

Debunking Misconceptions About Muslims and Islam

Stereotypes are beliefs about an entire group that may be based on information about an individual or a small number of people within that group. People use stereotypes to make snap judgments about others without looking at them as individuals. Stereotyping is almost always negative and is always harmful because it makes unsubstantiated generalizations and ignores the humanity of the people being stereotyped.

Stereotypes about Muslims range from insults about terrorism to misunderstandings about the meaning of *Allah*. Here are four common stereotypes about Islam—each followed by an explanation of why the stereotype is incorrect and wrong.

Islam is a religion that promotes violence and terrorism.

“Islam totally prohibits terrorism—there is no text that endorses that,” says Ameena Jandali of the Islamic Networks Group, a California-based nonprofit, which provides education about Islam and promotes respect for all faiths. “Killing an innocent person is considered to be the greatest crime after worshiping another god.”

Islam guides followers to oppress women.

Historically, Islam promoted women’s rights. For instance, the Qur’an grants women freedoms that they did not have before, such as the right to inherit property, conduct business and have access to knowledge. “Men and women have the same responsibility before God,” says Jandali. “Arranged marriages are more of a cultural practice—and women do have the right to divorce.” The oppression many women face in Muslim countries is caused by cultural tradition, not Islamic law.

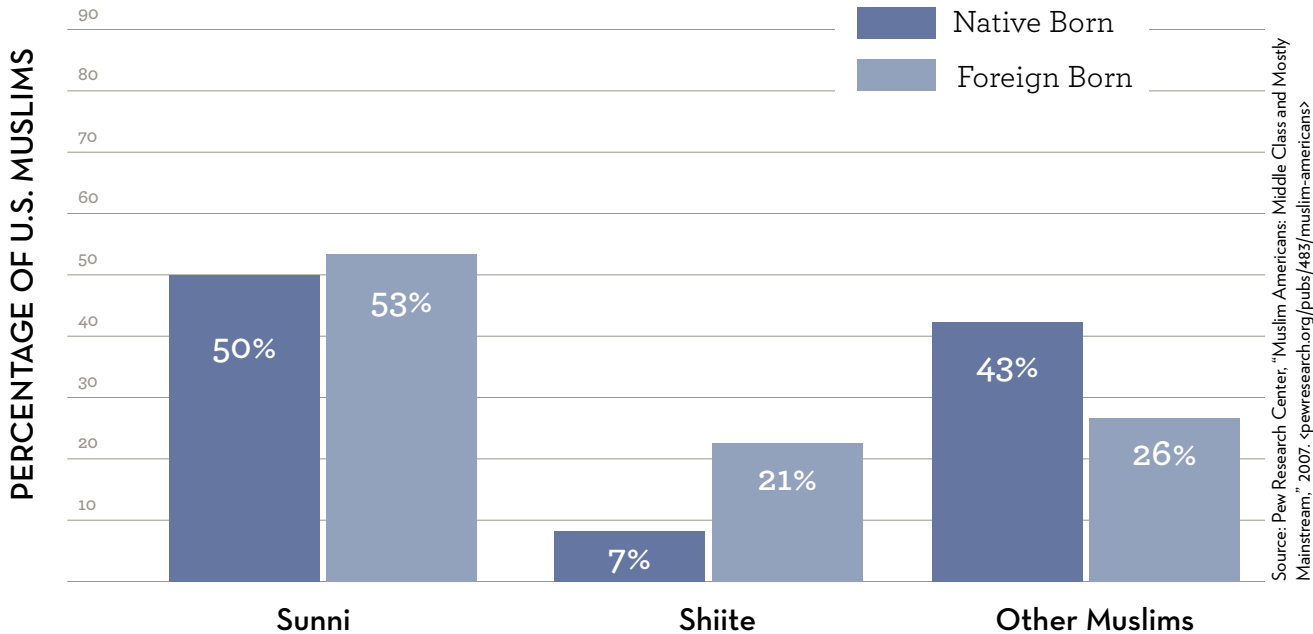
Women are forced by men to wear a headscarf, or hijab, as a sign of submission.

Rules about modesty are open to a wide range of interpretations. That is why women in Saudi Arabia must cover everything but their eyes, hands and feet, while many women in Turkey observe no special rules about dress. “It’s really because of a desire to please God,” Jandali says of using head or body coverings. The practice comes from a traditional interpretation that says the hijab protects women’s dignity. But wearing any special clothing is a personal choice. Further, women in other religious traditions also wear special clothing. Think about Catholic nuns, Amish women, and Orthodox Jewish women.

Muslims’ God is Allah.

The word *Allah* simply means *God*, and Islam springs from the same monotheistic tradition as Judaism and Christianity. To Muslims, Allah is the God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mary.

