



TAKING ON HATE & WHITE SUPREMACY

RECOMMENDATIONS TEN YEARS AFTER
THE ATTACKS IN OAK CREEK, WISCONSIN



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FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

Sikh Americans are the most targeted minority in hate crime bias incidents per capita as shared in the following special report from the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF).

This SALDEF special report is a summary of top research findings and outreach over the past decade. This report is released as an action to the passing of the 10-year mark of the mass shooting at the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin in Oak Creek, WI. This violent attack, which resulted in the death of seven worshippers, was the deadliest mass shooting of Sikhs in U.S. history and, at the time, was one of the worst attacks on a U.S. house of worship in decades.

The special report reveals disheartening figures:



When adjusting for the population size of the minority group, Sikh Americans are the **most targeted minority** in bias incidents per capita.



85% of respondents said they **do not feel safe** practicing Sikhism all of the time.



58% of respondents reported **being bullied or harassed** because of their Sikh identity.



63% of turbaned respondents reported being **discriminated** against for wearing a turban.

The Sikh community is historically understudied in the United States. As a policy organization dedicated to building leadership capacity in Sikh community, SALDEF has spent the past decade conducting in-community surveys and qualitative research to better understand and portray Sikh Americans to policymakers in Washington, D.C., and nationwide.

This report has resulted in specific policy recommendations needed to protect our community.

INTRODUCTION

The Sikh community is historically understudied in the United States. As a policy organization dedicated to building leadership capacity in our community, the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF) has spent much of the past decade conducting in-community surveys and qualitative research to better understand and portray Sikh Americans to policymakers in Washington, D.C., and nationwide. As we approach the ten-year anniversary of Oak Creek, we re-examined our research and outreach over the past decade and prepared this snapshot of where the community stands ten years on.

It is clear that the Supreme Court of the current moment is one that prizes what it considers to be religious liberty.[1] As SALDEF marks ten years of advocacy and community building work since the mass shooting at Oak Creek, we are struck by the incongruity of this moment for our community. For a religious minority that has faced persecution, xenophobia, and overt racism from our arrival in this country to the present day, the dissonance between our struggle to practice our faith without fear of violence and the Supreme Court's barrage of rulings on behalf of an already-empowered plurality is deafening.

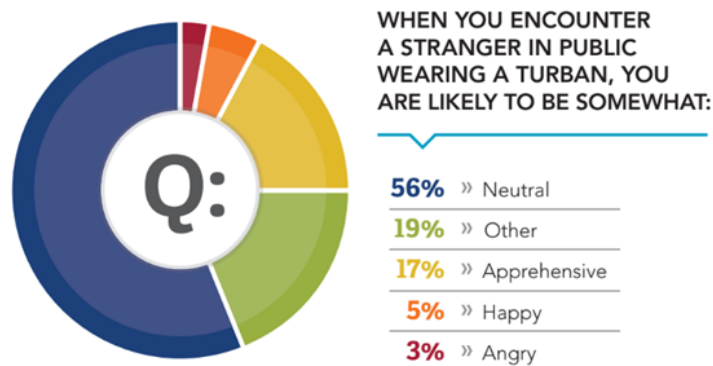
SALDEF has conducted an analysis of data we have generated through several studies to map the contours of the Sikh American population. Most of our findings will be released in a full report in the coming months, but for the anniversary of Oak Creek we have prepared this whitepaper to relay important high-level information and present the policy platform we continue to work to implement.

[1] The new Supreme Court doctrine against religious discrimination. Washington Post. July 7, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/07/07/scotus-carson-makin-maine-schools-bremerton-football-coach/>

TURBAN MYTHS AND HATE CRIMES

The 2020 Hate Crimes report released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) showed that anti-Sikh hate crimes hit a record high of 89 documented incidents, reflecting an 82% increase over 2019 despite an overall decrease in the number of anti-religious hate crimes. [2] When adjusting for population size of the minority group, Sikh Americans are the most targeted minority in bias incidents per capita.[3]

This reality is consistent with the data SALDEF has worked to gather for the past decade. In 2013, we collaborated with the Peace Innovation Lab Stanford to produce Turban Myths, a study on the perception of Sikh Americans. The summary findings quantified the Sikh American experience: 79% of respondents could not identify India as the geographic origin of Sikhism, 49% of respondents believed Sikhism is a sect of Islam, and 70% of respondents could not correctly identify a Sikh man in a photo.



This pie chart, reproduced from the original report, sorts respondents' answers to questions about how they perceive individuals wearing turbans. Despite the survey being produced nearly a decade ago, we have seen little to suggest a major difference in most Americans' perceptions of Sikh Americans today.

