



# Community Brief: American Muslims and Aging



Made possible thanks  
to the support of



According to the *State of Aging and Health in America 2013*, a report by the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, the current “growth in the number and proportion of older adults is unprecedented in the history of the United States.” Americans are living longer, and by 2030 older adults will account for roughly 20 percent of the U.S. population.

Aging is an issue of urgent need and high interest in the U.S., and to date little is known about the American Muslim aging experience. This needs assessment was conducted to develop a more informed understanding of older American Muslims’ needs, gather preliminary insight on their aging experience, and explore the role American Muslim communities can play in serving those needs.

## About the Author

### Dr. Kristine Ajrouch

ISPU Fellow



Dr. Kristine Ajrouch is a Fellow at ISPU and a Professor in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminology at Eastern Michigan University. Her

research interests include matters of social relations and aging, with emphasis on gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. She recently completed a study, funded by the National Institute of Aging, which examined issues of social relations and health among Arab American elders.

### Edited by:



**Zeba Iqbal**, Editor, ISPU



**Katie Grimes**,  
Communications Associate, ISPU

---

From the cover: *State of Aging and Health in America 2013*<sup>1</sup>

---

ISPU would like to acknowledge the generous supporters whose contributions made this report possible:

Dr. Mohamed Elnabity &  
Mrs. Rania Zagho

and

The Ikram Family:

Khawaja M. & Farhat Ikram  
Dr. K. Haroun & Mugheera Ikram  
Dr. K. Nimr & Beenish Ikram

## Introduction and Background

American Muslims are extremely diverse,<sup>2</sup> varying by race, culture, religiosity, ethnicity, and socioeconomic and immigrant status. Despite this diversity, they all place a high priority on family, particularly parents.

Religiously and culturally, many American Muslims consider caring for aging parents to be a moral duty. Protecting family dignity is highly valued, and thus many families may not feel comfortable openly discussing illness or asking others for help.<sup>3</sup> For these reasons and others, children and close friends and family consider it their sole and direct responsibility<sup>4</sup> to care for elders.<sup>5</sup>

The *Quran*<sup>a</sup> and other religious scripture strongly mandate caring for aged parents, but Islam specifically directs society to care for *all* elders, not just one's parents. The *Quran* includes several passages referencing decline in old age, making clear that the younger generation shall serve elders kindheartedly.<sup>6</sup>

Despite Islam's strong and clear emphasis on caring for older adults, American Muslim communities have not developed formal or comprehensive programs to support this demographic. The number of older American Muslims (over 60 years old) is increasing, and thus gaining a better sense of this population's needs is critical.

## Scope of the Study

A multi-method approach including:

### Quantitative method

- Survey responses from 264 American Muslims across the country via a web-based survey. Survey respondents are American Muslims either over 60 or who have parents and/or grandparents living in the U.S. who are over 60.

### Qualitative methods

- 90-minute focus group discussions with a total of 37 older adults (60+) at four Muslim centers in the Detroit metro area. Focus group participants are a diverse, almost equal mix of African/African American, Arab/Middle Eastern American, South Asian and Albanian/Eastern European Muslims.
- One-on-one interviews with 18 Detroit community leaders.

The samples identified are limited and do not represent all American Muslims. However, they do provide critical preliminary data and insights.

a <sup>1</sup> Quran: Central religious text of Islam, which Muslims believe to be a revelation from God.



# Key Findings

## *From the survey:*

The top three **physical and functional needs** reported are:

- Taking care of home (54 percent)
- Transportation (42 percent)
- Physical health (40 percent; i.e., taking medicine)

...approximately 78 percent have participated in some organized social activity and want to participate in more.

## Reported Levels of Support

- Older Arab/Middle Eastern Americans report higher proportions of need (over 50 percent) and receive the highest levels of support (over 47 percent) in all categories except home care. In home care, South Asians report the highest level of need (over 60 percent) and receive the highest levels of support (over 60 percent).
- Older African Americans and Europeans/Other report the lowest levels of need and receive the lowest levels of support for those needs. African Americans are least satisfied with help they receive, and Europeans/Other are most satisfied with help they receive.
- All respondents report similar levels of help they need or receive with no significant differences based on immigrant status. Immigrants are more satisfied overall with help they receive.

## Social Interaction and Activities

- **Socially**, almost all (97 percent) of survey respondents state that older American Muslims speak to at least one person on a regular basis, and for over 80 percent on average their contact is with family members.
- Older American Muslims' level of participation in organized **social activities** is high, and approximately 78 percent have participated in some organized social activity and want to participate in more.

# Key Findings continued

The focus groups provide deeper insight into older American Muslims' existing and potential future needs. Here are some of the key findings:

## Dependency and Family Roles

- With regard to **functional and physical needs**, participants fear loss of independence and becoming a burden on their children. They fear that the inability to care for themselves will negatively impact family relations.
- Some participants believe in the tradition of children caring for them in times of need. Others are more pragmatic.
- There are gender differences in the reactions and attitudes of various participants. Men tend to support traditional family roles for caregiving, while women have a more pragmatic approach to both care and social needs.
- Many who have cared for parents or in-laws do not expect their children to be caregivers.

