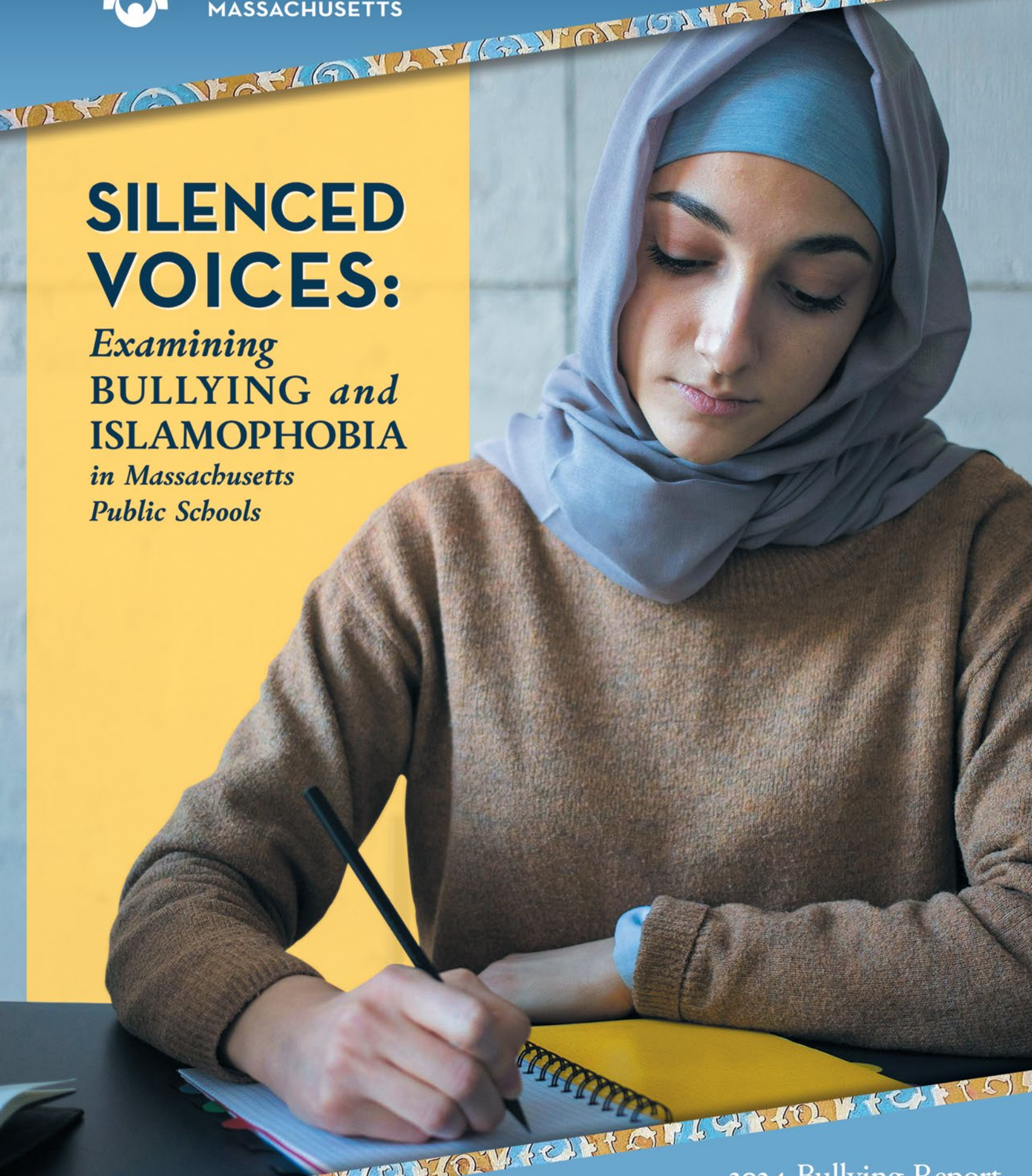


# **SILENCED VOICES:**

*Examining  
BULLYING and  
ISLAMOPHOBIA  
in Massachusetts  
Public Schools*



# Table of Contents

- 3 Executive Summary**
- 4 Key Findings**
- 5 Demographics**
- 6 Introduction**
- 7 Beyond Statistics: The Lived Realities of Muslim Students**
  - 7** Physical Violence
  - 8** Gendered Islamophobia & the Hijab  
Teachers Perpetuating Anti-Muslim Bias
  - 9** Targeted & Silenced for Palestine Advocacy
  - 10** In Their Own Words
- 13 Methodology**
- 14 Recommendations**
  - 14** For Teachers & School Administration
  - 17** For Parents
  - 18** For Students  
For Mosques & Community Leaders
- 19 Anti-Bullying Laws & Advocacy**
  - 19** Starting Point: The School's Anti-Bullying Plan
  - 22** Calling the Police
  - 23** Restorative Justice
  - 24** Harassment Protection Order (HPO)
  - 25** Suing the Aggressor's Parents  
Discrimination Complaint Against the School
  - 26** What Do the Courts Say?
- 27 Resources**
- 28 Appendix: Survey Findings**
- 36 Get in Touch with CAIR-MA**



**FAIR USE NOTICE:** This report may contain copyrighted material, the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. It is being made available in an effort to advance the understanding of political, human rights, democracy, and social justice issues. It is believed that this constitutes a 'fair use' of any such copyrighted material as provided for in section 107 of the United States Copyright Law. In accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. §107, the material in this report is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving the included information for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material from this site for purposes of your own that go beyond 'fair use,' you must obtain permission from the copyright owner.

The material in this report is provided for educational and informational purposes only and is not intended to be a substitute for an attorney's consultation. Please consult an attorney in order to get counsel on your situation. The information in this report does not constitute legal advice.

No part of this publication may be stored in a retrieval system, transmitted, or reproduced in any way, including but not limited to photocopy, photograph and magnetic, or other record, without the prior agreement and written approval of the publisher.

**The Council on American-Islamic Relations** is the largest American Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States. The Massachusetts chapter (CAIR-MA) was established in 2015 and serves the estimated 150,000 Muslims living in the Commonwealth. CAIR-MA's mission is to enhance the understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.

### Authors:

**Fatuma Mohamed, MA**, Youth Advocacy Director

**Barbara J. Dougan, Esq.**, Legal Director

**Aneeqa Abid, MS**, Community Outreach & Advocacy Specialist

**Acknowledgments:** This report was made possible through the support of numerous mosques and weekend school programs that welcomed us to survey their Muslim students. The entire **CAIR-MA staff**, including Tahirah Amatul-Wadud, Esq., Mariam Aydah, Esq., and Vincent Ware, contributed to this report. We also thank Associate Professor **Mona Abo-Zena, PhD**, for her invaluable feedback as a community reviewer.

*This report was completed in January 2025 and reflects data collected throughout 2024.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**I**n 2021, CAIR-MA published its first-ever statewide bullying report, “Standing Up and Speaking Out,”<sup>1</sup> which highlighted the discrimination and anti-Muslim bullying faced by students in Massachusetts. Since then, CAIR-MA has continued to receive calls from Muslim families and parents reporting faith-based bullying in schools. **This report, the CAIR-MA 2024 Bullying Report, builds upon our previous findings by further monitoring the school climate for Muslim students, documenting their experiences and challenges, and providing recommendations to address bullying and create a safer, more inclusive school environment.**

The ongoing war in Gaza and the rise in national and global tensions since October 2023 have intensified Islamophobic sentiments, which have manifested in school communities. In this volatile climate, CAIR-MA has received an alarming increase in reports of anti-Muslim bullying, including verbal harassment and physical violence, endured by students from elementary school through high school. This report shows that **48% of Muslim students who participated in our Bullying Report reported being bullied for being Muslim during the past school year, and 22% of students reported facing religious-based bullying regularly** (monthly, weekly, or daily). These numbers illustrate the widespread and persistent nature of bullying that Muslim students endure.

This increase in bullying, as reported by students, is mirrored by disturbing individual cases in which CAIR-MA has been contacted for legal support. One such case involved Abdul, a teenage student at a Massachusetts public high school who was **rushed to the emergency room after a classmate poisoned him by adding rubbing alcohol to his water bottle**. Even inhaling the fumes from rubbing alcohol is dangerous, while ingesting it can cause severe injuries and death. The perpetrator admitted to the crime, yet a local television station minimized its severity, referring to the incident as a “prank gone wrong,” suggesting that the incident could have somehow gone “right.” While the perpetrator was reportedly charged, Abdul’s experience underscores

the grave dangers Muslim students face—ranging from verbal harassment to life-threatening violence.

Another case involved Jabir, a Muslim middle school student. When he tried to defend himself from an older student who had repeatedly bullied him, he was **punched with such force that he sustained a severe concussion**. The older student had previously called Jabir slurs like “nasty Middle Easterner,” slapped him, and knocked him down. The school’s response at the time was to ask both students to sign a no-contact agreement. Although the school agreed to create a safety plan for Jabir, his parents had lost faith that he would be protected, and instead, they transferred him to another school to keep their son safe. These incidents reflect a disturbing trend—Muslim students are facing escalating levels of bullying, often with insufficient responses from schools to ensure the safety of their students.

This report presents the findings from CAIR-MA’s 2024 Bullying Report, administered to 325 Muslim students across Massachusetts between January and September 2024. The purpose of this report is to understand better how Islamophobia<sup>2</sup> manifests in schools and the extent to which bullying and discrimination impact Muslim students. **Our findings underscore the urgent need for systemic change to protect Muslim students and create safer, more inclusive school environments where all students can thrive free from fear and discrimination.**

<sup>1</sup> [www.cairma.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/CAIR-MA-Bullying-Report.pdf](http://www.cairma.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/CAIR-MA-Bullying-Report.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Islamophobia is a fear, prejudice and hatred of Muslims that leads to provocation, hostility and intolerance.

