2024).

This concept of racialization is particularly useful in considering the experience of Arab Americans and Muslims post 9/11. While the racialization of Arabs dates to the American immigrant experience in the late 19th century, it was not until 1967 that Arabs came to be politically and socially viewed as “other” (Cainkar, 2009, Suleiman, 1999), thereby promoting the social and structural exclusion of Arab Americans. Several factors in the late 1960s contributed to the “othering” of Arab Americans. The 1960s were a time of social movements, an influx of refugees and immigrants from Palestine, and an increase in Palestinian community institutions (Cainkar, 2007; Citino et al., 2023). However, it was global events, and the role of the United States in those events, that led to the exclusion of Arab Americans from mainstream organizations and the era’s civil rights movement. Media portrayals since the 1967 Israeli-Arab war⁴ constructed images of Palestinians as “inherently savage,” successfully silencing Arab Americans of all national origins and religious backgrounds (Cainkar, 2007, p. 227). The events of 9/11 complicated these views further by creating a mainstream narrative that Islam as a religion was dangerous (Kaufman & Niner, 2019). This led to increased racial profiling and harassment, particularly of young men, who were perceived to “look Muslim” regardless of their actual religious or ethnic background (Kaufman & Niner, 2019).

This rhetoric and hate were heightened again during the Trump campaign and presidency, as Trump encouraged anti-Muslim sentiment and enacted the “Muslim ban,” an executive order blocking Syrian refugees and citizens of seven predominately Muslim countries, in January

⁴ For more comprehensive coverage of the Israeli-Arab war and the plight of Palestinian refugees, the reader may review Anera (2022) and Khalidi (2020).

of 2017 (Johnson & Hauslohner, 2017). The xenophobic and anti-Arab/Muslim racism that culminated during the Trump presidency resulted in a continued “othering” process endorsed by the political state. This social and political context solidified what scholars termed the “racialization of religion” (Cainkar & Selod, 2018). According to Cainkar and Selod (2018), while Muslims are not described as a racial group (e.g., the “Muslim race”), the term “Muslim” is associated with more than a religious group and is treated as a racial group. As Hochman (2019) states, “[r]acialization is not well understood as the process through which a group is *labeled as a race*. It is better understood as the process through which a group is *understood to constitute a race*” (p. 1248). This project aims to understand the impact of racialization on the Arab American/Muslim community and how this racialization can impact access to services.

Anti-Muslim Racism Is Not the Same as Islamophobia

The terms “anti-Muslim racism” and “Islamophobia” have often been used interchangeably. While these terms certainly overlap (Tabahi & Khayr, 2021), they are distinct in some ways. Anti-Muslim racism consists of state-based and institutionalized efforts to target Muslims and those perceived to be Muslims, often conflated with nationality, race or ethnicity, and religion (Naber & Rana, 2019).⁵ Islamophobia focuses more on “the belief that expressions of Muslim identity are correlated with the propensity for terrorism” (Beydoun, 2016, p. 111). Recontextualizing the discussion of “Islamophobia” as “anti-Muslim racism” addresses not only implicit biases or the discourse of mindsets but also underscores institutional and systemic oppression against the Muslim community, including hate crimes, harassment, and civil rights abuses (Tabahi & Khayr, 2021). In addressing the larger issue of hate and violence against Muslims, the term “Islamophobia” suggests individual fear or individual bias (Rana et al., 2020) and does not fully address the systemic and historical racism against the community rooted in White supremacy.

In the United States, hate crimes against Muslims have gone underreported, and Muslim

women and men experience anti-Muslim racism differently. Muslim women carry the symbol of their faith through the hijab,⁶ making them more visible targets of discrimination and abuse (Brown et al., 2017; Tabahi & Khayr, 2021). As an overt expression of faith, the hijab explicitly identifies females as adherents to Islam. Muslim women are more likely than Muslim men to report feeling unsafe in public spaces (Beydoun, 2018; Brown et al., 2017), while Muslim men are twice as likely as women to report physical abuse or be the targets of physical violence (Abdelkader, 2016). Responses to incidents of hate have been problematic, mostly centered around victim blaming rather than addressing the systemic and structural racism embedded in such incidents. For example, some police agencies have recommended that women stay home or remove their hijabs to reduce the incidence of violence or aggression (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017). According to Tabahi & Khayr (2021), “Efforts at reducing incidence of hate crimes and acts of violence against Muslim women should thus focus on policies and a political discourse that condemns racial intolerance and hate and promotes religious freedoms” (p. 4). Because current data focus on statistics rather than the voices of survivors, there is limited research that acknowledges the lived experiences and impact of hate crimes and the targeting of Muslims. This research contributes to acknowledging and understanding the racialized experiences of Muslims in the United States.

The Impact of Racism on Identity and Well-Being

An extensive body of literature documents the negative impacts of discrimination and racism on the well-being of people of color in the United States (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2016; Ayón, 2016; S. Rodriguez, Roth, et al., 2022; Stone & Han, 2005). Despite evidence of anti-Muslim racism, the community remains largely invisible in the United States due to their categorization as “White” (Abdulrahim, 2008; Awad et al., 2021; Cainkar, 2008; Naber, 2008). Understanding the impact of discrimination and racism is particularly relevant for the Arab American and Muslim communities given the rise in anti-Muslim racism and racialization post 9/11 as well as Trump-era policies and rhetoric (Levin,

⁵ As mentioned in note 1, not all Arabs are Muslim, nor are all Muslims Arabs. In the article, we at times use “Arab,” “Arab American and Muslim,” or “Muslim” depending on the context. For example, this section reviews the literature focused on anti-Muslim racism. Therefore, we mostly talk about Muslims, as they are the targets of this type of hate. However, Arab Americans are also targets of this hate because they are perceived to be Muslim regardless of their religious affiliation.

⁶ Arabic term for “headscarf” or veil that is worn by Muslim women.

2018; Naber, 2008). For some Arab Americans, these experiences lead to an internalization of feelings of inadequacy or helplessness, while for others they lead to stronger ethnic/racial pride and become the start of political activism and coalition work (Alsaïdi et al., 2021; Awad, 2010; Naber, 2000). Due to the increased incidence of violence and bullying either witnessed, personally experienced, or present in the media, there has also been an increase in racialized trauma. Alsaïdi and colleagues (2021) found that women in their study reported symptoms of racialized trauma such as hopelessness, panic attacks, and emotional outbursts. Policy and practice that is culturally responsive depends on understanding how the social context affects racialized and minoritized communities. Furthermore, responding to racialized, identity, or historical trauma requires collective and group-level opportunities for healing (Yellow Horse Braveheart & De Bruyn, 1998).

Methodology

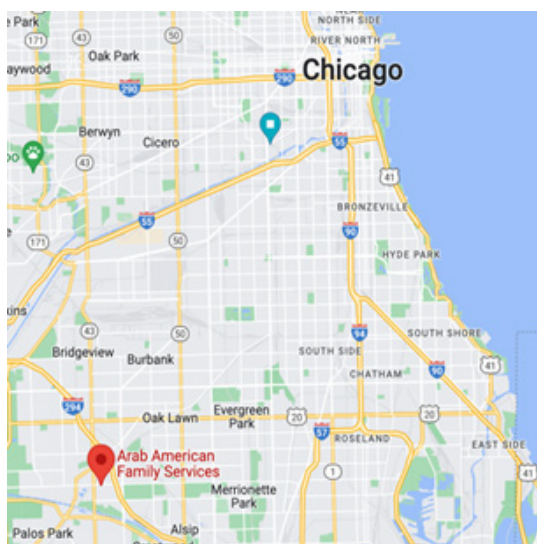
This community-based participatory research (CBPR) project used Photovoice as a methodology to better understand the lived experiences and narratives of Arab Americans and was part of a larger project focused on the impact of the Trump era on Latine⁷ and Arab American communities during 2020–2022. This article highlights the Photovoice project conducted in collaboration with AAFS, a community partner affiliated with the Willenborg Fellows Learning Academy.⁸ AAFS, a nonprofit social service agency founded in 2001 by Itedal Shalabi and Nareman Taha, serves over 30 communities in the South Suburban Chicagoland area. AAFS serves as a catalyst for social change by actively seeking to confront the myths and taboos that have kept some Arab Americans from obtaining the assistance they need. By helping local neighbors overcome personal crises, strengthen their families, and live healthier, more successful lives, AAFS is making a profound and positive

impact in its community. The mission of AAFS is to change and impact quality of life by serving and building stronger and healthier generations of Arab Americans.

