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Poll: New Yorkers say NYPD has treated Muslims fairly in trying to prevent terrorist attacks

By Associated Press, Updated: Tuesday, March 13, 3:26 PM

NEW YORK — Most voters in New York City have no problem with the way the police department has treated Muslims, a poll showed Tuesday, despite weeks of criticism leveled against the NYPD's counterterrorism program by Muslim activists and out-of-state politicians.

A series of articles by The Associated Press has revealed how the police department conducted surveillance of Muslim communities, infiltrating student groups, monitoring the Web activity of college students, taking notes at mosques and eavesdropping at cafes and grocery stores.

A poll conducted by Quinnipiac University after the latest stories found that 58 percent of city voters surveyed believe the department has treated Muslims fairly, while 29 percent think police were unfair and 13 percent didn't know or had no answer. Overall, 82 percent believe the NYPD has been effective in its counterterrorism efforts.

"New Yorkers overwhelmingly think their police are going a good job of protecting against terrorism, and they don't believe they're picking on Muslims," said Maurice Carroll, director of the university's polling institute.

The poll showed a slight increase from last month — five percentage points — in the number of New Yorkers who believe the police have acted inappropriately. Carroll said that was probably due to a burst of publicity after the AP disclosed last month that the surveillance had extended far beyond the city limits.

Internal NYPD documents show the department's Intelligence unit cataloged and eavesdropped in Muslim-owned businesses in New Jersey and on New York's Long Island. They collected license plate numbers outside a mosque in Paterson, N.J., and noted the names of people who posted on student websites at colleges as far away as Buffalo, N.Y.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie accused the NYPD of acting like "masters of the universe" by casing his state. The head of the FBI in Newark, N.J., warned that the NYPD's operations were undermining the bureau's efforts to prevent terrorist attacks by sowing distrust among Muslims.

The poll surveyed 964 voters in New York City from March 6 to 11 and had a margin of error of plus or minus 3.2 percentage points.

Carol Martin, a retired bookkeeper, said she is uncomfortable with the idea of putting people under surveillance with no evidence they are doing anything wrong, but feels it is a necessary precaution.

“I don’t think there’s such a thing as fairness after 9/11,” Martin said as she walked through a park within sight of the unfinished World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan. “I don’t know if it’s right or wrong to do these things, but there’s some credence behind it.”

Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly have maintained that the NYPD’s actions are legal and necessary in a city under constant threat of another terrorist attack.

They say the police have stopped 14 terrorist attacks since 9/11. However, some of those plots never got past the discussion stage, and the NYPD had nothing to do with thwarting some of the others.

The poll showed New Yorkers are more divided about the policy of “stop-and-frisk,” in which police can stop and question people exhibiting suspicious behavior, such as moving furtively or acting like lookouts. Of the 684,330 street stops last year, 87 percent of those targeted were black or Hispanic.

The poll found that 46 percent of New Yorkers approve of stop-and-frisk, while 49 percent disapprove.

Opinions about the NYPD varied according to such factors as racial group or age. While 22 percent of whites thought the NYPD had unfairly targeted Muslims, 41 percent of blacks did. People 18 to 34 were more likely than other age groups to think it was unfair, at 40 percent.

Emilio Aguilar, a 32-year-old deliveryman, said he empathizes with people who feel their privacy is being invaded, but also understands the pressure police are under as they try to protect the city.

“I think they’re doing what they have to do,” Aguilar said. “It’s for the good of the country.”

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