The Sociological and Psychological Effects of Public Policies on Specific Communities in the United States

A Case Study on the US PATRIOT Act and Arizona SB 1070

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Abstract

The emphasis of this analysis is to better understand the psychological and sociological experiences of public policy on ethnic and minority communities in the United States. Recent studies in Michigan and Arizona revealed how these policies led participants to experience racial and religious discrimination that undoubtedly affected their ability to assimilate peacefully. Various obstacles such as disruptions to family life, barriers in attaining education, and lost opportunities to begin or advance their careers, were some of the consequences of policies that had a direct effect on these groups. Awadi (2014) carried out a study in Michigan that demonstrated how Arab American participants decided to either continue to practice their Islamic faith or distance themselves from their religion or ethnic identity altogether. A study by Lopez (2011) exposed the detrimental effects of policy on Mexican families and their youth in Arizona. The aim of our research is to further examine the effects of particular government policies on ethnic, racial, or religious populations. These policies, whether deliberate or not, kept these communities separate from mainstream American society. Consequently, both policies yielded a powerful barrier for the targeted societies to meritoriously establish themselves as contributing members of society.

Keywords: Public Policy, Ethnic Minority, Michigan, Discrimination, Arab Americans

Introduction

The devastating attacks on September 11, 2001 affected how Arab American Muslims are perceived by many in America (American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, 2011). The negative perceptions surrounding them increased the challenges for members of this religious and cultural group to fully integrate and assimilate into American society (Syed, 2006). Historically, many Muslim immigrants found that they could best assimilate by attempting to conceal their religious and ethnic identities. After 9/11, Arabs and Muslims in the United States found it increasingly difficult to change the negative perceptions about their communities (Alsultany, 2012). Regardless of these obstacles, many in this community kept their focus on retaining their religious and cultural identities while still working towards assimilation and integration. Arab American Muslims continue to develop productive ways to confront these issues while more actively participating in the social and political arenas of American society (Smith, 2011).

The vast amount of diversity in the Arab American Muslim communities has challenged researchers. In order to report how the population is affected by internal and external forces, qualitative researchers have studied a multitude of experiences that are as complex as assimilation and integration, particularly in the milieu of increased anti-Islam and anti-Arab sentiment since 9/11 (Ali, et al., 2011; Pew Research Center, 2011). The feeling of being a target in society has resulted in both subtle and apparent lifestyle changes that impact on their freedom to practice the Islamic faith without fear. Arab Muslims in the United States today continue to face challenges of identity, educational and occupational choices and opportunities, dress, religious expression, and acculturation with various racial and ethnic Muslim groups (Haddad, 2007).

In recent times, many nations have enacted laws or policies that unequivocally target Muslim residents (Kuru, 2009). These decisions were solely or partially related to a violent incident caused by the actions of extremists' who claim to be Muslim. Consequently, policies that affect an ethnic or religious group create a recipe for disorder and betrayal. For this reason, it has become increasingly important for public policy professionals to understand the impact of policy in relation to actual assimilation and integration experiences of the current minority groups in America (Pew Research Center, 2011). Current research indicates that these policies can serve as a deterrent for Arab Muslims in America to fully assimilate into mainstream American culture (Awadi, 2014). Therefore, the ability to have policies and decisions implemented effectively has been a concern for public policy makers in the aftermath of 9/11. In actuality, the creation, implementation, and delivery of particular policies that were intended to make life easier for Arab Americans have caused them more discomfort.

Impact of the USA PATRIOT Act

It is without a doubt that the attacks of 9/11 uncovered the United States' vulnerability to violence. As a result, the US enhanced their anti-terrorist strategies in hopes of preventing future attacks by directing their attention to both foreign and domestic terrorists. For example, one month after the dreadful attacks on the World Trade Centers, Congress passed the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001. The title of this Act is constructed of a ten-letter backronym (USA PATRIOT), which stands for Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism. This Act provided unlimited strength and resources to law enforcement agencies at all levels in the United States. Many agencies used this boost of power to keep a watchful eye on anyone who appeared to be tied to the Muslim faith not limited to Arab, African, Hispanic, and Asian Americans. However, what the government did not foresee is the discrimination factor in this policy, or they were ignorant of the psychological and sociological effects of this maltreatment. Muslims who practice their faith have described feelings of intimidation, shame, and discouragement from openly engaging in activities such as attending prayer services at a local mosque (Shamas & Arastu, 2012).

The Implications of The USA PATRIOT Act: Impact on Physical and Mental Health

From a social science perspective, there exists both psychological and sociological adverse effects of public policies. An example, the USA PATRIOT Act inadvertently targeted Arab and Muslim Americans or anyone who resembled that group by allowing law enforcement agencies

to investigate without rights or constitutional limitations. Although, this Act is just one legal element affecting human rights in the United States, it appears to be the one that has had the largest impact on this population.

For instance, a study of Arab American Muslims in Michigan (Awadi, 2014), revealed how this policy has led participants to experience racial and religious discrimination that affected their family situations, education, career advancement opportunities, or even continue to work without incident at their job. Awadi (2014) explained that participants in the study either decided to continue to practice their Islamic faith or distance themselves from their religion altogether. Some of the themes derived from the study presented how the effects of 9/11 impacted their assimilation efforts along with cultural and religious identity. Additionally, the study revealed that discrimination against Arabs and Muslims caused them to experience various psychological issues. As a result of these unfortunate circumstances, participants began to employ their coping methods, which varied between these two generations.