## Formal Care Options and Attitudes

- Some fear living in nursing homes because they do not like the conditions of nursing homes.
- Most are willing to live in a nursing home or to utilize formal care options if their cultural and religious needs are met.

- Many like the idea of Muslims caring for their own by setting up Muslim formal care options.

## Interactions and Connectivity

- With regard to **social interaction**, focus group attendees emphasize interpersonal relations. They desire respect and meaningful relationships with family, youth, and peers.
- Within family relationships some experience conflict based on culture or religious differences.
- With youth, focus group participants feel disconnected.

## Senior Programming

- To encourage more social contact, attendees propose intergenerational programs and “senior day” through the *mosque*.<sup>b</sup>
- Any out-of-the-home programming is challenging due to seniors' dependency on transportation.
- Older American Muslims seek progress. Even small steps forward are important to ensure success.

---

Discussion from the one-on-one interviews with metro Detroit American Muslim community leaders provides critical feedback and recommendations.

- Interviewees agree that ideally American Muslims would like to care for their own and that integrating elders in community activities is critical to their health and well-being.
- Aging needs to be a high priority issue of discussion and action in the American Muslim community.
- More collaboration and unity among American Muslim communities are needed. No one individual, group, or mosque can fully address the needs associated with aging.
- Aging is universal, but the aging experience is not. Older American Muslims are not monolithic. They have varying wants, needs, and viewpoints toward care.
- More open communication is needed between older American Muslims, their communities, and their families on the issue of care.
- The community has resource constraints, and as a result seniors may not be getting the time and attention they require.
- Interviewees would like to:
  - Develop educational programming to provide guidance, resources, and support to older American Muslims.
  - Have spiritual programming for older American Muslims.
  - Visit older American Muslims who are sick or immobile.
  - Create opportunities for socialization beyond the immediate family to prevent isolation.
- Realizing the limitations of the mosque, interviewees encourage moving beyond the mosque to social service providers as a means of developing acceptable and effective care options.
- Interviewees are optimistic that there are many well-qualified American Muslim health professionals to address health- and care-related issues of aging.

<sup>b</sup> Mosque: A Muslim place of worship.





# Implications

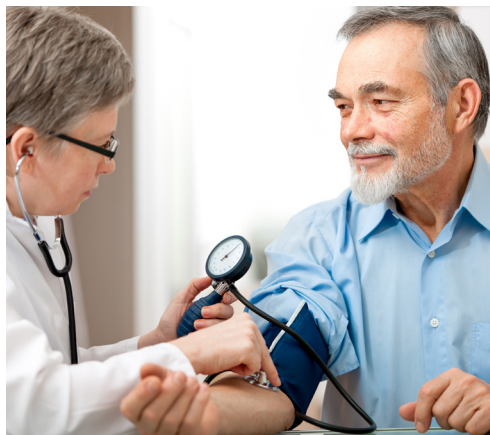
Some mosques are willing to program for seniors spiritually and socially, which would enhance their emotional health and well-being.

The population of older American Muslims is growing and increasingly needs assistance with home care, transportation, and maintaining their physical health—three factors critical to their physical quality of life.

Past generations were able to directly care for their elders. Due to changing lifestyles and family structures, longer life spans, and the rise of chronic disease, direct care of parents and other elders is not always possible. Some older American Muslims realize this and are willing to explore formal care options. However, the options that exist currently are not always culturally sensitive to the needs of older American Muslims.

Some mosques are willing to program for seniors spiritually and socially, which would enhance their emotional health and well-being. However, community will and prioritization on aging have been low, and they are generally not prepared to serve the needs of older American Muslims. Mosque leaders would like individuals, families, and the community to converse openly about aging and to look beyond the mosque to fulfill the care-related needs of older American Muslims.

In many cases, caring for the older population is limited to caring for one's parents. Islam, however, strongly guides the community to care for all elders. Knowing this and that the population of older American Muslims is increasing, proactively and systematically addressing their needs is critical.



# Recommendations

## Individuals

---

- Communicate openly with family about your issues and fears on aging, including your preferences with regard to caregiving and end-of-life decisions.
- Ask for Seniors and Intergenerational days, workshops, and activities at your mosque.

## Families, Nonprofits, and Mosques

---

- Put aging on the agenda at home and at the mosque, advancing the role and responsibility of the entire community above and beyond the family.
- Communicate openly with parents, grandparents, and community members about issues, hopes, and fears on aging.
- Be conscious in your interactions of how important meaningful and respectful engagement is to older American Muslims.
- Plan social events, community service events, and spiritual programming for older American Muslims.
- Organize discussions with adult children of older American Muslims on caring for their aging parents, including the discussion of end of life, POAs, living health wills, etc.
- Other minority and faith communities in America are facing similar issues with regard to caregiving for aging parents and elders.<sup>7</sup> Reach out to senior services centers and nonprofits catering to minority populations to understand the services and training they are offering to home caregivers. Ask to share information and learn from their experiences and caregiving models.
- Organize and/or sponsor Seniors and Intergenerational days and activities at your mosque.
- Plan a *khutbah*<sup>c</sup> on aging and the needs of older American Muslims.
- Assess area care options, service providers, and facilities for cultural and religious sensitivity.

