

# ISLAM IN AUSTRALIA

## Demographic Profile of Muslim Youth

Islam is the fourth largest religious grouping in Australia, with the 2006 Census reporting that approximately 1.71% (340,392 people) of the population identify as Muslim. The distribution of Muslim followers differs between states, with 3.1% of the South Australian population identifying as Muslim (Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIAC], 2008a).

The Australian Muslim community is among the most ethnically and racially diverse religious groupings, with members from over 60 different ethnic and racial backgrounds.

Since the late 1960s, there have been a number of significant Muslim migrations into Australia, most notably from Turkey and Lebanon. In the 1990s, refugees and migrants from the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Indonesia and Malaysia have all also migrated to Australia. The recent migratory waves of Muslims to Australia include the nations in the Middle East, North Africa, South East Asia, India and most recently Sub-Saharan Africa. The largest proportion of refugee and migrant Muslims in Australia originate from the nations in the Middle East (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2006; DIAC, 2008b).

The following lists the countries of origin of Muslim people in Australia:

Australia: 36%
<b>Lebanon: 10%</b>
Turkey: 8.5%
<b>Bosnia-Herzegovina: 4.0%</b>
Afghanistan: 3.5%
<b>Pakistan: 3.2%</b>
Indonesia: 2.9%
<b>Iraq: 2.8%</b>
Bangladesh: 2.7%
<b>Iran: 2.3%</b>
Fiji: 2.0%

The Muslim population in Australia is a relatively young group with 58.6% aged 29 years and under. From this group, the second generation Australian-born Muslim people constitute the largest proportion, where 81.8% are under 25 years. Overseas-born Muslim people migrating to Australia tend to be in the 25 to 44 year age group (DIAC, 2008a).



## Information about Islam in Australia

Islam consists of three main groups: (1) the majority Sunni; (2) the minority Shi'a and; (3) the smaller Sufi sect. These three main religious groups do not differ in their principal beliefs: the Sunni and the Shi'a follow the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran, however, the split in their religious beliefs occurred following the succession of the prophet, and the Sufis are characterised by a more mystical orientation (Canberra Islamic Centre [CIC], 2009; ABC, 2000).

At the core of Islam are five religious duties known as the Five Pillars of Islam. These are: the declaration of faith (*Shahadah*), five prescribed daily prayers (*Salat*), contribution to charity (*Zakat*), fasting during the month of Ramadan (*Sawm*) and a pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*). The consumption of alcohol and recreational drugs is religiously prohibited, as is engaging in any immoral act or behaviour such as criminal behaviour (CIC, 2009; ICNSW, 2004).

The Australian Muslim community is not a homogenous group, but rather a multilayered mixture of the various streams of the religion. In addition, as with many religions, the interpretation of Islam and its religious tenets varies between nations and followers. A recent report indicated that in general approximately 33% of Australian Muslims do not follow Islamic practice but remain cultural Muslims, 30% are very committed to their religion, whilst approximately 37% fit in-between (ABS, 2006; Islamic Council of New South Wales [ICNSW], 2004).

The following describes the cultural differences between the main Muslim groupings in Australia needed for consideration when working and engaging with young Muslims. It is important to note that there are likely to be variations within each country of origin grouping:

*In Afghanistan* the majority of the population identifies as Sunni Muslim (84%). The Afghan Muslims consider family very important and a man's family and family affairs are strictly off-limits to all outsiders. It is considered disrespectful to intervene intrude or probe into family life.

**In Iran** the majority of population identify as Shi'a Muslim (90%). Iranian Muslims families tend to stay together and parents are very devoted to their children. Parents are very involved in their children's lives including their career and marriage decisions. Daughters are generally subject to more parental restrictions than sons.

*In Iraq* the majority of the population identify as Shi'a Muslim (60-65%). Iraqi Muslim families are headed by the husband who makes all major decisions and has authority over the education, occupation and marriage of his children. Daughters are subject to more restrictions than sons.

**In Sudan** it is estimated that 70% of the population are Sunni Muslim. The

**Sudanese Muslims incorporate extended family members into the family network where the first-born son is the head of the family. As the children age, they become responsible for the care of their parents as well their extended family members.**

In *Somalia* the great majority of the population identify as Sunni Muslims. For Somali Muslims, family is extremely important and living with extended family is the norm. Men are usually the head of the household while women manage the finances and take care of the children. It is considered unacceptable for a man to not be perceived as being in charge of his home. Adulthood is considered to begin around the age of 18 years though it is acceptable to marry and have children around the age of 15 years.

