INVISIBLE IN THE DATA

The Lack of a Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) Race & Ethnicity Category Obscures Disparities

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NEW YORK IMMIGRATION COALITION

The New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC) is an umbrella policy & advocacy organization that represents over 200 immigrant and refugee rights groups throughout New York. Since its founding in 1987, the NYIC has evolved into a powerful voice of advocacy by spearheading innovative policies, promoting and protecting the rights of immigrant communities, improving newcomer access to services, developing leadership and capacity, expanding civic participation, and mobilizing member groups to respond to the fluctuating needs of immigrant communities.

MALIKAH

Malikah is a grassroots anti-violence and wellness organization advocating against gender and hate based violence through self-defense training, healing justice, economic empowerment, and community organizing for safety and power. Malikah has been spearheading the Coalition for Middle Eastern and North African New Yorkers, a collective of organizations building power for MENA communities in New York State.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report serves as a guide for community leaders and advocates working to advance equity for Middle Eastern and North African communities by ensuring that demographic data collected, analyzed, and reported by government agencies on race and ethnicity accurately represent many distinct populations. This report discusses the importance of a MENA category including the limitations of categorizing Middle Eastern and North African Americans as white.

INTRODUCTION

Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) communities have long been categorized as "White" in government data collection, including the decennial census, household surveys, and administrative forms. MENA communities are diverse, representing various cultural, linguistic, and religious identities. Research suggests that a majority of people with MENA origins neither perceive themselves to be white, nor are perceived to be white. There is also evidence that, like other ethno-racialized groups, MENA communities experience high rates of socioeconomic disadvantage, health disparities, and discrimination when compared to whites. Inclusion in the single racial category of "White" renders the experiences of MENA communities invisible in many areas, including education, employment, housing, healthcare, and political representation. The lack of a MENA category has hindered our understanding of the needs of MENA communities and our ability to consider those needs in decision making and resource allocation.

POLICY CONTEXT

Disaggregated data refers to the practice of collecting and analyzing data in a way that allows for the illumination and examination of subgroups within a larger population.

Usually, information about race and ethnicity is collected under seven federal categories established by the OMB Statistical Policy Directive No. 15 (SPD-15). However, these categories are broad, rendering certain communities invisible by lumping distinct populations together. Moreover, state and local agencies are not mandated to collect race and ethnicity data only under SPD-15 but are authorized to collect data on additional ethnic and racial subgroups.

When data are aggregated, the unique needs, experiences, and challenges faced by different groups can be obscured, making it difficult to identify and address specific barriers. Disaggregated data ensures that the experiences and contributions of populations are properly represented and acknowledged.

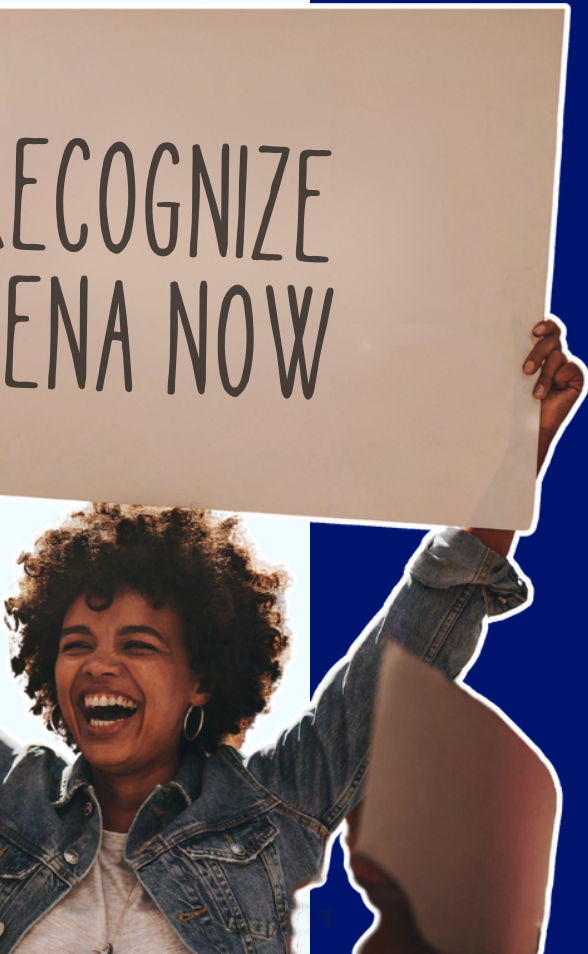# LEGISLATION AND LAWS RECOGNIZING MENA COMMUNITIES IN DATA: FEDERAL LEVEL

There has been significant movement on the federal and state levels to disaggregate data on MENA communities from the "White" racial category.