# KEY FINDINGS

48%



During the 2023–2024 school year, nearly half of the students (48%) reported experiencing **bullying because they were Muslim**.

22%

Among them, 22% indicated that they faced **bullying related to their religion on a regular basis**, including monthly, weekly, or daily occurrences.

17%

Many students reported experiencing **various forms of bullying, such as physical violence** (5%, 17 students), online harassment through social media, taunting, yelling, and hurtful comments from peers.

37%

37% of students have **witnessed another Muslim student being bullied** at school due to their religious affiliation.

35%



Among females who wear the hijab,<sup>3</sup> 35% experienced **physical harassment** at school, including incidents of having their **hijabs pulled or removed**. Almost a third of respondents (31%) reported hearing of someone who wears a hijab being physically harassed at school.

<sup>3</sup> Religious head covering worn by some Muslim women.

35%



35% of students report **teachers or staff making offensive comments about Islam or Muslims** inside or outside of the school.

22%

22% of students whose teachers taught lessons on Islam reported that their **instruction was not conducted in a neutral, fair, or factual manner**.

52%



Over half of the students, specifically 52%, reported experiencing **bullying due to their ethnicity or race**. This indicates that Muslim students frequently face compounded bullying stemming from their intersecting identities.

10%

A portion of students expressed discomfort regarding their identity, with 10% indicating they **do not feel comfortable revealing that they are Muslim** to others at school.

23%

23% of students reported they **have altered or considered altering their appearance, behavior, or name** to hide the fact that they are Muslim.

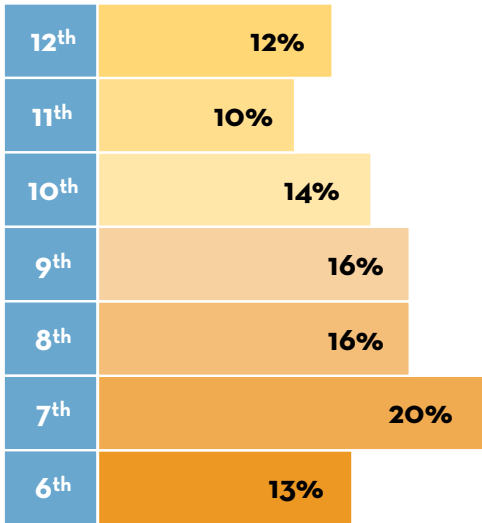
34%



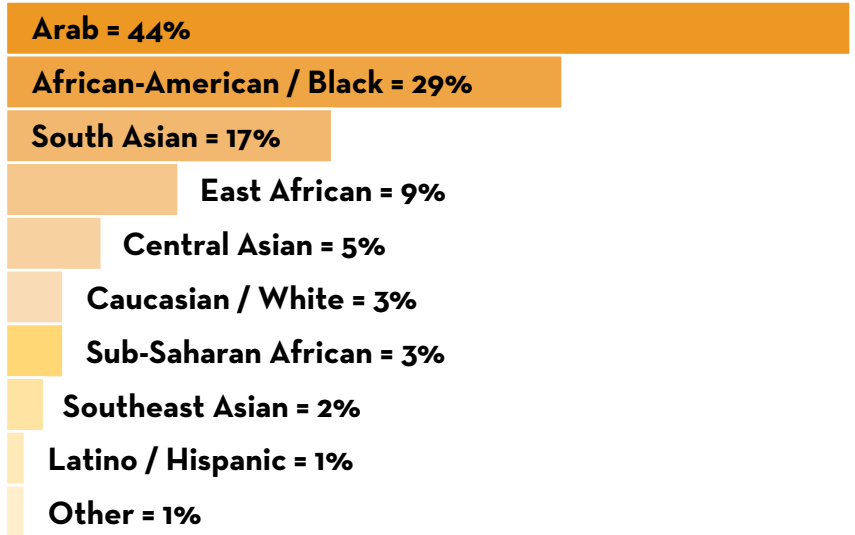
34% reported not being comfortable or only somewhat comfortable **expressing opinions about Palestine** in school.

# DEMOGRAPHICS

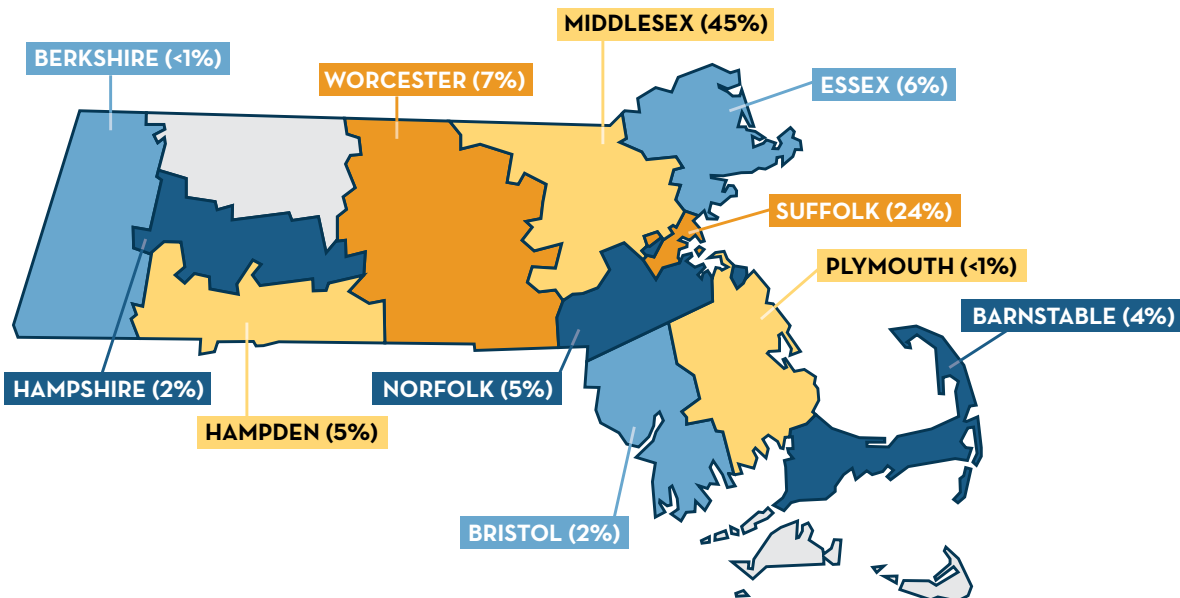
## Grade



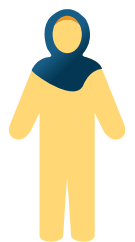
## Ethnicity



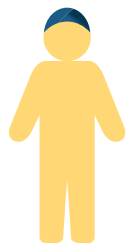
Eleven of the fourteen counties in the Commonwealth are represented in this study



## Gender



**53% female**  
(172 participants)



**47% male**  
(150 participants)

# INTRODUCTION

*Note: This report includes personal accounts, and for confidentiality reasons, all names and some details were changed to protect the identities of individuals involved.*

This report is based on a 35-question survey conducted between January and September 2024 with 325 Muslim public school students across Massachusetts in grades 6-12. The survey explored the school climate for Muslim students, incidents of anti-Muslim bullying,<sup>4</sup> and how teachers address Islam in the classroom. It also explored how intersecting identities, such as race, socioeconomic status, and immigration status, influence students' experiences with bullying. Additionally, the survey assessed Muslim students' interactions with police officers in schools and neighborhoods. These experiences were all set against the backdrop of the War on Gaza, which has brought national and global tensions into the classroom.

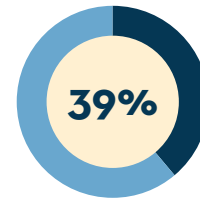
Students spend a significant portion of their lives in school, making it essential for educators to create a safe, inclusive environment for all. However, our findings show that schools often fail to provide this for Muslim students. **Alarmingly, 39% of respondents reported being bullied, more than double the national rate for public school students aged 12-18 in 2021-2022.**<sup>5</sup> Moreover, 5% experienced physical violence due to their religious affiliation. Given these statistics, it is unsurprising that 23% felt compelled to hide their Muslim identity to avoid bullying. **Racial and ethnic bullying was also widespread**, with 52% of students facing race-based bullying and 30% targeted because of their family's immigration status.

Among the various forms of bullying, certain issues disproportionately affect Muslim girls. Over one-third of Muslim girls (35%) who wear the hijab reported having it tugged or pulled and 31% witnessed **physical harassment of students wearing hijabs**. These experiences significantly erode students' sense of safety and comfort with their Muslim identity. 10% of respondents stated they **do not feel comfortable letting others know they are Muslim**.

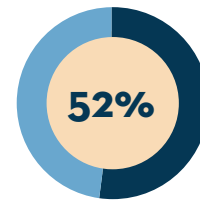
Bullying has severe consequences, impacting students' physical and mental health, academic engagement, and overall well-being. Muslim students encounter both overt Islamophobia (such as verbal abuse and physical violence) and covert Islamophobia (such as microaggressions and social exclusion). They also experience biases from teachers, curricula, and school administration, including neglect of reported incidents and a lack of accommodations for Islamic holidays. Our findings reveal the alarming school climate for Muslim students and underscore the urgent need for concrete actions to create safer, more inclusive, and equitable learning environments.

