

Social and Economic Conditions of Australian Muslims: Implications for Social Inclusion

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Using specially generated tabulations of Muslim and non-Muslim Australians from the 2006 Census, this paper examines the social and economic position of Australian Muslims and implications for their social inclusion. Although Australian Muslims come from more than 30 countries, the largest number, 38 per cent, are Australian-born and almost 40 per cent are younger than 20 years. Educationally they are high-achievers. Twenty-one per cent of adult Muslim men have a university degree compared with 15 per cent of non-Muslim Australians, yet their age-specific unemployment rates are two to four times higher than those of non-Muslim Australians. On other indicators of socioeconomic well-being they fall into a very disadvantaged category. For example their rate of home ownership is half the national average; 40 per cent of Muslim children are living in poverty, which is twice the Australian average; only 25 per cent of Muslim households have above-average household income while the corresponding figure for non-Muslim households is 34 per cent. These indicators suggest that a significant proportion of Muslim Australians occupy, both socially and economically, a relatively marginal position in Australian society. This marginalisation is conducive to the intergenerational transfer of disadvantage. It may also contribute to their alienation from Australian society and its values and, in addition, make them vulnerable to religious and non-religious radicalism. The paper will discuss these issues in some detail. It will argue that socioeconomic marginalisation and a sense of relative deprivation are often breeding grounds of religious and non-religious radicalisation. Theological and ideological impulses only further galvanise those who are socially and economically disadvantaged.

Equality of citizenship is one of the most significant yardsticks to measure social inclusion in modern societies. At its core are the ideas of equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes afforded to all citizens irrespective of their gender, race, religion, class and other similar attributes. Elaborate legal frameworks, including laws promoting equal opportunity and prohibiting race and ethnic discrimination, have been introduced to ensure their realisation.

Sociologists have developed theoretical models to identify the social structural barriers that can frustrate the realisation of equality of citizenship in modern society.

One of most useful of such models was developed by the American sociologist Robert Merton.¹ It focuses on two key elements of social and cultural structures that are analytically separable, although they merge in concrete situations.

The first consists of culturally defined goals, purposes and interests, held out as legitimate objectives for all members of society. They are integrated into the social fabric of society and ordered in some hierarchy of value. Involving various degrees of sentiment and significance, the prevailing goals comprise a frame of aspirational reference. They are the 'things' worth striving for and relate not only to biological survival but also to 'living decently' in society.

A second element defines, regulates and controls the acceptable means of reaching these goals. Every social group invariably couples its aspirational goals with regulations rooted in mores or institutions of allowable procedures for moving towards these objectives. These regulatory norms are not identical with technical or efficiency norms. For example in the context of Australian society the allowable procedures to achieve the aspirational goal of economic security would involve one or more of the following: good education, a well-paying job or inheritance of wealth. But for some individuals the most efficient way of achieving the same goal may be fraud, robbery or other similar acts, which are ruled out by society as impermissible.

While the achievement of culturally desirable goals and institutionalised means may operate jointly to shape the prevailing practices, they do not always bear a direct relationship with each other. Under certain conditions the emphasis placed on certain goals may vary independently of the emphasis placed on the institutionalised means. There are many factors that play a critical role in determining these patterns. I will return to the causes of these later. The model in figure 1 describes the possible modes of interaction between the culturally valued goals and institutionalised means.²

Figure 1: Social structure, social cohesion and anomie

Cultural goals	Institutionalized means	Behavioural adaptation	Sociological implication
1. Know, accept and identify with goals	Know, accept and follow approved means to achieve goals	Conformity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Moral basis of social order ▪ Strengthens social cohesion ▪ Promotes social inclusion
2. Know, accept and identify with goals	Reject approved means and follow impermissible means	Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Criminal and deviant behaviour ▪ Threat to social cohesion ▪ Indicates lack of social inclusion
3. Know but reject goals	Know and reject/are indifferent to means	Retreatism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Deviant behaviour promotes opting out of normal society: conducive to social exclusion
4. Reject goals and seek their replacement with new goals	Reject approved means and seek their replacement with new means	Rebellion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Basis of revolutionary movements ▪ Radical/Islamist movement ▪ Seek new basis of social cohesion ▪ Promote social exclusion

Source: adapted from RK Merton, 'Social structure and anomie', in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Free Press, New York, 1968.

