

Mosque study shows rapid U.S. growth in last decade

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [April 4, 2012](#) issue

The number of mosques in America has jumped 74 percent since 2000, and the majority of them—56 percent— espouse a less-than-literal approach to interpreting Islam's holy texts.

These are some of the findings of a major new survey of American mosques that was released February 29, the third study produced by a coalition of Islamic civic groups and Muslim and non-Muslim religion scholars. "Islam," said David Roozen of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, part of Hartford Seminary, "is one of the few growth spots in America's religious mosaic."

Leaders of the institutions that sponsored the survey offered it as a counterargument to the currents of Islamophobia that they say have tainted much political and personal discourse during the past ten years. The report, they said, shows a strong willingness on the part of mosque leaders to encourage worshipers to engage in American society, including its politics.

"Post-9/11, I was really afraid of the new negative attitude Muslims were receiving," said Safaa Zarzour, secretary general of the Islamic Society of North America. "It made me feel that Muslim communities would feel marginalized from American society, and that to me is where things can become dangerous."

But that did not happen, he continued. "We see outreach and engagement among mosques—mosques with food pantries, medical clinics. You have people who can look at mosques in their neighborhood and see Muslims as people who can help, not people to be feared."

The survey, "The American Mosque 2011," counted 2,106 mosques in the nation and reported a spike in the number of people who attend prayers during Eid, the Muslim holy days that tend to attract more people than any other. In 2011, the survey found 2.6 million people had gone to Eid prayers, up from 2 million in 2000.

That last figure challenges many previous estimates of the U.S. Muslim population, which generally fall well below 3 million. Given the number of Muslims who do not pray the Eid prayers, the total number of Muslims in the U.S. likely exceeds 3 million, perhaps by more than a million, the study's authors conclude.

Within those mosques, a more flexible attitude toward the interpretation of Islam is the most typical, with 56 percent of mosque leaders describing their own approach as one that sees the Qur'an and other Muslim holy writings as a guide relevant to modern life.

Of the remaining mosque leaders surveyed, 31 percent take a more conservative approach and base their interpretations on centuries of Islamic scholarship. Another 11 percent follow a single, traditional religious school of thought. Just 1 percent followed a strict interpretation that the study's authors likened to Wahhabism, the brand of Islam that predominates in Saudi Arabia.

Zahid Bukhari, president of the Islamic Circle of North America, suggested that American politicians—from presidential candidates to local office seekers—should reach out to Muslim voters. "Visit a mosque," he said.

The study also reveals the diversity of American mosques. Among regular mosque participants, 33 percent are South Asian, 27 percent are Arab and 24 percent are African American.

Among other findings of the report:

- A steady conversion rate. In 2011, the average number of converts per mosque was 15.3, compared to 16.3 in 2000.
- A decrease in the number of mosques in urban areas and an increase in suburban mosques. In 2000, 16 percent of mosques were located in the suburbs, compared to 28 percent in 2011.
- A shift in geographic distribution of mosques, which in 2000 were mostly concentrated in the Northeast. In 2011, the South had the greatest number of mosques, 34 percent, compared to 26 percent in 2000.
- About 7 percent of the mosques surveyed identified as Shi'ite, with the greatest proportion located in the West (37 percent).

The survey is part of a larger, continuing study of American congregations called Faith Communities Today, a multifaith effort.

Sponsors

of the mosque survey in addition to the Hartford Institute were the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the Islamic Society of North America, the Islamic Circle of North America and the International Institute of Islamic Thought. —RNS