<sup>4</sup> Anti-Muslim bullying is the unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance that is or can be repeated, based on the student's perceived Muslim Religious affiliation.

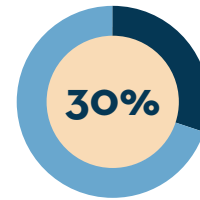
<sup>5</sup> "Student Bullying. Condition of Education." National Center for Education Statistics, 2024. [www.nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/a10/bullying-electronic-bullying#:~:text=In%202021%E2%80%9322%2C%20about%2019,happened%20online%20or%20by%20text.](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/a10/bullying-electronic-bullying#:~:text=In%202021%E2%80%9322%2C%20about%2019,happened%20online%20or%20by%20text.)



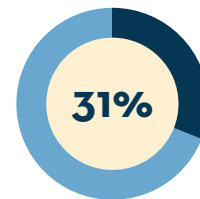
of respondents report having been **bullied**



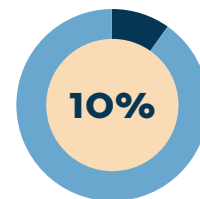
of respondents have been **bullied** due to **race**, and ...



have been **bullied** due to their family's **immigration status**



of respondents have seen **physical harassment** of students wearing **hijabs**



of respondents **do not feel comfortable** letting others know they are Muslim

# BEYOND STATISTICS:

## The Lived Realities of Muslim Students

### PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

One of the most concerning findings in our report is that 5% of respondents (17 students) reported experiencing physical violence due to their religious affiliation. As mentioned in the Executive Summary, the incidents involving Abdul's poisoning and Jabir's concussion were clear cases of bullying in the form of physical violence. In the last two academic years, CAIR-MA has been consulted on several more cases that further illuminate the harsh realities faced by Muslim students who endure physical violence in school settings.

Yusuf, a Muslim high school student, experienced a brutal physical attack when a classmate suddenly assaulted him in the lunchroom. He was **placed in a headlock and repeatedly punched in the head, resulting in a concussion**. Yusuf demonstrated impressive self-discipline by choosing not to retaliate, as he was fasting for Ramadan and the school year was nearing its end. In addition, his classmates did the right thing by restraining the aggressor. The aggressor was suspended; however, the school declined CAIR-MA's request to prohibit him from participating in end-of-year activities and graduation to ensure Yusuf's safety.

Karim, a Muslim high school student, was attacked in the hallway by another student who punched him in the face while calling him anti-Arab slurs. The aggressor pulled Karim into a restroom and continued to punch him, while another student filmed the attack. Karim was taken to the hospital with a **broken nose and concussion**.

Two Muslim brothers, Harun and Musa, were subjected to **relentless harassment and racial slurs**. They were told to "go back where you came from" and were called "terrorists." Harun, a middle school student, was roughed up by classmates. When he retaliated by hiding the belongings of one of the aggressors, he was disciplined by school administrators until his parents intervened, demanding that they look at the larger context of the bullying he faced. His older brother, Musa, was suspended after opening a video containing profanity, sent to him by a classmate, despite being unaware of its content. Yet the school took no action against the classmate who repeatedly called him a terrorist, even when other students corroborated Musa's complaints.

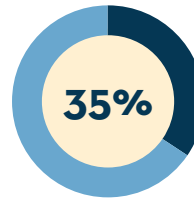
These cases illustrate that Muslim students who already face physical violence in a hostile school environment often endure additional injustice due to inadequate and inequitable disciplinary actions by school authorities.



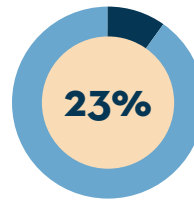
## GENDERED ISLAMOPHOBIA & THE HIJAB

The experiences of female Muslim students wearing the hijab are particularly distressing, with 35% reporting being physically harassed at school, including having their **hijabs tugged on or pulled off**. Additionally, 31% of respondents had heard of others who wore the hijab facing similar harassment, highlighting the widespread nature of this issue. Experiencing and witnessing religious-based harassment significantly impacts Muslim students' sense of safety. This is supported by our finding that 23% of all respondents **consider altering their appearance, behavior, or names to hide their Muslim identity**.

One case involved two siblings in elementary school, Nour and Maryam. Nour, the younger sibling, **endured racial slurs and physical aggression**, while Maryam faced attempts by classmates to remove her hijab forcibly. When Maryam defended herself physically, the school administrators labeled her the bully. It was only after her parents intervened and explained the context of the ongoing harassment that the school's perspective shifted. This incident underscores the disproportionate burden placed on Muslim caregivers to advocate for their child's safety and prevent negative disciplinary records, which could affect the child's school engagement. This responsibility should rest with school officials to ensure the safety of all children.



*of female respondents who wear hijabs have been* **physically harassed**, including having their **hijabs tugged on or pulled off**

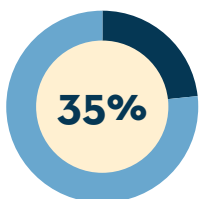


*of respondents have considered* **altering their appearance, behavior, or name** to hide their Muslim identity

## TEACHERS PERPETUATING ANTI-MUSLIM BIAS

Towards the end of 2024, a high school administrator asked Asiya, a Muslim student, for information about a possible bullying incident between two other students concerning questions about Israel. Although the Muslim student had no involvement in the incident, the administrator lectured her about the need to be sensitive to her Jewish classmates' feelings, even though several of Asiya's relatives have been killed in Gaza. **“Genocide happens,” the administrator reportedly told the girl, who left the meeting in tears.**

Anti-Muslim bias and Islamophobic bullying are not limited to peers; sometimes they are perpetuated by educators, with 35% of Muslim students reporting that **teachers or staff made offensive comments** about Islam or Muslims. Rather than contributing to a learning environment that facilitates inclusion and belonging, adults may inadvertently enable school environments where discrimination is normalized and institutionalized.



*of respondents report that* **teachers or school staff** have made **offensive comments** about Islam or Muslims

In one instance, a social studies **teacher informed her fourth-grade class that “Muslim terrorists” were responsible for the 9/11 attacks**, despite the lesson materials lacking any reference to religion. All eyes in the classroom turned to Khalid, the only Muslim student present, making him feel singled out and targeted. The teacher then attempted to mitigate the damage by saying,

“Not all Muslims are terrorists,” implying that the norm is that Muslims are terrorists. The harm did not end there. A classmate of Khalid later refused to work with him on a group project, calling him a “terrorist.” Khalid's parents contacted the school to discuss the teacher's and the classmate's actions, urging the administration to incorporate positive representations of Islam into the curriculum and suggesting materials from CAIR-MA. This case underscores how harmful stereotypes perpetuated by authority figures can embolden peers to engage in discriminatory behavior, isolating and stigmatizing Muslim students.



In October 2023, soon after the outbreak of war in Gaza, Nasir, a middle school student, was taunted by classmates who **called him a “terrorist” and a “Nazi.”** They falsely accused him of carrying a bomb. Another middle school student, Layla, **faced harassment on her school bus**, where classmates shouted “Allahu Akbar” at her, seemingly unaware that the phrase simply means “God is greater.”

The ongoing genocide in Gaza since October 2023 has deeply impacted Muslim students in Massachusetts, regardless of their ethnicity, shaping their school experiences. Incidents like Nasir’s and Layla’s illustrate why over 30% of students feel uncomfortable or partially comfortable sharing their views. Many reported fear of backlash and feeling silenced by a pro-Israel, often Islamophobic, school environment. Some teachers even targeted Muslim students and shut down student advocacy efforts. This dynamic is further exemplified in Asiya’s aforementioned experience (page 8), highlighting how Muslim students are held to unequal standards, further perpetuating a hostile and Islamophobic school environment. Despite these obstacles, some students continued to voice their concerns. For others, supportive peers and a positive school climate contributed to a sense of comfort in expressing their opinions.

### *Fear of Backlash*

Many students report a **profound fear for their safety and social standing, and concerns about academic repercussions.** One student shared, “My father tells me not to talk about it with my teachers as I do have teachers from Israel, and he doesn’t want my standpoint in the ongoing genocide to affect how I’m treated in school or my grades.” Another noted her parent’s fear after hearing rumors that “police officers are going around asking kids about their parent’s opinions on the conflict.”

### *Pro-Israel School Environment & Islamophobia*

Many students perceive that most members of their school community, including faculty, support Israel at the expense of Palestinians and Muslims. This environment fosters anxiety around expressing pro-Palestinian views, leading to **fears of being labeled as supporting terrorism or being antisemitic.** One student stated, “I feel like I will be judged and hide my identity from others.” Often, in these discussions, bigoted Islamophobic tropes were brought up with students facing accusations of terrorism. A student explained,

“When we do [stand up for Palestine], Zionist parents and students pretend we are terrorists, rejecting our right to have an opinion. They are trying to censor us and our [activities] to fit what the Zionists want. They pretend to be ‘inclusive’ unless it comes to us.”

### *School Censorship*

**Instances of censorship further inhibit open dialogue about Palestine.** Students report feeling threatened when attempting to speak on the issue. As one student stated, “Recently, I’ve been censored, and there have been threats made to students who try to talk about Palestine.” Another Muslim student explained that their after-school club faced repeated denials for fundraising efforts and was only allowed to hold their fundraiser if they opened it to support other countries and avoided specific discussions about Palestine.