Graph 1: U.S. Muslims' Beliefs



UNDERSTANDING

1. To be sure you are reading the data correctly, answer the following questions:

- To which branch of Islam do most U.S. Muslims belong? _____
- Which is the second most numerous group of U.S. Muslims? _____

ANALYZING

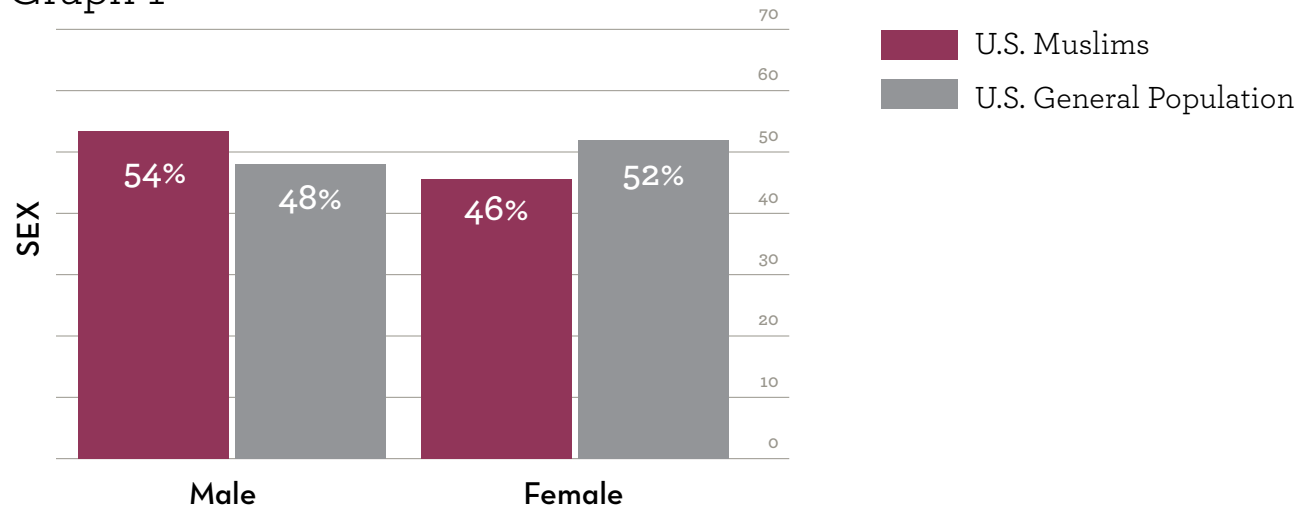
2. Now think about what the data means.

- Hypothesize about why there might be such a high proportion of "other" Muslims in the United States.

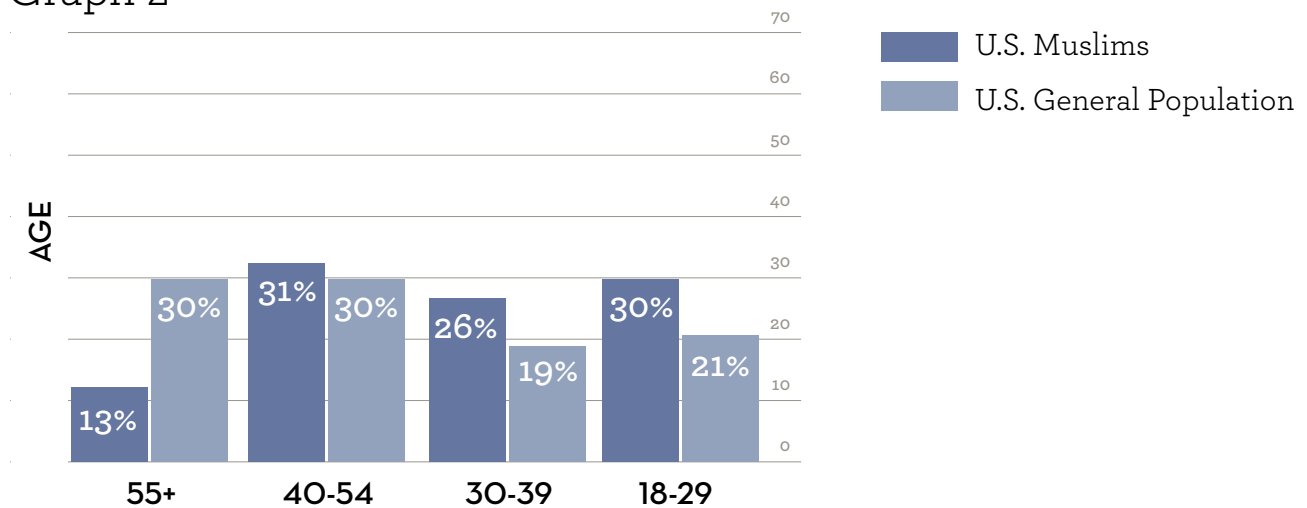
- How does knowing that there are different branches within Islam affect your understanding of the faith? Of U.S. Muslims?