FEDERAL LEVEL

In January 2023, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) proposed the first substantive revisions to the federal guidelines on the collection of race and ethnicity since 1997.

In March 2024, the OMB released new race and ethnicity standards. These guidelines for the first time require the collection of MENA as a separate racial/ethnic category. This change will have far-reaching consequences for federal data collection efforts and reporting requirements across agencies.

LEGISLATION AND LAWS RECOGNIZING MENA COMMUNITIES IN DATA: STATE LEVEL
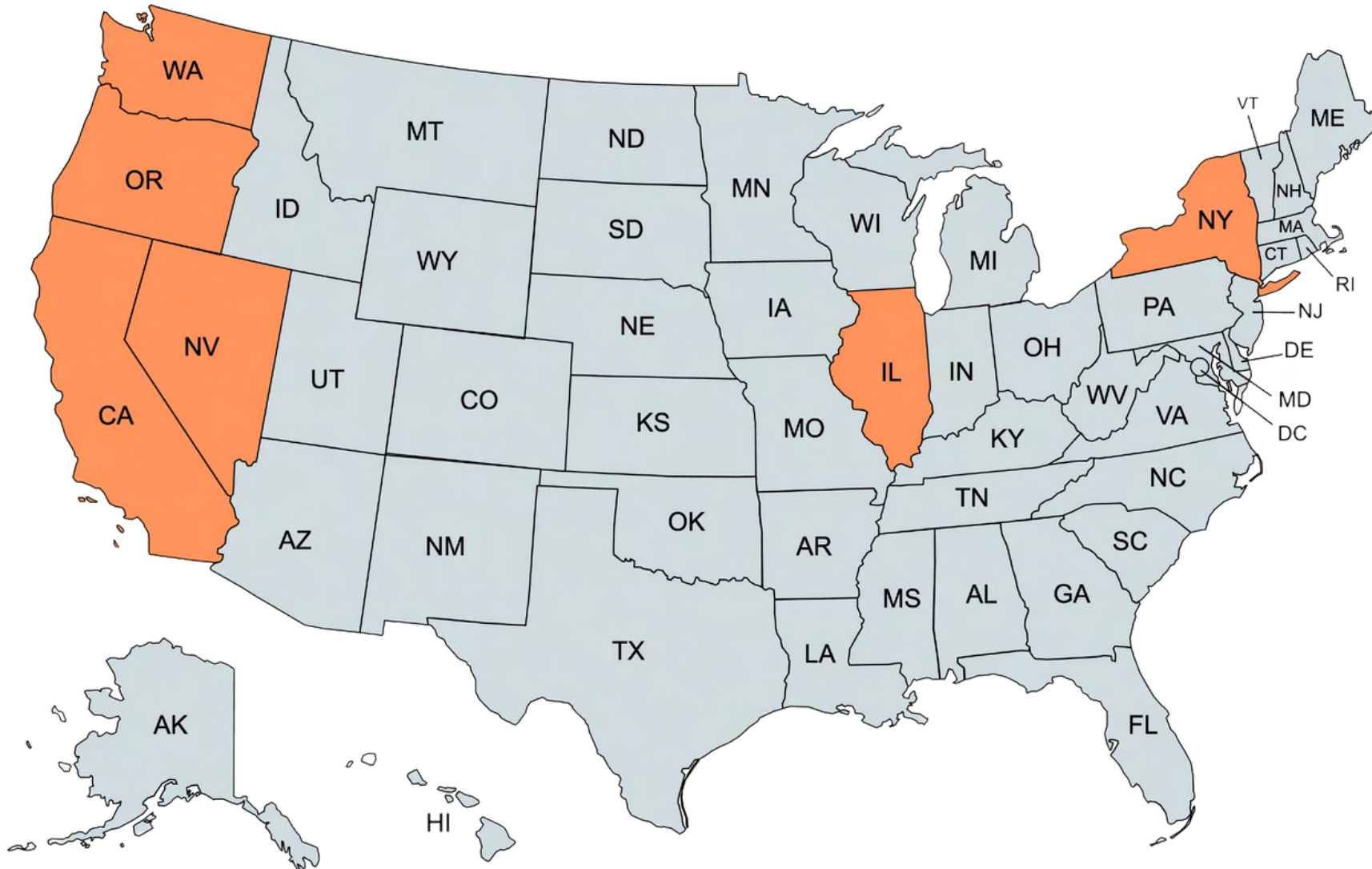
STATE LEVEL