### *Courage Despite Opposition*

Despite these challenges, some students feel comfortable sharing their opinions, driven by a strong desire for advocacy. These students are motivated by the urgency of the issue. One student remarked, “It is a genocide, and it needs to be spoken about.” Another confidently stated, “Personally, I don’t care what people will think, say, or do.” Even in the face of backlash, **many remain committed to speaking out.** One student participant mentioned, “I do feel comfortable expressing my opinions about Palestine, even though others have said rude things to me.” Many also emphasized the importance of freedom of speech and expression, with one student asserting, “I have freedom of speech. As long as I do not harass someone, then there shouldn’t be a problem.”

### *Supportive Communities & Peer Networks*

Many students attributed their comfort in sharing their opinions about Palestine freely to the fact that the majority of their student bodies are pro-Palestinian and their teachers encourage respectful debate on current events. As one student stated, “I’m unapologetic about it,” highlighting that many of their classmates are non-religious students of color, which alleviates some concerns. In schools where this is not the case, **even a small group of supportive and like-minded peers and friends plays a crucial role in empowering students** to express their thoughts freely. As one student explained, “The administration keeps trying to shut us down whenever I talk, but my friends support me.”

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Bullying and Islamophobia are pervasive in schools, impacting the mental and emotional well-being of numerous students, particularly those from marginalized communities. This section includes **quotes from students who elaborated on their experiences** through an optional open-response field in the survey. The experiences shared by students reveal not only

the **harmful impact of bullying on self-esteem and mental health** but also the deep-seated biases faced by Muslim students. Ranging from physical harassment to microaggressions and exclusion, these forms of abuse frequently go unnoticed or are inadequately addressed by school administrators.

### 1. ISLAMOPHOBIA IN SCHOOLS

**Targeting Visible Muslims:** Muslim students, especially those who are visibly Muslim, face Islamophobic bullying, including physical harassment and verbal abuse.

**“People literally insult me while I’m praying.”**

(Female, 10th Grade)

**“There were multiple incidents where my hijab was taken off by classmates.”**

(Female, 8th Grade)



**Discrimination by Peers & Teachers:** Students feel targeted by both peers and staff, which makes it challenging to practice their religion freely.

**“Our school has massive Islamophobia; everyone in the [Muslim Student Association] experiences it.”**

(Female, 9th Grade)

**“People are constantly disrespectful ... and I still have to be the bigger person”**

(Female, 10th Grade)



**Media-Driven Bias:** Non-Muslim students and teachers often have misconceptions about Islam, influenced by negative media portrayals.

**“Non-Muslims don’t know enough about Islam. They only believe what’s shown in the media.”**

(Male, 10th Grade)



## 2. BULLYING & ITS IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

**Psychological Effects:** Students described the emotional toll of bullying and how it may result in feelings of depression, embarrassment, and even suicidal thoughts.

“Someone can be bullied a lot and might go through depression, and depression can then lead to suicide.”

(Female, 8th Grade)

“[Bullying] can really affect how one sees themselves.”

(Female, 11th Grade)



**Social Isolation:** Being bullied leads to social isolation, especially for those who are visibly Muslim.

“Going to [my school] as a niqabi<sup>6</sup> is hard ... no one wants to be in the same group with me, no one wants to have to sit at the same table as me.”

(Female, 10th Grade)

“I feel alone and like nobody cares about me.”

(Female, 8th Grade)



## 3. INACTION FROM SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

**Lack of Accountability:** Students report that even when incidents of bullying or Islamophobia are reported, little action is taken by school officials.

“The school administrator literally did nothing to support me or my family.”

(Female, 8th Grade)

“I was praying in the hallway during transition, and a group of kids congregated across from me and one of the guys (who was in my class) said ‘She’s gonna blow up the building.’ This person ended up trying to act all innocent, saying, ‘Who was it?’ and when I got bothered and said it was him, things escalated. The dean of student discipline was called, and I had to talk to him. He told me that it seemed like an isolated issue and this didn’t need to be dealt with.”

(Female, 10th Grade)



<sup>6</sup> Niqabi refers to a woman who wears the Niqab — a religious face veil worn by some Muslim women.

**Insufficient Punishments:** When bullying is reported, consequences are either non-existent or ineffective.

**“Bullying is taken lightly at my school ... schools should try harder to punish students who have been reported.”**

(Female, 10th Grade)



**“Bullying occurs when others aren’t there to hold the bully accountable.”**

(Female, 12th Grade)



#### 4. BULLYING PREVENTION & SOLUTIONS

**Call to Action:** Students advocate for more proactive approaches to address bullying, including anti-bullying programs and stronger disciplinary actions.

**“Taking action towards bullying helps more than trying to convince people to stop verbally.”**

(Female, 10th Grade)



**“I think bullying is a major problem within this school as well as society as a whole. I think some valid methods of stopping bullying are teaching and talking about bullying prevention and the importance of having a positive relationship with everyone of all types of races and religions.”**

(Male, 11th Grade)



**“The only way to solve it is through proper exposure to these topics, with eliminated bias.”**

(Female, 12th Grade)



### The voices of these students underscore the need for immediate action to combat bullying and Islamophobia in schools.

Their stories highlight both the emotional toll of these experiences and the inadequacy of current educator responses. Meaningful change will require multi-pronged responses that engage systems of accountability for adults and students, anti-bullying and Islamophobia education, and a commitment to

fostering environments where all students feel safe and respected. Only by addressing these issues head-on can we begin to build schools where diversity is celebrated, and every student feels empowered to be themselves without fear of judgment or harassment.

## METHODOLOGY



Between January and September 2024, CAIR-Massachusetts surveyed 342 public school students in grades 6-12. The final report analyzes 325 valid responses, excluding those from students whose school status could not be verified. This is CAIR-MA's second survey and report on faith-based bullying and discrimination against Muslim students in Massachusetts public schools and was modeled after CAIR-California's biennial reports that have been conducted since 2015. Students answered 36 questions, including multiple-choice, select-all-that-apply, and open-response questions, which were analyzed for key themes.

Surveys were administered both in person and online at mosques during after-school or weekend programs, Friday prayers, and community events. Social media and CAIR-Massachusetts' network of Muslim students and leaders helped spread the survey statewide, covering 11 counties (Barnstable, Berkshire, Hampshire, Hampton, Norfolk, Middlesex, Essex, Suffolk, Bristol, Plymouth, and Worcester). Participants received a briefing on the purpose of the survey before starting.

The survey included the following sections:

1. **Demographic Questions** – Grade, school, ethnicity, and gender.
2. **General Exposure to Bullying** – Experiences of being a victim, witnessing bullying, and strategies for addressing it.
3. **Bullying Based on Identity** – Targeted questions on bullying related to religious identity, race/ethnicity, immigration, income, location, hijab, and whether students conceal their Muslim identity.
4. **Interaction with Law Enforcement** – Questions about student engagement with law enforcement in both the school and community settings.
5. **Islam in the Classroom** – Experiences with instruction of Islam in the classroom and comfort expressing political opinions about Palestine.





## RECOMMENDATIONS

CAIR-MA developed the following **recommendations for teachers, parents, students, and community leaders based on our study findings, our extensive experience handling bullying cases, and insights from current literature in the field.** We have also included suggestions directly contributed by students themselves.

### FOR TEACHERS & SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

#### 1. Implement Prevention & Intervention Programs for Identity-Based Bullying

- Bullying prevention and intervention strategies must be tailored to each child’s experiences of identity-based bullying. In recognizing and addressing identity-based bullying, the school community should also see how bullying in schools exists as a part of a larger framework of institutional racism and discrimination (e.g. anti-Muslim bias is linked to more extensive Islamophobic policies and political discourse).
- Encourage the entire school community to recognize and challenge stereotypes and prejudices against all students, including Muslims.<sup>7</sup>
- Train students to be active allies, shifting from passive bystanders to advocates when they witness bullying, especially in the absence of adults.<sup>8</sup>

**“Everyone in the school community needs to work together to create a safe environment.”**  
(Female, 7th Grade)

#### 2. Cultivate a Culture of Inclusion & Accountability in School

- Create a culture of accountability for anti-Muslim discrimination by modeling appropriate behavior and establishing school norms of inclusion.

**“To stop bullying, we need to foster a culture of respect and understanding to all kinds of people no matter how different they are.”**  
(Female, 11th Grade)

- Foster open, respectful discussions where all students can learn and discuss current events and express their views fairly, including pro-Palestinian views, without fear of retaliation or selective censorship.
- Ensure that anti-bullying interventions originate from authority figures, not the bullied students, as is too often the case.<sup>9</sup>
- Incorporate anti-Muslim discrimination and bullying policies in school handbooks. Bystander training should also be offered to teachers, staff, and students to empower them to act against bullying.

<sup>7</sup> Killen, Melanie, and Adam Rutland. “Promoting Fair and Just School Environments: Developing Inclusive Youth.” Policy insights from the behavioral and brain sciences, March 2022. [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8992963](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8992963).

<sup>8</sup> Spiegler, Jinnie. “What Is Identity-Based Bullying-and How Can I Stop It?” Edutopia, October 26, 2016. [www.edutopia.org/article/what-is-identity-based-bullying-jinnie-spiegler](https://www.edutopia.org/article/what-is-identity-based-bullying-jinnie-spiegler).

<sup>9</sup> Aroian, Karen J. “Discrimination against Muslim American Adolescents.” The Journal of School Nursing 28, no. 3 (December 27, 2011): 206–13. [www.doi.org/10.1177/1059840511432316](https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1059840511432316).

