

13/02/15

Project Summary
Australian Research Council Project - Avoiding Community Backlash in the fight against terrorism
For distribution to members of the QPS/Muslim reference group

Investigators:

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This project aims to:

1. Gauge the perceptions among Muslims in Australia about the fairness of counter-terrorism policing and laws.
2. Identify how community cooperation in counter-terrorism and the prevention of violent extremism can be enhanced.
3. Identify how community backlash against counter-terrorism can be avoided.

Project methodology:

1. 14 focus groups: 104 participants in total; youth, middle aged, new arrivals. 67 males/37 females, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne; occurred in 2013 & 2014).
2. Face-to-face survey of Muslims: sample of 800 in total, 200 respondents Brisbane; 300 respondents Melbourne; 300 respondents Sydney; occurred 2014. Sample characteristics - 69% Sunni Muslim; 31% Shia Muslim; 58% born in Australia, 99% Australian citizens; 43% English is main language spoken at home; 57% do not speak English at home; mean age 35 yrs (range 17 to 82); 53% of sample 30 years or younger; 50.5% male and 49.5% female; 53% attend a mosque on a weekly basis or more.

Analysis of the focus groups results reveal:

- Participants felt that many Australians misunderstood the Islamic religion.
- Participants felt the media mainly perpetuated this misunderstanding.
- Respondents believed there was a lot of misinformation spread about Islamic principles (e.g. the meaning of Jihad) with there also being a double standard in how terrorism was reported in the media.
- When out in public, respondents (in particular female participants) felt they were being constantly watched and some reported forms of verbal vilification from members of the public.
- It was stressed that Islamist terrorist groups were not true Muslims and distorted the meaning of Islamic principles.
- Participants reported that since events such as 9/11, they felt under more scrutiny by state and federal police. While overall judgments about police were favourable and supportive, stating that police in Australia acted in an ethical manner, there was the perception that counter-terrorism laws were being used to target Muslims.
- A key concern was that police could "do what ever they wanted" when it came to using counter-terrorism laws.
- Participants believed that police needed to learn more about the Islamic religion.
- Participants stated that they felt reluctant to publically voice an opinion about Islam, foreign policy issues, terrorism or counter-terrorism out of fear they would be labelled as extremists. These views were particularly strong among young Muslims.
- Young participants felt resentful about the need to constantly defend their faith and expressed strong opinions about being unfairly singled out by the police and ASIO.
- Nine respondents reported direct contact with AFP/state police and/or ASIO relating to counter-terrorism.

- Participants discussed the merits of different police and legal efforts to combat terrorism or radicalisation. Methods based on the use of informants, surveillance of the Muslim community, racial profiling and detention of suspects, were seen as unfair and counter-productive, with them only isolating and dividing Muslim communities.
- Consultative approaches, such as engagement with Muslim leaders and community members were regarded as more reasonable and effective.
- However there was some suspicion about community engagement, with the belief that only a small number of selected Muslim leaders were being consulted by police and the government.

Snap shot of survey results (below is a selection of overall results - the survey contained 131 questions; an ethnic naming system was used to draw the survey sample):

- How fairly do you feel Muslims are treated in the media: 58.7% very unfair/unfair.
- I am proud to be an Australian: 84.9% agreed/strongly agreed.
- Counter terrorism laws unfairly target Muslims: 74.1% agreed/strongly agreed.
- The War on Terror is a war on Islam: 51.9% strongly disagreed/disagreed.
- I trust the police in my community: 88% agreed/strongly agreed.
- Islam is often misinterpreted as a religion that advocates violence: 96.8 % agreed/strongly agreed.
- 20.3% of the sample (or 162 respondents) claimed that terrorists sometimes have valid grievances. This was unrelated to a respondent's age.
- Respondents were asked whether they had changed certain practices as a result of police scrutiny around terrorism. These practices included: (a) attendance at mosque; (b) how they dress in public; (c) their everyday activities; and (d) their travel behaviour. 50% of the sample reported changing the way they dress in public.
- Three survey questions assessed willingness to work with police to encourage other members of the Muslim community to fight terrorism; and seven questions asked about the respondent's own willingness to report suspicious terrorist related information to police. The majority of respondents indicated they would work with police across all these areas.
- On average, respondents felt police rarely considered the views of their community when it came to making decisions about how to address terrorism or when trying to deal with radicalisation. 46% of the sample felt police 'never' or 'rarely' considered their views when trying to deal with radicalization in their community and 40% felt police did so occasionally.

Analysis of the data also reveals that:

- Muslims who trust police are more willing to cooperate in all aspects of crime control, counter terrorism education and report suspicious terror related activity.
- Muslims who feel more under siege (e.g. they feel under more scrutiny by police and authorities because of their faith) are less trusting of police, are less likely to identify with Australia and are less willing to cooperate with police.
- If Muslims feel the police use procedural justice (i.e. treat Muslims with respect, impartially, in a trustworthy manner and provide an opportunity to have a say) in counter terrorism policing they are more likely to trust police and are less likely to feel under siege.

*Adrian Cherney and Kristina Murphy will provide further results at the next QPS/Muslim community reference group meeting in March, which will include state breakdowns of selected results.