



**Population Inequities Study:
Middle Eastern and North
African Immigrants and
Refugees in
Washington State**

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Summary of Findings

This report examines everyday experiences shared by Middle Eastern and North African (MENA)¹ immigrants and refugees living in the State of Washington (the “State” from here on). The most significant findings revolve around challenges faced by MENA populations in the State around employment and economic empowerment, education, housing, healthcare, and identity, with employment, education, housing, and healthcare being the most salient of these areas at issue.

With regard to employment, skilled immigrants often find their qualifications unrecognized, limiting their job opportunities, while unskilled immigrant workers deal with low wages and a lack of economic mobility. Language barriers and the lack of targeted services and programs in MENA languages further hinder both employment prospects among adults and educational experiences among children. Housing is another critical issue, with rising costs and discrimination making stability difficult to attain for MENA immigrants. Language and cultural barriers make navigating the complex American healthcare system challenging as well, leading to poor access and unaddressed needs, particularly in mental healthcare.

To address these challenges, recommendations include creating processes that increase access to job opportunities for non-English speakers, increasing access to affordable housing, and improving culturally competent healthcare services and education support. The role of expanding service provisions can be undertaken by existing community-based organizations and non-profit organizations that are already making progress in these areas.

This report is composed of the following sections:

- Part I: Research Study Background and Purpose
- Part II: Main Findings and Recommendations
- Part III: Conclusion and Next Steps

The report also underscores the need for holistic and continuous approaches to support for MENA immigrants and refugees in the State. By addressing these challenges through targeted policies and community-based initiatives, the State can better support the integration and well-being of all of its communities.

¹ Term defined by the [Arab American Council](#).

ملخص النتائج

يتناول هذا التقرير التجارب اليومية التي أبلغ عنها المهاجرون واللاجئون من منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا² الذين يعيشون في ولاية واشنطن (يُشار إليها بعبارة "الولاية" من هنا فصاعدًا). وتتمحور أهم النتائج حول التحديات التي تواجه أبناء هذه المنطقة في الولاية من حيث التوظيف والتمكين الاقتصادي والتعليم والإسكان والرعاية الصحية والهوية، مع العلم أن التوظيف والتعليم والإسكان والرعاية الصحية هي أبرز المجالات محل النقاش.

في ما يتعلق بالتوظيف، غالبًا ما يجد المهاجرون المهرة أن مؤهلاتهم غير معترف بها، ما يحد من فرص العمل المتاحة لهم، بينما يواجه العمال المهاجرون غير المهرة أجورًا منخفضة وانعدام القدرة على الاستفادة من الحراك الاقتصادي. وتؤدي الحواجز اللغوية وعدم توفر خدمات وبرامج مستهدفة باللغات المحكية في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا إلى الحد من آفاق التوظيف بالنسبة للبالغين ومن التجارب التعليمية بالنسبة للأطفال. ويشكل الإسكان مسألة أخرى بالغة الأهمية نظرًا لارتفاع التكاليف ومستويات التمييز، مما يجعل الاستقرار أمرًا بعيدًا عن متناول المهاجرين من منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا. كما أن الحواجز اللغوية والثقافية تصعب التعامل مع نظام الرعاية الصحية الأمريكي المعقد، فتقلّ فرص الوصول إليه وتبقى الاحتياجات غير ملبّاة، لا سيّما في مجال رعاية الصحة النفسية.

ولغاية التغلب على هذه التحديات، تشمل التوصيات إنشاء عمليات تستهدف زيادة فرص وصول المتحدثين بغير الإنكليزية إلى الوظائف، وزيادة إمكانية الحصول على مساكن ميسورة التكلفة، وتحسين خدمات الرعاية الصحية والدعم التعليمي المراعية للاعتبارات الثقافية. ويمكن للمنظمات المجتمعية والمنظمات غير الربحية القائمة، التي تحقق في الأساس تقدمًا في هذه المجالات، أن تتولى مهمة توسيع نطاق تقديم الخدمات.

يتألف هذا التقرير من الأقسام التالية:

- القسم الأول: منطلق وغاية دراسة البحث
- القسم الثاني: النتائج والتوصيات الرئيسية
- القسم الثالث: الخلاصة والخطوات التالية

ويؤكد التقرير أيضًا على ضرورة اتباع نهج شامل ومستمر لدعم المهاجرين واللاجئين في الولاية القادمين من منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا. وستساهم مواجهة هذه التحديات، من خلال اعتماد سياسات وإطلاق مبادرات مجتمعية مستهدفة، في تمكين الولاية من تقديم المزيد من الدعم لإدماج كافة مجتمعاتها وتحقيق رفاهها.

² تعريف المصطلح الصادر عن [المجلس العربي الأمريكي](#).

خلاصه یافته‌ها

این گزارش به تجربیات روزمره مهاجران اهل خاورمیانه و شمال آفریقا (MENA)³ که در ایالت واشنگتن (از این پس «ایالت») زندگی می‌کنند می‌پردازد. مهم‌ترین یافته‌ها به چالش‌های پیش‌روی جمعیت MENA در ایالت در حوزه‌های اشتغال و توانمندسازی اقتصادی، آموزش، مسکن، خدمات درمانی و هویت مربوط می‌شود که در میان آن‌ها، مسائل اشتغال، آموزش، مسکن و خدمات درمانی، برجستگی بیشتری دارند.

در زمینه اشتغال، مهاجران ماهر اغلب با مشکل تأیید نشدن مدارک تحصیلی روبرو هستند که موجب محدود شدن فرصت‌های شغلی می‌شود، در حالی‌که نیروی کار مهاجر غیرماهر با مشکل دستمزد ناکافی و نبود امکان بهسازی وضعیت اقتصادی روبروست. موانع زبانی و نبود خدمات و برنامه‌های هدفمند به زبان‌های MENA چشم‌انداز شغلی بزرگسالان و تجربیات تحصیلی کودکان را تحت‌تأثیر قرار داده است. مسکن یکی از مسائل مهم است. افزایش هزینه‌ها و تبعیض سبب شده است که دستیابی به ثبات مالی برای مهاجران MENA دشوار شود. موانع زبانی و فرهنگی باعث دشواری استفاده از سامانه پیچیده خدمات درمانی آمریکا و در نتیجه ضعف دسترسی به این خدمات و برآورده نشدن نیازها، به‌ویژه در حوزه سلامت روان، شده است.

برای مقابله با این مشکلات، پیشنهادهایی مانند ایجاد فرایندهای تسهیل دسترسی به فرصت‌های شغلی برای گویشوران غیر انگلیسی، تسهیل دسترسی به مسکن ارزان‌قیمت و ایجاد زمینه دسترسی افرادی با فرهنگ‌های مختلف به خدمات درمانی و حمایت‌های تحصیلی، مطرح شده است. وظیفه گسترش حوزه خدمات را می‌توان به سازمان‌های همگانی موجود و سازمان‌های غیرانتفاعی فعال که در این زمینه پیشرفت چشمگیری داشته‌اند و اگذار کرد.