### 3. Create Educational Opportunities on Islam & Muslims

- Integrate accurate and comprehensive education about Islam and Muslims in the school curriculum, to ensure that both educators and students will gain a clearer understanding of Muslims and the Islamic faith. Our findings showed that 22% of respondents believed that when teaching lessons about Islam, teachers did not do so in a standard, rational, and accurate manner, and 35% of respondents indicated that teachers or staff have made offensive comments about Islam or Muslims.
- Engage qualified professionals to ensure consistent and accurate information is provided.
- Ensure Muslim students are not expected to speak for all Muslims or educate others about their faith. Over 230 (74%) of survey respondents indicated that individual Muslim students are being pushed to be the voice of all Muslims, including in classroom discussions. As recent research has shown, this burden can negatively impact students' performance and their relationships with peers.<sup>10</sup>
- Use lesson plans and resources developed by vetted organizations that include in-group and out-group perspectives to educate the broader student body about Islam.

**“I also hope that people can be further educated about Islam and its practices to foster a more tolerant and inclusive environment for Muslim youth.”**

**(Female, 12th Grade)**



### 4. Cultural Humility Training & Awareness of Islamophobia

- Teachers and school administrators should engage in cultural humility training on anti-Muslim discrimination and discussions of Muslim students' distinct experiences with bullying. We believe that schools that intentionally engage in anti-bullying programs will develop a strong student body that takes action when they encounter or are subjected to bullying.<sup>11</sup>
- Professional development for teachers and school staff should include comprehensive information on what constitutes Islamophobia, anti-Muslim bias, and bullying. This will equip educators to document and respond to incidents effectively and allow them to recognize patterns in the data.

**“They should learn about Islam to avoid misconceptions and biased ignorant comments.”**

**(Male, 6th grade)**



<sup>10</sup> Abu Khalaf, N., Woolweaver, A. B., Reynoso Marmolejos, R., Little, G. A., Burnett, K., & Espelage, D. L. The Impact of Islamophobia on Muslim Students: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *School Psychology Review*, 52(2), 206–223. 2023. [www.doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2022.2075710](https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2022.2075710); Amjad, A. Muslim students' experiences and perspectives on current teaching practices in Canadian schools. *Power and Education*, 10(3), 315–332. (2018) [www.doi.org/10.1177/1757743818790276](https://doi.org/10.1177/1757743818790276).

<sup>11</sup> CAIR CA “Growing in Faith: California Muslim Youth Experiences with Bullying, Harassment & Religious Accommodation in Schools” 2013.



## 5. Support for Student Organizations

- Schools should encourage the formation of Muslim student associations or affinity groups. This will provide a supportive community for Muslim students to build community, share experiences, and foster greater understanding among their peers.
- Ensure that the responsibility for addressing Islamophobia and supporting Muslim students does not rest solely on these student groups. School leadership must actively combat discrimination, provide resources, and ensure a safe, inclusive environment for all students.

**“They should empower their Muslim students in order to create a safe environment where Muslim students could talk about their religion.”**

**(Male, 6th grade)**



## 6. Curriculum Evaluation

- Evaluating the curriculum is essential to ensure it accurately reflects the diversity of the Muslim community and avoids perpetuating stereotypes. The curriculum should not alienate Muslim students or place them in situations where they feel compelled to defend their faith. Building teacher knowledge is vital to prevent the perpetuation of anti-Muslim stereotypes and rhetoric in the classroom.

**“Organize Ramadan Iftars in the schools to educate the communities about Islam.”**

**(Female, 8th grade)**



## 7. Accommodations for Religious Practices

- Educators should be mindful of and accommodate significant religious practices, such as daily prayer, for which students may require a quiet space, and the month of Ramadan, during which Muslim students observe fasting. This understanding will foster a more supportive learning environment.





## FOR PARENTS

### 1. Recognize Signs of Bullying<sup>12</sup>

- Notice if your child avoids or refuses to go to school.
- Look for cuts, bruises, or unexplained injuries.
- Check for missing or damaged personal items.
- Pay attention to changes such as not wanting to communicate with friends, incurring frequent absences, frequent headaches/stomach aches without a medical cause, desire to change schools, or signs of depression, irritability, or anxiety.

### 2. Respond Supportively

- If you see one or more of these signs presenting themselves, gently inquire if something is happening in school.
- Reassure your child that the bullying is not their fault and that it's unacceptable.
- Be available as a source of support and work together on an action plan to inform school administrators.

### 3. Understand Bullying Laws & School Policies

- Reach out to CAIR-MA for assistance with understanding policy language and identifying bullying behaviors. **Contact CAIR-MA at (413) 206-9839 or via e-mail: info@ma.cair.com**
- Review your school's handbook and anti-bullying policies.
- Familiarize yourself with Massachusetts' bullying laws through CAIR-MA's anti-bullying advocacy information (read the "Anti-Bullying Laws & Advocacy" section of this report, page 19).

### 4. Advocate for Culturally Competent Education

- Advocate for your child's interests using this knowledge. This may include meeting with other parents, sharing information, and meeting together with school administrators with specific requests.
- Encourage teachers and school administrators to practice cultural humility and be aware of anti-Muslim bullying.

<sup>12</sup> [www.stopbullying.gov/bullying/warning-signs](http://www.stopbullying.gov/bullying/warning-signs).

## FOR STUDENTS

### 1. Document & Report Bullying

- Record incidents with details: names, dates, times, descriptions, and witnesses.
- Immediately report incidents to school administrators.
- Inform your parent, guardian, or trusted adult and work with them to submit a formal complaint to your school.
- Report the incident to CAIR-MA.

**“Encourage Muslim students/staff to report bullying incidents.”**

**(Female, 8th Grade)**

**“Create Islamic Awareness Week in schools.”**

**(Female, 8th Grade)**

### 2. Seek Support & Establish a Muslim Student Association



- Find a trusted adult to talk to and develop an action plan together.
- Connect with other Muslim students and consider establishing a Muslim Student Association (MSA) as a supportive space to address Muslim student issues and advocate on their behalf.
- If your MSA needs help creating an inclusive community, contact CAIR-MA for support.
- If there isn't a Muslim population at your school, join a Muslim youth group at your local mosque or Islamic center to find support and build relationships.

### 3. Advocate for Religious Accommodations

- Request accommodations (exceptions from the general rules) for practicing your religion, such as prayer breaks, prayer rooms, dress code exemptions, and holiday observances.
- Reach out to CAIR-MA if you encounter difficulties accessing these accommodations.

### 4. Know Your Rights & Advocate for Yourself

- Know your rights by reading your school's handbook and anti-bullying policies and Massachusetts' bullying laws.
- Familiarize yourself with CAIR-MA's anti-bullying advocacy recommendations (read the “Anti-Bullying Laws & Advocacy” section of this report, page 19).
- Understand the bullying reporting mechanisms for your school and ensure you report all incidents of anti-Muslim bullying to both your school and CAIR-MA.

## FOR MOSQUES & COMMUNITY LEADERS

### 1. Support MSAs and Facilitate Mentorship

Masjids can facilitate mentorship programs and collaboration between local Muslim students (especially ones who've established MSAs), local college MSAs, and other Muslim student groups. Local Masjids can also establish mentorship programs between students and young professionals in their area.

### 2. Educate the Community About Their Rights

Mosques and community leaders can familiarize themselves with Massachusetts' bullying laws through CAIR-MA's anti-bullying advocacy recommendations (read the “Anti-Bullying Laws & Advocacy” section of this report, page 19). Encourage community members to report incidents to their school and to CAIR-MA.

**By implementing these recommendations, schools can enhance the educational experience for their Muslim students, ensuring they feel valued and respected within the school. Parents, students, and Muslim community leaders can empower themselves with the knowledge and tools to support their Muslim students.**

# ANTI-BULLYING LAWS & ADVOCACY



This section describes how to address bullying and protect Muslim students by using several laws, including Massachusetts' anti-bullying law. Our legal advocacy department developed this as a reference/guide for families. **If your child is being bullied, or you are a young person who is being bullied, please call CAIR-MA at (617) 862-9159 or submit a request for help on our website at [cairma.org](http://cairma.org).** We can talk about which approach may be most helpful, how your family wants to handle the situation, and what role CAIR-MA can play.

For a shorter version of the following information see our Know Your Rights handout on bullying.<sup>13</sup>

## A. STARTING POINT: THE SCHOOL'S ANTI-BULLYING PLAN



Massachusetts law mandates that all schools serving students from kindergarten through 12th grade have a bullying prevention and intervention plan. It must be posted on the school's website. Each school gets to decide on the details, but very generally, the plan must:

- Apply to both staff and students;
- Tell students and parents how to make a complaint;
- Explain what steps the school will take to respond and investigate;
- Include protections for those who file a complaint or who cooperate with the investigation; and
- List the kind of discipline that may be taken against a student or staff member who bullies.

Report the problem! The school needs to know what is going on in order to do something about it. Call the school and **ask for a meeting with school officials**. Reach out to CAIR-MA if you need assistance requesting a meeting, whether due to feeling uncomfortable or needing linguistic or other support. Older students may feel comfortable reporting a problem on their own, but the school must still notify the parents when they learn of bullying. **Do NOT contact the aggressor or their parents on your own; that is the role of the school.** This also protects you from false claims that you threatened or harassed the aggressor or their parents.

<sup>13</sup> [www.cairma.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/CAIR-MA-Bullying-at-School-Mar.-2022.pdf](http://www.cairma.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/CAIR-MA-Bullying-at-School-Mar.-2022.pdf).



