

Muslim Americans worry about discrimination but profess faith in the American dream

Many U.S. Muslims have been mistreated because of their religion, but nearly half say they have also received support for that reason.

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(RNS) — Three-quarters of the nation’s Muslims perceive a lot of discrimination against their faith group and half say being Muslim in this country has been more difficult in recent years, a new Pew Research Center survey shows.

But even more Muslims—89 percent—say they are proud to be both American and Muslim. A significant majority also profess a continuing faith in the American dream.

“The survey makes clear that the early days of the Trump administration have been an anxious time for many Muslim Americans,” said Greg Smith, one of the lead authors of the new survey of 1,001 Muslims conducted for several months after President Trump’s inauguration. “At the same time, however, the survey also shows that Muslims express a persistent streak of optimism and positive feelings about their own lives and their place in American society.”

In the last decade, an increasing percentage of Muslims say they have experienced support from others because they are Muslim—49 percent in the most recent survey, up from 37 percent in 2011 and 32 percent in 2007.

“In a sense, with rising Islamophobia has come more support from the general public, so I think that’s one of the reasons why Muslim Americans feel more comfortable in their place in the U.S. today,” said Amaney A. Jamal, a Princeton University professor of politics who served as an adviser on the survey.

But even as Muslims have a growing sense of American support, they report increasing instances of religious discrimination in the past year, including being treated with suspicion and physical attacks. Almost half—48 percent—say that was their experience, compared to 43 percent in 2011 and 40 percent in 2007.

The study also pointed to some clear divides in gender.

“Muslim women are more likely than men to say that Muslims face a variety of challenges,” said Farid Senzai, a political science professor at Santa Clara University and a survey adviser.

For example, 70 percent of Muslim women believe it is likely the government is monitoring their emails and calls, compared with 48 percent of men. And 69 percent of Muslim women say the GOP is unfriendly toward Muslim Americans, compared with 49 percent of men. More than half of Muslim women (54 percent) say Trump makes them angry, compared with 37 percent of men.

Overall, the majority of Muslims surveyed disapprove of Trump’s job performance, but President George W. Bush received similar levels of disapproval ten years ago during his second term. While 65 percent of U.S. Muslims disapprove of Trump in the 2017 survey, 69 percent disapproved of Bush in 2007. In contrast, 14 percent disapproved of President Obama in 2011.

Muslim Americans are less likely than the general public to say Trump makes them hopeful (26 percent vs. 40 percent) or happy (17 percent vs. 30 percent) but are on par with the general public about whether he makes them feel angry or worried.

Researchers report a growing U.S. Muslim population—increasing from an estimated 2.35 million in 2007 to 3.35 million people of all ages today—with almost six in ten born outside the U.S. The vast majority of Muslims living in the U.S. (82 percent) are American citizens.

While respondents came from at least 75 nations, their diversity extended beyond the place of their birth.

More than half (55 percent) identify with the Sunni branch of Islam; 16 percent say they are Shi’ite; 4 percent associate with other groups (such as Ahmadiyya or the Nation of Islam); and 14 percent don’t specify a tradition.

Respondents were young, with 60 percent of Muslim adults under the age of 40. Only 38 percent of the overall U.S. adult population is that young.

They were also racially and ethnically diverse: 41 percent were white, 28 percent Asian, 20 percent black, 8 percent Hispanic, and 3 percent from another other background or multiple backgrounds.

“Regardless of how you split it up, there’s not a single racial or ethnic group that’s dominant within the Muslim community,” said Besheer Mohamed, a senior researcher at Pew and a lead author of the study.

Ihsan Bagby, an Islamic studies professor at the University of Kentucky, said the American ideals expressed by U.S. Muslims reflect a change from the 1980s and '90s.

“This idea of being both American and being Muslim obviously is now the clear consensus view of Muslims,” said Bagby, another adviser on the study. “And to me it’s actually quite remarkable that we’ve come that far.”

Here are a dozen other findings about U.S. Muslim adults:

- 85 percent say believing in God is essential to what it means to be Muslim.
- 82 percent are concerned about extremism in the name of Islam around the world.
- 80 percent fast during Ramadan.
- 76 percent say targeting or killing civilians is never justified.
- 65 percent say religion is very important in their lives.
- 65 percent don’t think there is a natural conflict between Islam and democracy.
- 64 percent say there is more than one true way to interpret Islam.
- 53 percent of Muslims are married.
- 52 percent say homosexuality should be accepted by society.
- 44 percent are employed full time.
- 43 percent attend mosque weekly.
- 21 percent are converts.

The findings of the survey, conducted between January 23 and May 2, had a margin of error of plus or minus 5.8 percentage points.