The outcome in which the social actors subscribe to the cultural goals and employ the institutionalised means to achieve them is labelled as *conformity* and is indicative of the social integration and social inclusion of individuals in their society. It represents an effective equilibrium between two phases of social structure because individuals derive an intrinsic satisfaction from conforming to societal norms about the goals and means in a competitive order. The satisfaction accruing from this conformity reinforces social participation and social cohesion. Instances in which actors are forced or motivated to deviate from this pattern are indicative of mal-integration, anomie and alienation.

In the above model these instances have been labelled as *Innovation*, *Retreatism* and *Rebellion*. Innovative behaviour is essentially what we label deviant or criminal behaviour. Here the individuals seek to achieve culturally prescribed goals through impermissible non-institutionalised means. Retreatist outcomes signify rejection of both the cultural goals and means, and in doing so the individuals primarily choose to opt out of society. The final outcome, *Rebellion*, involves not only rejection of the cultural goals and means but also a commitment to their replacement with new goals and means leading to a radical restructuring of society.

The last three outcomes are forms of aberrant behaviour symptomatic of disassociation between culturally prescribed aspirations and socially sanctioned means for realising them. Their presence invariably poses a threat to social cohesion and invokes negative sanctions to minimise their impact on the social order. Society, as a moral community, predicated on positive rewards for the individuals conforming to socially sanctioned goals and means, also creates conditions for the emergence of aberrant behaviours. Conformity to the goals and means and the positive emotional, psychological and social feedback associated with it are critical for social cohesion and integration.

Are there certain social conditions that are conducive to motivating individuals to achieving socially and culturally prescribed goals through institutionalised means? Sociological studies show that access to economic opportunities has a major influence on promoting such conditions. Conversely, conditions of economic and social disadvantage are likely to impede achievements of socially and culturally desirable goals through socially sanctioned means. In the rest of the paper I will examine the economic and social conditions of Australian Muslims in order to explore whether or not these are conducive to promoting their social inclusion in Australian society.

Social and economic position of Australian Muslims

According to the 2006 Australian Census of Population, there were 340,391 Muslims in Australia, constituting about 1.7 per cent of the Australian population. Specially generated Australian Bureau of Statistics tabulations on a number of indicators were used to analyse Muslim and non-Muslim social and economic profiles.

Country of birth and age structure. In 2006 38 per cent of Australian Muslims were Australian-born, followed by Lebanon (9%), Turkey (7%), Afghanistan (5%), Pakistan (4%), Bangladesh (4%), Iraq (3%) and Indonesia (2.5%). Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iran, Fiji and India each had 2 per cent. As figure 2 shows, compared with the non-Muslim Australians, Muslim Australians were significantly younger. Almost 40 per cent were younger than 20 compared with 27 per cent of non-Muslims. Around 37 per cent of Muslims and 27 per cent of non-Muslim Australians were between 20 and 39 years of age, and only 6 per cent of Muslims were older than 60 compared with 19 per cent of non-Muslim Australians. Their age structure suggests that as a human resource Australian Muslims are concentrated in the more economically productive years of the lifecycle.