What should the school do to the aggressor? The school gets to decide on the appropriate discipline, as the anti-bullying law doesn't say what the punishment should be. Instead, a wide range of discipline is possible, depending on the age of the aggressor, the type of bullying, and whether the aggressor has previously caused problems. The disciplinary actions may include any of the following or a combination thereof:

- The school reports the behavior to the aggressor's parents;
- The school meets with the aggressor and their parents;
- Detention or in-school suspension;
- The aggressor must complete an assignment about bullying and discrimination;
- Aggressor must apologize to your child;
- Suspension from school: short-term (up to 10 days) or long-term (up to 90 days);
- Suspension from the school bus if that is where the bullying took place;
- The school calls the police; and
- Expulsion

Parents have the right to inquire about options and propose alternatives; however, **the school ultimately decides the course of action**. In addition, it often surprises parents when the school cannot give details about the discipline that is imposed—that is because of

school privacy laws. The school may be able to provide you with a general sense of how the situation is being handled, but they may not be able to provide all of the information you want.

Finally, schools must also decide if the aggressor needs any services to help them behave appropriately. Bullying can be a sign that aggressors are having serious problems of their own.

What should the school do to keep your child safe? As with discipline, **parents have the right to discuss what the school will do to ensure their child's safety and to offer suggestions**. If the bullying is serious and repeated, or if a group of students is bullying your child, the school may need to create a safety plan. It could include any of these or a combination of them:

- Naming a staff member as a "safe person" for the targeted student to go to if there are problems, or just to check in with each day or as often as needed;
- Allowing the targeted student to call a parent or other adult between classes;
- Increased supervision by staff in locations where the bullying takes place, such as hallways between classes or in the lunchroom;
- Changing seat assignments in a classroom, the lunchroom, or on the school bus; or
- Changing the schedule of the aggressor, to avoid contact with your child.



### *Is your child being protected—or punished?*

Students who bully often do so as part of a group. We have seen cases where the school reassigned the targeted student's class or seat, rather than moving the aggressors. There are two problems with that approach. First, it may suggest not only to those involved but to other classmates that the targeted student is the problem. Second, it may also indicate that convenience is more important than the child's safety. In some situations, parents might agree with changes to their child's schedule or seating. But if they do not, parents can advocate against actions that essentially punish the child who is being bullied.

### *What happens if the school says your child is the aggressor?*

Sometimes the school wrongly blames the Muslim student if there is a problem. While most schools are committed to treating all students fairly, there are also teachers and other school officials who are anti-Muslim or racist—just like there are people from all walks of life who are anti-Muslim or racist. **If the school claims that your child has caused a problem when the opposite is true, please contact CAIR-MA.** We may be able to help you and your child explain to the school what really happened, and work to make sure that your child is not punished unfairly.

Sometimes, Muslim students retaliate against classmates who bully them—and then get in trouble for their reaction. Again, if this happens, please

contact CAIR-MA to see if we can help you explain the reason for your child's actions to the school. Even if your child will be disciplined, keep in mind that the school can also take steps to protect your child at the same time.

What if the school doesn't take the bullying incident seriously? A bad situation only gets worse when a school fails to take bullying seriously or does not follow its own policies. If that happens, the state's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) might get involved, but its focus will be on the overall practices at the school, not the aggressor.

In situations where your child has been repeatedly bullied, parents and students may get better results by filing a discrimination complaint against the school with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (see section E, page 25). Parents may not get quick results, but the school will probably take the complaint seriously.

### *Homeschooling*

Some parents feel that the only way to keep their children safe is to remove them from their current school or to remove them from the school system altogether. While Massachusetts parents have the right to homeschool their children, when they do so for this reason, the schools have clearly failed them. If you are thinking about homeschooling your child, please check with CAIR-MA first because there are rules you must follow.

## B. CALLING THE POLICE

Massachusetts' anti-bullying law mandates that schools call the police if it appears the aggressor may have committed a crime. Some schools do so, while other schools are more hesitant to get the police involved, for various reasons. Please know that **caregivers also have the right to call the police** on their own.

In our experience, Muslim parents are concerned about several things when it comes to calling the police:

- If they are immigrants and are fearful of the police in their home country, they do not know if they should call the police in Massachusetts. Given law enforcement's historical mistreatment of people of color and suspicion of Muslims in the U.S., parents do not know if the police will help them.
- If parents are not U.S. citizens, they may worry that attention from the police might somehow affect their immigration cases.
- Parents may not want a young aggressor to get in trouble with the police; they just want them to stop bullying their child.

If you are not sure about calling the police, please call CAIR-MA. We can discuss your concerns and your options.

### *When is bullying a crime?*

There are many types of bullying that, while wrong and harmful, do not rise to the level of a crime. However, the actions listed below are crimes that may take place as part of bullying. If your child describes incidents like these, you may want to consider calling the police. NOTE: These are **very general descriptions**, and several different laws may apply to an incident. In addition, the specific facts of each case must be considered.

- **Threat to commit a crime** – the threat can be spoken or written and can include posts on social media.
- **Criminal harassment** – when an aggressor does something mean or cruel to the targeted student, at least *three* different times, that causes serious alarm to the student. The acts could be in person or through email or social media.
- **Vandalism** – when the aggressor damages or destroys property belonging to the targeted student, the school, or anyone else. Examples include defacing the targeted student's locker or damaging their belongings, slashing tires on the student's car, or spray painting graffiti about the student on a building.
- **Assault** – when the aggressor puts the targeted student in fear of physical harm, but there is no contact. Examples: the aggressor shakes a fist in the targeted student's face, or swings but misses.
- **Assault and battery** – when the aggressor makes physical contact with the targeted student without the targeted student's consent. Examples: pulling off a student's hijab or kufi, shoving, grabbing, or tripping. There does not need to be any injury.
- **Assault and battery with a dangerous weapon** – when the aggressor uses anything other than their bare hands or feet. Examples: kicking someone while wearing shoes, spitting on someone, or hitting someone with a book, backpack, or hockey stick.
- **Hate crimes** – Massachusetts' hate crimes laws may apply when an aggressor commits a crime because of the targeted student's religion, race, national origin, or certain other reasons. For more information, see our flyer, Know Your Rights: Hate Crimes & Harassment.<sup>14</sup>



<sup>14</sup> [www.cairma.org/resources/kyrhatecrimes](http://www.cairma.org/resources/kyrhatecrimes).

### **Ask for a copy of the police report**

Whether the school calls the police or you call them, ask the police for a copy of the police report. Each police department has its own policies about police reports. They may write up a detailed report or may only note that you made a complaint. Either way, ask for a copy. If there is more than one incident, ask for a copy of the police report each time the police are involved. That's because you need to **create a record of your complaints about the aggressor**. The police may suggest that you ask your local court for a Harassment Prevention Order to protect your child (see next section) and it will greatly help if you can give the court a copy of each police report. The police reports will also be helpful if you need to file a discrimination complaint against the school (see section F, page 25).

### **Pressing charges or not**

Parents may speak with the police or request a copy of the police report, even if they *do not wish the aggressor to be charged with a crime*. However, if they do want the aggressor to be charged, please keep in mind that the decision whether to do so is made by the police and prosecutors, not the parents. The police and prosecutors will decide based on the facts of the case and the law that applies.

## **C. RESTORATIVE JUSTICE**

A few Massachusetts communities have “restorative justice” programs. Very generally, restorative justice is a voluntary process where the victim, the offender, and members of the affected community meet as a group to identify and address the harm, needs, and obligations resulting from an offense. In the bullying context, the targeted student, the aggressor, parents, school officials, and perhaps even classmates would be involved. Depending on how serious the offense was, the police may also be part of the process.

The restorative justice model seeks to hold offenders accountable and encourages them to both acknowledge and take responsibility for their offenses. **The process takes place outside of the legal system.** It also offers a chance for a targeted student and the aggressor to speak face-to-face, which rarely happens in the legal system. The restorative justice approach also acknowledges the harm inflicted on the broader community, such as the students and staff at a school, and seeks to address and heal that harm, too. We recommend that every school (or school district) have some type of restorative justice program (see Recommendations, page 14).





## D. HARASSMENT PREVENTION ORDER (HPO)

In Massachusetts, parents can go to court and **file an application for a Harassment Prevention Order (HPO)**, which orders an aggressor to leave your child alone. You can find more information online,<sup>15</sup> including the forms<sup>16</sup> to fill out.

- 1. If the aggressor is under 18**, you will need to file your application in the Juvenile Court that serves your town/city (which may not be the closest courthouse). In order to find the right courthouse, find your town online.<sup>17</sup> This list will display several courts, including Juvenile Court.
- 2. If the aggressor is 18 or older**, you can file your request in the District Court or Superior Court that serves your town/city. Use the same list<sup>18</sup> to find the right courthouse.

It does not cost anything to file an application. In order to qualify for an HPO, you must show two things:

- 1.** There have been at least three separate acts of bullying by the aggressor. You will need to give as specific a date as possible for each incident, along with the details.
- 2.** Each act of bullying meets this test: It was done on purpose *AND* it was aimed at your child *AND* it was done to cause your child “fear, intimidation, abuse, or damage to property.” Abuse is defined as physical harm or the threat of physical harm.

If more than one classmate is bullying your child, you will need to file separate applications for each aggressor.

Quick action is possible. HPOs can be very useful when fast action is needed. A court can issue an **emergency order**, without notice to the aggressor if the judge thinks it is needed to keep your child safe. An emergency order usually tells the aggressor to stay away from the targeted student—although this may be difficult if both students are in the same classroom—and not to contact the targeted student, either in person, through email or social media, or by asking someone else to contact your child.

An emergency order remains valid for up to 10 days. After that time, a *hearing must be held* where both the targeted student and the aggressor, or their parents, can give their side of the story. The judge will decide if the emergency order should be kept in place, for how long, and if any changes are needed.

If the aggressor violates the court order, another hearing will be held for the judge to decide what to do. The aggressor can be arrested for violating an HPO.