Coping with Policy: First and Second Generation Differences

Differences in assimilation efforts for first generation and second generation Arab American Muslims were personally expressed during interviews. The way in which these two generations reacted to, and were affected by, the public policy counter-terrorism initiatives, such as the USA PATRIOT Act, was especially interesting. First-generation participants, who experienced government-sanctioned religious and political repression and witnessed racial discrimination against others in their homelands, were much more tolerant of the ramifications of the post 9/11 US public policy initiatives. This group was also overwhelmingly grateful and relieved to be able to live in relative freedom. On the other hand, second-generation participants were more likely to feel that the United States was their country and therefore felt that their rights as American citizens were being attacked and invalidated. They expressed disappointment with American government policies that they felt were threatening their rights as native-born American citizens (Awadi, 2014). This generation recognized that to assimilate into American society, they must understand that elected officials of federal, state, and local governments will continue to perpetuate the notion that Arabs, Muslims, Islam, and Shari 'a are threats to the security of the United States and disrupt the American way of life (Pew Research Center, 2007).

Arizona SB 1070: Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act

Lopez (2011) conducted a qualitative study that focused on the impact of the Arizona's immigration law on its youth. This legislative act was signed into law in 2010 is known as the "Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act" and is the harshest anti-illegal immigration law in the United States to date. Similar to the USA PATRIOT Act, Lopez (2011) describes an abundance of evidence that reveals the negative implications of SB 1070 on both individuals and their families. The complexities of immigration status has not only been on undocumented immigrants but also for many young citizens and legal residents facing problems such as instability in families, limited educational opportunities and a constant fear of institutions and law enforcement. The USA PATRIOT Act and the Arizona immigration law (SB 1070) both focus on the sociological and psychological ramifications of public policy.

The Implications of SB 1070: Impact on Physical and Mental Health

While SB 1070 was not the first Arizona state law that addressed the illegal immigration issue, it was the most powerful one because it required many youth and their families to undergo a wide range of emotions and lifestyle changes. Interestingly, many (Mexican) families only heard about the law from television and radio media and it soon became the most talked about at home (Lopez, 2011). Participants in this study used keywords such as "panic" and "fear" when describing their reaction after the law was passed. The 9/11 Commission encouraged Americans to establish a border and immigration system, including law enforcement, that sends a message of welcome and tolerance (Ong Hing, 2006). Clearly that was not the case with this law and many Mexican families felt they were the intended target of SB 1070, which affected their emotions on a more personal level. As a result, this exposure to stressful family circumstances could inevitably leave a damaging impact on physical and mental health.

Likewise, Thoits (2010) describes "stress proliferation" as a process in which an initial stressor gives rise to additional stressors. This idea is parallel to a rippling effect where one problem leads to another in ones' life and can multiply immediately or over time. Her research highlights a critical finding that occurs in childhood. In this early stage of life, events and strains that generate stressful experiences, led to further stressors in later life. Thus, childhood stressors harm adult mental health both directly and indirectly through a process of stress accumulation. Furthermore, stress proliferates across the generations. For example, this proliferation spans to close social relationships, adversely affecting the members (Thoits, 2010).

Accordingly, stress proliferation processes play a part in the reproduction of social disadvantage from one generation to the next. The SB 1070 passage created a path for destruction for Mexican families in Arizona. Lopez (2011) discusses how one family's tension over the potential departure from Arizona caused the parents to separate. As a result, an older daughter dropped out of college and returned home to assist her family financially while the parents were separated. The "fear" factor within the affected families caused vast amounts of confusion and anger. Lopez (2011) also described how some youth had conflicts with their parents about leaving Arizona. Additionally, distress manifested itself on school grounds when a school volunteer witnessed seeing Mexican children "giving little pieces of paper to the other kids" and telling them "have these papers so that they don't stop and take you" (Lopez, 2011). It was also reported that schools had an increased level of stress-related health problems as a result of increased anger and aggression by many youth and their family members.

The Complexity of Policy: The USA PATRIOT Act and SB 1070

The mixture of xenophobia and racism is fueled by lawmakers who enact policies without merit or research. A possible result of this could be a negative perception from the greater American society towards the targeted ethnic or religious community. Hence, the reaction to these policies may cause fear, hatred, and discrimination. Research conducted on two distinct populations in the United States show similar issues as a result of unfounded and improper policies. Research carried out by Awadi (2014) demonstrated how Arab and Muslim Americans are forced to change their ethnic and religious identity out of fear and anxiety while Lopez (2011) explained how policies put the safety of Arizona's youth in jeopardy, has undermined education, and has

destroyed Mexican families. Both papers established a common outcome, which is the feeling of betrayal by the American people resulting from the public policies enacted.

Conclusion: Policy Recommendation and Future Research

Part I of this research will provide public policy professionals with additional scholastic knowledge that will aid in the design and implementation of policies. It is of the utmost importance to have appropriate policies in place since it is not only crucial to the well-being of individual groups in society but to also establish a rule of law within a nation. However, prior to policies being imposed, they must be supported by factual and intensive research in order to prevent the segregation of ethnic, racial, and religious communities that are directly affected. Furthermore, public policy officials will gain a better understanding of the vast array of diversity that is considered the fabric of the United States.

What is needed now is for researchers and policymakers to pay more attention to the unique issues that these populations must confront. Often times, what is hidden from public view are the daily stressors endured. The evidence clearly documents an abundance of daily stress, mental health needs and inadequate coping resources. The various stressors encountered will further substantiate both physical and mental health over time for these individuals. Further research on the daily stressors endured due to government policies that ultimately effect mental health and well-being will be conducted in Part II of this study.

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