The Research Context

Chicagoland is a major population center for Arab Americans. It is estimated that 100,000 Arab Americans from over 20 different countries reside in Chicagoland (Naber et al., 2023). The location of AAFS is provided in Figure 1 with reference to downtown Chicago. Table 1 compares the size of the Arab American community in the United States, Chicagoland, Chicago, and Cook County as well as the change over time. Due to the lack of a census category for Arab Americans, the only way to identify them is through the ancestry question, which is only asked of a sample in the decennial census, and through the American Community Survey, which is also a small sample. These factors likely lead to an undercount of the Arab American population (Naber et al., 2023).

Figure 1. Location of Arab American Family Services (Attribution: Google Maps)



⁷ The term "Latine" is used to describe individuals and communities with Latin American ancestry. It is a gender-inclusive alternative to the commonly used masculine "Latino" to refer to the community. Latine was created by nonbinary and feminist communities in Spanish-speaking countries. We used this term because it aligns with the values of inclusion, equity, and justice. The term promotes inclusion to those who have been marginalized by gender binaries and colonization. The term also acknowledges intersectional identities. See El Centro (n.d.) and Call Me Latine (n.d.) for further information about this terminology.

⁸ The Willenborg Civic Learning Academy at Dominican University is designed to bring together university and community partners to support student engagement and development in activism, democratic engagement, and community-based research as well as student and community understandings of political power. <https://www.dom.edu/academics/civic-learning/willenborg-civic-learning-academy>

Table 1. Demographics

Arab American Population in the U.S., Chicagoland, Cook County, and Chicago, 1990 to 2020				
	U.S.	Chicagoland	Cook County	Chicago
1990	928,490	43,894	36,193	21,978
2000	1,336,475	63,240	49,700	22,431
2010	1,745,006	82,900	61,717	22,175
2020	2,385,146	108,340	80,838	30,462
% Change	156.88%	146.82%	123.35%	38.60%

Source: Decennial Census 1990 & 2000, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2006-2010 & 2016-2020

Note. Chicagoland refers to the Chicago metropolitan statistical area which was originally designated by the U.S. Census Bureau in 1950. It originally comprised the Illinois counties of Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake, Will, as well as Lake County in Indiana. Now, it also includes Grundy, McHenry, DeKalb, and Kendall in Illinois; Jasper, Newton, and Porter County in Indiana; and Kenosha County in Wisconsin.

The Chicago Arab American community is a microcosm of the national Arab American population, representing a diversity of national origins and other factors such as socioeconomic status. Research by Naber and colleagues (2023) has also shared the lived experiences of Arab Americans in Chicagoland, including the microaggressions, discrimination, surveillance, and hostility the community faces.

CBPR is an approach to research that equitably involves community members in all aspects of the research process (Israel et. al., 2003; D. X. Rodriguez & McDaniel, 2019; Smith et al., 2016) and is focused on being “useful” (Stoecker, 2013). According to Stoecker (2013), participatory research uses a diversity of approaches with an emphasis on methods that “make sense” to the participants and the community. In addition, Stoecker (2013) states that the method that is most “useful” or “makes sense” is the one that “will create research that will actually be used” (p. 28). This project encouraged participation from community partners in all aspects of the research, from developing the research question to the process of dissemination. This kind of research would not be possible without community partners providing their extensive cultural knowledge and the resources necessary for translating research into action (Hacker, 2013).

Photovoice

Photovoice is a qualitative method that uses photography and discussion as tools for social change and highlights the lived experiences of minoritized people (Jarldorn, 2019).⁹ Participatory visual methodologies can provide tools for changing narratives and supporting policy changes (Mitchell et al., 2018). Photovoice provides participants an opportunity to document, analyze, and reflect on personal and community issues related to the research questions (Schuch et al., 2014; Wang, 1999). Collectively, the participants decide how and where to share the photographs and stories to advocate for social change and create awareness. Furthermore, the use of photography in Photovoice has been shown to change the power dynamics between researcher and participant and ensures space for those with minoritized experiences to speak about social conditions (Mitchell et al., 2018). As social workers, this approach aligns with the human rights base of the profession and the centrality of challenging oppression in our practice and research (Jarldorn, 2019).

Participatory Process: Selection of the Research Question

The research questions were developed in collaboration with AAFS. The first meeting occurred in December 2020. When meeting with

⁹ We use the term “minoritized” to better reflect the active process of structural racism and the social construction of minoritized or statuses. Using this term implies that minoritization is the result of inequality and inequity rather than the minority status itself. See Lindsay (2020) for a more extended discussion.

community partners, the overall idea of exploring the impact of the Trump era on Arab American communities was presented for discussion as a potential research topic. For AAFS, the anti-Muslim and anti-Arab racism experienced both during the Trump era and post 9/11 were important stories to tell in efforts to create awareness and change the dominant narrative. Given the ongoing efforts to be counted in the state and national census, this project could also be used in those advocacy efforts. After some discussion, consensus was reached on the main research question: What does it mean to be a member of the Arab or Muslim community in a post- 9/11 and post-Trump America?

The Research Process: Participant Recruitment and the Photovoice Process

Recruitment. The recruitment process and selection occurred in March 2021. After deciding on the research questions, AAFS assisted in the participant recruitment process, resulting in a total of 11 participants. AAFS works to hire community members to represent the communities it serves. The participants in this study were AAFS staff who were also members of the community. All AAFS staff are committed to the mission of promoting community well-being and understand the sociopolitical context that Arab and Muslim communities are currently navigating. Both Shalabi and Taha, being informed of the research and its purpose, selected staff who demonstrated interest in supporting this research. The most important part of this process was the prior trust building process with Shalabi and Taha and transparency with the potential participants. During the initial recruitment meeting, the participants asked questions about how the data would be used, and most importantly, they wanted to ensure that their voices would be heard and that “something” would result from the data and their participation.

Sample. Participants were asked to complete a short demographic survey. Ten participants answered the survey. Seven survey respondents identified as women, and three as men. The respondents identified racially as Arab or Arab American ($n = 3$), Palestinian ($n = 3$), Middle Eastern ($n = 1$), Jordanian ($n = 1$), Arab American/Palestinian ($n = 1$), and White ($n = 1$). Education levels included bachelor's degrees ($n = 7$), master's degree ($n = 1$), trade school ($n = 1$), and some college ($n = 1$). Nine were employed full time, and one was employed part time. Eight respondents stated that their native language was Arabic, and

two stated that English was their native language. All participants were bilingual in Arabic and English, and one participant spoke Spanish as a third language. Eight responded that COVID-19 had impacted their families in terms of mental health or job loss, while two stated that COVID-19 had not impacted their families.

As a purposive sample, this group of participants represented the Arab American community well in terms of the impact of COVID-19. While data were not specifically collected on COVID-19's impact on the Arab American community due to a lack of a category for counting the group, AAFS reported an increase in the number of individuals filing for unemployment, which exacerbated already precarious financial situations (Naber et al., 2023).

The ethnic identifications in our sample also mirrored the Chicagoland Arab American population. In Chicagoland, those who identify as Palestinian comprise one of the largest percentages of the Arab American population (16%), equal to those who identify as Other Arab (16%; Naber et al., 2023). These two groups are followed by those who identify as Arab (14%). Jordanians make up about 9.4% of the population in the Chicagoland area (Naber et al., 2023). If this study were to be expanded, we would work to capture ethnicities that make up smaller percentages of the overall Arab American population, such as the Somali (1.1%) and Sudanese (2%) populations (Naber et al., 2023). The experiences of those two groups are not reflected in this study. The Somali population is linguistically and culturally distinct from the Arab American groups in this study (Ploeckelman, 2021).