<sup>15</sup> [www.mass.gov/harassment-prevention-orders](http://www.mass.gov/harassment-prevention-orders).

<sup>16</sup> [www.mass.gov/lists/harassment-prevention-order-court-forms](http://www.mass.gov/lists/harassment-prevention-order-court-forms).

<sup>17</sup> [www.mass.gov/guides/find-a-courthouse-serving-you#-courts-serving-cities-and-towns-a-d-](http://www.mass.gov/guides/find-a-courthouse-serving-you#-courts-serving-cities-and-towns-a-d-).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



## E. SUING THE AGGRESSOR'S PARENTS

Under Massachusetts law,<sup>19</sup> the parents of a child may be able to sue the aggressor's parents for up to \$5,000. If the student being bullied is 18 or older, the student would need to file the case on their own. This can be a useful tool if the aggressor steals, damages, or destroys your child's belongings (cellphone, laptop, sports equipment, etc.) or vandalizes the family's property (for example, spray painting graffiti on your home). This law is intended for out-of-pocket expenses, rather than claims that are more difficult to prove, like emotional distress.

In order to sue the aggressor's parents, you need to show:

- The aggressor is between the ages of 7 and 18;
- The aggressor lives with their parents, not on their own;
- The parents knew, or should have known, that it was likely the aggressor would harm the targeted child or the child's property; *AND*
- The aggressor's parents did not take action to prevent the harm.

A case like this can be filed in Small Claims Court,<sup>20</sup> which provides an informal way to resolve disputes that do not involve a lot of money. You do not need a lawyer in Small Claims Court, although you can be represented by a lawyer if you wish.



## F. DISCRIMINATION COMPLAINT AGAINST THE SCHOOL

If your child is bullied based on their race, religion, or national origin and the school fails to take adequate action in response to repeated complaints, parents may file a discrimination complaint with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. This is free and can be done online.

OCR enforces several federal laws, including one called "Title 6," which applies to discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin. This law doesn't specifically mention religion, but OCR takes the position that it protects students who belong to a religion with "shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics." The most common example would be girls who wear hijab as an expression of their Muslim faith. This law also protects children whose English is limited because their family speaks a different language.

Here are a few things to know about OCR complaints:

- The complaint is against the school, not the student(s) doing the bullying. For action against the aggressor(s), see sections B, C, and D.
- The complaint must be filed within 180 days of the discrimination.
- OCR is not required to accept every complaint that is filed.
- If OCR accepts your complaint, it will investigate the complaint and then try to work out a solution.
- Most schools take it seriously when an OCR complaint is filed against them, as they will now be investigated by a federal agency.
- OCR will see if a quick resolution is possible. But if it's not, the process can take many months or longer.
- OCR functions as a neutral investigator rather than an advocate. Parents can be represented by their own lawyer if they wish.

Bullying is, of course, very upsetting for both targeted students and their parents. But we hope parents will feel more confident protecting their children knowing about the legal tools described above. As always, please do not hesitate to call CAIR-MA for assistance.

<sup>19</sup> [malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartIII/TitleII/Chapter231/Section85G](http://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartIII/TitleII/Chapter231/Section85G).

<sup>20</sup> [www.mass.gov/small-claims](http://www.mass.gov/small-claims).

## G. WHAT DO THE COURTS SAY?

To the best of our knowledge, Massachusetts courts have not yet issued decisions specifically addressing cases involving Muslim students who experienced bullying. But here are some **major Massachusetts cases about bullying** in general.

- **Limits on suing a school for a student’s injuries.** Under Massachusetts law, public employers and their employees are generally protected (“immune”) from personal injury lawsuits when the injury is caused by someone other than a public employee. In the school setting, this means that school officials are generally protected from personal injury lawsuits when a bully injures a child, even when the school has failed to protect the child.

In a tragic case from Lynn, a 4th-grade student was pushed down the stairs at his school by a classmate. He suffered a spinal cord injury and was permanently paralyzed. His parents sued the school. The court ruled that while the school could have and should have done more to protect the student, the school was not liable for the child’s injuries because school employees themselves didn’t *affirmatively do something* to injure the child. Failing to act wasn’t enough. *Cormier v. City of Lynn* (2018).<sup>21</sup>

- **Bullying is not protected as free speech.** In Hopkinton, two high school athletes were among a group of students who were briefly suspended for bullying a younger member of the hockey team. The aggressors took videos and locker room photos of the younger student and shared them on Snapchat, along with insults about the victim’s looks and his parents. The targeted student needed mental health counseling and eventually transferred to a school in Canada.

Despite the harm inflicted upon the student, the two aggressors filed a lawsuit against their school. They claimed that their rights had been violated because the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and Massachusetts law<sup>22</sup> protect public students’ right to free expression. The court ruled that bullying was not protected by either the Constitution or state law. *Doe v. Hopkinton Public Schools* (2021).<sup>23</sup>

- **Limiting student speech aimed at a particular group of classmates.** A recent case from Middleborough also addressed free speech issues, this time balancing students’ free speech rights with the need to prevent discriminatory language directed at other students based on their race, religion, gender identity, etc. When a middle school student wore a t-shirt to school that said, “There are only two genders,” the school told him he was not allowed to do so. His parents sued. The court ruled in favor of the school, noting that messages that demean the identity of certain groups of students are likely to harm their educational success. *L.M. v. Town of Middleborough* (2023).<sup>24</sup> However, the parents have appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court and 18 states are supporting the appeal, arguing that the school violated the student’s free speech rights.

- It is not a Massachusetts case, but there is a 2011 court decision from Florida that involved anti-Muslim discrimination. Several public school students wore t-shirts that said, “Islam is of the Devil.” The school district would not allow the students to wear the t-shirts, so their parents sued. The court ruled in favor of the school, affirming that schools have the authority to restrict speech that is disruptive or promotes unlawful discrimination. *Sapp v. School Board of Alachua County* (2011).<sup>25</sup>



<sup>21</sup> [www.masscases.com/cases/sjc/479/479mass35.html](http://www.masscases.com/cases/sjc/479/479mass35.html).

<sup>22</sup> [malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter71/Section82](http://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter71/Section82).

<sup>23</sup> [media.ca1.uscourts.gov/pdf/opinions/20-1950P-01A.pdf](http://media.ca1.uscourts.gov/pdf/opinions/20-1950P-01A.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> [www.casetext.com/case/lm-v-town-of-middleborough](http://www.casetext.com/case/lm-v-town-of-middleborough).

<sup>25</sup> [s3.amazonaws.com/cdn.getsnworks.com/spl/pdf/sapp.pdf](http://s3.amazonaws.com/cdn.getsnworks.com/spl/pdf/sapp.pdf).

# RESOURCES



## Resources for Parents

- **CAIR-MA Know Your Rights: Bullying At School:** [www.cairma.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/CAIR-MA-Bullying-at-School-Mar.-2022.pdf](http://www.cairma.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/CAIR-MA-Bullying-at-School-Mar.-2022.pdf)
- **CAIR-MA Know Your Rights: Your Child's Rights at School:** [www.cairma.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/CAIR-MA-Education-discrimination-11-30-23.pdf](http://www.cairma.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/CAIR-MA-Education-discrimination-11-30-23.pdf)
- **CAIR-MA The Rights of Parents:** [www.cairma.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/CAIR-MA-Rights-of-Parents-Mar.-2022.pdf](http://www.cairma.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/CAIR-MA-Rights-of-Parents-Mar.-2022.pdf)

## Resources on Combating Islamophobia

- **CAIR's Counter Islamophobia Project:** [www.islamophobia.org](http://www.islamophobia.org)
- **Institute for Social Policy and Understanding:** [www.ispu.org](http://www.ispu.org)
- **Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative:** [www.muslimarc.org](http://www.muslimarc.org)
- **Institute for Muslim Mental Health:** [www.muslimmentalhealth.com](http://www.muslimmentalhealth.com)
- **Muslim Wellness Foundation:** [www.muslimwellness.com](http://www.muslimwellness.com)
- **Muslim Mental Health Toolkit** (this toolkit also includes specific resources for addressing the needs of American Muslim children who face the added challenge of bullying from peers and adults): [www.ispu.org/mental-health](http://www.ispu.org/mental-health)
- **Douglass, Susan, and Dunn, Ross.** "Interpreting Islam in American Schools." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 2003. [www.jstor.org/stable/1049854](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1049854)
- **CAIR-California's "An Educator's Guide to Islamic Religious Practices"** provides answers to common questions and misconceptions about Islam and Muslims. [ca.cair.com/sacval/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2018/08/Educator-Handbook\\_web1.pdf?x62983](http://ca.cair.com/sacval/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2018/08/Educator-Handbook_web1.pdf?x62983)
- **Bullying Prevention Guide Islamic Networks Group:** [www.ing.org/resources/for-students/bullying-prevention-guide](http://www.ing.org/resources/for-students/bullying-prevention-guide)
- **State of American Muslim Youth: Research & Recommendations Institute for Social Policy and Understanding:** [www.ispu.org/state-of-american-muslim-youth-research-recommendations](http://www.ispu.org/state-of-american-muslim-youth-research-recommendations)

## Organizations Providing Educational Resources on Islam

- **Islamic Networks Group (ING):** [www.ing.org](http://www.ing.org)
- **Teaching Tolerance: A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center:** [www.splcenter.org/news/2021/02/03/learning-justice-teaching-tolerance-changes-its-name-reflect-evolving-work-struggle-radical](http://www.splcenter.org/news/2021/02/03/learning-justice-teaching-tolerance-changes-its-name-reflect-evolving-work-struggle-radical)
- **WhyIslam:** [www.whyislam.org](http://www.whyislam.org)
- **Unity Productions Foundation:** [www.upf.tv](http://www.upf.tv)

