Interracial mingling vital in weathering terror strike: Study

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In the event of a terror attack here, Singaporeans would display stronger negative reactions if it had been carried out by a foreign extremist Muslim organisation than if Buddhists, Christians or Hindus had been behind it, a survey has found.

In analysing a survey from last year of just over 2,000 Singaporeans, researchers from the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) also found that older and less well-off people were less likely to retain trust in and openness to Muslims in such circumstances.

However, non-Muslims who had more interracial interaction were more likely to express solidarity with Muslims after an attack, which highlights the "importance of providing ample avenues for interracial mingling", the researchers said.

The report, released by IPS yesterday, is believed to be the first public study of its kind to examine perceptions of different religious groups after a hypothetical terror attack.

The report - titled Community Relations Amidst The Threat Of Terror - is authored by IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews and co-authored by IPS research associate Leonard Lim and IPS research assistant Shanthini Selvarajan.

The Singaporeans were asked to respond to news of a bomb exploding on an MRT station platform which killed 15 people and wounded 40.

They were further told that the authorities had confirmed the identity of those behind the terror attack, and given four scenarios of the foreign extremist organisation involved - that it was Buddhist, Muslim, Christian or Hindu.

If the attack was by a Muslim group, 48 per cent of respondents were quite or very likely to be suspicious of a Muslim stranger walking around in their neighbourhood, compared with 40 per cent for a Buddhist or Hindu stranger and 35 per cent for a Christian stranger if the attack was by the corresponding group.

Less-educated respondents, as well as those less well off as measured by housing type, were also more likely to show less trust and openness after an attack.

Across most of the survey findings, those residing in one-and two-room Housing Board flats fared differently from the rest.

"This is indicative of the exclusion those at the extreme end of the socio-economic status may be experiencing, which fuels their prejudices and biases," said the authors, adding that this minority group may not be receiving full access to programmes that promote multiculturalism and interracial interaction.
The study also found "substantial levels of mistrust" between races in Singapore, especially by the majority Chinese community in relation to the minority Malays and Indians.

This was measured by asking the respondents what proportion of people of each race they thought would return their wallet if they had dropped it in a shopping mall.

A majority of Chinese respondents said they could not trust Indian and Malay people to hand it back; they were more likely to trust a fellow Chinese person to return it.

But non-Muslims who had more interracial interaction in the previous two years - such as friendships or shared cultural experiences with Malays - were less likely to display Islamophobic tendencies after an attack by a foreign Muslim group.

They were also more likely to express solidarity with Muslims after an attack.

The researchers added: "This suggests that efforts to deepen understanding and integration among different communities in Singapore, through events in the grassroots, schools and other such organisations, should continue as the country seeks to build up social ballast before any terror attack."

Mr Murali Pillai, deputy chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Home Affairs and Law, said: "The study, at face value, provides further evidence of what we all fear - that terrorism has the potential to tear apart our society and unwind all the progress we have made to strengthen multi-racial and religious harmony over the past decades.

"This was a point observed in Parliament last year when MPs unanimously passed a motion to affirm our longstanding principle of multiracialism as a bulwark against the challenge posed by terrorism."

The survey of Singapore citizens, conducted by consumer research firm Media Research Consultants and funded by Mediacorp, questioned 1,016 Chinese people, 504 Malays and 511 whose ethnicity was classified as Indian or others.