این گزارش شامل بخش‌های زیر است:

- قسمت 1: پیشینه و هدف طرح پژوهشی
- قسمت 2: یافته‌ها و پیشنهادها اصلی
- قسمت 3: نتیجه‌گیری و مراحل بعدی

این گزارش بر اهمیت رویکردهای جامع و پیوسته برای حمایت از مهاجران و پناهندگان MENA در ایالت تأکید دارد. با رسیدگی به این مشکلات از طریق سیاست‌های هدفمند و برنامه‌های همگانی، ایالت می‌تواند زمینه بهتری برای حمایت از هم‌آمیزی و رفاه همه جوامع خود فراهم کند.

³ اصطلاح تعریف‌شده توسط [شورای عربی آمریکایی](#).

د موندنو لنډيز

دغه راپور د منځني ختيځ او شمالي افريقا (MENA)⁴ څخه راغلو کډوالو او هغو مهاجرينو لخوا ورځنۍ شريکي شوي تجربې ازمويني چې په واشنګټن ايالت کې (تر دغه وروسته "ايالت") اوسي. تر ټولو مهمې موندنې په واشنګټن ايالت کې د MENA خلکو د کارموندنې او اقتصادي پياوړتيا، زده کړې، مسکن، روغتيايي خدمتونو او هويت په تړاو له ننګوونو سره تړاو لري، چې په دې کې کارموندنه، زده کړې، مسکن او روغتيايي خدمتونه تر ټولو مهمې برخې دي.

د کارموندنې په تړاو دا دي چې مسلکي کډوال اکثره خپلې وړتياوې په رسميت نه پېژندل کېدونکي ويني چې د دندې فرصتونه يې محدودوي، په داسې حال کې چې غير مسلکي کډوال کارگران له ټيټو معاشونو او اقتصادي پرمختګ له نشتوالي سره مخ دي. د ژبې خنډونه او په MENA ژبو کې د ځانګړو خدمتونو او پروګرامونو نشتوالی د لويانو لپاره د دندې فرصتونه او د ماشومانو لپاره د زده کړې تجربې لا پسي محدودوي. مسکن يو بله مهمه ستونزه ده چې د لګښتونو زياتوالي او تبعيض د MENA کډوالو لپاره ثبات تر لاسه کول ستونزمنوي. د ژبې او فرهنگي خنډونه د امريکا د پېچلي روغتيايي سيستم پر لار اچول هم پېچلی او ننګوونکی کوي، چې په ځانګړې توګه د رواني روغتيا په برخه کې د کم لاسرسي او اړتياوو د نه پوره کېدو سبب ګرځي.

د دغو ستونزو د حل لپاره په سپارښتنو کې داسې پروسي جوړول شامل دي چې د غير انگليسي ژبو ويونکو لپاره د دندې فرصتونو ته لاسرسي زيات کړي، ارزانه مسکن لاسرسي زيات کړي او د فرهنگي وړتيا لرونکو روغتيايي خدمتونو او د زده کړې ملاتړ ښه کړي. د خدمتونو عرضي د پراختيا دنده کولی شي چې د شته ټولنيزو بنسټونو او غير انتفاعي سازمانونو لخوا ترسره شي چې تر دې مخکې په دې برخو کې پرمختګ کړی دی.

دغه راپور له لاندې برخو څخه جوړ شوی دی:

- لومړۍ برخه: د څېړنې د مطالعې شاليد او موخه
- دويمه برخه: اصلي موندنې او سپارښتنې
- دريمه برخه: پايله او راتلونکي ګامونه

دغه راز راپور د MENA کډوالو او پناه غوښتونکو لپاره په ايالت کې د هوليسټيک او پرلپسي ملاتړ پر اړتيا ټينګار کوي. د دغو ننګوونو د حل لپاره د موخو پاليسيو او ټولنيزو بنسټونو له لارې، ايالت کولی شي چې د خپلو ټولو ټولنو ادغام او هوساينه په ښه توګه ملاتړ کړي.

⁴اصطلاح د عربي امريکايي شورا لخوا تعريف شوې ده.

Part I: Research Study Background and Purpose

Population inequities studies focus on understanding and addressing disparities in health, economic opportunities, education, and other social determinants of well-being among different groups within a population. This study aims to explore and present the experiences that illustrate how factors such as legal status, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and geographic location contribute to unequal outcomes in various aspects of life for MENA communities in the State. By examining these factors, the study seeks to highlight the complexities of systemic inequities, explore the impact of these inequities on MENA populations, and explore how to create more equitable structures for the future.

This study was commissioned by Washington’s 46th District Representative, Darya Farivar. As a community advocate for the rights and voices of the underserved, Representative Farivar approached the University of Washington Tacoma’s Office of Community Partnerships (OCP) with a request to conduct interviews with individuals from the MENA region, representing all backgrounds and immigration experiences—focusing especially on people living in the Puget Sound area—with the intent of learning more about their lived experiences.

The study was launched in January 2024, followed by the hiring of two full-time researchers in February. Research design and implementation took place in March and April, with qualitative interviews and focus groups commencing in May and being completed by July. The researchers spent considerable time on community outreach in four counties (King, Pierce, Snohomish, and Spokane) and developed a community contact database of stakeholders for future engagement opportunities.

The findings of the study are organized under the following themes: economic empowerment, access to social services, education, housing, health and well-being, cultural integration, and population-specific needs of elders, women, and youth. The census and population data used to analyze the study’s greater context are drawn from a time period ranging from approximately 1970 to 2023.

MENA regions are united by shared cultural, historical, and geopolitical characteristics. For this report, the region is considered to be inclusive of the following countries: Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Occupied Palestinian Territories,⁵ Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Yemen.

⁵ This report uses the official United Nations term *Occupied Palestinian Territories* to refer to the Palestinian territories of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.

For the purposes of the study, the definition of MENA also included Afghanistan and Somalia given the cultural and religious similarities to the above countries and the high presence of these communities in the Puget Sound region.

Research Relevance

Understanding the lived experiences of MENA immigrants and refugees in the State is important for several reasons.

First, to the authors' knowledge, there has never been a formal needs assessment or community consultation specifically focused on the State's MENA population. This gap in knowledge is exacerbated by the fact that MENA-identifying individuals are often instructed to select "White" or "Other" in defining their race or ethnicity on official forms—including the U.S. Census—which effectively erases the unique needs and challenges of the MENA community.⁶

Second, documenting instances of exclusion and xenophobia, as detailed later in this report, is essential for advocacy groups and local organizations working toward a more just and inclusive Washington.

Third, as reported by the State's Office of Financial Management,⁷ immigration to the State is on the rise, necessitating a more nuanced understanding of the specific needs and strengths of immigrants relocating here. This understanding is vital for enhancing the effectiveness of social services and community organizations in delivering targeted support to these populations.