The participants in this sample also mirror the range of educational levels in the larger Arab American population, from trade school and some college to graduate degrees. Educational attainment for the Arab American population in the Chicagoland area is 16% graduate degrees, 35% bachelor's degrees, 27% some college, 15% high school diploma, and 3% less than a high school diploma. Thus, in this sample, we would not be capturing the small percentage of those with less than a high school diploma. However, the participants' reported experiences of racialization, microaggressions, fear, anti-Arab/Muslim racism, and discrimination reflect the experiences of the Arab American community locally, nationally, and internationally (Abdelkader, 2016; Awad et al., 2019; Khan et

al., 2021; Naber & Rana, 2019; Rana et al., 2020; Selod, 2019; Tabahi & Bucher, 2020).

Introducing Photovoice. Once the participants were selected by the founders, they were invited to a virtual orientation session using Zoom that took approximately 60 minutes and occurred prior to the beginning of the photo taking process.¹⁰ The session included an introduction to the overall project as well as an explanation and examples of Photovoice. Special attention was given to discussing and reviewing the consent forms (both consent for participation in the study and consent for use of photographs in presentations and publications), the process for submitting the photos, obtaining consent from the people in a photo, co-ownership of project data, as well as ethics regarding confidentiality and photography (e.g., taking pictures that are symbolic images rather than people). Finally, the participants were asked to take photos that reflected the following questions:

- What does it mean to be a member of the Arab or Muslim community in a post-9/11 and post-Trump America?
- What are issues of discrimination or anti-Muslim or anti-Arab sentiment that you see or experience in your community?
- How do you understand and express your Arab American or Muslim identity?
- What are the supports needed being a resident in the southwest suburbs?
- What are some issues around policing, employment, transportation, infrastructure or housing, mental health, or health care in your community?

Sharing Meaning. A discussion guide was created to prepare participants to discuss their images. The Photovoice discussion guide (see Appendix A) contained five questions that allowed the participants to share their photo and discuss its meaning, importance, and impact/implications for the community (Amos et al., 2012). Participants were given 2 weeks to take their photos and upload them along with the accompanying discussion guide to a password-protected shared online folder through Google. Google Docs was the most accessible way to share data with AAFS and to upload photos.

One of the participants worked in collaboration with one of the researchers to gather and organize the photos. The researchers

then created a slide deck of the images using PowerPoint. Approximately 1 month after the initial orientation, the participants were invited to a 90-minute discussion group on Zoom where the photos were presented to the group, and the participants were asked to share the meaning of each photo and respond to each other's photos. Each of the groups had 5 participants, facilitated by a researcher and a graduate assistant. One participant did not attend the photo discussion group but did submit photos and the photo description form with a written narrative for each picture. In one discussion group, participants were invited to speak in both English and Arabic, while the other group was held in English. Together, the participants and researchers developed and discussed the themes that emerged. The discussion groups were recorded, transcribed, translated into English, and analyzed along with the photos to further explore the themes that were identified during the discussion groups and to identify any other themes. This analysis consisted of further thematic coding. The approach to coding identified units of meaning that were described by the participants in relation to the photos, with consideration of broader contextual and theoretical considerations (Padgett, 2017). Member checking was conducted to build consensus around final themes.

Findings and Discussion

The findings from the photo sharing sessions underscore the continued challenges of identity and representation, (in)visibility, and pushing back against anti-Arab/anti-Muslim racism. The findings highlight religion and group identity as a protective factor against structural and systemic racism. Islamophobia, racialization, anti-immigrant laws, and barriers to access were among the challenges discussed. The participants focused on the impact of Islamophobia on children in school settings, bullying experiences in schools, and the fear of expressing their social identity in school settings. While the participants noted challenges, they also discussed allyship, the need for institutional accountability, the resilience of the Arab American population over generations, and their desire to fight White supremacy and oppression.

Considering the above, we identified seven main themes through both discussion groups:

¹⁰ While meetings with the community partners began in person, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the subsequent meetings were held via zoom. Data was collected during the Spring of 2021.

1. “Not Quite White”: Representation Matters
2. Barriers and Access to Services
3. (In)visibility and Hypervisibility
4. Anti-Muslim Racism and Islamophobia
5. Civic Engagement and Advocacy
6. Faith Above Fear: “Allah Knows Best”
7. Unapologetically Resilient

Overall, the study participants demonstrated their community resilience and navigational capital as they survived and thrived amid racializing experiences and microaggressions. Below we unpack each of these major themes and provide photos that are illustrative of the themes along with explanations provided by the participants.

“Not Quite White”: Representation Matters

Racial classifications and the history of a racialized identity in the United States have long posed significant challenges to the Arab American community and their sense of belonging within the United States (Tabahi & Bucher, 2020). Complicating that quest for representation and identity is that before 1956, the White designation was a prerequisite to gaining full U.S. citizenship (Awad et al., 2021). The negative classification of Arabs as a nonwhite ethnic group emerged in 1967 in the Arab-Israeli war in which Israelis were depicted as heroes and Arabs as barbaric (Awad et al., 2021; Cainkar, 2009; Suleiman, 1999). While such media coverage and harmful portrayals of Arabs gained momentum in the United States and promoted White hegemony and nativism, the classification of Arabs as nonwhite is a

designation that many advocacy groups, scholars, and communities are currently addressing to gain accurate representation. This notion of being “not quite White” (Samhan, 1999) and the country’s gatekeeping immigration policies compounded the precarious position of Arab identity in the United States. Given the challenges of being officially recognized as a racial category and the historical undercount, the following photos represent advocacy to be counted and the challenges members of the Arab American community face as a result.

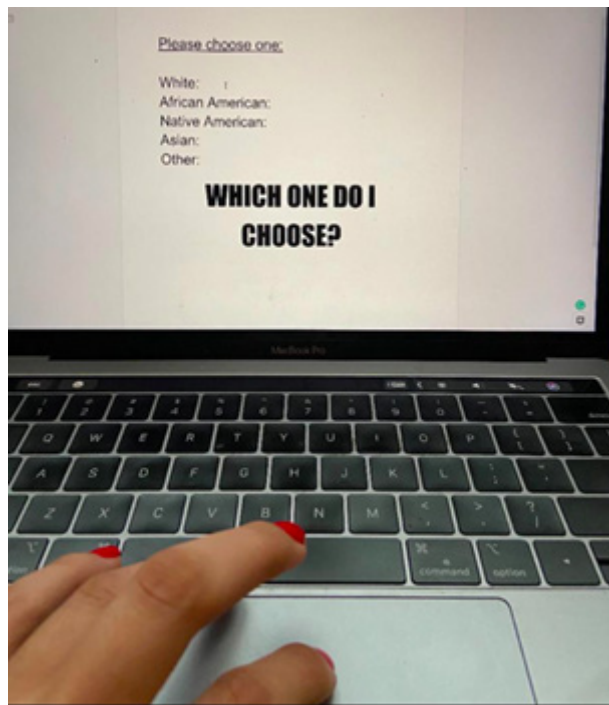
I was leading the census campaign ... and I chose this picture specifically because we, people from the Middle East and North Africa, all the time, considered as White and that’s something I have been working on about our category as MENA on the census since I was in college at UIC [University of Illinois Chicago]. We have been trying to have our category to be respected as who we are and show our identity as we are, Arab or Middle East and North Africa ... I think it’s a way for us to be visible in the United States nationwide also and locally ... like since we are being considered as White, we have been overlooked for the past many centuries almost yeah almost the ones that almost essentially since the 1920s, when we first time became recognized as White. (Yusuf, Group 2, Figure 2)¹¹

Figure 2. Campaign to Be Counted!



