

Civic Engagement among Middle Eastern and North African Refugees and Immigrants

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Overview

This research explored the attitudes toward, frequency and predictors of civic engagement among the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) immigrants and refugees. Respondents (n=106) reported strongly positive attitudes and engaged in various civic activities. Attitudes were found as main predictor for level of civic engagement.

Learning Objectives

- 1- To increase the knowledge regarding the attitudes toward and level of civic engagement among immigrants and refugees from the MENA
- 2- To understand factors contributing to civic engagement among this group which lead to more effective research, interventions and policies

Background: Civic engagement is frequently defined as a collective action to address public concerns and community challenges (Checkoway, 2009; Ehrlich, 2000; Lerner, 2004) and has benefits for both individuals and communities. At individual level, civic engagement increases social support and employment opportunities, improves English language competency and leadership skills, and decreases stress and feelings of isolation (Chan, 2011; Handy & Greenspan, 2009). At community level, civic engagement can improve social capital, sense of community, quality of public life, citizenship and facilitate integration of newcomers in new community, and even engage them in policy-making process (Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Malik & Wagle, 2002; Putnam, 1995; Tucker & Santiago, 2013; Weng & Lee, 2015). Considering that there are a few studies on civic engagement among immigrants, the purpose of this study is to examine frequency and types of civic engagement, attitudes toward civic engagement and specify factors impacting civic engagement among the MENA refugees and immigrants, and therefore, to provide some implications for research, policy and interventions.

Methodology: MENA refugees and immigrants who are 18 years or older, and able to read English were recruited using snowball and availability sampling from various sources such as church, mosques and Facebook groups. Online and face-to-face (self-administered) surveys were conducted. Besides background information, participants completed questions on the extent to which they participated in different types of civic engagement as well as their attitudes toward civic engagement. The survey questions were developed based on existing scales on civic engagement (Bobek, Zaff, Li & Lerner, 2009; CIRCLE, 2006; Doolittle & Faul, 2013; Finlay, Flanagan & Wray-Lake, 2011, Gele & Harsløf, 2012, Keeter, Jenkins, Zukin & Andolina, 2003; Zaff, Boyd, Li, Lerner & Lerner, 2010) and some culturally sensitive modifications were incorporated through experts' feedback.

Results: Participants for this study were 106 immigrants and refugees representing 12 countries of origin, with Iran (22.6%), Tunisia (17.9%), Jordan (15.1%) and Egypt (12.3%) being most popular. The average age of participants was 37.7 years. Majority of participants were males (67.9%) and had college or higher level of education (90.6%). About 60.4% were married. Thirteen (12.3%) respondents entered the US as a refugee. The average length of time participants had been in the US was 15.2 years.

Average attitudes toward civic engagement is 30.4 (N=101; SD= 5.4) demonstrating very positive attitudes. Respondents also participated in various types of civic engagement. The mean of frequency summary score is 25.6. The most popular items are “staying informed of what is going on in the community” (64.1%) and “helping to the neighbors” (42.4%). Less popular items of frequency of civic engagement are “help raising money for groups and organizations” with 27 (25.5%) people highly engaged, and becoming volunteered in community services with 28 (26.4%) participants actively engaged. Of those who volunteered (N=73, 68.9%), educational programs are the most popular area of volunteering by 31 (29.2%) people, followed by services for homeless and the poor by 29 (27.4%) participants, and then children programs by 22 (20.8%) people.

Before conducting multiple regression, it was examined if there is correlation between independent variables and dependent one. Statistical analysis show that gender, age, length of stay in the US, education, whether married or not, having child, monthly family income, weekly time spent on work, and health status do not have relationships with the level of civic engagement. The regression analysis demonstrates that attitudes explain almost 9% of variance in civic activities ($r=.30$, $r^2=.09$). Unstandardized coefficient is 0.4 ($p<0.01$).

It is good to see what variables have significant correlations with attitudes. This is important, because it provides some implications for improving civic engagement among the population of study. Being married ($r(101)=0.3$, $p<0.05$), having child ($r(100)=0.3$, $p<0.05$), higher family income ($r(99)=0.3$, $p<0.05$), and better English proficiency level ($r(100)=-0.3$, $p<0.05$) have positive impacts on attitudes toward civic engagement.

Conclusion: The overall positive attitudes and the level of active civic engagement indicate MENA immigrants and refugees’ integration and contribution to the community. Contrary to previous research, (Chan, 2011; Finlay et al., 2011; Gele & Harsløf, 2012; Handy & Greenspan, 2009, Sundeen, Garcia & Raskoff, 2009 ; Tucker & Santiago, 2013; Weng & Lee, 2015), gender, age, education, economic status, marital status, having child, health, weekly time spent on work, and length of stay are not predictors of civic engagement in this sample. The main predictor for civic engagement is attitudes. Implication of this result is that providing awareness and information through mass media and newspapers are helpful to increase civic engagement among MENA immigrants and refugees. For future studies, it is recommended to consider other types of civic engagement such as political participation, to evaluate how attitudes can be improved, to examine ways to increase overall level of civic engagement, and to identify barriers to their civic engagement. The main limitation of the study is not to be generalizable, because the recruitment largely happened through Facebook.

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