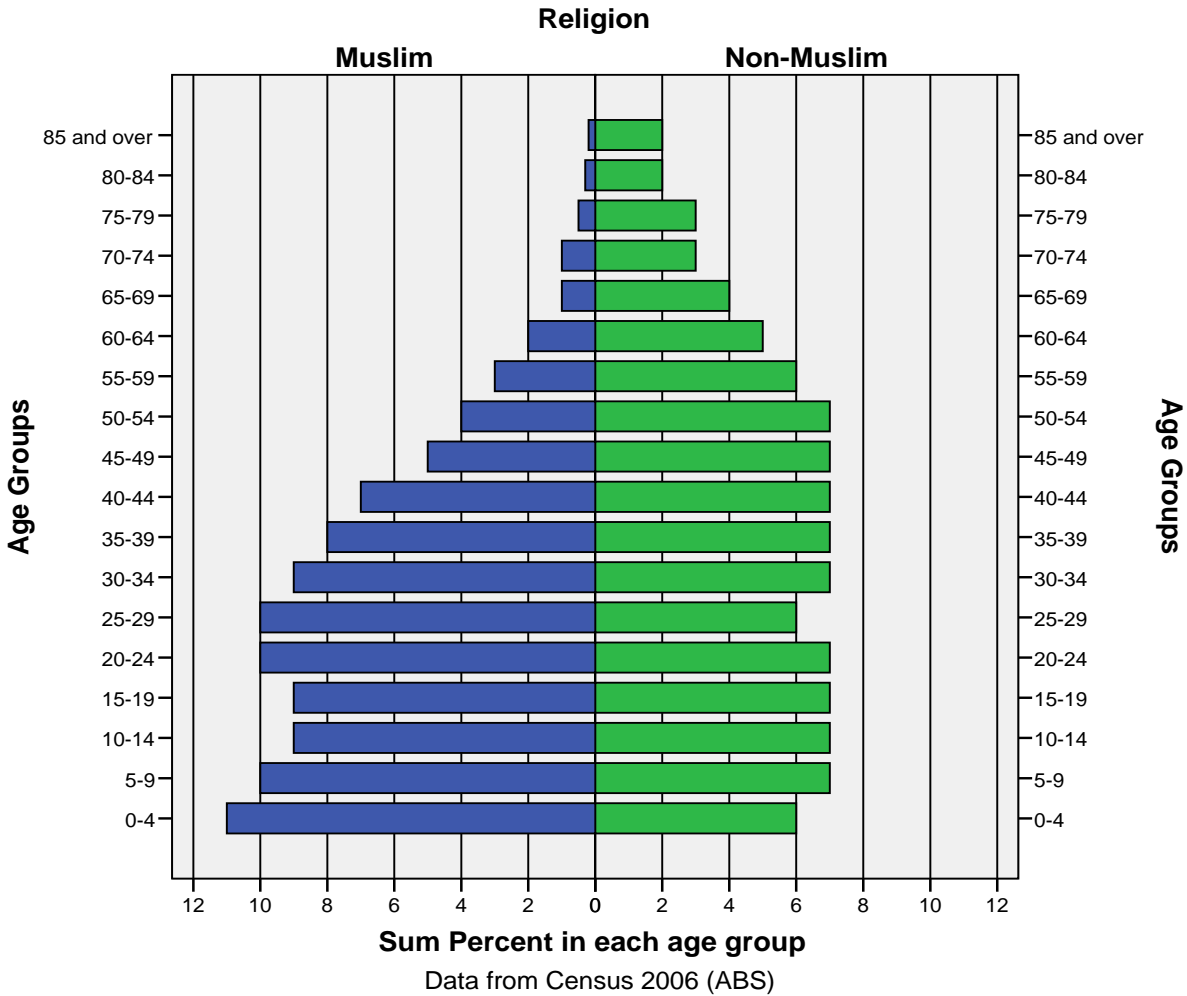
Table 1: Muslims in Australia by country of birth

Country of birth	Australian Muslims (%)
Australia	38
Lebanon	9
Turkey	7
Afghanistan	5
Pakistan	4
Bangladesh	4
Iraq	3
Bosnia-Herzegovina	2
Iran, Fiji, India	2 each

Source: ABS, 2006 census, Special Tabulations

Figure 2:

Comparison of age-group breakdown between Muslim and non-Muslim populations



Educational attainment. Educational attainment is an important indicator of cultural capital. It represents societal investment in its human resources, endowing individuals with capacities to achieve their social and economic aspirations. The educational attainment profile of Australian Muslims shows that in all categories except one they are either similar to or better than non-Muslim Australians. This applies to both Muslim men and women. The only category in which non-Muslim Australians are significantly over-represented is the Certificate/Diploma and Associate degree category. Significantly more Australian Muslim men and women had completed high school, and a significantly higher proportion of Muslim men had a university degree compared with their non-Muslim compatriots. This profile shows that in terms of human capital the Muslims are similar to, and in some respects better endowed than, the non-Muslim Australians. On this basis one would expect that Muslims and non-Muslims would have some parity in their economic position in society. Is this reflected in the indicators of their economic position in Australian society?