In June of 2013, the legislature passed House Bill 2134 also known as the Race, Ethnicity, Language, and Disability (REALD) data collection law to mandate the health departments to develop data collection standards, collect data biannually and allow residents to select more than one race. Agencies developed at least 39 different race and ethnicity categories including Middle Eastern and North African.

In June of 2022, Washington State Legislature enacted WAC 246-455-025 which requires hospitals collect additional demographic information on a patient's ethnicity, race, preferred language, disability, gender identity, and sexual orientation, and establishes 71 different race and ethnicity categories.

In June of 2023, the New York State Senate unanimously passed S6584B, requiring the collection of data on MENA communities by certain state agencies, boards, departments, and commissions. However, the bill died in the State Assembly.

In June of 2023, the Governor of Nevada signed AB-139/ Chapter 430, authorizing government agencies that collect demographic information on race or ethnicity to include a separate category for persons of Middle Eastern or North African descent.

In August of 2023, the Governor of Illinois signed House Bill 3768, creating a MENA category for the purposes of reporting statistical data within state agencies.

In February 2024, California introduced AB-2763 in the State Assembly to require state entities to use separate collection categories and tabulations for the MENA group.

IMPORTANCE OF RACE AND ETHNICITY DATA

Accurate and detailed data on race and ethnicity is crucial for understanding the needs of communities and considering those needs in decision making and resource allocation. For example, government data on race and ethnicity determines how federal, state and local funding will be spent, how political boundaries will be drawn, how disparities among groups will be addressed (i.e. achievement gaps/ elevated health risks), and much more.

The exclusion of MENA communities presents a critical civil rights issue. Because MENA communities are aggregated under the "White" category, not only are their specific needs not understood, but also their needs are largely not considered. As such, MENA communities are not granted equal protection under the law. Paradoxically, because there is a lack of data that documents their experiences and underrepresentation, MENA communities are hamstrung from raising legal challenges to their treatment.

ISSUES WITH LACK OF A MENA CATEGORY

Political Representation

Classifying MENA communities as "White" hinders equitable political representation.

Elected officials lack accurate data on their constituents. Astoria's Little Egypt has a significant MENA population. It is represented by State Senator Gianaris and Assembly Member González-Rojas, who introduced the MENA legislation in NYS in 2023. City and State interviewed González-Rojas: "What I see is that my district is 27.6%, white, and I know folks who identify as MENA do not live as white people, and they don't benefit from white privilege," González-Rojas said. "There are multiple language needs and multiple challenges that they face in terms of civil rights – we're still feeling the repercussions of 9/11 – and we still see a lot of discrimination." As Assembly Member González-Rojas depicts, the needs of MENA communities, and the discrimination they experience, are not represented in the data, which informs policy and practice.

MENA communities are not considered in redistricting processes. New congressional districts are typically redrawn every ten years. Lawmakers and courts use data to ensure these maps fairly represent various minority groups. Because of the lack of data, MENA communities are, in effect, excluded from equitable consideration.

Middle Eastern and North African communities are rendered invisible by existing data standards that classify MENA as "White".