U.S. Muslims and the Larger U.S. Population

Graph 1



Graph 2

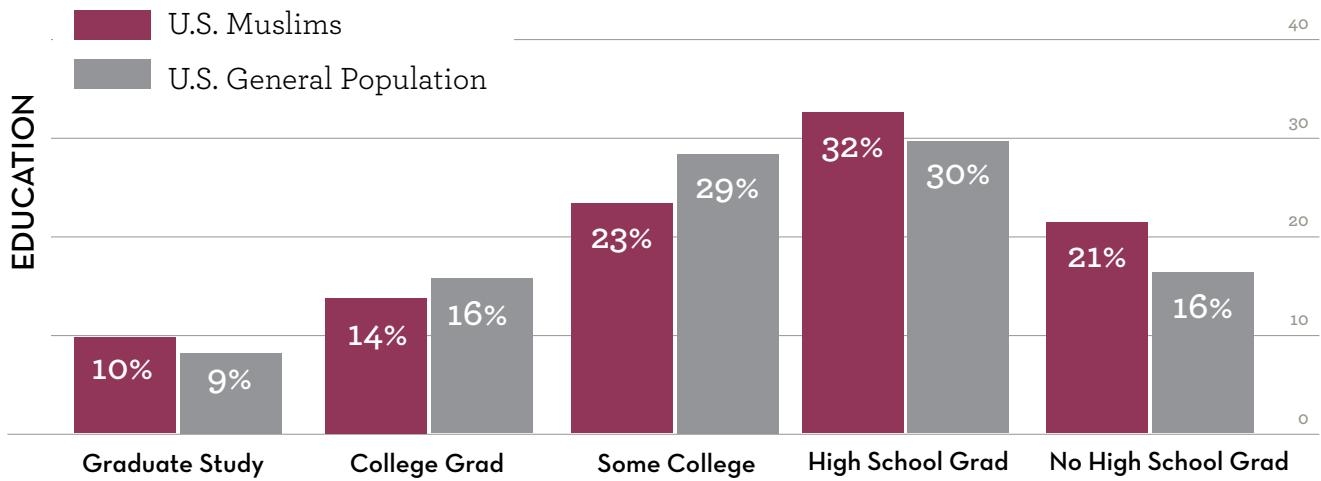


TEACHING TOLERANCE

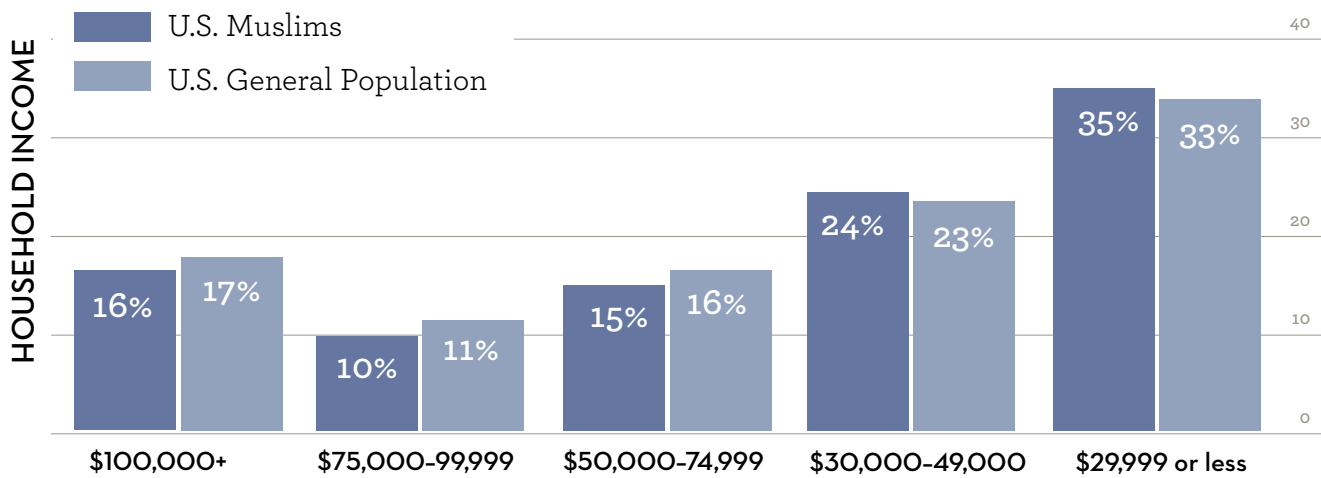
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MIDDLE & UPPER GRADES ACTIVITY

Graph 3



Graph 4



Source: Pew Research Center, "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream," 2007. <pewresearch.org/pubs/483/muslim-americans>

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MIDDLE & UPPER GRADES ACTIVITY

UNDERSTANDING

1. To be sure you are reading the data correctly, answer the following questions:

a. How does the male/female ratio among U.S. Muslims compare to the male/female ratio in the larger U.S. population?

b. How does the age breakdown among U.S. Muslims differ from that of the general population?

c. How does the education status of U.S. Muslims compare to that of the general population?

d. How do the household incomes of U.S. Muslims compare to those of the general population?