Table 2: Highest level of educational attainment

Educational attainment	Muslims (%)	Non-Muslim (%)
Male		
Year 11 and below	29	29
Year 12	24	15
Cert/dip/assoc. degree	16	28
BA/postgrad	21	15
Female		
Year 11 and below	36	37
Year 12	26	17
Cert/dip/assoc. degree	11	15
BA/postgrad	16	16

Source: ABS, 2006 census, Special Tabulations.

Note: 11 per cent Muslim and 14 per cent of non-Muslim males and 11 per cent of Muslim and 15 per cent of non-Muslim females did not provide adequate data.

Home ownership. Home ownership is the most common vehicle through which Australians accumulate private wealth. Table 3 shows that a third of non-Muslim Australians are outright owners of their homes, but only 15 per cent of Muslims fall into this category. Muslim and non-Muslim Australians have similar proportions among those who are purchasing their homes but don't yet own them. Striking differences emerge when it comes to rental accommodation. The majority of Australian Muslims live in rental accommodation, with the largest proportion residing in the private rental market and twice as many living in public housing as non-Muslim Australians. Other indicators suggest that Muslim Australians live in more crowded housing. What this data suggests is that in terms of accumulation of private wealth, Muslims are not as successful as non-Muslim Australians. In part this may be due the fact that they are recent immigrants to the country.

Table 3: Housing tenure of Muslim and non-Muslim households

Tenure type	Muslim households (%)	Non-Muslim households (%)
Fully owned	15	33
Being purchased	33	33
Rented: private	35	20
Rented: public	9	4
Other	8	11

Source: ABS, 2006 census, Special Tabulations

Household income. Disadvantage is also reflected in the household incomes of Muslim and non-Muslim Australians (see table 4). Muslim households are significantly over-represented in lower-income and under-represented in higher-income categories. While the proportions are small, almost twice as many Muslim households had no or negative income compared with the non-Muslim households.

Table 4: Weekly income

Income	Muslim households (%)	Non-Muslim households (%)
Negative/nil income (\$)	2.3	1.1
\$649 and less	31	27
\$650–\$1199	25	23
\$1200–\$3499	25	31
\$3500 or more	2	3

Source: ABS, 2006 census, Special Tabulations.

Note: 15% per cent of Muslim and non-Muslim households did not provide income information.

Table 5: Children in poverty

Income per week	Muslim households (%)	Non-Muslim households (%)
Less than \$650 per week	40	19
\$650 or more per week	60	81

Source: ABS, 2006 Census, Special Tabulations.

Note: excludes households where income was not stated or which were non-applicable.

Children in poverty. The Australian benchmark of poverty is household income equivalent to \$650 or less (which was 60 per cent of the average male weekly wage in 2006). Using this benchmark, the census data shows that 40 per cent of Muslim Australian children were living in poverty. Muslim children were twice more likely to live in poverty than non-Muslim children.

Table 6: Occupational structure

	Muslims (%)	Non-Muslims (%)
Professional and managerial	26	33
Skilled blue-collar	26	21
Sales, clerical and personal services	30	24
Labourers	15	10

Source: ABS, 2006 census, Special Tabulations.

Note: occupations 'inadequately described' not included.

Occupation. Although Muslim Australians are more like to have a university degree, their occupational affiliations show that they are significantly under-represented in the high-paying and more prestigious professional and managerial occupations and over-represented among labourers and skilled blue-collar occupations (see table 6).

Table 7: Age and labour force status

	Muslims in age group (%)	Non-Muslims in age group (%)
15–18		
Employed, full-time	17	21
Employed, part-time	45	58
Employed hours not stated	11	8
Unemployed	26	14
19–24		
Employed, full-time	40	54
Employed, part-time	33	32
Employed hours not stated	9	6
Unemployed	18	9
25–44		
Employed, full-time	57	66
Employed, part-time	24	24
Employed hours not stated	7	6
Unemployed	12	5
45–64		
Employed, full-time	59	64
Employed, part-time	23	27
Employed hours not stated	7	6
Unemployed	11	4
65 and over		
Employed, full-time	46	41
Employed, part-time	33	46
Employed hours not stated	13	10
Unemployed	8	2

Source: ABS, 2006 Census, Special Tabulations

Note: Excludes persons not in the labour force and not stated.