Health Inequities

Classifying MENA communities into the "White" racial category can complicate efforts to identify and address health equity and disparities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, the MENA community experienced a disproportionate burden of COVID-19 related mortality. The <u>CDC</u> was able to identify and thus address the needs of other high-risk groups. However, because the <u>MENA community mortality data</u> is subsumed within the "White" racial category, they seemed to be faring better than they were and their needs remained unseen.

The limited data available that is able to examine the experiences of MENA communities <u>suggest</u>s that (relative to non-Hispanic whites) Arab/ MENA Americans experience higher rates of metabolic disorders, cardiovascular disease, depressive symptoms, and low birth weights. Government data collection standards that classify this community as "White" obscure these disparities.
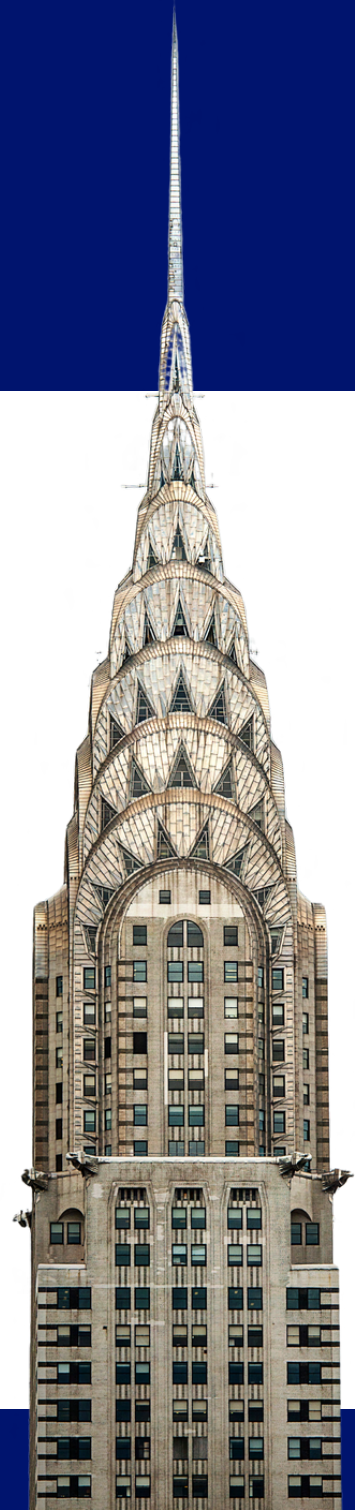
ISSUES WITH LACK OF A MENA CATEGORY