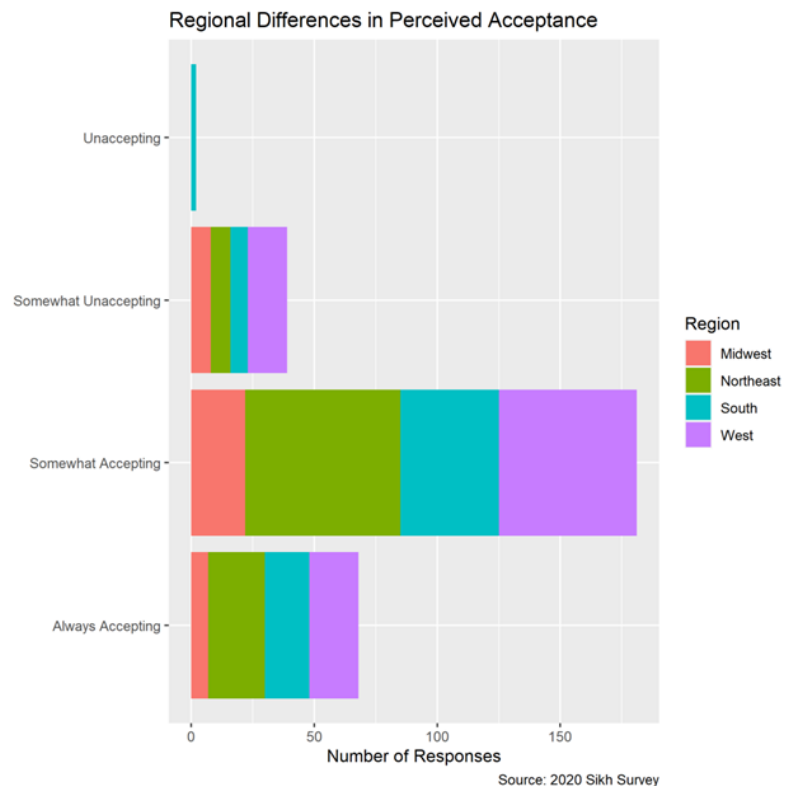
[2] FBI Releases Updated 2020 Hate Crime Statistics. October 25, 2021. <https://www.fbi.gov/news/press-releases/press-releases/fbi-releases-updated-2020-hate-crime-statistics>

[3] Tweet by Josh Kaufman @HeyHeyJoshK. August 31, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3BY2GWC>

REGIONALLY DIFFERENTIATED EXPERIENCES

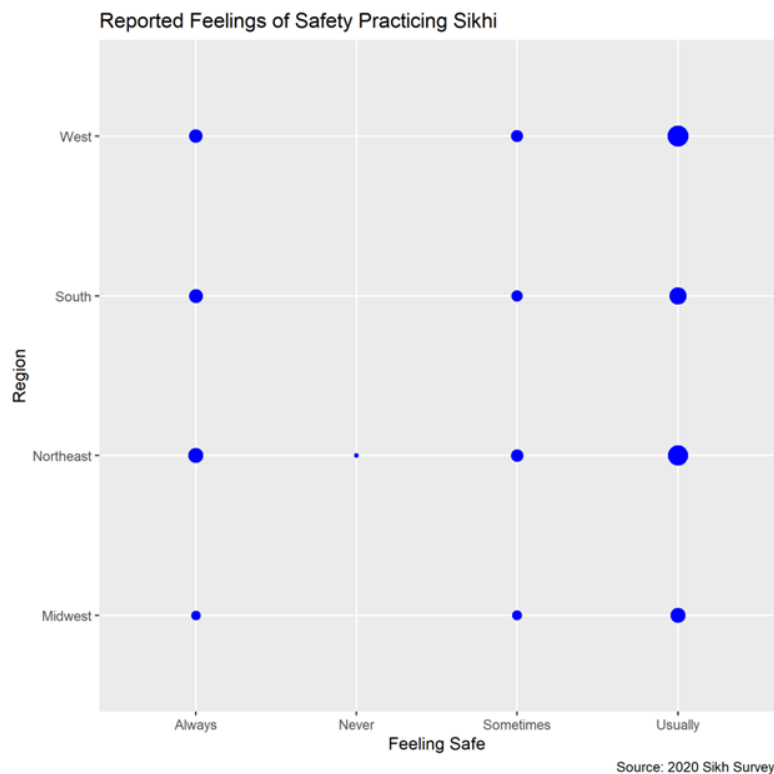
SALDEF has also explored these themes in our proprietary data-gathering. The 2020 Sikh American Survey asked respondents questions about demographics and their own safety in carrying out their lives as identifiable Sikh Americans.

The Sikh American Survey revealed some disheartening figures: 85% of respondents said they do not feel safe practicing Sikhism all of the time, with respondents living in the South feeling the least safe. 58% of respondents reported being bullied or harassed because of their Sikh identity, with 60% of respondents living in the Midwest reporting such mistreatment. 63% of turbaned respondents reported being discriminated against for wearing a turban. When sorted regionally, 70% of turbaned respondents living in the South experienced turban-related discrimination.