Employment and unemployment. Since incomes in Australian society are mainly distributed through the labour market, the employment and unemployment rates influence individual life chances and economic well-being more than any other factor. Table 8, which provides data about the age and labour force status of Australian Muslims and non-Muslims, reveals the most important aspect of economic disadvantage suffered by Australian Muslims. The general pattern is that in all age groups Muslim Australians' employment rates were lower and the unemployment rates significantly higher than those of non-Muslim Australians.

Among Muslim teenagers the unemployment rate was 26 per cent compared with 14 for non-Muslim Australians. Among 19- and 24-year-olds Muslims, only 40 per cent had full-time employment and 18 per cent were unemployed, compared with the corresponding figures for non-Muslims of 54 per cent and 9 per cent. The pattern among the prime working years of 25 to 44 was similar with 57 per cent of Muslims being in full-time work and 12 per cent were unemployed. The full-time work figures are significantly lower than those for non-Muslim Australians. The same pattern is repeated for those aged 45–64. Only among Australian Muslims aged 65 years and older is the proportion of full-time employment a little higher than that of non-Muslim Australians, but the unemployment rate among them is four times higher.

Besides the fact that significantly lower numbers of Muslim compared with non-Muslim Australians are in full-time employment throughout their working lives, the most striking feature of Australian Muslim disadvantage is that their relative economic disadvantage as measured by the unemployment rate increases with age. The ratio of Muslim: non-Muslim unemployment continues to increase during the working lifecycle from 1.86:1 among 15- to 18-year-olds to 2.40:1 among 25- to 44-year-olds, peaking at 4:1 among those aged 65 and older.

Sociological implications for social inclusion

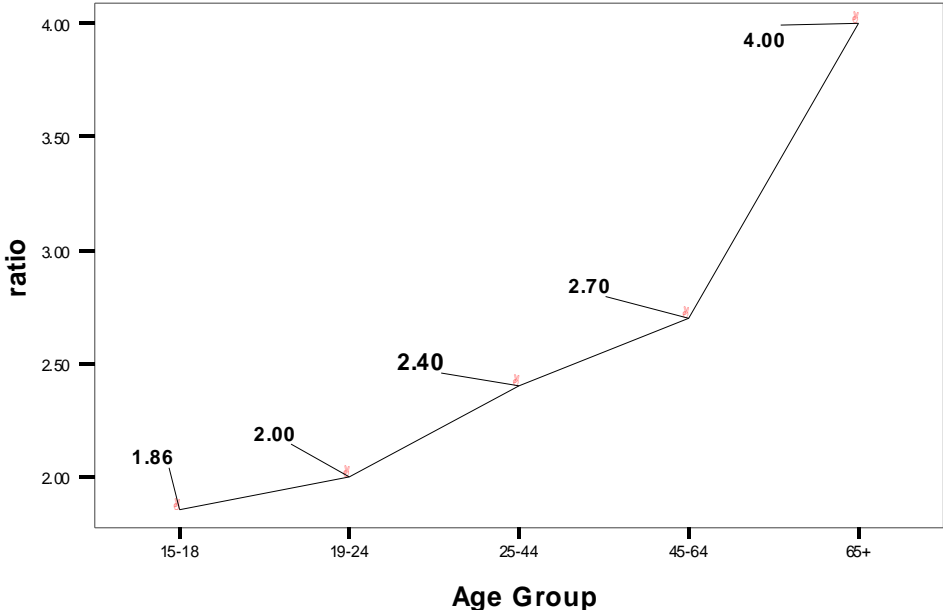
What are the sociological implications of the socioeconomic position of Australian Muslims for their inclusion in the Australian society? The employment and unemployment rates of Australian Muslims indicate that the cultural capital embodied in their educational profile does not materialise in producing the same level of returns as it does in the case of non-Muslim Australians. Australian Muslims have significantly high unemployment rates throughout their economically productive years compared with non-Muslim Australians. This obviously accounts for the greater prevalence of poverty among them. More importantly, the proportion of Australian Muslim children living in poverty is twice that of non-Muslim compatriots.