Language Access

Classifying MENA communities as "White" conceals different linguistic needs among MENA communities.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York. New York's Governor had daily broadcasts of the COVID-19 situation in the state. However, his briefings were only available in English. Written materials in Arabic were not as helpful as not all of the MENA community were literate and understand/can read standard Arabic. Thus, there was a void in spreading COVID-19 related information to the MENA community. The need for auditory broadcasting on COVID-19 was provided by community members. A recording on the COVID-19 situation in New York, for example, in Arabic, received over 100,000 views, suggesting great need for information to be provided in an auditory manner in Arabic, that could not be seen from aggregate data. This situation highlights how many members of the MENA community, particularly recent immigrants, speak Arabic rather than English. When MENA communities are classified as "White", differences in language barriers for example, may be hidden in data. These differences prevent the MENA community from having access to pertinent information, affecting various outcomes, including health related ones.
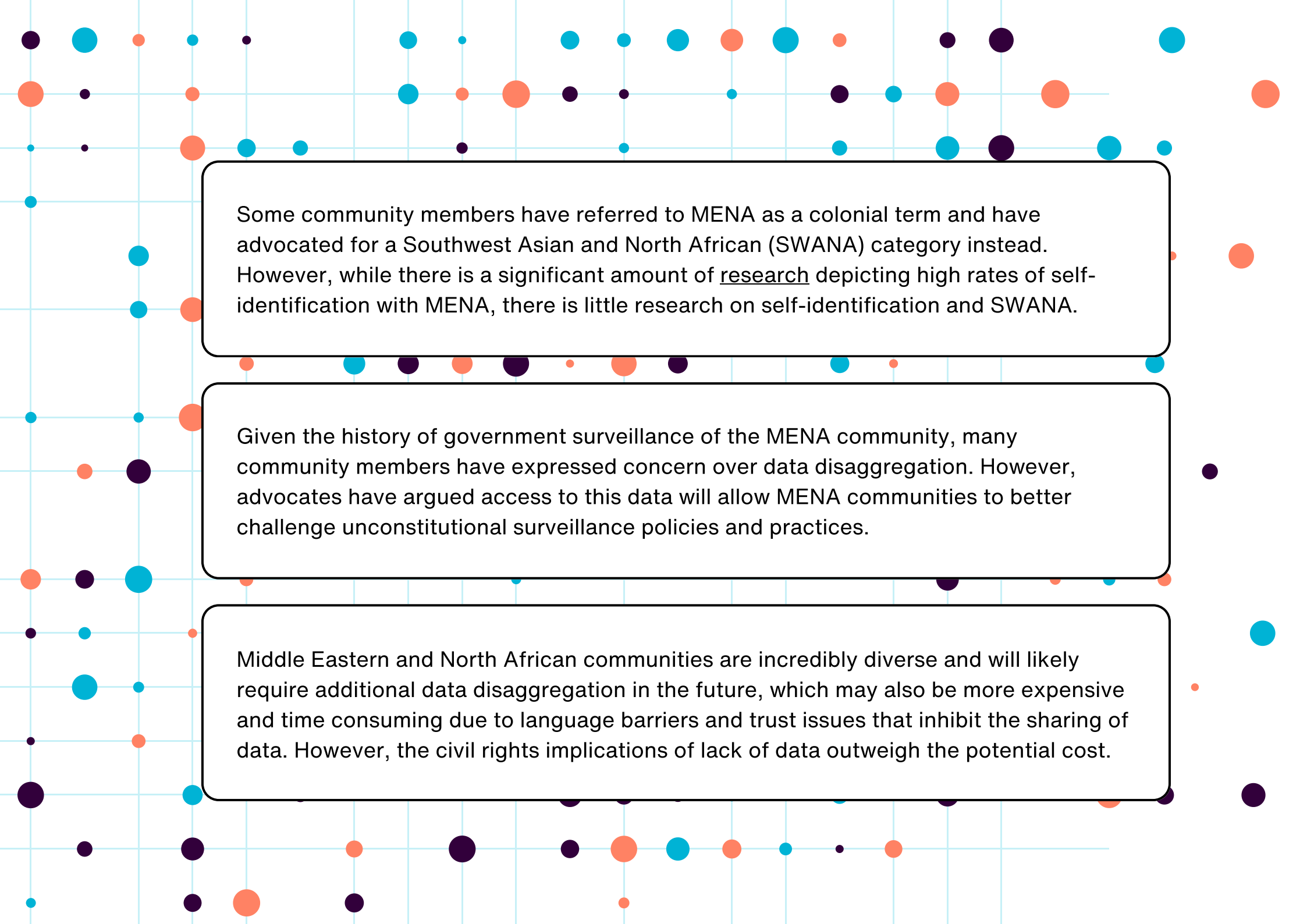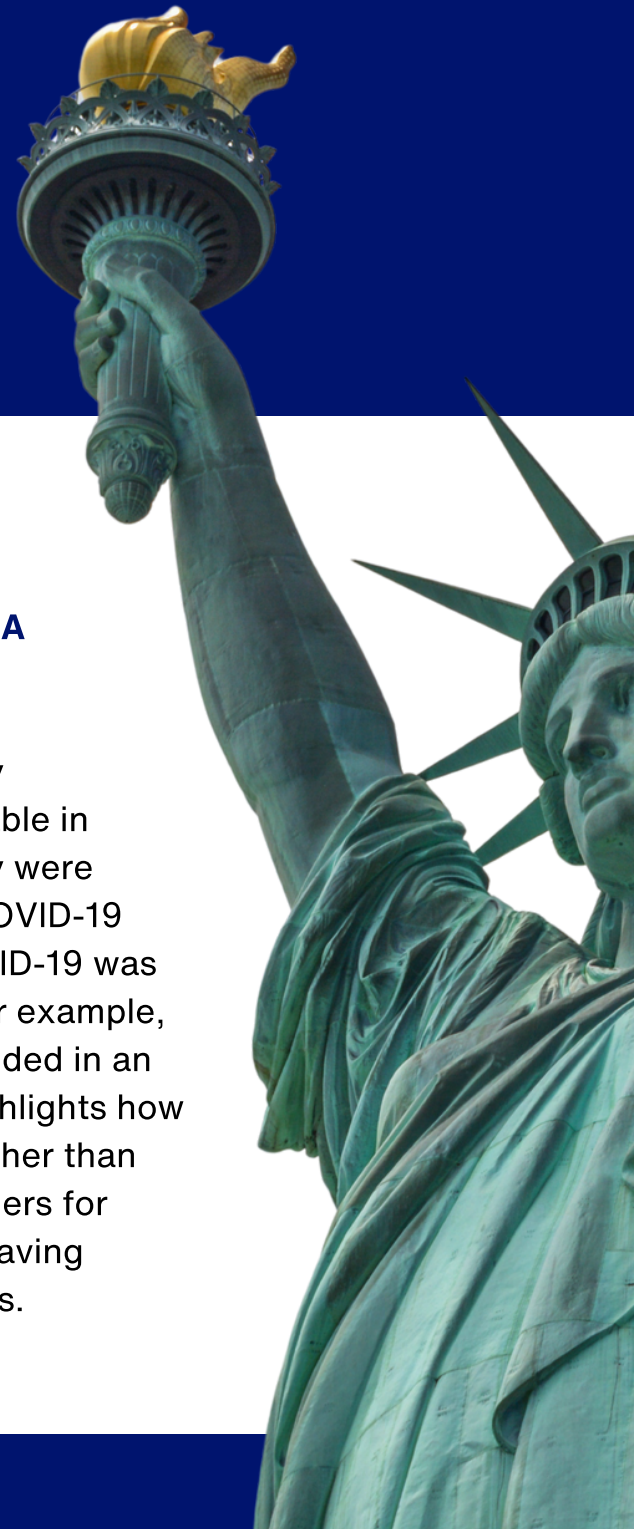
NOT NOTICED. LEFT BEHIND. LEFT OUT IN AMERICA.

