

Survey shifts spotlight away from poor as key supporters of militants in Pakistan

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A groundbreaking survey of Pakistanis has found stronger support for militant groups among the middle class than the poor. The finding by a team including Princeton researchers challenges the conventional wisdom about links between economic status and views on militants that has helped shaped American foreign-aid policies since 2001.

The nationally representative survey of 6,000 Pakistani adults, conducted in the spring of 2009, also found that Pakistanis in general held militant groups in low regard. And, when the survey results were analyzed along with data that identified the sites of violent attacks, researchers saw evidence that support for the militant groups was reduced by residents' direct exposure to militants' violent actions.

The survey and its potential implications for the way American foreign aid is distributed are described in an article published online in July by the *American [Journal of Political Science](#)*. The authors are Princeton graduate student Graeme Blair; C. Christine Fair, assistant professor, Center for Peace and Security Studies at Georgetown University; Neil Malhotra, associate professor, Graduate School of Business at Stanford University; and Jacob Shapiro, assistant professor of politics and international affairs in Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.

Expectations that poorer people are more susceptible to the appeals of violent groups have contributed to U.S. policies that focus on using aid to reduce poverty as a way to combat militant violence. But the survey

found that the poor in Pakistan were substantially more negative toward militant groups than their middle class countrymen. By one measure, poor Pakistanis were up to 23 times more negative about militants than their middle-class counterparts.

"Giving development aid may be effective in improving peoples' livelihoods and making them better off in monetary ways, but it is not going to be effective in changing their minds because the poor in Pakistan are not the people whose minds we need to change," said Blair, a fourth-year Ph.D. student in the Department of Politics. "They already really dislike the militant groups."

David Laitin, the James T. Watkins IV and Elise V. Watkins Professor of Political Science at Stanford who wasn't involved with the research, said it represents an advance in scholarship on the topic.

"This paper takes one more careful step toward understanding the relationship of poverty and terror, much of it moved forward by Princeton scholars. Alan Krueger, now chairman of the [White House Council of Economic Advisers], revealed that suicide bombers came from the richer elements in countries with terrorist organizations," Laitin said. "Professor Shapiro, in an earlier paper, demonstrated that Iraqi insurgents were recruited more successfully from the employed than the unemployed. And this paper pushes us further, showing that the absolutely impoverished in Pakistan are less likely to support terrorist cells.

"Poverty is bad enough, these Princeton scholars show us, but the poor aren't willing accomplices to terror." The survey, which the journal article describes as "arguably the first valid, national measurement of attitudes toward militant groups in Pakistan," used a novel technique to measure support for four militant groups: Kashmiri tanzeems (or organizations), the Afghan Taliban, al-Qaida and sectarian tanzeems.

Participants were visited, normally at their homes, by survey teams between April 21, 2009, and May 25, 2009. In keeping with cultural norms of the area, participants were surveyed by a member of their own sex.

Participants weren't asked directly about support for the groups—which could have been dangerous for those conducting the survey and could have skewed results.

Instead, some participants were asked their level of support for four policies—such as universal polio vaccination across Pakistan. When other participants were asked about their support for the same policies, the survey takers noted that one of the militant groups supported each policy.

From the difference in responses, researchers estimated support for the groups themselves.

"At the time we were in the field, the subject of militancy was a tense one in Pakistan," Shapiro said. "So asking people directly how they felt about specific organizations, lots of people wouldn't tell you how they felt. The estimate of support you would draw if you asked people directly would be biased."

The researchers later compared the locations where the survey was conducted with areas where political violence had been reported, using data they collected on 27,570 incidents of such violence. The researchers found that dislike of militant groups was stronger among the urban poor living in areas affected by militant violence in the year before the survey.

"Our interpretation of the fact that the urban poor in Pakistan are the most negative toward militant groups suggests to us that these are the

people who are most affected when a bomb goes off," Shapiro said. "The average upper-middle class family in Pakistan doesn't go to the market for itself, isn't out in exposed public spaces that much and its income isn't extremely vulnerable to short-term disruptions. But of the urban poor, all of that is true."

Shapiro said that a similar survey undertaken in the winter and spring of 2012 and overseen by many of the same researchers indicates that militancy has become an even more sensitive topic in Pakistan than it was when the original survey was taken, though it is too early to know how support levels for militant groups has changed.

"We know now that poor Pakistanis are more negative towards militants than others," Shapiro said. "Now we want to understand exactly why, and the new survey is designed to help get at that."

The results of the 2009 [survey](#) are part of a growing body of research that calls into question a direct link between economics and violence, Shapiro said.

"There are a ton of wonderful reasons to give money to Pakistan and try to support economic growth there and in lots of other places," Shapiro said. "But when we premise it on what I think is an incorrect notion that doing so is going to change people's political views, we're distorting how we spend the money. Foreign aid is scarce and powerful and should be spent on making people's lives better."

And over the past several years, Shapiro said, the U.S. government has begun rethinking how it directs development spending, focusing more on how aid programs can address specific grievances that are motivating people to support militant groups.

Another potential area to focus aid is on helping residents understand the

consequences of militant violence, Shapiro said. That includes helping middle-class and upper-class Pakistanis understand the extent to which their country's underperformance economically compared with its peers is a consequence of the presence of militant organizations, he said.

Provided by Princeton University

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