

The changing profile of Arab peoples in the U.S.: New evidence from the 2000 Census (Andrzej Kulczycki and Arun Peter Lobo)

Introduction:

Much has been written about the major immigrant and ethnic groups in the US, particularly Asian and Latino Americans. Curiously, there has been little scholarly analysis of Arab Americans and almost none based on census data. Previous research conducted by the authors has established that Arab Americans are a growing presence and, as a group, are younger, more educated, earn higher incomes than the US adult population, and also have high rates of intermarriage (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2001; 2002). These and other findings suggest an increasingly assimilated ethnic population, although Arab Americans face pervasive negative stereotypes, recently compounded by association with the terrorist attacks of September 11. We analyze demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of Arab Americans over three decennial censuses, 1980-2000, and document differences in the same characteristics by nativity and major ancestry groups, as well as between Arab and non-Arab Americans.

The increased flows of Arab immigrants in the 1990s have added to the diversity characterizing the major Arab American ancestry groups already settled in the US. Reflecting the increased interest in this ethnic group, the US Census Bureau recently released its first ever brief on Arab Americans (Cruz and Brittingham, 2003). Although informative, the report's focus is on the geographic distribution of the population and it offers only limited comparisons with 1990 data or other information. In this study, we examine continuity and change across a greater range of demographic and socio-economic characteristics and over a longer period. Although our analysis is essentially descriptive, it is also prescient so as to better inform knowledge and debate about a group much misunderstood, distrusted and stigmatized, as well as much in the news.

Objectives and data:

Specifically, this paper has four objectives. First, we examine current demographic and socio-economic characteristics of Arab Americans as defined by ancestry and country of birth. We define 'Arab' to include all 22 Arab League member states; overwhelming majorities in all those populations identify themselves as Arabs. Second, we assess changes in these characteristics over recent decades. Third, we compare immigrant and US-born Arab Americans, and compare both groups to the U.S. born total population. This enables assessment of whether Arab Americans exhibit distinct demographic and socio-economic characteristics that differentiate them from the rest of the U.S. population. Fourth, we compare the characteristics of major Arab ethnicities, to the extent possible given existing sample size constraints.

To achieve these objectives, we use the 5% Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) data from the 1980-2000 decennial censuses. We have previously used 1980 and 1990 PUMS data (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2001; 2002) and will likewise extract data on Arab Americans from the recently obtained 2000 PUMS dataset so as to evaluate recent changes as well as continuities in the profile of this ethnic group. We supplement this information with INS flow data on Arab immigrants (defined by country of birth) entering the U.S. in the years 1972-2001 which, though restricted to count data, provides an annual time series.

As in our previous work, we define Arab Americans by ancestry and place of birth: those persons who report their first or second ancestry was from one of the 22 Arab League states, or that they were born in one of those countries. The unweighted sample size of our Arab American PUMS files from 1980 and 1990 are 35,588 and 46,767, respectively. (An equally large gain in sample size is anticipated for the 2000 PUMS data).

Growth and ethnic composition of the Arab American population:

We first examine the total size and growth of the population over the study period, as well as its breakdown by major Arab American ethnicities. The Arab American population grew in size by 42% in the 1980s to just over 1 million in 1990. (According to Cruz and Brittingham (2003), 1.2 million persons reported an Arab ancestry in 2000, up by 38% from 860,354 in 1990). Increased flows of Arab immigrants during the 1990s ensured the continued growth and rejuvenation of the Arab American population. In all, 633,141 Arab immigrants were admitted to the US during 1972-2001. The growing volume of immigration was sustained through 2001, notwithstanding the events of 9/11. In 2001, 38,892 Arab immigrants entered the US, up from 26,556 in 1999, a gain of 47% over two years. Overall, Arab Americans are one of the smallest ethnic minorities in the US, accounting for less than 1% of the total population, and their growth trajectory is less dramatic than that of other minority/ethnic groups such as Asian or Latino Americans. Nevertheless, the Arab-descendent population has doubled in size over the last 20 years. Increased scrutiny placed on immigrant applications and restrictions imposed by the INS and the Department of Homeland Security on persons from Arab and Muslim countries may have since caused a decline in Arab immigrants, although data to verify this assumption are lacking (we anticipate having 2002 data in time for PAA).

We disaggregate the data to investigate the changing composition of Arab Americans by ancestry group/country of birth. The two largest Arab ancestries remain the Lebanese and Syrians, reflecting their longer history of immigration to the US, but their share of all Arab Americans has fallen to just over one-half. Other large Arab groups include Egyptians, Palestinians, Iraqis, Jordanians, Saudis and Yemenis. Since 1995, Egyptians have made up the largest annual number of Arab immigrants into the US and immigrant flows from Iraq, Yemen and Algeria have experienced high growth rates. These new data show that many Arabs have continued to immigrate to the US in waves reflecting political upheavals, as occurred earlier in the history of Arab immigration into the US, while many others have entered for professional or economic reasons.