¹¹ All participants are identified with pseudonyms. If a picture contains an image that can identify a person, additional consents were collected allowing for publication of a picture that contains their image.

Figure 3. Identity Crisis



The participants in this study reflected the continued challenges of racial classification in the United States and the microaggressions, discrimination, and racism they experience navigating a post-Trump landscape. They discussed that while they are classified as White, they do not experience White privilege, nor do they associate with that categorization. Phenotypically, many Arabs may “pass” as White, specifically those from the Levant area (e.g., Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan); however, that perception does not match their lived experiences of navigating a post 9/11 or post-Trump United States. One participant expressed feeling “less than” in the process of identification, not only in terms of the U.S. Census form but also any other federal or organizational document that does not identify “Arab” or “Middle Eastern” as a race:

In a world that revolves around race, we have no place in it. Middle Eastern is not an option. ... We are not a simple checkbox as “other.” Our identity has been put into the bottom of a race list and labeled as an outsider. (Fatima, Group 1, Figure 3)

Barriers and Access to Services

As stated earlier, participants were staff at AAFS. Being on the frontlines of the COVID-19

pandemic and navigating many other social issues within the community, participants voiced their frustration and challenges associated with serving a community that lacks representation, has limited data on social and health concerns, and continues to face language barriers in accessing services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, numbers of hospitalizations and deaths within the Arab community were not being captured, as Arabs were opted into selecting “White” or “Other” on legal or hospital documentation. Various news outlets reported on the challenges that the Arab American community was experiencing in the COVID-19 pandemic because of the federal designation of Arabs as “White.” According to Hasibe Rashid of New York City’s planning department:

We are told we are White when in reality, we are deprived of proper and accurate statistical data. ... We are expected to conform to something we do not agree with, and worse yet, something society does not see us as. We do not live the life of White privilege. (Ramirez, 2021, para. 9)

Shalabi and Taha achieved a great victory in supporting their community in the Chicagoland area by advocating for data related to COVID-19 vaccination. The Illinois Department of Public

Health (IDPH) created a new MENA category for individuals who identify as such to choose when they got their vaccine. Participants in the study echoed concerns of feeling “left behind” by the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the frustration of needing to identify as “White” or “Other” in hospital and clinical settings. Participants shared either personal stories of navigating the public health system during COVID-19 or recounted anecdotal experiences of family and friends who struggled when accessing services at the hospital or in other primary care settings. Such challenges included language barriers and discrimination due to perceived race/ethnicity or religious affiliation. While participants or members of the community being discussed selected “White” on the intake questionnaires, they were not granted the “White privileges” of service or accommodation. The lack of national data on Arabs and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is pervasive and is detrimental to providing adequate services and treatment.

Barriers and access to service are further complicated by immigration status and linguistic challenges. Amina, a case manager, expressed her frustrations with the U.S. health care system and the Public Charge Rule.¹² The Public Charge Rule is a ground of inadmissibility, meaning there are reasons a person could be denied legal permanent

residency or a visa. When granting legal permanent residency or a “Green Card,” an immigration officer decides if the person is likely to become dependent on government benefits, making them a “public charge.” During the Trump era, all benefits programs were considered in determining who was and was not a public charge. Amina explains:

So, a lot of our clients canceled their health insurance to keep their Green Card or to obtain the citizenship, which is unbelievable, which is an awful feeling that I had when our clients came to me and told me “Well, I will give up on my health insurance, even if I have diabetes, even if I cannot afford the doctor visit, even if I can’t afford the medication” ... It is a shame of any country to make people choose between health and to be a citizen of the country that they lived, worked, and paid taxes in. (Group 1, Figure 4)

Participants spoke to the myth of undocumented and legal/documented immigrants not “paying into” the system, perpetuated by false narratives from the Trump campaign, and how such a narrative is to the detriment of the Arab community.

Jamila joined the conversation by speaking to her experiences as a domestic violence case worker:

Figure 4. Citizenship or Health



¹² This policy was rolled back in 2022 so that health care programs such as CHIP, Medicaid, or immunization are not considered as part of the public charge determination. However, the fear in immigrant communities remains, and this may change once again in the second Trump term.

Figure 5. Folders of Domestic Violence



I work as a domestic violence advocate, and this is a photo of my files after a particularly bad day. It turned out that my client couldn't speak English and there was a language barrier, and the person talking to her didn't even bother to bring a translator or interpreter to explain. [A language barrier] is literally the difference between life saving services and just being stuck in extremely abusive relationships. (Jamila, Group 1, Figure 5)

The language barrier addressed here is often cited as the most significant barrier in accessing services (Abdulrahim & Baker, 2009). Culturally relevant and linguistically appropriate services for the Arab community, despite its population growth in many metropolitan cities, continue to fall short of meeting the needs of the community.

(In)visibility and Hypervisibility

Feelings of invisibility juxtaposed with the negative media portrayal of Arabs and Muslims as visible targets resonated with many study participants. Simultaneously being hypervisible and nonvisible has more recently been documented in the literature (Abdulrahim, 2008; Awad et al., 2021; Cainkar, 2008; Naber, 2008; Naber et al., 2023) within the context of experiences of discrimination (Awad et al., 2019). Participants' discussions about hypervisibility focused on the hijab (headscarf) and Arabic names. One participant shared a picture with three children, each holding up a poster with their name, the meaning of that name, and the phrase, "I am not a terrorist." Amina (Group 1, Figure 6: My Name Is Amar) shared stories of friends or relatives who

changed their names to avoid discrimination and others who were denied access to a visa or other services due to the bias or racism triggered by their name. She also shares that she "taught these kids to be proud of their names and their great meaning." A continued discussion of this photo allowed Amina to share the intergenerational nature of this type of hypervisibility and the process of teaching young people to actively resist narratives about who they are perceived to be.

Unfortunately, when 9/11 happened, a lot of people were making judgment on Muslim people because of their names. In this picture, the kids are holding cards with their names handwritten. They decided to send a message for the community that Islam is a beautiful, peaceful religion, and also to be proud of your religion, and again terrorism is not about religion or a person's name. (Amina, Group 1, Figure 6)

Several participants took photos related to the hijab. Jamila shared a photo of her own hijab collection, and Malik shared a photo of his mother's hijab collection (see Figure 7). For women, the hijab is one way that their bodies are racialized, and they are consequently either treated as potential terrorists or as victims and anti-feminists (Selod, 2019). The ways in which people are racialized rely on visible cues and draw on perceived associations. However, these visible cues are not limited to skin color or biological characteristics; they may also include language, clothing, and religious practices (Garner & Selod, 2015). For Arab Americans who are also

Figure 6. My Name Is Amar



Muslim, there are cultural practices grounded in their religious identity, such as wearing a hijab. In the post-Trump era, wearing the hijab was an identifier leading not only to racialized surveillance, but also potentially to violence. Below, Jamila describes the difficult decision she faced to stop wearing her hijab to protect herself from potential threats or violence.

During my first year of college in a small liberal arts school in Ohio, I was the only girl on campus wearing the hijab. I was extremely visible to everyone on campus, but I was hyperinvisible because many of my peers at my PWI [Predominantly White Institution] only saw my hijab, not me. Then the 2016 Paris Attacks happened, and I was harassed on campus. They were calling for the death of all Muslims. Walking home one night alone someone started shouting at me and I was terrified and not sure what to do. When Trump won the RNC [Republican National Committee] convention, I was in Amman and when my father came to visit, he suggested I take the hijab off for my safety. ... I decided to take it off in airport back in Chicago. ... I was about to tell my father I was uncomfortable

and wanted to put it back on when he said, "Now I feel so much calmer about sending you back to Ohio," so I stayed silent and kept it off. (Jamila, Group 1, Figure 7)

Jamila shared her conflicting feelings and sense of loss regarding her decision to no longer wear the hijab. However, she felt resolved because of her love for her family and their peace-of-mind knowing she would be safer without the hijab. Jamila stated,

I will say, with the hijab to this day, I respect so much women who wear it and who wear it with pride and who are like willing to deal with it because there's so much abuse that Muslim women who wear the hijab deal with, and I, yeah, but I still have very like weird feelings around it. (Jamila, Group 1, Figure 7)

Malik shared his mother's hijab rack as a symbol of the various microaggressions Muslim women have to deal with and the assumptions that are made about Muslim women as victims, oppressed, or as abused and in need of saving. When describing the picture, Malik (Group 2, Figure 8) shared the comments he has heard made toward Muslim women, including his mother:

Figure 7. Hijab Collection: Safety or Identity



Figure 8. My Mother's Hijab Rack



"I did not recognize you wearing that thing on your head," or "Is it really uncomfortable in that?" The worst one was when a friend asked my mom, "Did your husband force you to put that on?" These comments alone can make someone quit or give up.