## Resources for Educators

- **ISPU: Religious-Based Bullying: Insights on Research and Evidence-Based Best Practices from the National Interfaith Anti-Bullying Summit:** [www.ispu.org/religious-based-bullying-insights-on-research-and-evidence-based-best-practices-from-the-national-interfaith-anti-bullying-summit-2](http://www.ispu.org/religious-based-bullying-insights-on-research-and-evidence-based-best-practices-from-the-national-interfaith-anti-bullying-summit-2)
- **Teaching September 11, 2001, in Diverse Classrooms General Mental Health Resources:** [pa.cair.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CAIR-PA-School-Resource-Document-Teaching-September-11.pdf](http://pa.cair.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CAIR-PA-School-Resource-Document-Teaching-September-11.pdf)
- **Khalil Center Institute for Muslim Mental Health:** [www.khalilcenter.com](http://www.khalilcenter.com)
- **Ruh Care:** [www.ruhcare.com](http://www.ruhcare.com)
- **ISPU Toolkits:** [www.ispu.org/educators](http://www.ispu.org/educators)

## Crisis Support

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (USA)** Call/Text: 988
- **Crisis Text Line (USA)** Text: HOME to 741741

## Muslim-Specific Crisis Hotlines

- **Amala Hopeline (USA):** A free helpline that provides peer support to Muslims. Call/Text: 855-95-AMALA (26252). [amala.mas-ssf.org](http://amala.mas-ssf.org)
- **Naseeha-Muslim Helpline:** Provides mental health services to address the unique challenges faced by Muslims and offers confidential and non-judgmental support to those in need. Call: 1-866-627-3342. [www.naseehausa.org](http://www.naseehausa.org)

## APPENDIX: Survey Findings

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

### Question 5: During this school year, how often have you been bullied?

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	9	3%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	15	5%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	29	9%
Rarely (1 or 2 times a year)	71	22%
Never	200	62%
<b>Total</b>	<b>324</b>	<b>100%</b>

### Question 6: During the past school year, how often have you seen someone else being bullied?

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	15	5%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	46	14%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	79	24%
Rarely (1 or 2 times a year)	102	31%
Never	82	25%
<b>Total</b>	<b>324</b>	<b>100%</b>

### Question 7: Have you ever stood up for someone being bullied in the past?

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	14	4%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	27	8%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	81	25%
Rarely (1 or 2 times a year)	99	31%
Never	103	32%
<b>Total</b>	<b>324</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 8: Has a classmate ever stood up for you if/when you were bullied in the past?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	11	3%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	20	6%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	62	19%
Rarely (1 or 2 times a year)	68	21%
Never	163	50%
<b>Total</b>	<b>324</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 9: Has an adult ever talked to you or your classmates about bullying?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	11	3%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	53	16%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	103	32%
Rarely (1 or 2 times a year)	85	26%
Never	70	22%
<b>Total</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 10: Do adults do a good job at addressing bullying at your school?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
No, they don't understand what's going on	69	22%
Sometimes	134	42%
They do not address bullying	26	8%
Yes, they are very helpful	91	28%
<b>Total</b>	<b>320</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 11: What can adults do at school to help stop bullying? Select all that apply.**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Make rules against bullying and discipline the bullies	161	51%
Supervise the school better	141	45%
Help students work out problems	139	44%
Talk about bullying prevention in class	113	36%
Bullying is not a problem at our school	81	26%

**Question 12: Select all that apply. If a bullying incident happened, I would tell a:**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Teacher or Administrator	179	57%
Friend	144	45%
Parent	112	35%
Someone Else	51	16%
I would not tell anyone	4	1%

**Question 13: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?**

**“I feel comfortable discussing bullying with my teachers/school administrators.”**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Agree	207	64%
Disagree	114	36%
<b>Total</b>	<b>321</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 14: How often have you been bullied at school for being Muslim?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	11	3%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	22	7%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	38	12%
Rarely (1 or 2 times a year)	84	26%
Never	163	51%
<b>Total</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 15: In what ways have you been bullied for being Muslim? Select all that apply.**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
I have not been bullied for being Muslim	163	51%
Mean comments in person	113	36%
Taunting/yelling	55	17%
Online/social media bullying	50	16%
Physical violence	17	5%
Other ways	11	4%

**Question 16: How often have you been bullied based on your ethnicity or race?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	13	4%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	25	8%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	39	12%
Rarely (1or 2 times a year)	87	28%
Never	149	48%
<b>Total</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 17: How often have you been bullied based on your or your family's immigration status? (Being an immigrant, a refugee, or not being a citizen)**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	5	2%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	10	3%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	20	6%
Rarely (1or 2 times a year)	60	19%
Never	222	70%
<b>Total</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 18: How often have you been bullied based on where you live? (The part of town you live in, your neighborhood)**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	3	1%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	9	3%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	17	5%
Rarely (1or 2 times a year)	28	9%
Never	260	82%
<b>Total</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 19: How often have you been bullied based on your income? (Based on how much money your family makes, the type of house you live in, the car your family drives, the clothing you wear)**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	4	1%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	6	2%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	14	4%
Rarely (1or 2 times a year)	31	10%
Never	262	83%
<b>Total</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 20: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?**

**“I feel comfortable letting others in school know that I am Muslim.”**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Agree	284	90%
Disagree	32	10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>316</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 21: How often do you see another Muslim being bullied at school for being Muslim?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	9	3%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	12	4%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	27	8%
Rarely (1 or 2 times a year)	65	20%
Never	200	63%
There are no other Muslims at my school	5	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 22: If you wear hijab, how often have you been physically harassed at school, such as having your hijab pulled on, removed, etc at school?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	5	4%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	4	3%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	9	7%
Rarely (1 or 2 times a year)	26	21%
Never	81	65%
<b>Total</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 23: How often have you heard of someone else who wears a hijab being physically harassed at school?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
No one else wears a hijab in my school	3	1%
Constantly (everyday)	9	3%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	10	3%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	16	5%
Rarely (1 or 2 times a year)	62	20%
Never	215	68%
<b>Total</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100%</b>



**Question 24: Have you altered or considered altering your appearance, behavior, or name to hide the fact that you are Muslim?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	8	3%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	14	4%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	19	6%
Rarely (1 or 2 times a year)	31	10%
Never	241	77%
<b>Total</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 25: Have teachers or staff made offensive comments about Islam or Muslims inside or outside of the school?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	9	3%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	9	3%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	30	9%
Rarely (1 or 2 times a year)	62	20%
Never	206	65%
<b>Total</b>	<b>316</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 26: Do you notice police officers at your school?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
No	120	37%
Yes	202	63%
<b>Total</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 27: Do police officers or other law enforcement come to your school to talk about Islamophobia, Islam, and/or Muslims?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	2	~1%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	4	1%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	6	2%
Rarely (1 or 2 times a year)	30	9%
Never	281	87%
<b>Total</b>	<b>323</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 28: How often would you say that you notice police officers or other law enforcement present in your neighborhood?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	25	8%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	42	13%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	63	20%
Rarely (1 or 2 times a year)	80	25%
Never	110	34%
<b>Total</b>	<b>320</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 29: Do you feel comfortable expressing your political opinions about Palestine in your school?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
No	70	24%
Somewhat	28	10%
Yes	194	66%
<b>Total</b>	<b>292</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 30: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?**

**“When my teachers taught lessons about Islam, they did so in a neutral, fair, and factual manner.”**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Agree	158	50%
Disagree	44	14%
My teachers did not teach lessons about Islam	117	37%
<b>Total</b>	<b>319</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 31: Have you ever felt responsible for teaching your classmates about Islam, Muslims, and/or Islamophobia?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Constantly (everyday)	26	8%
Regularly (1 or 2 times a week)	33	10%
Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)	88	28%
Rarely (1 or 2 times a year)	88	28%
Never	83	26%
<b>Total</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 32: In your classroom, have your teachers discussed the subject of Jihad, Shariah, Terrorism, or the War on Terror?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
No	178	56%
Yes	141	44%
<b>Total</b>	<b>319</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 33: If these subjects were discussed, how were they presented?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
These subjects have not been discussed in any of my classes	147	47%
They were presented as not representative of mainstream Islam	103	33%
They were associated with all Muslims	63	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Question 34: If any of these subjects have been discussed, in which classes did the discussion occur? Select all that apply.**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Social Studies, Geography, or History	190	61%
These subjects have not been discussed in any of my classes	99	32%
Language Arts, Literature, or English	58	19%
Science or Math	23	7%
Specialty courses (art, computers, foreign languages, or gym)	12	4%
Other	5	2%

**Question 35: If you have ever been asked to participate in a training on online/social media/internet safety, were there references made to extremism or terrorism?**

Answer	Count	Percentage of Respondents
I have not participated in training	152	48%
No	153	49%
Yes	9	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>100%</b>



[cairma.org](http://cairma.org)

(617) 862-9159  
[info@ma.cair.com](mailto:info@ma.cair.com)

800 Boylston Street  
P.O. Box 990445  
Boston, MA 02199

 [facebook.com/CAIRmassachusetts](https://facebook.com/CAIRmassachusetts)

 [instagram.com/CAIRmass](https://instagram.com/CAIRmass)

 [twitter.com/CAIRmass](https://twitter.com/CAIRmass)

 [linktr.ee/CAIRma](https://linktr.ee/CAIRma)