Distinguishing the MENA community from the "White" population could better highlight disparate outcomes between the communities that are currently hidden by the misclassification and aggregation of data. It can also shed light on other, new disparities that previously may not have been found or collected. If the MENA community is not seen in the data, disparities are left hidden and ignored by those who might call for or fund improvements.

CONCERNS WITH A MENA CATEGORY

Some experts expressed concern over the OMB proposal to include MENA as a separate category, arguing that it "may confuse respondents and make the census form too complex to generate accurate data." However, the U.S. Census Bureau in the 2015 Content Test found that the inclusion of a MENA category with a combined race and ethnicity question was optimal, producing better data.

Others have expressed concern that a MENA category will lead to decreased reporting to Black and Hispanic groups. However, the U.S. Census Bureau also found that a combined race and ethnicity question with a MENA category increased reporting to Black and Hispanic groups.

Some community members have referred to MENA as a colonial term and have advocated for a Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA) category instead. However, while there is a significant amount of <u>research</u> depicting high rates of self-identification with MENA, there is little research on self-identification and SWANA.

Given the history of government surveillance of the MENA community, many community members have expressed concern over data disaggregation. However, advocates have argued access to this data will allow MENA communities to better challenge unconstitutional surveillance policies and practices.

Middle Eastern and North African communities are incredibly diverse and will likely require additional data disaggregation in the future, which may also be more expensive and time consuming due to language barriers and trust issues that inhibit the sharing of data. However, the civil rights implications of lack of data outweigh the potential cost.

CONCLUSION

Disaggregating data on Middle Eastern and North African communities in New York State is essential to ensuring the needs of MENA communities are understood and used in decision making and resource distribution.

However, greater discussion is needed on how to take data disaggregation work forward. For example, disaggregation of MENA data into further subgroups continues to remain a conversation worthwhile having amongst our New York MENA communities.