ANALYZING

2. Now think about what the data means.

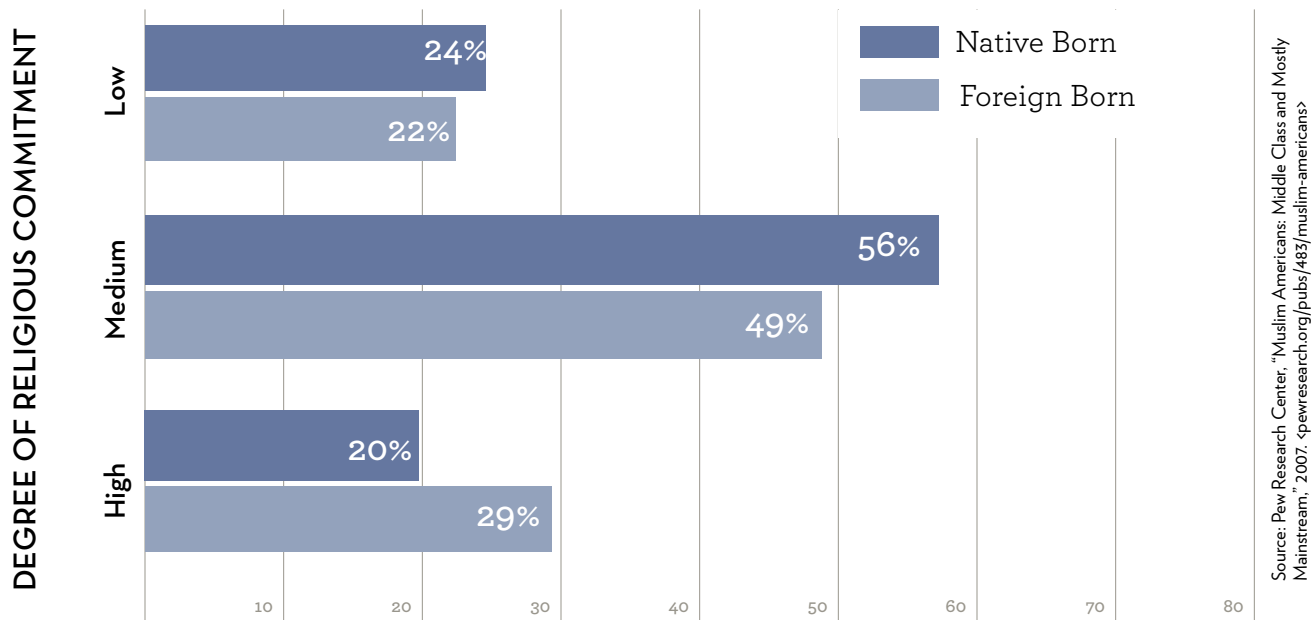
a. In what area do you see the biggest differences between the U.S. Muslim population and the larger U.S. population? Hypothesize: Why might that difference exist?

b. Write a sentence that summarizes the data comparing the U.S. Muslim population to the larger U.S. population.

c. How does knowing this information affect your understanding of American Muslims?

Graph 2: Religious Commitment Among U.S. Muslims

People vary widely in how committed they are to their religion—following its rules and participating in its practices. This is true among American Muslims, as the graph below shows.



UNDERSTANDING

1. To be sure you are reading the data correctly, answer the following questions:

- The majority of American Muslims describe themselves as having a ____ level of religious commitment.
- Within which commitment level is the percentage of foreign-born Muslims higher than the percentage of native-born Muslims? _____

ANALYZING

2. Now think about what the data means.

- Hypothesize about why it is that in one branch there is a larger percentage of foreign-born Muslims than native-born Muslims.

- How does knowing that there are different degrees of religious commitment among Muslims affect your understanding of the faith? Of U.S. Muslims?

Writing Assignment

In a well-organized paragraph (at least 8 sentences), discuss at least 2 lessons you learned from this activity and why those lessons are important. Be sure to do the following:

- Keep your writing organized (discuss one lesson and then the other)
- Use excellent word choice
- Use at least 3 sentence patterns
- Proofread