A Muslim and Arab American identity has historically been racialized and connected to negative associations such as terrorism and misogyny (Bayoumi, 2006; Cainkar, 2009). Since 9/11, Muslim men and women have had to endure this racialized surveillance, shaped by gender, that is based on stereotypes attached to their bodies and names (Selod, 2019). This surveillance is carried out by the state (such as TSA agents when flying) and private citizens (Selod, 2019). Arab Americans and Muslims navigate the racial categorization of "White" by the U.S. Census without the privileges of Whiteness, while that same category or label of "White" makes their lived experiences of racialization invisible. Being forced to claim the "White" label is considered for many a "microinvalidation" (Alsaiedi et al., 2021). Microinvalidation is part of Sue and colleagues' (2007) taxonomy of microaggressions; it is a form of discrimination by invalidating or nullifying the lived experiences of a minoritized group (Sue et al., 2007).

Anti-Muslim Racism and Islamophobia

The Impact on Children. Heightened experiences of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant racism, discrimination, bullying, and exclusion after 9/11 have made the U.S. school experience for Arab and Muslim youth exceptionally challenging. This results in Arab Muslim youth experiencing isolation and discomfort in the educational setting, strained peer interactions, anxiety, and identity confusion. The Trump campaign and election intensified these challenges. Shortly after the 2016 presidential elections, Costello (2016) found that 90% of school officials nationally reported a negative effect on school climate, specifically in schools with large numbers of minoritized students. Moreover, Muslim children in K–12 schools are more likely to be bullied in schools compared to their Protestant or Jewish peers (Institute for Social Policy and Understanding [ISPU], 2017a). The impact of this bullying is compounded due to the developmental stage that the youth may be in, leading to internalization of these narratives and increased levels of anxiety and stress (Ochieng, 2017; Tabahi & Khayr, 2021). In the pictures below (Figure 9), Amina (Group 1) shares the experience of a little girl who experienced exclusion after wearing her hijab to school, and Nura (Group 2) shares the fear and emotional impact that she and her child experience because of this climate.

Figure 9. Hijab Girl



So, this is a hijab girl with two kids walking away. It describes a story of someone that I know. She was in school and at first, she didn't wear the hijab. She was not wearing the hijab, so at that time, a lot of people were friends with her. ... So when she started wearing the hijab everybody stayed away from her. A lot of friends, they are not friends with her anymore, and also, she'd been bullied from some kids too. One of the stories that happened to her, her friend came to her and told her, "Oh my mom told me to not play with you because you're wearing [a] hijab and you're Muslim." And that was after the 9/11 attack.

Today, young children from Arab and Islam heritage are being bullied in school and surrounding communities. Because [of] people's phobia toward Muslim and Arab after 9/11 our children are living in a fear and scared to show their true heritage and culture, because of Islamophobia

Figure 10. I am Muslim, Not Terrorist



in our society. So. We still have facing Islamophobia. I don't like my kids to wear like this outside, so I'm scared that somebody's going to follow them. (Nura, Group 2, Figure 10)

The term "Trump effect" was coined by the Southern Poverty Law Center in its report *The Trump Effect* (Costello, 2016). The Trump effect refers to the increase in racialized bullying and harassment in schools (Deits Cutler, 2018), reflecting the hateful and dangerous rhetoric that was used by Trump directed toward immigrants and people of color (Costello, 2016; Deits Cutler, 2018). Subsequent studies (Huang & Cornell, 2019; ISPU, 2017b; Rogers et al., 2019) found similar findings confirming increased incidence of bullying, incivility, and other incidents of hate (Tabahi & Khayr, 2021). At a national level, Muslim families have reported rates of bullying in K-12 schools due to religious identity that are more than twice the reported rates among the larger public (ISPU, 2022). While rates of Muslim children experiencing bullying were lower than the national average for children living in Illinois (29% versus

51%; Mogahed et al., 2022), rates remain high and unacceptable.¹³ Participants in our Photovoice project who are parents expressed their concerns for their children and the school climate they navigate every day. Some recommendations resulting from this study for addressing these issues in school settings include promoting a school climate that supports equity and inclusion, providing curriculum that challenges misperceptions and develops empathy, and supporting school-based professionals to examine their own biases and to be informed about local policy advocacy.

The Impact on Adults. The participants discussed the impact of both 9/11 and the Trump era on their lives and communities. They described the hypervisibility and negative media portrayals that fueled anti-Muslim racism and violence and the way these events contributed to racialization and racializing experiences such as profiling, surveillance, and harassment. The following two images describe the impact of these events. In the first image (Figure 11), Amina stated that she drew the bomb near the Islam symbol to represent the way the media has created a distorted and untruthful image of Islam. The black paint represents the way the media does not send images of what is really happening, instead constructing what they want people to associate with Islam. Amina stated that these images and messages from the media have played a significant part in her life and that of her family members. The media is powerful, and this type of image goes out to millions of people across the United States, making it very difficult for the Arab American and Muslim community to combat this narrative. Malik discussed how these media representations of the Arab American and Muslim community impacted him at work. He gives an example of how the climate at work changed for him after the mass shooting in Orlando, Florida, in which the shooter claimed to be affiliated with ISIS.¹⁴

This image that been created from media played a large part in my life. My dad and a lot of the community members lost their jobs and business. Our community deal until now with hate and racism because of that image that been created by media even drama too there is a lot of films that's describes how is Islamic countries are dangerous. (Amina, Group 1, Figure 11)

The reason why I chose this picture for this question is this is really the first place I experience racism towards to me in a post-Trump world. On June 12th, 2016, a mass shooting happened in Orlando killing about 53 people. The shooter claimed he joined ISIS and did it for his faith. The next day, I went to work without a worry. ... I was working at a restaurant at the time. ... I greeted my coworkers, and I noticed one [was] pretty upset. So, I tried to cheer him up by saying an inside joke we had with each other. Then he turned to me, and I saw the anger in his eyes and for the first time I felt fear. He asked me "Why do your people are always looking to hurt everyone?" ... He shook his head and told me. "Just wait till Trump win this year, you people will not be able to do anything after this." ... I remember going home that day and calling my general manager. ... I asked for a different name on my name tag, that way if a customer who was upset already, I could be more comfortably helping them without fear for my own life. (Malik, Group 2, Figure 12)

Indeed, research during and after the Trump era found that the general public thinks of Muslims as homogeneous and as potential criminals (Kaufman, 2019). The narratives about Muslims

¹³ While it is not known exactly what has led to the lower rates of bullying toward Muslim children in Illinois compared to national levels, some of this could be explained by the fact that Illinois and the Chicagoland area are major population centers for Arab Americans. Chicagoland is home to the fifth-largest Arab American population in the United States, and it is also home to the second-largest Palestinian, Jordanian, and Assyrian populations in the country. The size, history, and organization of the Arab American population in Chicagoland could be a protective factor for those living in the area compared to others living in communities without a critical mass or without identifiable communities that have established social service organizations, businesses, schools, etc. See Naber and colleagues (2023) for more information about the history and demographics of the Arab American population in the Chicagoland area.