Sikh Americans, across all of America’s regions, reported that they continue to live in an America that falls well short of the basics of tolerance. Below, we examine the respondents’ answers to questions assessing how often they felt accepted for their faith and how safe they felt practicing Sikhi.

First, we present the respondents' answers about how tolerant they feel their neighbors are of their faith, differentiated by the region of the respondents. A majority across all regions in the country chose an answer other than 'always accepting'. Specifically, we see some respondents in the South indicate clearly that their neighbors are completely intolerant of their Sikh faith - selecting '0' on a 4-point scale, meaning 'never'. The data also make clear that respondents in the Midwest and South, as a percentage, were significantly likelier to report that their neighbors were somewhat unaccepting of their Sikh faith.



When we directly mapped reported feelings of safety against respondents' region (above), the nationwide scope of the problem our community faces becomes evident. Across all regions, significantly more Sikh American respondents reported 'sometimes' or 'usually' feeling safe practicing their faith, rather than always feeling safe. To our surprise, a majority of respondents who reported never feeling safe practicing their religion lived in the Northeast at the time of the survey.

True religious liberty should mean everyone is always fully safe to worship. From what our community tells us via these and other surveys, and what we have learned in our own advocacy and policy work, SALDEF is aware of how far we as a country have to go to create religious equality for all - not just those who claim the same theological community as the people in power. To that end, we present our policy platform addressing racially motivated acts of hate, especially those conducted with weapons of war against minority targets like the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin.

POLICY PLATFORM TO ADDRESS WHITE SUPREMACIST MASS VIOLENCE

We call for all government and public actors to meaningfully take on white supremacy. Eradicating the persistent intertwined threats of domestic terrorism, white supremacy, and nationalist violence requires commitment and clarity across government and civil society.



We call on governments at all levels to strengthen hate crimes laws that protect all diverse communities, including on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, national origin, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, and disability. SALDEF strongly endorses the anti-domestic terrorism framework articulated across the Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act of 2022 (H.R. 350 / S. 963); Justice for Victims of Hate Crimes Act; and the Nonprofit Security Grant Program (NSGP) Improvement Act of 2022 (H.R. 6825); mandating that federal agencies create dedicated offices to investigate domestic terrorism; allowing prosecutors to feasibly indict perpetrators of hate crimes; and allowing religious nonprofits to access federal funding to enhance their own security. While these bills continue to experience friction in Congress, we are adamant that without naming the problem as entrenched, endemic, and cultural and dedicating federal resources to address it, America will never move past these tragedies and spasms of racist hate.



We demand meaningful investment in communities like ours. Governments at all levels are lagging in offering in-language resources, particularly in heavily immigrant communities so all residents may access services. We call for increased safety and security funding for nonprofits and houses of worship. Victims' services must be thoughtfully designed for all our communities, and policymakers must commit to sustained investment in accessible mental health services.

We urge statistical agencies to conduct targeted, inclusive, and disaggregated research that reflects the diversity within the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) communities - acknowledging the wide range of experiences and socioeconomic outcomes both within and between AANHPI groups. Community outreach specialists for state agencies and federal field offices should proactively visit community centers (i.e., houses of worship, like the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin) in their area to provide free security assessments and connect with community leaders.



Finally, we demand that America addresses the lethal intersection of guns and hate. The historic, persistent twin threats of domestic terrorism and white supremacy have been supercharged in recent years by the public health crisis of mass gun violence. The Oak Creek shooter had reported links to white supremacy that did not surface in a federal background check in 2012. Our great fear is that another hate-fueled person with similar reporting around them, in 2022, may still be able to purchase assault weapons platforms legally.

We call on the federal government to create requirements for states to submit data on arrests, mental health adjudications, juvenile records, etc., to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) if those states are unwilling to become full 'point of contact' states and conduct background checks via state agencies across multiple sources. State and federal agencies should prioritize the regular submission to NICS of reported ties individuals may have to organizations known for white supremacy, domestic terrorism, and white nationalism.

Additionally, we endorse a national extreme-risk program orchestrated through federal courts to remove subjectivity and variability in enforcing the red-flag process (a framework outlined in H.R.2377, the Federal Extreme Risk Protection Order Act of 2021, which has not received a Senate vote). All people reported as extreme-risk should be required to attend court hearings assessing their fitness to legally purchase weapons platforms in future. Specific attention must be paid to white supremacist connections in carrying out extreme-risk orders.

QUESTIONS? CONTACT US. SALDEF.ORG

SALDEF is a national Sikh American media, policy, and education organization. Our mission is to empower Sikh Americans by building dialogue, deepening understanding, promoting civic and political participation, and upholding social justice and religious freedom for all Americans.