The State's growing population is increasingly diverse, with the total immigrant population having grown by 29% (1.1 million people) from 2010 to 2021.⁸ In the 2020 Census, there were 42,409 people in the State who self-reported as belonging to the MENA categories (see chart in Appendix 2), but this is only a fraction of the MENA population that did not have a specific ethnic category to self-report on that Census. The leading countries of origin for MENA immigrants are Iran, Iraq, and Egypt,⁹ but other countries of origin are increasingly represented: for example, as of 2022, 5,900 Afghan immigrants live in the State, and dozens of Afghan families continue to be resettled here each year, following the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan.¹⁰

The goal of this report is to share the lived experiences of these populations and thereby bring these statistics to life, illustrating how factors like culture, socioeconomic status, and personal history intersect to influence outcomes. These narratives are indispensable for developing policies

⁶ <https://lawcommons.luc.edu/luclj/vol47/iss3/3>

⁷ <https://ofm.wa.gov/sites/default/files/public/dataresearch/researchbriefs/brief110.pdf>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <https://immigrationimpact.com/2024/04/23/data-snapshot-middle-eastern-and-north-african-immigrants/>

¹⁰ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-immigrant-population-state-and-county?width=850&height=850&iframe=true>

that genuinely address the needs of communities. To honor the voices of those who participated in this study, each will receive a copy of this report in their native language, empowering them to engage with and reflect on the collective experiences of their communities of origin.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, with the goal of reaching the largest cross-section of the MENA population. Research took place during May, June, and July of 2024, primarily in King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties, with a small subset of data coming from Spokane County. Qualitative interviews were conducted to gain insights into individuals’ experiences, perspectives, and opinions about their experience with living in the State.

The study aimed to answer the following questions:

- What are the primary challenges faced by MENA families in Washington State?
- How do these families navigate cultural, social, political, and identity integration?
- What are the perceptions and experiences of MENA families regarding access to public services, education, and employment?
- What supports and community resources are most effective in assisting MENA families?

The study’s data-collection methods included semi-structured interviews and focus groups. In total, 144 individuals residing in King, Pierce, Snohomish, and Spokane Counties were interviewed, and within that total, six focus groups were conducted, composed of approximately 10 to 15 participants each. The table below provides a breakdown of interviews by county:

County	Number of interviews	Number of community meetings
<i>King</i>	100	9
<i>Pierce</i>	30	0
<i>Snohomish</i>	12	2
<i>Spokane</i>	2	1
Total	144	12

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. No interviews were recorded or photographed, and participants’ identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms. The

research was conducted with an emphasis on cultural sensitivity and respect for the participants' beliefs, traditions, and privacy. If requested, both interpretations and translations of research materials, including interview questions, were provided to the participants. (For the full list of interview questions, see Appendix 1.)

Participants were each invited to an interview or focus-group meeting based on their self-identified origin or birthplace within a MENA country, and non-random snowball sampling was used to identify individuals and organizations to survey. Snowball sampling is a simple way to find participants through referrals from initial contacts—in this case, service providers who were contacted in the early stages of research. These service providers referred individuals to take part in the study, those who agreed to participate were asked to refer family members and friends to be contacted for interviews as well. Since contacts referred by service providers were primarily refugees who came to the State under the refugee-resettlement program, additional outreach was conducted among community-based organizations and religious organizations in order to find first- and second-generation immigrants. (For the full list of participating organizations, see Appendix 3.)

As a gesture of acknowledgement and appreciation for the time and effort of participants, each received a \$50 Tango gift card as reimbursement for their time. This compensation recognized the value of their insights and ensured that participation did not impose a financial burden on them. This reimbursement facilitated the inclusion of participants with professional commitments, limiting the economic impacts of participating. A select few organizations and individuals who provided significant labor in organizing focus groups, providing translation, and/or conducting community outreach were also compensated for their time.

The purpose of this study was not to identify a representative sample of the population. Time constraints and travel distances were limitations in reaching more participants, so qualitative analysis was used for this study. Thematic and content analysis were used to identify patterns, themes, and meanings in responses, and the recommendations contained in the study were derived either directly from participants' comments or discerned from repeated themes among multiple responses.

MENA Communities in Washington State

After the oil embargo, the 1970s to 1990s saw a significant increase in the number of MENA families migrating to the United States.¹¹ Events such as the Iranian Revolution (1979), the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), and the Gulf War (1991) contributed to a new wave of refugees and immigrants seeking safety and stability. This period marked the growth of more substantial

¹¹ <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/oil-embargo>

MENA communities¹² in Washington cities like Seattle, Bellevue, and Redmond,¹³ which began to establish cultural centers, mosques, and businesses that played an important role in preserving cultural heritage, contributing to economic growth, and providing support for these new arrivals.

Over the last fifty years, the State of Washington, and particularly the Puget Sound area, has become a destination for a growing immigrant population. In 1970, the total “foreign-born” population in Washington was around 90,000. By 1980 this number had increased to approximately 150,000, and by 1990 it reached about 242,800. This growth continued into the 1990s, with the immigrant population rising to more than 322,000 by the year 2000.¹⁴

The State’s immigrant populations continued to grow through the 2000s, in tandem with an increasing number of immigrants and refugees from the MENA region. Immigrants in the State are heavily involved in professional sectors such as healthcare and engineering, and many are active in civic service, including Cyrus Habib, who became the first Iranian-American elected to statewide office in the U.S., serving as the 16th Lieutenant Governor of Washington from 2017 to 2021. The post-9/11 era posed significant challenges as MENA individuals faced increased scrutiny and discrimination, prompting community leaders to engage more actively in advocacy and bridge-building efforts.

The 2020 U.S. Census reported that country-wide, more than 3.5 million people—1.5% of the White population—identified as MENA alone or in combination. The same census found that 26% of the U.S. MENA population are under age 18, 42% are age 18 to 44, 22% are age 45 to 64, and 11% are age 65 and over. The states with the largest MENA populations are California, Michigan, and New York; Washington has the 16th largest MENA population in the country.

MENA immigrants make a significant contribution to the U.S. economy, with a combined household income of \$92 billion.¹⁵ They pay \$17.9 billion in federal taxes and \$8.3 billion in state and local taxes, resulting in a substantial spending power of \$65.8 billion¹⁶ that highlights their vital role in supporting and driving the U.S. economy. They tend to have higher levels of educational attainment, with nearly 49% holding a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared with 35% of all immigrant adults overall; this translates into a strong presence in professional and high-skilled occupations.¹⁷

¹² <https://www.historylink.org/File/9412>

¹³ <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US5357535-redmond-wa/>

¹⁴ <https://cis.org/Report/Immigrants-United-States-2000>

¹⁵ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/middle-eastern-and-north-african-immigrants-united-states>

¹⁶ <https://immigrationimpact.com/2024/04/23/data-snapshot-middle-eastern-and-north-african-immigrants/>

¹⁷ Ibid.

In Washington, there are over 1.1 million immigrant residents, who contribute to approximately 15% of the State's GDP.¹⁸ MENA populations represent approximately 0.55% of the State's total population, with 42,409 people self-reporting in the 2020 Census.

U.S. Census data do not officially track MENA populations in the U.S. as a distinct group, which makes it difficult to determine their precise numbers. However, the upcoming 2030 Census will feature a MENA category on all data-collection forms for the first time in U.S. history.¹⁹ This category will include six subcategories: Lebanese, Iranian, Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi, and Israeli,²⁰ with an additional blank space left to allow individuals to specify their own identity if it does not fall within one of the listed subcategories.

It is important to note that not all MENA populations in the State are Muslim. The MENA region includes a diverse range of religious beliefs, including Christianity, Judaism, and various sects within Islam, as well as other religious traditions (e.g., Zoroastrianism and Bahá'í) and secular identities. For instance, many immigrants from Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, and Syria might be Christian, and there are also Jewish populations from countries like Iran and Morocco. Accordingly, while Islam is a significant religion among MENA populations, it is essential to recognize the religious diversity within these communities.