**In *Bosnia-Herzegovina* it is estimated that 40% of the population practice Islam. Bosnian Muslims are moderate in their religious beliefs and therefore many practices observed in the Middle East would not be seen in Bosnia. Many Bosnian families in Australia do not strictly adhere to all religious practices.**

**(Multicultural Youth SA inc [MUSA], 2006)**

Many Muslim communities are now entering their second and third generations in Australia and their religious practices are increasingly merging into Australian culture. This leads to alternations in religious practices, such that these practices are less external and visible and more internal and personal, particularly among young people.

Young Muslims are striving to achieve successful integration and settlement into Australia. As such, young Muslims are practicing the teachings of Islam which are consistent with the dominant values of their Australian surroundings. This may be reflected in their increased internal religious practices and secondary focus on the external, visible religious practices.

Although alternations in Islamic practices may not be acceptable in their country of origin, young Muslims are beginning to blend their religious and cultural practices into Australian culture, with many developing a distinct Australian-Muslim identity (ICNSW, 2004). This can be a challenging process of identity development, with young people struggling to equally merge their values and beliefs from two different cultural systems. Muslims in Australia come from over 60 different ethnic and racial backgrounds. As a result, cultural values sometimes override Islamic teachings. The practice of Islam is now also being shaped by the prevailing values, norms and practices of Australian society, particularly among young people.



## **Key Issues Impacting on Police-Youth Relations**

Focus groups of young people aged 17 to 23 years from Somalia, Congo and Afghanistan were conducted to explore issues impacting on police-youth relations. The key issues identified are as follows:

**The young Muslims felt stereotyped due to their appearance and religious practices. Young people feel that they are more likely to get randomly searched and questioned because they are Muslim.**

**The young people felt police officers rarely take their side, primarily due to religious and cultural discrimination.**

**The young people tended to respond defensively to police because of the way they believed the police approach them and the lack of respect they feel they show.**

**Young people tend to 'act out' when they perceive they are being treated differently by police officers due to their religion and culture.**

**The young people felt that some police officers were quick to formulate conclusions without adequate exploration of the situation, particularly in terms of understanding the situation from the young person's perspective.**

**Young Muslims can have a negative view of the police force in their country of origin, where authority is often not trusted. This negative view towards authority can sometimes be transferred to police and authority figures.**

**Police officers could benefit from training and resources to enhance their understanding of the diverse Muslim populations in Australia, particularly the diverse customs practiced by young Muslims.**

**Police officers could benefit from training in multicultural issues, cultural awareness and interpersonal skills in interacting with young Muslims.**





## How to Engage Effectively with Young Muslims

Police officers could identify themselves when initially approaching a young Muslim. This is considered a sign of respect.

Police officers could work towards developing an understanding and employing culturally appropriate means of engaging with young Muslims, especially young women.

- Islam gives considerable guidance about interactions between men and women. Proper codes of conduct are to be observed between unrelated members of the opposite gender and limits set to casual interaction and physical proximity. Therefore, many Muslims will not shake hands with unrelated members of the opposite gender. It is preferable that female police officers interview young Muslim women.
- Islamic dress is more than one's clothing. It must meet the larger goal of commitment and obedience to Allah. The Hijab or Khimar (headscarf) is a requirement and demonstrates the Muslim woman's commitment to God. She should not feel compelled to remove it unless in an emergency situation.

Aim to recruit police officers, particularly women, who are of Muslim background.

Although a quick response is often necessary, the response must include communication in the first few moments of contact with a young Muslim person. If not a crisis situation, ask whether actions and strategies are culturally and religiously appropriate.

Police would benefit from engaging with young Muslims with equal consideration as other young people. This implies that there is no preconceived opinion or conclusion when engaging with young Muslims. This also implies an understanding that young people should recognise police roles in providing safety for the community.

Negotiate conflicting values. As the values and goals of police and young Muslims are not always in concordance, it is important that conflicts are addressed to the satisfaction of all parties.

Ensure that the situation is heard and understood from the perspective of the young Muslim person.

Avoid acting on a preconceived notion that a group of young Muslims are engaged in illegal activity, simply by virtue of being in a group.

'Hard policing' approaches with young Muslims may lead them to feel that they are being targeted due to their religion. A dialogue that aims to know more about the



person not only their behaviour is also likely to reduce feelings of victimization.

Rapport and trust are often established with young people through open communication and objective exploration of issues and concerns.

Aim to develop an understanding of Muslim practices and employ this understanding to contextualise issues involving young Muslims. This will ensure all perspectives are explored and the issues are approached in a context and culturally sensitive way.

Communication, openness and acceptance of difference in religion, and religious and cultural matters are essential components of successful engagement with young Muslims.



### Further information

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