Demographic characteristics:

We consider the age and sex composition of foreign-born and US-born Arab Americans and then analyze their fertility rates by comparing children ever born to women aged 35-44 to the U.S. population as a whole. We also assess whether Arab American women (differentiated further by nativity) have their first child at a lower or higher age than US women as a whole. Given enough cases in 2000 PUMS, we will explore how fertility rates vary by major Arab ancestries. Our earlier research indicates that immigrant Arabs tend to have larger average household size than US-born Arab Americans or all Americans. Also, their household structures are more likely to consist of married-couple family units and Arab American children are more likely to live in two-parent family households than are

all American children. We expect recent data to show similar patterns because Arab socio-cultural customs and religious values (both Christian and Islamic) emphasize traditional family structures and gender roles (Bilge and Aswad, 1996).

As the primary focus of the recent Census Bureau report on Arab Americans concerns their geographic distribution, we do not attempt to analyze this topic in depth. We will complement that report, however, by highlighting salient features of the population's spatial distribution and concentration with data on Arab ethnicity derived from both the ancestry and birthplace questions of the census. Arab Americans are disproportionately concentrated in relatively few states (California, New York, New Jersey, Michigan, Illinois, Texas) and though some ethnic enclaves are identifiable that may suggest slow assimilation, the numbers of Arab Americans in such communities are small.

Socio-economic characteristics:

We next analyze the major socio-economic characteristics of Arab Americans and their evolution over time. In 1990, 83% of Arab Americans reported having strong English language skills and the share of immigrant Arabs with strong English proficiency had increased by 10% over 1980. We test to see if this pattern continued, despite sustained heavy Arab immigration in the 1990s; if so, it would signify continued favorable prospects of adapting to the US labor market. We also assess the proportions of US-born and foreign-born Arab Americans who continue to speak another language at home, presumably Arabic, as an indicator of the ability to retain ethnic distinctiveness. In 1990, 87% of immigrant Arabs continued to speak another language at home, presumably Arabic, compared to 16% of US-born Arab Americans. If recent data show similar findings, this would suggest that most members of the second generation are not proving as adept at keeping Arabic as a common bond as they are at developing a strong command of English which would assist in their integration.

Past research shows that both Arab American men and women tend to have higher education levels than the average American and that their levels of educational attainment improved over 1980-90, especially for immigrant Arab women. We assess changes in the ensuing decade for all groups and, given sufficient cases, for major Arab ancestry groups. Several Arab countries (e.g. Lebanon, Egypt) continue to lose many well trained graduates and the US has been a major beneficiary of such movements in the past. In 1990, we also discerned a sizeable fraction of less-skilled immigrants and it is of interest to see if this has remained the case. If Arab Americans overall are shown to continue to have higher levels of educational attainment than all Americans, this bodes well for their ability to move into higher paying occupations which, in turn, enhances their prospects for successful social and economic integration.

Regarding their economic situation, employment rates have been somewhat lower for Arab American women than for all American women, and roughly equivalent for men. We determine if these marked differentials by nativity were sustained more recently, particularly among immigrant women. Lower female employment rates may reflect gender traditionalism, adherence to which may be differentiated by nativity; US-born Arab American women tend to be better educated and are more likely to be formally employed. Lower female labor force rates may reflect additional structural barriers to obtaining

formal-sector work and/or husbands' high earnings. We explore trends in major occupational categories and compare these to US adults overall. Our earlier work indicated that Arab Americans were more likely to occupy managerial, professional, sales and administrative positions, and that they were underrepresented in both skilled and unskilled blue-collar positions. Moreover, we gauge recent earnings of Arab Americans and examine if these have changed over time. In 1990, the median household income of immigrant Arabs was similar to that for all Americans, whereas it was much higher for native-born Arab Americans.

Conclusions:

Arab Americans have received less scholarly attention than other ethnic groups, although they have been subjected to a great deal of press and popular attention in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. 'Arab Americans' include persons of different national origins and socio-economic backgrounds, although Arab Americans do share a cultural and linguistic heritage. This study sheds new light on this group, portraying continuity and change along a number of demographic and socio-economic characteristics. The Arab-descendent population in the US has roughly doubled in the past two decades, a function of more liberal US immigration laws and continued political unrest in the Middle East. This segment of American society tends to be younger, more urban, more educated, more affluent, and more likely to hold sought-after jobs and to be self-employed as compared to the average American. Arab immigration into the U.S. continued apace throughout the 1990s, lending increased heterogeneity to this population.

Data suggest that as a group, Arab Americans continue to fare well on many indicators of social and economic assimilation. This assessment is tempered by several caveats. First, there exists a sizeable fraction of less-skilled immigrant and native-born Arab Americans, especially among immigrant women. Second, the heightened political sensitivity ascribed to this group following the events of 9/11 and the conflation of Arab Americans with images of suicidal jihadists in many people's minds renders continued progress toward social integration more problematic for all Arab Americans. To date, however, Arab Americans have entered and assimilated into the US on an individual basis, and most have become a solid part of the middle class. In the process, they have added to the U.S. experience of successfully assimilating a wide variety of ethnicities and mass immigration streams.

References:

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