## Donors and Funders

---

- Proactively fund and plan research on issues, wants, and needs associated with aging in the American Muslim community.
- Organize events bringing together Muslims in diverse health care fields (physicians, nurses, long-term care professionals, therapists) to discuss recommendations, proactive planning, and areas where action can take place.
- Draw from existing research, if needed, on aging of minorities in America to help educate the community.
- Create short videos and Public Service Announcements (PSA) interviewing elderly Muslims and aging experts to discuss needs and recommendations.
- Approach policy makers at local and state aging agencies and offices as well as aging industry associations for their support of community-based initiatives on aging.

<sup>c</sup> Khutbah: Sermon given during the Friday Noon Prayer.



# Community Discussion Guide

Put aging on the agenda at home and at the mosque, advancing the role and responsibility of the entire community above and beyond the family.

## **Following is a list of discussion questions to begin conversations about aging in your home and in your community:**

- What do older American Muslims want most from family and friends? From the community?
- What are the top three most critical physical, functional, and social needs of older American Muslims?
- Which of these wants and needs are best served by the family? By the community? By other organizations and institutions focused on promoting health and caregiving?
- Do older American Muslims want their families to be their direct caregivers? What formal care options (senior centers, nursing homes, home health care and palliative care), if any, are they willing to consider?
- Do older American Muslims want or need Muslim or Islamic formal care options?
- Can the American Muslim community with its various constraints successfully support Muslim or Islamic formal care options?
- Are there ways to work with existing non-Muslim formal care options as an alternative to the development of Muslim or Islamic formal care options?
- What is the role of the mosque or Muslim center when addressing the wants and needs of older American Muslims?
- Are there examples of effective models from other faith groups or minority communities to look at?
- Are there organizations that research aging that can help us further understand the aging experience? What is the best way to develop and fund programs or centers for older American Muslims?



# Institute *for* Social Policy *and* Understanding

RESEARCH MAKING AN IMPACT

© 2016 Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding normally does not take institutional positions on public policy issues. The views presented here do not necessarily reflect the views of the institute, its staff, or trustees.

## About ISPU

ISPU conducts objective, solution-seeking research that empowers American Muslims to further community development and fully contribute to democracy and pluralism in the United States. Since 2002, ISPU has been at the forefront of discovering trends and opportunities that impact the American Muslim community. Our research aims to educate the general public and enable community change agents, the media, and policymakers to make evidence-based decisions. In addition to building in-house capacity, ISPU has assembled leading experts across multiple disciplines, building a solid reputation as a trusted source for information for and about American Muslims.

For more information, please visit: [www.ispu.org](http://www.ispu.org).

### **Institute for Social Policy and Understanding**

1 (800) 920-ISPU (4778) • [info@ispu.org](mailto:info@ispu.org)

#### **Michigan**

6 Parklane Blvd, Suite 510  
Dearborn, MI 48126  
(313) 436-0523

#### **Washington, DC**

1110 Vermont Ave. NW, Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20005  
(202) 768-8749

## Endnotes

- 1 *The State of Aging and Health in America 2013*, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, [http://www.cdc.gov/features/agingandhealth/state\\_of\\_aging\\_and\\_health\\_in\\_america\\_2013.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/features/agingandhealth/state_of_aging_and_health_in_america_2013.pdf)
- 2 K. S. Leonard, (2003), *Muslims in the United States: The state of research*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation; J. G. Read, (2008). Muslims in America, *Contexts*, 7(4), 39–43.
- 3 R. Hasnain & R. Shoab, (2010), Unveiling Muslim voices: Aging parents with disabilities and their adult children and family caregivers in the United States," *Topics in Geriatric Rehabilitation*, 26(1), 46–61; M. C. Sengstock, (1996), Care of elderly within Muslim families. In B. C. Aswad & B. Bilge. (Eds.), *Family and gender among American Muslims* (pp. 271–297). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- 4 K. J. Ajrouch, (1999), Family and ethnic identity in an Arab American community. In M. Suleiman (Ed.), *Arabs in America: Building a new future* (pp. 129–139). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- 5 Hasnain & Rana, 2010; Sengstock, 1996.
- 6 And your Lord has commanded that you shall not serve (any) but Him, and goodness to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, say not to them (so much as) "Ugh" nor chide them, and speak to them a generous word. And make yourself submissively gentle to them with compassion, and say; O my Lord! Have compassion on them, as they brought me up (when I was) little. (Quran, 17:23-24)
- 7 "As Parents Age, Asian Americans Struggle to Obey a Cultural Code," *New York Times*, January 15, 2014, <http://nyti.ms/1cjF49P>