Despite massive challenges, including discrimination and navigating immigration policies, the MENA communities in the State remain resilient and continue to thrive. Today, the State is home to vibrant and diverse MENA communities whose many contributions to the State are evident across various fields, reflecting their integral role in the State's multicultural landscape.

¹⁸ [2021 American Community Survey 5-year data sample](#)

¹⁹ <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2021/08/improvements-to-2020-census-race-hispanic-origin-question-designs.html>

²⁰ <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/09/2020-census-dhc-a-mena-population.html>

Part II: Main Findings and Recommendations

Employment and Economic Empowerment

“People that come here do not want to be dependent on others. They want to work and be independent and build up their adaptive skills.”

MENA individuals in the State face a variety of employment challenges upon their arrival to the U.S. Across numerous interviews with both MENA individuals and service providers, the biggest challenge reported to obtaining gainful employment is the language barrier. For those with low English proficiency, job opportunities are often limited to the service, construction, or hospitality sectors, which offer little in the way of job security, economic mobility, flexible schedule, or living wage. Furthermore, many candidates are ill suited for these positions due to physical disabilities.

The typically low wages provided by jobs in these sectors require recent arrivals to supplement their income through gig work like driving Lyft or Uber vehicles, or delivering food.²¹ Several participants working in these sectors mentioned that they are only offered second- or third-shift positions, which limits their ability to improve their English proficiency through ESL classes, attend skills trainings, or participate in community events during the day or early evening. An Iraqi woman shared her struggles with balancing a demanding work schedule and learning English: *“I had to start working in Seattle right away as a house cleaner, and take three buses. I had no time for English classes, and I did not use English at the job.”* Compounding these issues, participants and service providers mentioned difficulties in securing employment due to the lack of digital literacy among new arrivals. Many have never had to submit an application, résumé, or cover letter in English to an online job portal, and do not own a personal computer to do so.

Resettled refugees, however, receive specialized employment placement and skills training within their first several months of official arrival through the State’s WorkFirst²² and WorkSource programs²³ if they have lived in the U.S. for less than five years. This population also receives employment assistance through the State’s eight contracted resettlement agencies. (Participants did not discuss whether they had enrolled in these programs, or describe their experiences with employment-placement services, so additional program evaluation of these services and the experience of refugee and immigrant clients utilizing these services is needed.)

Several resettled refugee participants who were interviewed possessed advanced degrees in medicine, nursing, engineering, and teaching from their countries of origin, but were unable to work in these fields in the State because their licenses and foreign degrees are not recognized by state and national accreditation bodies. Given the temporary nature of cash-assistance programs

²¹ <https://www.kuow.org/stories/90-days-to-make-a-life-one-afghan-family-s-resettlement-in-washington-state>

²² <https://workfirst.wa.gov/>

²³ <https://www.worksourcewa.com/Resources/TrainingPrograms.aspx>

and the high cost of living, all participants stated that they'd had to take the first job offered to them, even if it was mismatched with their skill level and education. Many have had to abandon the prospect of pursuing equivalent degrees or certification in the U.S. due to the length of time and funds needed. DSHS offers the Career Ladder for Educated and/or Vocationally Experienced Refugees (CLEVER) program "for educated and/or skilled refugees who want to re-enter their career field in the United States" through credential evaluation, targeted job placement, and career-planning services within five years of arrival.²⁴ In interviews, the CLEVER program was not mentioned by service providers or participants, possibly due to lack of awareness of the existence of these types of specialized services.

Immigrant entrepreneurship and creation of small businesses in the State offers exciting opportunities for economic empowerment within MENA communities. In 2020, immigrant small-business owners and entrepreneurs generated \$2.4 billion in business income for the State.²⁵ There are no reliable estimates for MENA-owned business in the State, but anecdotally these businesses comprise restaurants, catering services, groceries, child/senior care services, car dealerships, truck-driving services, tailoring services, and translation services, among others. While opening small businesses offers alternative pathways for those with limited education or credentials, along with opportunities for MENA individuals to address service gaps in their own communities, interviewees mentioned several barriers to the long-term success of small businesses. The main barrier mentioned was the lack of access to capital to start or expand a business, largely due to the fact that immigrants do not have an established credit history in the U.S. and must therefore seek support outside of traditional bank loans. Although it is not the biggest barrier for potential MENA business owners, it should also be noted that traditional financing options offered by banks are not compliant with Islamic banking laws, which prevents observant Muslim business owners from taking advantage of small-business loans.

Many potential small-business owners are stymied by lack of easy access to local banking services and must rely on more established community members to help them establish a bank account. One MENA accountant interviewed mentioned the extensive bureaucratic hurdles that immigrant small-business owners must overcome to obtain the required licenses and permits to operate legally. Many do not know how to navigate this system, or whom to contact for support within it. In addition, many are unfamiliar with how to pay monthly, quarterly, and annual state and federal taxes or comply with annual reporting requirements. Three separate interviewees mentioned the economic empowerment potential for MENA women who operate in-home daycares: such work would allow them a robust source of income and address a severe shortage of affordable childcare options for families in the State, but many MENA women face challenges in obtaining the local and state licenses they need to scale up their childcare offerings.

²⁴ <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/esa/csd-office-refugee-and-immigration-assistance/career-ladder-educated-and-or-vocationally-experienced-refugees>

²⁵ <https://www.commerce.wa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Keep-Washington-Working-Report.pdf>

Many MENA immigrants also lack the technical capacity and knowledge they need to expand their businesses or market their services to those outside their immediate communities. One MENA accountant believes that more medium- and long-term coaching and capacity-building is needed for immigrant business owners *“on topics like how to start and manage a business, bookkeeping, and lawful hiring practices. There are so many cases of people filing for bankruptcy and losing their life’s savings due to preventable reasons.”* Both the Small Business Resiliency Network (SBRN) through the Muslim Association of Puget Sound and the Community Business Connector programs provide mentoring and technical support to small-business owners, but their geographic reach is limited to King County and more established immigrants.

Recommendations

1. Conduct an evaluation of the WorkFirst, WorkSource, and CLEVER programs to assess their long-term performance in assisting refugee and immigrant clients in job placement, workforce development, and accreditation.
2. Support the organization and capacity of immigrant business coalitions that include MENA small-business owners, such as the African Chamber of Commerce of the Pacific Northwest, SBRN, and the Ethnic Business Coalition. Conduct a deeper-needs assessment of MENA-owned businesses to better understand their unique challenges.
3. Evaluate models like that of the Muslim Community Finance Coalition,²⁶ which helps purchase capital equipment for businesses and sells it back to the businesses at a profit in order to be compliant with Islamic banking laws.
4. Develop a specialized plan to assist MENA childcare providers in scaling up services while working toward increased professional development, including a U.S. high-school diploma and new accreditation.

Education

“The school district does not treat Arab students well. I feel like we don’t have a voice there.”