¹⁴ See Ellis, R., Fantz, A., Karimi, F., and McLaughling, E. C. (2016, June) and Zambelich & Hurt (2016) for more information about this shooting. The biased and inflammatory reporting is evident in this story (CBS News, 2016), where the title of the piece is "ISIS claims responsibility for Orlando mass shooting."

Figure 11. False Narratives

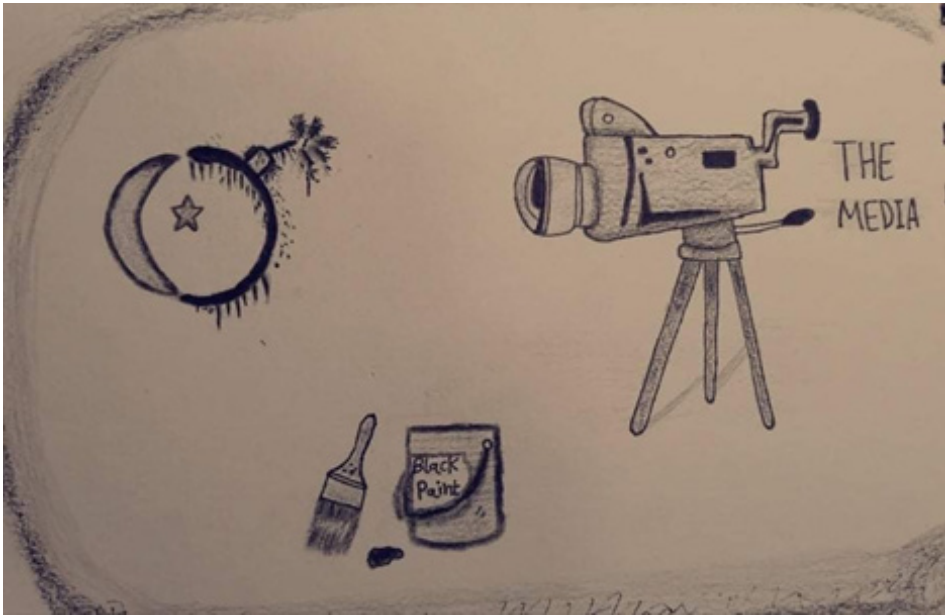


Figure 12. Fear For My Life



include language characterizing them as a racial threat and as violent, even among people who identify as politically liberal (Kaufman, 2019). Post 9/11, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (2002) documented widespread backlash against Muslim and Arab Americans or those perceived to be due to appearance or cultural or religious backgrounds. This backlash included harassment, discrimination in workplaces and schools, physical assault, and vandalizing of homes, businesses, and mosques (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2002).

The time after 9/11 caused a rise in Islamophobic discourse that Trump was able to capitalize on during his campaign (Khan et al., 2021). Trump used Twitter (now known as X) to promote anti-Muslim rhetoric as a campaign strategy (Marko, 2019). According to Khan and colleagues (2021), Trump was able to use Twitter not just to express his Islamophobic ideology but also to influence the ideology and actions of others. Abu-Ras et al. (2018) also noted that the safety and well-being of Muslims in the United States in the

wake of the Trump era can be considered a public health and social justice crisis. In fact, the Pew Research Center (2017) found that half of Muslims found it harder to be Muslims in the United States, and nearly half stated they experienced at least one incident of harassment or discrimination in a 12-month period during and immediately after the Trump campaign. According to Abdelkader (2016), based on data gathered during the campaign and election season spanning from January 2015 to March 2016, there were 174 reported incidents of anti-Muslim violence and vandalism.

The discussion groups paralleled the literature, as participants symbolized through their photos the psychological and emotional toll of the hostile climate and anti-Muslim racism. Research has documented that ethnic discrimination is associated with higher levels of psychological distress (Ikizler & Szymanski, 2018; Padela & Heisler, 2010; Rousseau et al., 2011). What has not been as well documented for Muslims is the identity- or community-level trauma associated with the larger sociopolitical climate that targets whole communities or individuals because of group identity (Villarreal Sosa, 2019a). Participants described increased levels of trauma, anxiety, and isolation as a result of anti-Muslim attacks across the globe. When describing the school-based bullying and the experience of children, Amina (Group 1) stated, “In the community, I believe that every [girl who wears] a hijab is struggling, and this should be stopped.” Jamila (Group 1, Figure 13) described the trauma because of the mosque shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, on March 15, 2019, and her persistent anxiety every time her parents go to Friday prayer.¹⁵

Yeah, so this is going to keep making me sound a little traumatized. But basically, so this is the mosque near my house. ... There has been threats against the mosque previously, so like every Friday prayer ... there's police every Friday, because there have been threats. ... The reason why I think about it a lot is after the Christchurch mosque shootings, my dad and my mom that day decided to go in solidarity and my dad will always go to Friday prayer ... and I had a panic attack when they left for the mosque, because I

was afraid they will not come back and ... like he goes every Friday and there's always that tinge of worry of “what if he doesn't come back,” ... like there's just so many things in the world that can kill your loved ones, and to have them killed over their identities. (Jamila, Group 1, Figure 13)

The impact of anti-Muslim/anti-Arab racism manifests not only in discrimination in the workplace but also in the toll on emotional and psychological well-being. Mental health services for the Arab American community must be provided by clinicians who are aware of and understand how this context shapes psychological distress.

Muslims remain one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented populations in the United States (Ahmed & Reddy, 2007; Ali et al., 2004; Erickson & Al-Timimi, 2001; Hodge, 2005). For Muslims, maintaining and navigating their identity and freedom to practice their faith has become exceedingly challenging, as anti-Muslim sentiment and discriminatory acts against persons perceived to be Arab, Muslim, or South Asian have increased as a result of 9/11 (Ali et al., 2004). Ibrahim and Dykeman (2011) asserted, “It is difficult to live according to the tenets of Islam and its recommended lifestyle and traditions because of the negative ascriptions by the larger social systems about Islam and Islamophobia in general especially since 9/11” (p. 89). The tenets of Islam serve as a way of life for Muslims and include (a) a declaration of faith which is repeated during prayer (shahadah); (b) the five daily ritual prayers (salah) at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and before bed, which can be carried out alone or in a group; (c) giving to charity (zakat); (d) fasting during Ramadan (sawm); and lastly (e) the pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia (hajj).¹⁶

Living these tenets are visible acts of faith, and in the U.S. context of anti-Muslim racism, it can become a challenge to do so. While these core tenets seem to contradict mainstream values and ways of living, many Muslims remain steadfast in their foundation of faith and assert these principles to contribute to civic and community engagement. The tenets of Islam coupled with the Sunnah (the traditions and practices of the prophet Muhammad) encourage Muslims to be

¹⁵ The shooting at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killed 49 people and left 48 wounded. This gunman was Australian and had anti-immigrant and racist views (BBC, 2019).

¹⁶ See PBS (n.d.) for more resources about the beliefs and practices of the Islamic Faith.

Figure 13. Identity Trauma



active agents for change in the community, ensure the well-being of their neighbors, and support the collective well-being of society. One of the AAFS's responses to address the impact of this hostile climate is to expand mental health services and build capacity among other mental health professionals to provide culturally responsive services. The AAFS also regularly engages in training for other institutions such as the police, schools, or professional conferences to support relationship building and awareness among other stakeholders in the community.

Civic Engagement and Advocacy

While the research on civic engagement of Arabs and Arab Muslims is limited compared to similar research on other racial or ethnic groups in the United States (Read, 2014), Arab and Muslim advocacy and engagement in U.S. political life has a long history that has often been dismissed or interrupted, such as the impact of 9/11 (Kaiser, 2020). Levels of advocacy and participation of activism in the community increased after 9/11 (Kaiser, 2020). Participants in both focus groups

articulated and passionately expressed their commitment to advocacy not only for the Arab community but also for other similarly minoritized communities. In the context of advocacy, one participant shared the following photo and stated:

We are told to represent America with red, white, and blue but red, to minorities, is the color of blood. Blood of those we lost from hate crimes, suicides due to bullying, and the wrongful death of Arab Americans on American soil or done by the American government. ... This picture shows how Arab Americans have fallen through the cracks and have stood by various movements, battles of racism towards minorities, and much more but no one has stood with us because we're only on the news for war or to be generalized with terrible criminals. (Fatima, Group 1, Figure 14)

Participants felt that solidarity was not reciprocated among other racialized groups. Such feelings of being left behind or forgotten resulted in growing

Figure 14. The Color of Blood



frustration with the notion of allyship. Nevertheless, there is hope and power in coalitional organizing, and fighting for immigrant rights is one area where immigrant groups can come together.