One way to demonstrate this economic gap is the unemployment ratios of Australian Muslim and non-Muslims explained above. This comparison, presented graphically in figure 3, shows that the relative economic disadvantage experienced by Australian Muslims continues to increase over the lifecycle and is most likely cumulative. It makes Australian Muslims more vulnerable to multigenerational endemic poverty making it difficult for them to enjoy the fruits of equal citizenship in Australian society. This situation has special import giving that a third of Muslim children live in poverty, thus making poverty a way of life for many of them.

Economic disadvantage is disempowering. The relative economic disadvantage of Australian Muslims increases the probability of their alienation from mainstream Australian society, making comparatively more Muslims vulnerable to such adaptations as innovation, retreatism and radicalism. One way to ascertain whether this is happening is to examine their imprisonment rates. Unfortunately I do not have this data, but evidence from comparable societies, such as the UK and France, is instructive. In the UK 2.8 per cent of the population is Muslim but around 10 per cent

of its prison population is Muslim. In France 8 per cent of the population is Muslim but, according to one recent estimate, around half of its prisoners are Muslims.³

Figure 3: Unemployment ratio of Muslims to non-Muslims by age group



Why are Australian Muslims more economically disadvantaged? One possible reason is that since many of them are recent immigrants, their overseas educational qualifications might not be fully recognised in Australia. But this reason does not explain 26 per cent unemployment and 17 per cent employment rates among Muslim teenagers who are mostly Australian-born and -educated. Other factors could include lower levels of proficiency in the English language and prejudice and systemic discrimination. More research is required to explore this problem in order to develop appropriate remedial public policies.

The issue of young Muslim Australians' economic disadvantage gains a special significance in the current environment given the heightened public concern about

Islamic radicalism. Last year the report *Australia Deliberates: Muslim and Non-Muslims in Australia* concluded:

There has been a proliferation of mutual misperceptions and lack of understanding by both Muslims and non-Muslims in Australia. Misperceptions and lack of understanding fuels a mutually reinforcing negative spiral: fear of the 'other' and aggressive behaviours feed stereotypes on both sides which may work as self-fulfilling prophecies.

The report goes on to say:

Young Australia Muslims, most of whom are born in Australia, are becoming increasingly alienated because of the relentless questioning of their 'Australian-ness'. In searching for identity, they turn to others who share this experience, and therefore gravitate away from mainstream Australian culture which appears to reject them. The danger is that they may turn to more radical sects of Islam. Stereotypes and prejudices are fuelling a widening of the divide from both sides, not just in Australia but globally.⁴

We need to interrogate public policies implying a nexus between Islam, radicalism and deviant values. In recent years public debates on terrorism and around events such as the 'children overboard incident', the treatment of asylum seekers and Dr. Mohammad Haneef case have implied the existence of such a relationship. These debates have implied that Muslims are more inclined towards radicalism than followers of other religions. This paper has sought to challenge this view by arguing that conditions which may produce proclivity towards religious and non religious radicalisms are more likely to arise from socio-economic inequities, negative ethnic and religious stereotypes and discriminatory practices and not from the impulses of Islamic theology.

The overall conclusion of this paper is that Australian Muslims come from diverse ethnic and national backgrounds with the largest proportion being Australian-born. They represent an educated segment of Australian society but experience significant economic disadvantage in the labour market. This is pushing many into poverty, which has the potential to become endemic. Their economic disadvantage creates barriers to achieving aspirational social and cultural goals, thus impeding their social inclusion in Australian society. These issues require urgent attention and more focused research in order to aid development of appropriate public policies to address and alleviate this situation.

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Footnotes

¹ Merton, RK, 'Social structure and anomie', in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Free Press, New York, 1968.

² Ibid.

³ *The Economist*, 'Muslim extremism in France', 20 September 2008, p. 65.

⁴ Issues Deliberation Australia, *Australia Deliberates: Muslim and Non-Muslims in Australia Final Report*, Canberra, 2007.