MENA youth in the State encounter several educational challenges that stem from both systemic barriers and cultural factors. One significant issue is a disparity in academic resources and support. Many students from MENA backgrounds, particularly recent Afghan and Iraqi arrivals, face language barriers, as English is not their first language. This challenge hinders their ability to fully participate in classroom activities, understand instructions, and perform well on assessments. Schools outside of King County lack the resources or specialized support needed to address these needs effectively, such as English as a Second Language (ESL) programs for Dari-

²⁶ <https://www.spl.org/programs-and-services/business-and-nonprofit/nonprofits/mcfc>

Pashto-, and Arabic-speaking students. Several parents of refugee children who participated in the study expressed concerns for their children’s educational experience and lack of specialized ESL resources for Arabic or Persian and Dari speakers to facilitate a smooth adjustment to U.S. public schools. Even so, many of these same parents were hopeful that their children will quickly learn English and succeed academically. Under several DSHS-funded Refugee School Impact programs, school districts in Seattle, Kent, Tukwila, Spokane, Federal Way, and Auburn are able to support newly arrived refugee children from the elementary through the high-school levels to help them adjust academically and socially to a U.S. school environment, but it is unclear what reach and impact these programs may have in supporting MENA refugee and immigrant students specifically.²⁷

Cultural differences also impact educational experiences. MENA students have trouble adjusting to the U.S. education system, which differs significantly from those of their countries of origin. Differences in pedagogical approaches, expectations of classroom behavior, and social norms make adapting to the new environment challenging, ultimately affecting MENA students’ academic performance and social integration. Furthermore, the lack of cultural representation within the curriculum can lead to a sense of alienation and lower engagement levels among students who do not see their backgrounds reflected in their studies. Youth participants in the study frequently noted that they were either the only MENA student or one of a few in their class or grade, leading to feelings of exclusion and lack of belonging. Most did not feel like their cultural and religious traditions were adequately reflected in their school curriculum at any level of education; the only exception to this was found in students’ parents who volunteer to present on Ramadan and Eid traditions to their children’s classrooms. One MENA college student provided the following reflection on her public-school experience in Seattle: *“Cultural competency is severely lacking in public schools here. The lack of awareness on Islamic religion and Arab history leads to an Orientalist, ‘mystical’ view of Arabs and people from the MENA region. When I think of my elementary and middle school experiences, these topics were not covered at all... When I was in kindergarten, I learned more about Christian and Jewish holidays, but nothing on Islamic holidays.”*

Multiple young adults who participated in the study, particularly hijabi women, described their experiences with bullying and harassment from fellow students and often inadequate responses from teachers and school administrators. According to one: *“When my sister who wears a hijab was a freshman in high school, another student tugged on her hijab and tried to take it off. My mom emailed and called the principal, but there was no response, and the student was not punished. Things felt unequal. If she had done something similar, she would have been suspended.”*

Economic factors also play a role in the educational challenges faced by MENA youth. Many families might experience financial instability or work multiple jobs, which can limit their ability to provide additional academic support or enrichment opportunities for their children. This

²⁷ <https://www.seattleschools.org/departments/multilingual/refugee-school-impact-grant/>

economic strain impacts students' access to extracurricular activities, tutoring, and other resources that contribute to academic success.

MENA parents of public-school students face barriers to participating in Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) and feeling fully engaged in their children's education. Language barriers and lack of digital literacy often prevent these parents from communicating with school personnel and teachers or playing active roles in their children's schools, since announcements and progress reports are posted to online platforms in English. Schools often do not have a community liaison for MENA populations in the State, so when there are behavioral or academic challenges, parents cannot actively work with school officials and teachers to address issues. As one parent observed: *"The school district does not treat Arab students well. I feel like we don't have a voice there. I reached out to my child's principal about announcing Eid and he blew me off. I am very active in the PTA so I can have a voice, but other Arabs in the community don't have strong voices because the other Arab moms stay at home and don't speak English."* The International Women's Community Center (IWCC), based in Bellevue, has offered trainings and workshops to empower MENA parents to participate in local PTAs and advocate for curricular changes that are more culturally inclusive, but broader programming to engage and mobilize MENA parents does not exist.

Moreover, MENA youth and young adults encounter challenges related to navigating the complexities of a U.S. education, including college application processes and scholarship opportunities. Their lack of familiarity with these structures, combined with limited access to guidance and mentorship, can create additional barriers to higher education and career advancement. One current first-generation university student interviewed for this research study pointed to the lack of formal advising and mentoring support for MENA youth with foreign-born parents: *"A lot of first-generation Arab students are trying to access educational institutions but have very little support to navigate the process of applying for college and financial aid. I was lucky to receive support from older students who had gone through a similar experience, but nothing is formalized. Navigating the complexities of FAFSA and the college application process is hard for Arab parents who were educated overseas."*

Recommendations

1. Create more opportunities for MENA parents, educators, and school officials to engage with one another, by supporting the state-wide expansion of the school-based Family Connections model utilized in the Bellevue School District to connect students and families with educational opportunities to better navigate the school system and help them become engaged in their children's education.²⁸

²⁸ <https://www.bsd405.org/programs-and-services/family-resources/family-connections-centers>

2. Consider piloting the Minneapolis-based Somali American Parent Association’s program, Waalidow Indhaha Furr (Parents Wake Up), which offers a six-week training program for newly arrived parents to help them become oriented to the U.S. school system.²⁹
3. Consider scaling up the University of Washington’s Antisemitism and Islamophobia Task Forces to middle and high schools across the state to assess the general educational climate among MENA students.³⁰

Housing

“For most newly arrived refugees, the language barrier and lack of English means they can’t secure employment quickly. Programs and services are so short-term and geared toward securing any sort of employment. Even if they are employed within 90 days, the salaries are not high enough to cover rent with one income. Family stability and community safety nets are put under a lot of pressure when faced with eviction.”

MENA refugees and immigrants in the greater Seattle area face significant housing challenges that impact their stability and overall quality of life. One of the primary issues is affordability. Rapidly rising housing costs in the Puget Sound region pose a substantial barrier for low-income refugees and immigrants, who often find themselves in precarious financial situations. New refugee arrivals are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of high housing costs. Their first jobs upon arrival are often low-paying hourly positions that do not cover the full cost of rent without significant rental assistance from refugee resettlement service providers via city and state housing programs. While rental assistance provides stability for new arrivals, it is temporary and limited in nature. Eligibility criteria and funding duration of DSHS housing assistance for asylum seekers and arrivals coming through the Humanitarian Parole program is highly contingent and dependent upon renewal by the State Legislature, as federal assistance is limited to resettled refugees. DSHS and service providers struggle with long-term planning for housing assistance and services, and they are unable to offer longitudinal or comprehensive programming that guarantees access to affordable, stable housing.³¹ Furthermore, more settled refugee and immigrant community members will often host or sponsor new arrivals, including Humanitarian Parolees and asylum seekers, while they wait for permanent housing. This process can take months to years, during which time these host families do not receive housing assistance or compensation for providing core services like shelter and cultural orientation.

One housing service provider discussed the extensive intake, reporting, and assessment obligations required to administer DSHS housing assistance, given overlapping eligibility requirements across numerous housing assistance funding streams. The heavy administrative

²⁹ <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2015/12/29/somali-parents-education-program>

³⁰ <https://www.washington.edu/antisemitism-and-islamophobia-taskforces/>

³¹ Interview with DSHS ORIA Housing Services manager.

burden makes it difficult for service providers to use staffing and resources strategically to address housing challenges for refugee and immigrant families, including MENA families, over the long term.