The photo illustrates different ethnic and religious groups coming together to denounce and condemn the actions of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Department and their decision to host a Citizens Academy in Chicago (training private citizens how to look for and even detain folks who are undocumented). I took this photo because it shows that the criminalization of immigration and immigrants is an issue that many

minority groups face. Although it might manifest differently for each racial identity, the problem stems from the same place of xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment. This photo says that our communities will not live in fear, and we will fight back when we are under attack. (Amir, Group 2, Figure 15)

Many of the participants were actively engaged in an anti-hate campaign against a local politician, Sharon Brannigan, a Palos Township trustee and Trump Republican, who made racist and Islamophobic comments on her social media accounts. The community had organized a protest demanding that Brannigan resign as trustee. After

Figure 15. Solidarity



Figure 16. Fighting Racism



4 years, she did not resign; she instead ran for Palos Township assessor and lost.¹⁷ Participants shared their pictures and spoke to the intense political discourse that culminated from her election and incumbency. Yusuf stated,

For the past four years basically ... the Palos Township trustee, Brannigan, has said racist remarks against the community and the Muslims and anti-immigrant rhetoric. So, for the past four years we have been campaigning, calling for her to resign and have the townships take action against her, but nothing has been done. It's been going on for four years, and now the upcoming elections [are] coming up for the township. ... In every month we have been going to the

township protesting ... they are supposed to represent the community, but they are attacking it instead. (Yusuf, Group 2, Figure 16)

In this struggle against racism in city government, solidarity and allyship is important. Iman shares that in the rally against Sharon Brannigan (Figure 17),

There was a lot of the Southwest Side Project out there. There was another Latino coalition that was there. When you see people from other immigrant communities or people of color, like Black and Brown communities that are there to support you, you feel that much better about yourself, you don't feel so alone anymore.

Figure 17. Not Alone



¹⁷ See Staff (2021) for more information about the efforts of Arabs and Palestinians in the Southwest suburbs to Sharon Brannigan.

These examples of advocacy are testaments to the ways in which young Muslim Americans engaged in a variety of strategies to counter racist policies and actions. According to Itaoui and colleagues (2021), the 2016 election shaped these anti-racist strategies in an effort to challenge and survive the sociopolitical context.

Faith Above Fear: “Allah Knows Best”

Most of the focus group participants identified as Muslim. The participants’ faith served as a protective factor in combating nativism, Islamophobia, and anti-Muslim racism. The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), an organization whose mission is to provide objective research and education about American Muslims in order to support dialogue, decision making, and solutions, conducted a recent needs and assets assessment of Muslims living in Illinois (Mogahed et al., 2022) and found that a strong faith identity was categorized as an asset. Such findings corroborated previous research (ISPU, 2016), which asked a national sample of Muslims how important their faith identity was to their American identity. Ninety-one percent of participants stated that their strong American identity was associated with a strong religious identity. Participants in this study described how their faith identity grounded them in times of hardship, especially after 9/11. In the quote below, Iman describes the dissonance experienced when turning to one’s faith for support at the very same time that one’s faith is under attack.

I remember how I turned to the Quran in times of difficulty and confusion after 9/11. I felt robbed as a Muslim female. My religion was being hijacked and was under attack. Everywhere I turned I found negative energy and unwelcoming comments. I was made fun of for wearing my hijab. I was referred to as [a] “terrorist” by customers and fellow classmates. I remember having to be escorted to my car by security, because patrons felt uncomfortable around me when in fact, I was uncomfortable around them. They were shouting awful terms at me and had the nerve to call me aggressive and violent. (Iman, Group 2, Figure 18)

Despite such negative and discriminatory experiences, Iman further articulated,

I knew that ISLAM was the most peaceful religion on earth and that awful people hijacked my religion and used God’s name in vain all to cause fear, division, and gain power and control over the PEOPLE. I connected to my faith like never before and asked for answers.

Despite the negative narratives of Muslims and the direct verbal and psychological attacks Iman experienced against her Muslim identity, she described the way she navigated these narratives and continued to find comfort in her faith.

Unapologetically Resilient

Possibly one of the most hopeful themes of this study was the unwavering commitment to persevere in the face of adversity, racism, discrimination, and Islamophobia. Iman was so proud of this moment. She was standing for her community and in solidarity with the Latine community.

Because our voices are just not heard and this specific day, I really wanted them to know, everybody who wasn’t able to join this meeting or everybody wasn’t able to speak for themselves or who was too shy, who didn’t even speak the language, I wanted them to know that you know you have someone out there who’s willing to shout for you—willing to rally for you—willing to scream for you. Anybody that’s here to better themselves for a better

Figure 18. Hijacked Faith



education, or better future, a better life, I wanted them to know that you have our support. (Iman, Group 2, Figure 19)

Nura beautifully captured the resilience of her community by stating, “Our blood is not cheap.” She further expressed that the devaluing of Arab and Muslim lives will not be dismissed by the community (Group 2). While addressing their vulnerability and lived experiences of fear perpetuated by xenophobic rhetoric and unjust anti-Muslim racist policies, participants closed with their hope for a better future for themselves and their children in the United States. As one stated, “My community is resilient, and we have faced oppression for generations. However, this struggle has created life-long impacts that have affected Arab Americans in diaspora for years—economically, socially, and politically” (Amir, Group 1, Figure 20).

The findings from the focus group and photo sharing sessions underscore the continued challenges of identity and representation, (in) visibility, and pushing back against anti-Arab/anti-Muslim racism. The findings also underscore religion as a protective factor against structural and systemic racism. Islamophobia, racialization, anti-immigrant laws, and barriers to access were among the challenges discussed. The participants also focused on the impact of Islamophobia on the children in the school setting, bullying experiences in the schools, and fear of expressing their

Figure 19. Shouting with One Voice!



Figure 20. Youth Activists



identity in the school setting. Conversely, the participants also discussed their desire for allyship, the need for institutional accountability, the resilience of the Arab American population over generations, and the importance of fighting against White supremacy and oppression. Overall, the participants of this study demonstrated their community resilience and navigational capital as they survived and thrived amid racializing experiences and microaggressions.

Implications

Implications of this study include the need to support the reclaiming of identity and a MENA category in the census. Having a category and being counted is important for validating lived experiences of racism and discrimination. Being forced to claim the “White” label can be experienced as a microinvalidation and has very real consequences, such as not being able to assess the impact of public health issues or other social issues in Arab American communities. Equally as important, having a MENA category provides a way to address social and health inequities experienced by the Arab American community as well as an avenue for obtaining funding for addressing those inequities. The invisibility associated with the lack of a census category leads to other challenges, such as continued invisibility in school curricula, a lack of acknowledgement of the need for language access, and the continued proliferation of misperceptions and negative stereotypes within dominant U.S. society.

Furthermore, the Photovoice narratives make evident the need for increased consciousness raising about the lived experiences of the Arab American community and opportunities for allyship and advocacy. Opportunities for non-Muslims or non-

Arabs to learn about the community are critical for addressing anti-Muslim/anti-Arab racism. Consciousness raising first begins with critical self-reflection in identifying biases and working toward allyship. For example, understanding the tenets and pillars of Islam and how they serve to guide those who adhere to the Islamic faith are critical in leaning into active participation to dismantle anti-Muslim racism. Furthermore, a better understanding of and distinguishing between the Islamic faith and Arab culture is key so that religion and culture are not conflated and, conversely, areas of overlap are understood.