The competitive rental market makes it difficult for these individuals to secure affordable and stable housing and establish themselves in their new communities. For refugee and immigrant families who are no longer eligible for refugee housing assistance, low-income housing and Section 8 vouchers (Housing Choice Vouchers in King County) are an option, but many of the individuals interviewed stated they had been on wait lists for years and had little hope of securing permanent low-income housing. The State has 155,214 units for low- or moderate-income households, but as of 2019, the state had more than 700,000 households at this income level.³² The high cost of living has led to increased rates of eviction and housing instability, further exacerbating MENA immigrants' and refugees' struggle to attain financial security and focus on longer-term cultural integration and community resilience.

Another significant challenge is the availability of suitable housing. MENA refugees and immigrants in the State encounter difficulties finding housing that meets their needs, particularly if they are unfamiliar with the local rental market, face language barriers, or have large families. Many face discrimination from landlords and property managers who are reluctant to rent to individuals with limited credit histories or English language skills. As one service provider mentioned, post-COVID, landlords in King County are much less willing to rent to families without a stable income source, which often include newly arrived MENA refugees and immigrants; this forces organizations to devote considerable time and resources to managing landlord relationships. This can further limit housing options and contribute to a cycle of housing instability and insecurity. Additionally, navigating the complex rental application process and understanding tenant rights can be daunting for those who are new to the country or unfamiliar with the U.S. housing system.

Recommendations

1. Streamline state refugee and immigrant housing assistance into one program under the broadest existing eligibility criteria, in order to lessen constraints on fund administration.
2. Fund state refugee and assistance programs in multi-year intervals to allow DSHS and service partners to develop longer-term strategies for housing assistance.
3. Grant host families of refugees and newly arrived immigrants access to housing assistance funds.

³² [Department of Commerce Housing Advisory Plan 2023–2028](#).

4. Create incentive programs to encourage landlords to accept refugee and immigrant tenants who are receiving state or federal housing assistance.

Health and Well-being

“Greater representation among mental health professionals and resources could lead to greater trust in elected officials and the existing institutions.”

Barriers to Healthcare Access

Language Barriers: One of the most significant challenges to accessing healthcare that was highlighted in interviews was the language barrier between healthcare providers and immigrant patients. The limited English proficiency of many immigrants and refugees makes it difficult for them to communicate effectively with healthcare providers. While interviewees mentioned accessing interpretation and translation services, they frequently mentioned their poor quality. When interpretation services are not available, immigrant patients, especially elderly ones, are heavily reliant on children and younger English-speaking relatives to serve as informal interpreters, creating risks of misinformation and lack of privacy and patient autonomy. One participant noted the stark difference in how she and her children (as native English speakers) are treated by healthcare providers, compared to her non-English-speaking parents: *“I accompany my mom and dad to doctor’s appointments. I notice the staff do not treat them well and do not assist them if I am not there. When I go with my kids to the doctor as a fluent English speaker, we are treated much better.”*

Navigating U.S. Healthcare: The complexity of U.S. healthcare can be daunting for those unfamiliar with it. Case managers and immigrants interviewed for this report mentioned difficulties in understanding how to access services, how health insurance works, and how to navigate the various levels of care from primary to specialized services. In particular, refugee families who were recently resettled in the State revealed challenges with understanding how healthcare worked. For instance, many families did not initially understand that it can take weeks to months to schedule routine doctor’s appointments, or that specialty care often requires referrals from primary-care providers, resulting in unnecessary worry and confusion. This lack of familiarity can lead to missed appointments, ineffective treatment, and the avoidance of necessary care.

Cultural Barriers: Healthcare providers can lack cultural competency, affecting the quality of care provided to immigrant and refugee populations. Differences in health beliefs, practices, and traditions can lead to misunderstandings between patients and providers. For example, certain modesty requirements and dietary restrictions might not be respected or understood by Western-trained medical practitioners, impacting the sense of trust between Muslim patients and providers. As one interview with a pediatric nurse highlighted, Muslim patients and their families are rarely afforded private space for prayer in hospitals. On pediatric and NICU units, Muslim

mothers are often forced to breastfeed in public areas, despite their preference for more privacy. Immigrant women patients are often unaware of their right to request female medical providers, due to language barriers. A nurse working in Pierce County noted that healthcare providers can always do more to provide culturally competent care for Muslim and Middle Eastern patients: *“We try and do a good job of meeting different cultural requirements of Muslim or Arab families. Patients are not always empowered to ask for a different provider or make certain requests. Nursing and medical staff need to make the family comfortable so they can ask for what they need.”*

Education and Health Literacy: Limited education and health literacy can impede an individual's ability to make informed health decisions. MENA populations in the State, particularly new arrivals, often have limited knowledge about preventive care, health promotion, and how to utilize health and dental services effectively. Health literacy initiatives often do not provide literature in MENA languages or in culturally relevant formats. Dietary recommendations for treating or preventing chronic conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure are not tailored to the diets or culinary traditions of MENA populations. The Iraqi Arab Health Board (IAHB), based in Kent, has worked to fill the gap in health education and literacy across multiple generations of the local Arab community, hosting semi-annual health resource fairs, offering individual support in navigating the healthcare system, and conducting vaccination campaigns.³³ Similarly, the Health and Wellness Committee of the Bellevue-based organization Alefba Group has previously offered health-education webinars covering chronic health issues and COVID-19 in Persian.³⁴

Mental Health Challenges

Trauma and PTSD: A MENA youth interviewed for this study remarked that *“every single Muslim and Arab immigrant can benefit from mental health support. They all grew up with some form of trauma and experienced lots of depression and anxiety.”* Many refugees and immigrants of all national origins do indeed arrive with histories of trauma and violence, which can lead to mental health issues such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression. The process of resettlement and integration into American society itself can also be stressful and challenging, compounding these issues. However, there are often only limited mental health services available that are both culturally sensitive and linguistically accessible. Within MENA communities themselves, mental health issues are surrounded by strong cultural stigmas. Mental health problems are seen as a sign of weakness or are associated with shame, leading individuals to avoid seeking help to avoid social stigma or family dishonor.

Lack of Culturally Appropriate Services: Mental health services are not tailored to the cultural and linguistic needs of MENA populations in the State. This issue stems, in part, from the lack of mental healthcare providers who share cultural and linguistic ties to MENA clients. This can result

³³ <https://iahb.net/programs/>

³⁴ <https://alefbagroup.org/health-talks/>

in a lack of trust and engagement with mental health services, exacerbating mental health issues and preventing individuals from receiving the support they need. On an individual level, a lack of MENA representation among mental healthcare providers can impact treatment outcomes and the desire to engage with mental health services in the future. One participant described her experience with a non-MENA therapist, sharing that *“I went to therapy, and it wasn’t effective. A huge part of it was having a white therapist. White therapists are unable to understand or empathize with you or your struggles or Arab cultural context you are coming from.”* On an organizational level, expanding the number of MENA mental health professionals and resources tailored to MENA communities would create greater trust in city, county, and state service provision. As one legal expert consulted for this study remarked, *“greater representation among mental health professionals and resources could lead to greater trust in elected officials and the existing institutions.”* One example of such representation in action is the Center for Social-Emotional Wellbeing of the Refugee Women Alliance (ReWA), which offers behavioral health services, including individual and family counseling, group counseling, psychiatric services, and referral services in Arabic, Turkish, Persian/Dari, Pashto, Kurdish, and Somali.³⁵ More informal support groups are also available for Afghan community members.

Lack of Awareness: Immigrants, particularly refugees, may have experienced trauma or violence in their countries of origin, leading to a general mistrust of institutions and a reluctance to engage with unfamiliar approaches to healthy living and well-being, including mental health services. In interviews, many participants expressed some desire to access mental health resources but had little awareness about available mental health resources and how to access them in their community.

Recommendations

1. Commission the Washington State Coalition for Language Access (WASCLA)’s standing committee on healthcare to assess local and statewide gaps in language access for MENA populations in healthcare settings.³⁶
2. Ensure that recommendations for health services from the 2022–2024 DSHS Language Access Plan are implemented and tailored for MENA language needs in the State.³⁷
3. Survey existing mental health treatment options for the broader MENA community and address outreach barriers to youth and young adults and their parents. Scale up behavioral health programming and referral services, based on ReWA’s model, to relevant service organizations outside of King County.

³⁵ <https://www.rewa.org/services/behavioral-health/>

³⁶ <https://wascla.org/our-services/>

³⁷ <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sites/default/files/odi/documents/SFY22-24%20DSHS%20Language%20Access%20Plan%20.pdf>

Population-specific Experiences

Elders

MENA immigrant and refugee elders in the State face a range of unique challenges that impact their quality of life and overall well-being. In this respect as in many others, the primary hurdle is the language barrier. Many elderly immigrants struggle with English proficiency, which can severely limit their access to essential services such as healthcare, legal assistance, and community resources. This communication gap often results in difficulty understanding medical instructions, navigating bureaucratic processes, and connecting with local services designed to aid older adults.

Economic insecurity was an issue often raised in interviews and group discussions with elders. Many elderly immigrants live on fixed or limited incomes, which can be exacerbated by the higher cost of living in the State, particularly in Seattle and its surrounding areas. Elderly immigrants experience difficulties accessing financial support programs, due to complex application processes or lack of information in their native languages. This financial strain can affect their ability to afford adequate housing, healthcare, and other necessities, making their daily lives more challenging.

Social isolation is also a significant concern. Immigrant elders may be separated from their families and traditional support networks, leading to feelings of loneliness and disconnection. This isolation can be compounded by cultural differences and a lack of community resources tailored to their needs. Programs that offer social engagement and cultural preservation for elder populations are limited, making it harder for these individuals to maintain a sense of community and belonging. One exception is the life-enrichment programming for Arabic-speaking and Persian-speaking elders offered by the Iraqi Community Center of Washington (ICCWA) and Alefba Group, respectively. Via these programs, elders from each community are given opportunities to exercise in local parks, enjoy traditional meals, and form new social networks.

Finally, the majority of elders who participated in this study do not drive independently and are often reliant on family members or public transit to complete daily errands, such as trips to the grocery store, and attend medical appointments and community gatherings. Lack of mobility further exacerbates the social isolation faced by immigrant and refugee elders in the State's MENA communities.

Recommendations

1. Consider funding local organizations that serve elderly MENA clients to allow them to adapt the National Council on Aging's evidence-based Aging Mastery Program (AMP)³⁸ for MENA

³⁸ <https://www.ncoa.org/article/what-is-the-aging-mastery-program/>

linguistic and cultural contexts. AMP allows older adults to increase their social connectedness and adoption of healthful behaviors through targeted education and programming, and the Denver Regional Council of Government has successfully adapted AMP to serve elderly MENA and East African populations.³⁹

2. Consider funding the ICCWA and the Alefba Group to implement a more targeted needs assessment for older MENA adults in the State and identify more specific service gaps and opportunities among this population.

Women

“As a visibly Muslim woman in Tacoma, I have to be more self-aware in public and less trusting of people because you don’t know how people will react to you. In public, I always have an eye on where the exit is in an enclosed space in case I feel threatened.”

MENA women in the State play a significant role in their local communities, acting as key community advocates and participating in local government, school boards, and advocacy groups. Even so, MENA women face unique challenges related to harassment, discrimination, and the ability to take advantage of economic and educational opportunities equally with their male counterparts.

For more recently arrived MENA refugee women, interviews revealed that they are more likely to lack the basic English proficiency necessary to navigate life in the U.S. independently. MENA refugee women are the primary childcare providers in their households and often do not have the time or access to transportation to attend in-person ESL classes. Afghan women, in particular, struggle to participate in ESL programming because many are illiterate in their native languages. OneAmerica and ReWA, both located in King County, have developed targeted ESL programming to serve the language-learning needs of Afghan women, and offer remote classes that facilitate easier participation.⁴⁰ Manzanita House in Spokane has adapted their ESL programming to meet the needs of Afghan women by creating a WhatsApp group for English learners and creating instructional videos in Dari and Pashto on how to manage everyday tasks like navigating the bus system and making a doctor’s appointment. As noted in an earlier section, English proficiency is the main barrier for MENA refugees and immigrants in finding gainful employment in the State. Another barrier specific to MENA women refugees is the lack of affordable childcare and/or childcare subsidies that would allow them to participate in ESL classes and job-skill workshops, as well as provide them with opportunities to socialize with other refugee women. Several

³⁹ <https://www.ncoa.org/article/how-the-aging-mastery-program-is-helping-older-adult-immigrants-and-refugees-navigate-longer-lives-and-age-well/>

⁴⁰ <https://weareoneamerica.org/our-work/english-innovations/>

interviewees reported that they did not understand the eligibility requirements for childcare subsidies, nor did they feel comfortable communicating with childcare providers in English.

For MENA immigrant women who arrived years ago, as well as their daughters born here, interviews focused on challenges with harassment and discrimination, particularly for MENA women who dress modestly or wear the hijab. One young hijabi woman in Tacoma brought up that though her brothers do not attract the same attention, she *“can’t goof around. I make sure to act extra respectful to strangers in public and say, ‘Yes ma’am’ and ‘no sir’ so I don’t attract scrutiny or negative attention.”* Other hijabi women mentioned that customer-service staff in stores are afraid to approach them, and non-Muslim neighbors will not make eye contact or engage them in small talk. Several young women stated that they feel paranoid that job rejections are exclusively due to their foreign-sounding names and modest clothing.

Recommendations

1. Expand childcare subsidies for refugee and immigrant populations, with a particular focus on creating additional spots for Early Learning Centers like ReWA’s that provide childcare that honors diverse language, cultural, and religious backgrounds.⁴¹

Youth

“Now even children have stressful lives. Life is very isolated here and children don’t have access to any social supports. Both parents work and they don’t have time for children.”

As the state grows increasingly diverse, young people from MENA backgrounds find themselves navigating a complex landscape marked by cultural dislocation, socio-economic disparities, and identity struggles. These youth often struggle to balance their heritage with the expectations of a predominantly Western society, while also facing challenges related to identity, representation, educational inequalities, and limited access to community resources. The intersection of these challenges creates a unique set of obstacles that impact their educational achievements, mental health, and overall sense of belonging. Understanding and addressing these issues is crucial for fostering an inclusive environment that supports the aspirations and well-being of MENA youth in the State.