Several participants talked about the missing histories of Arab Americans and the lack of representation in books and materials in schools. As many respondents shared, bias and racism are learned and can be intergenerational. Tabahi & Khayr (2021) list numerous strategies for addressing Anti-Muslim racism in schools, including addressing school climate, the implicit curriculum, and the mental health needs of Muslim children. Examples of those strategies include using community resources and toolkits that address Muslim experiences in the United States, highlighting the strengths and assets of the community as opposed to centering discussions about the community on 9/11 and its aftermath, promoting restorative practices in schools, and ensuring that mental health professionals and social workers in schools are trauma informed and have experience working with Arab and Muslim communities. An excellent resource that offers multiple toolkits is *Therapy for Muslims* (2021). This resource categorizes a variety of issues with respective resources such as domestic violence, gender and sexual orientation, trauma, racism, discrimination, marriage, Muslim youth, and more. Participants noted the importance of professional development for educators, such as in the words of Amina:

Bullying others just because they are Muslim, why do they not educate educators to not be racist or to educate children to accept everybody, no matter what is their religion, no matter what they believe, no matter what their color is and all of that. (Amina, Group 1)

To move forward various advocacy efforts, it is critical that other racialized groups learn about and understand the Arab American experience. The Arab American community has faced a rise

in discrimination while not being recognized as a minority group (Alsaiddi et al., 2021). Furthermore, this invisibility as a racialized minority group has historically meant a lack of attention from civil rights groups (Aziz, 2012). In Chicago, there have been intentional efforts at building intergroup solidarity. For example, Hatem Abudayyeh, executive director of the Chicago-based Arab American Action Network (AAAN), spoke in Detroit alongside Frank Chapman, an African American activist from Chicago, in support of Rasmea Odeah, a Palestinian American and women's rights activist facing deportation and revoking of her U.S. citizenship (Harb, 2014). Later, Abudayyeh joined a delegation to Ferguson, Missouri, to demand justice for the murder of Michael Brown, the unarmed Black teenager shot by police (Harb, 2014). AAAN is involved in activism related to the racial profiling affecting people across ethnic and racial backgrounds in Chicago. It is also involved in Chicago Teachers Unions' campaigns to make schools sanctuaries for immigrant and Black youth (Hayoun, 2017). The Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR) has also been a source of intergroup solidarity. Many of the events hosted by ICIRR, such as rallies, include speakers across racial and ethnic groups standing in solidarity in support of all communities under attack by anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric. ICIRR (2017) has explicitly stated that its platform includes fighting against deportations, the Muslim registry, the violence against undocumented immigrants, refugees, Muslims, LGBTQ individuals, and other vulnerable groups. Figure 18, "Shouting with One Voice," was one such moment of solidarity between the Latine community and the Arab American/Muslim community at an ICIRR rally. Certainly, there are many shared histories and current lived realities across groups such as racial profiling, anti-immigrant and xenophobic attitudes, colonialism, occupation, apartheid, war, and U.S. imperialism (Hayoun, 2017).

Solidarity and coalitional organizing are necessary for addressing immigration policies and other policies that criminalize, profile, and prevent access to services across racialized groups. One of the most basic recommendations is that anti-Muslim/anti-Arab racism needs to be recognized and acknowledged. Denial of this racism silences the community and legitimizes the unjust treatment of Arab Americans. Research on building solidarity across people of color suggests that exposure to information about

ways that other groups are racially minoritized heightens solidarity between groups of people of color (Eidgahy & Pérez, 2023). Furthermore, in-group solidarity and consciousness raising leads to higher intergroup solidarity (Tate, 1993). Making intentional efforts to reach out to the local Arab and Muslim community and consciousness raising *within* groups are both excellent first steps toward understanding and solidarity. It is important to note that those wanting to learn more about the community should do their due diligence prior to reaching out to these respective communities. Often, racialized and minoritized communities bear the burden of educating others about the history of racialization, when community interaction and engagement should be focused on understanding the lived experiences of those being asked.

Our research underscores the importance of recognizing the increased political participation of the Arab American community and the critical role they will play in election results. In the 2022 national midterm elections, Muslim Americans made historic gains, as more than 80 Muslim candidates won judicial seats from local to federal levels and had a record-breaking number of candidates running for office (Molina, 2022). In Illinois's 51st District, Nabeela Syed defeated an incumbent Republican (Molina, 2022). As our study participants demonstrated, this activism is a central part of addressing injustices the community faces and is a way to push back on racism, bias, and injustice. Being familiar with the different civic and advocacy groups nationally and locally is an excellent way to be informed about trends, news, and initiatives to best support the Arab and Muslim community. Such groups include The Muslim Civic Coalition, Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, Council on American-Islamic Relations, and the Arab American Institute, among others.

Social workers and other mental health professionals need to be adequately prepared to provide culturally responsive services and advocacy. Conversations about mental health need to extend beyond culture and stigma to include structural barriers to access, such as the lack of language appropriate services or the implicit bias of practitioners or staff. In addition, mental health practitioners need to understand how the larger sociopolitical climate impacts mental health; an individually focused, pathologizing perspective will prevent Arab American community members from receiving the support they need to address

psychological distress resulting from identity- and group-level trauma. Addressing group-level traumas can also include coping strategies such as engagement in advocacy (Alsaïdi et al., 2021). The AAFS is currently undergoing a community needs assessment focused on mental health. This survey will parallel other surveys in the Chicagoland community focused on Latine and Black communities (Villarreal Sosa, 2019b). This will support awareness about the structural barriers to mental health services.

Clinicians can do their part by learning more about historical trauma and considering ways to provide group-level support and community-specific support. Three good resources to start this education process are Menekem (2017), who discussed racialized trauma and what this means for White bodies as well; Courtois and Ford (2016), who provided a thorough understanding of different forms of trauma including identity (trauma inflicted on a group because of their social identity) and historical trauma, as well as a model for treatment; and Fonville and colleagues (2023) who provided a comparative analysis of African American and Palestinian perspectives on historical trauma and Indigenous resources for healing. Understanding the lived experiences and historical trauma of specific groups such as Palestinians is essential for effective practice. Finally, it is critical for social workers and other mental health clinicians to stay abreast of the current political climate and policies that impact the Arab American and Muslim communities locally and nationally. Research suggests that social workers and other practitioners are more likely to advocate for their clients who are immigrants or other minoritized groups if they have awareness of the larger political climate, and this is especially true for White practitioners, who are less likely than practitioners of color to advocate for immigrants or minoritized groups (S. Rodriguez, Kirksey, et al., 2022).

Practitioners should also be aware of the ways that connection with Arab American and Muslim identity, including faith, is a protective factor in navigating experiences of racism and discrimination. Our participants' narratives and photos demonstrate the importance of that social identity and faith in navigating racializing and discriminatory experiences. With this awareness, practitioners can endeavor to create space that allows clients to bring their whole selves (which includes their intersectional identities) and can foster climates that permit clients to

enhance connections to their ethnic and/or faith communities. Thus, to be effective practitioners with the Arab American community, similar to other communities of color, one cannot be racially blind in their approach (Tabahi & Khyar, 2021; Villarreal Sosa & Castillo Martinez, 2023).

Finally, there is a lack of access to Arabic-speaking practitioners. Professional training programs should create partnerships and pathways to increase the pipeline of bilingual Arabic practitioners. For those organizations that do not have Arabic speaking practitioners, hiring and developing professionally trained, culturally responsive interpreters is an ethical responsibility and necessary for achieving equity.

Continued research needs to center the voices of and be in collaboration with the community. Researchers should collect data that provides insights into how to best reach the community and understand what hinders community members from full participation as citizens. Research should also address developing best practices for working with the Arab American community that are culturally responsive and consider the impact of the sociopolitical context. As social workers, whether as researchers or practitioners, complicity is not an option, and we must commit to anti-racist practices and advocacy.

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