Intergenerational differences between foreign-born parents and their U.S.-born children were a common theme among youth participants. As one youth participant noted, *“there are a lot of misunderstandings between how things were back ‘then’ for my parents and how things are now.”* Many youth participants reported feeling pressure to comply with their parents’ expectations that they live close to home after high school or college, which can create conflicts over education and career choices.

⁴¹ <https://www.rewa.org/services/early-learning-center/>

Above all, MENA youth reported struggling with the lack of youth programming available within their communities. While youth participants noted the presence of some youth programming available for elementary and middle-school students at their mosques, opportunities to engage with their MENA identity outside of a religious context were lacking: *“While my parents heavily emphasized our Arab and Muslim identity at home, I felt like I couldn’t engage in my identity much in elementary and middle school.”* One parent noted that *“I would love for my kids to have more structured events where we could rent out a space at a park for the weekend to highlight our presence in the community.”*

For college-aged youth, Muslim Student Associations (MSAs) and affinity groups for MENA students provide spaces and structured programming for students to celebrate their identities and cultural customs and create community with one another, sometimes for the first time in their lives. However, young adult participants noted the decrease in opportunities to socialize and build community with other MENA young adults following college graduation, due to work and personal commitments and the large geographic spread and fragmented nature of MENA communities across the Puget Sound area.

The absence of tailored youth and young adult programming for MENA communities in the state significantly hinders these young people’s development and integration into the broader community. Without specialized programs that allow them to engage with their identity and cultural traditions in positive ways, these young individuals often face increased feelings of isolation and marginalization. The lack of targeted support can exacerbate difficulties in academic achievement, intergenerational conflict, mental health, and social integration. Moreover, without programs that reflect their cultural backgrounds and experiences, MENA youth may struggle to find mentors and role models who understand their specific challenges. This gap in programming can limit opportunities for future community strengthening and the preservation of cultural and linguistic customs.

Recommendations

1. Provide funding for the Refugee and Immigrant Youth Advisory Council⁴² and religious and cultural institutions to gather input from youth, families, and community leaders to identify needs, interests, and gaps in youth programming.
2. Develop youth programming tailored to MENA and immigrant youth that cultivates leadership skills and encourages youth to take active roles in their communities.
3. Provide avenues for MENA youth to productively engage in community service and social activism.

⁴² <https://rootedbrilliance.org/programs/youth-education/>

4. Provide trainings for general city- and state-funded youth programming (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs of King County and the Seattle Youth Mentoring program) to ensure that programming is accessible to all youth, including MENA youth, and provides a safe, supportive environment free from discrimination and harassment.

Part III: Conclusion and Next Steps

The goal of this report is to provide a deeper reflection on the experiences of MENA immigrants and refugees within the State that could assist policymakers, city and state officials, service providers, resettlement agencies, and communities themselves in creating more targeted resources and programs. While MENA immigrant communities only make up a small fraction of the overall immigrant population in the State, their size and diversity only continue to increase each year. The data collected shows not only the barriers these communities face to economic security, housing, healthcare access, education, and broader cultural awareness and recognition, but also the strengths and resiliency of MENA communities in the State generally.

Given the limited size and scope of the study, the following next steps and suggestions for future research are recommended:

- For issue-specific recommendations highlighted in the report, expertise and solutions coming from within MENA communities must be recognized and acted upon. However, sufficient resourcing, support, and recognition from local and state institutions is also needed. Non-profit organizations specifically serving MENA communities rely heavily on volunteer support and limited outside funding, and lack the capacity to grow their programming or create long-term strategies for investing in and uplifting these communities. Further consultations and assessments with the organizations mentioned throughout the report, as well as with the list of experts identified in Appendix 4, is necessary in order to expand existing and needed services.
- As noted in Part I, this study did not involve a representative sample of MENA populations in the State. Additional community consultations for MENA populations outside of the Puget Sound area, as well as consultations with “minorities within minorities” (e.g., Kurdish, Hazara, and Chaldean communities), would provide a clearer picture of their experiences in the State. Further research and consultations should investigate the varying and evolving needs of these communities through route of arrival and length of time in the State (e.g., economic or educational migration versus refugee resettlement and family reunification).
- More targeted assessments and evaluations are needed on the performance of state employment, housing, and healthcare programs serving immigrants and refugees. Publicly available data was not offered on the DSHS Research and Data Analysis page concerning their refugee and immigrant programs, nor on how well their programs are serving MENA communities in the State. Publicly available performance data would allow for greater insights on gaps in services, as well as on successes and best practices in service provision.

Part IV: Appendices

Appendix I: Sample Questions

- *How long have you been in this region?*
- *How is your experience in everyday life here?*
- *What do you think your community needs?*
- *Can you describe any challenges?*
- *What kind of support networks or communities have you found in your city?*
- *Can you discuss your experiences with finding employment or pursuing education in your city?*
- *How do you access healthcare services in your city, and what has your experience been like?*
- *We've heard that the generation gap between immigrants/refugees and their children is sometimes difficult. Can you describe your experience?*
- *What are your hopes and aspirations for the future, both personally and for the MENA community in your city?*
- *Are there any specific policies, programs, or initiatives you believe would better support immigrants in your city?*
- *How can local organizations or community leaders better serve the needs of the MENA community?*
- *Do you have any suggestions for improving cultural understanding and integration in your city?*
- *What kinds of legislation and laws will help immigrants in your city?*

Appendix II: Self-Reported MENA Population Data in WA State from the 2020 Census

Ethnicity	Total in 2020
Algerian	397
Arab	2,165
Assyrian	106
Bahraini	12
Berber	51
Chaldean	20
Egyptian	4,789
Emirati	37
Iranian	10,218
Iraqi	5,563
Israeli	2,523
Jordanian	1,395
Kurdish	518
Kuwaiti	86
Lebanese	3,874
Libyan	557
Moroccan	1,068
Omani	26
Palestinian	1,387
Qatari	14
Saudi	559
Syriac	15
Syrian	1,180
Tunisian	244
Yazidi	16
Yemeni	435
Other MENA	4,360
Other White	1,774,440

Appendix III: Participating Organizations

Baladna PNW
Commission on Refugee and Immigrant Affairs (CRIA)
Greater Tacoma Community Foundation
Iranian American Community Alliance
Immigrant Women's Community Center
Iraqi Arab Health Board
Iraqi Community Center of Washington
Lutheran Community Services Northwest
Pierce County Health and Human Services
WA Office of Refugee and Immigrant Affairs
Partner in Employment
Refugee Women's Alliance
Snohomish County Human Services Department
Tacoma Community House
Thrive International
University of Washington Middle East Student Commission
Workforce Snohomish

Appendix IV: List of Experts

Mr. Noor A. Daftani, MBA, AAC

Social-Emotional Wellbeing Counselor & Team Leader at Refugee Women's Alliance

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Appendix V: Author Bios

Sameera Ibrahim is a community-based researcher and international development professional focused on Middle Eastern refugee and immigrant populations in the United States, Turkey, and Lebanon.

Amy Newcomb received a Masters of Arts in Development Studies from University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. Her primary research focused on women domestic workers in Jordan and the UAE. Amy's publications and research interests include topics in university civic engagement, community-based scholarship, service learning, and youth employability. Her previous experiences include positions with the Diplomatic Corps, the American University in Cairo, Tufts University, and the Lazord Foundation, the last of which offers a fellowship program for college graduates in Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia.