



The Honorable Steve Cohen  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on the Constitution,  
Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties  
U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary  
2138 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mike Johnson  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on the Constitution,  
Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties  
U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary  
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March 1, 2022

Dear Chairman Cohen, Ranking Member Johnson, and members of the U.S. House Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties Subcommittee:

On behalf of the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF) and the Sikh American community, thank you for the opportunity to submit this written statement to the Subcommittee. SALDEF is a national Sikh American media, policy, and education organization based in Washington, DC. Founded in 1996, SALDEF's 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.

Unfortunately, 25 years on, we find ourselves testifying about the problems our community faces trending in the wrong direction. We are grateful that the subcommittee has convened this hearing on Discrimination and the Civil Rights of the Muslim, Arab, and South Asian American Communities, because our communities are in the fight of our lives on two fronts: navigating how the pandemic has unrolled hard-earned economic gains, and in the resurgence of hate crimes.

Observant Sikhs are distinguished by *dastaars* (Sikh Turbans), uncut hair, and other conspicuous articles of faith - articles that have too often been lightning rods for acts of hate rooted in ignorance and fear. **According to an analysis of population size, Sikh Americans are the most disproportionately targeted group in the United States - at a rate of four times the national average.**<sup>1</sup>

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) released the annual report on hate crimes showing that 8,052 single-bias incidents involving 11,126 victims occurred in 2020.<sup>2</sup> Nearly 62% of victims were targeted because of the offenders' bias against the race/ethnicity/ancestry of the victims. **Anti-Sikh hate crimes also 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.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bit.ly/3BY2GWC>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/crs/highlights/2020-hate-crimes-statistics>

It is probably not news to any members of this committee that the pandemic has exacerbated the socioeconomic gaps and inequities between white Americans and ethnic minorities.<sup>3</sup> It is likely also not news to any members of the committee that anti-Asian violence has ratcheted up during the pandemic, with much of the violence occurring in “blue-state” cities - places Asian Americans have called home for generations and considered safe.<sup>4</sup>

SALDEF continues to urge all federal agencies and reporting to fully disaggregate data about our communities. To better understand the Sikh American community’s experiences, we have conducted surveys to paint a picture of our nationwide community. One survey, the National Sikh American Survey, involved reaching out to over 2000 Sikh individuals around the country during 2020. The survey built on understanding from our pioneering work on attitudes towards Sikh Americans, Turban Myths.

The Sikh American Survey revealed some disheartening figures: 15% of respondents said they only sometimes felt safe practicing Sikhism, 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 one. When sorted regionally, 70% of turbaned respondents living in the South experienced turban-related discrimination.

It is unsurprising that these figures were so high. Despite SALDEF and other Sikh advocacy organizations collaborating more closely with law enforcement and policymakers at all levels over the past decade, ignorance, fear, and xenophobia persist and are often politically leveraged. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Sikhs around the country were misidentified as Muslims and attacked. Some, like Balbir Singh Sodhi, were violently killed.<sup>5</sup> While there are many cases of bias and hate reported against our community, and countless more unreported cases, few are as burned into our collective memory as the tragedy at the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin in Oak Creek.

This summer will mark ten years since an avowed white supremacist opened fire with a semi-automatic weapon on volunteers preparing a communal meal at the *gurdwara* (Sikh house of worship) in Wisconsin. The six fatalities and three hospitalizations made the attack the deadliest on any house of worship on American soil since the 1964 Birmingham church bombing, until the 2015 mass shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston and then the 2018 mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. Law enforcement correctly categorized and investigated this incident as a hate crime, and SALDEF

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<https://jsri.msu.edu/publications/nexo/vol/no-2-spring-2021/the-covid-19-pandemics-socio-economic-impact-on-minority-racial-ethnic-groups>

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<https://theconversation.com/anti-asian-violence-spiked-in-the-us-during-the-pandemic-especially-in-blue-state-cities-176501>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/17/us/sikh-owner-of-gas-station-is-fatally-shot-in-rampage.html?>

remains committed to working with law enforcement, every level of government, and other community organizations to prevent, address, and combat hate crimes and domestic extremism.

However, in the pursuit of that goal, there are policy-based solutions that have not yet been pursued. We would like to refer the subcommittee to a recent Homeland Security Advisory Council Report, particularly the recommendation that the **Department of Homeland Security should install a central point of contact for Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs)**.<sup>6</sup>

Specifically, this role should be at the Assistant Secretary level (or higher) to serve as Director of all DHS faith-based programs and representing DHS within the Interagency. The report also recommends that the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs creates an FBO working group oriented around improving security of houses of worship, to be convened at the National Security Council to support policy formulation within the Interagency and across the federal government.

We also strongly agree with the report's recommendations that DHS takes the lead to **establish a package approach to FBO security** in conjunction with state and local officials, and that **DHS encourages FBOs to work with local first responders to develop real-time information sharing systems**. We urge DHS to work with the Department of State to earmark **additional funding to increase connectivity with FBOs, particularly in rural areas**.

DHS should also focus efforts, as the report recommends, on **enhancing the role of Protective Security Advisors (PSAs)** with specific requirements and additional funding to increase the numbers of PSAs as needed. Similarly, DHS should work with state and local officials to **standardize and uplift Fusion Centers** to these communities. Fusion Centers should all be organized around the principle of proactive outreach to all houses of worship within the Fusion Center's area of responsibility, and evaluate all Fusion Centers to identify areas to improve effectiveness, increase transparency in procedures and guidelines, and reinforce the expectation that Fusion Centers and PSAs are to collaborate as a team to protect local FBOs.

The report makes excellent recommendations around Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grants. DHS should **seek additional funding for FBO security grants, and establish an office dedicated to assisting applicants**, particularly from small or poorly staffed FBOs struggling to navigate the federal grants process. The responsibility for the Nonprofit Security Grant Program should be added to the portfolio of the new DHS Director, and the office of grant application assistance should be separate from grant-awarding arms of the agency to minimize conflicts of interest.

Finally, the report finds a critical gap: **the lack of a domestic terrorism statute**. This is a real threat disproportionately faced by minority communities like Sikh Americans, manifesting in ways both large and small as highlighted earlier in my testimony. Congress, working with DHS and the Department of Justice, **must pass a statute defining acts of domestic terrorism and**

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[https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/preventing\\_targeted\\_violence\\_against\\_faith-based\\_communities\\_subcommittee\\_0.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/preventing_targeted_violence_against_faith-based_communities_subcommittee_0.pdf)

**funding the monitoring of these acts** so law enforcement can better monitor, understand, investigate, and prosecute acts of domestic terrorism. Domestic terrorism has been painfully real for our community for much longer than ten years, and it is our hope that today's hearing represents a meaningful step toward naming and fighting it as such.

Despite the closer collaboration we have enjoyed with law enforcement since Oak Creek, the absence of these policy measures have meant attacks against the Sikh community and our institutions have not abated. Here are some specific hate incidents in just the last two years that have affected the Sikh community across the country, in states that range politically from deep red to purple to deep blue:

On April 29, 2020 in Lakewood, Colorado, a Sikh man named Lakhwant Singh was attacked by a man identified as Eric Breemen.<sup>7</sup> Breemen entered Lakhwant Singh's store and began harassing Mr Singh and his wife. He damaged numerous items, shouted profanity, and repeatedly told the couple to "go back to your country." When Breemen finally left the store, Mr. Singh followed him outside to take a photo of his license plate so that he could report the abuse. Breemen then struck Mr. Singh with his vehicle, throwing him several feet across the parking lot, causing multiple injuries. Breemen then continued his spree, attacking two additional minority individuals in the area.

In June 2020, a Sikh-owned Indian Restaurant called India Palace in Sante Fe, New Mexico, was vandalized with hate messages scrawled on its walls including words like "white power", "go home [to your country]", and other profanities.<sup>8</sup>

On September 20, 2021, the Khalsa Gurmat Center gurdwara, a significant Sikh community center near Seattle, was vandalized and burglarized.<sup>9</sup> A/V equipment was stolen and numerous objects, including musical instruments, were smashed to pieces.

This year, on January 3rd, a Sikh taxi driver was attacked at John F Kennedy International Airport.<sup>10</sup> Mr. Singh parked his cab curbside and collected a customer, but was blocked in by another cab driver. When he asked the other driver to move his car briefly so he could depart, the driver hit Mr. Singh with his car door before physically assaulting him. Mr. Singh's turban became unraveled and fell off as the man attacking him repeatedly used slurs and told him to "go back to [his] country."

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<sup>7</sup> <https://coloradosun.com/2020/07/23/eric-breemen-hate-crime-lakewood-colorado/>

<sup>8</sup>

[https://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/local\\_news/india-palace-vandalized-in-racist-attack/article\\_40b1d3c2-b558-11ea-b1e6-e7f1a85ed099.html](https://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/local_news/india-palace-vandalized-in-racist-attack/article_40b1d3c2-b558-11ea-b1e6-e7f1a85ed099.html)

<sup>9</sup>

<https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/police-investigating-after-federal-way-sikh-center-vandalized/>

<sup>10</sup>

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/suspect-anti-sikh-attack-jfk-airport-arrested-charged-hate-crime-rcna12658>

In each of these cases, Sikhs attempting to do nothing more than conduct their day-to-day lives were met with spasms of racist violence for having the courage to wear the articles of their faith in keeping with the First Amendment. Unfortunately, while most of these incidents did not involve loss of life, the pandemic era does include another mass shooting that disproportionately affected our community.

On April 15, 2021, a gunman launched an attack on a FedEx ground facility in Indianapolis, IN.<sup>11</sup> The facility was widely known for employing a high concentration of Sikh workers. In the shooting, eight innocent people were killed, four of whom were Sikhs in the Indianapolis Sikh community.

In our work in Indianapolis, we encountered many of the same structural issues that we saw in the aftermath of the Oak Creek shooting. The nine gurdwaras in the area, which primarily serve immigrant and limited English speaking populations, were largely not connected to local and state governments investigating and responding to the incident. Thus, government attempts to share information went largely through the English language media. There was no centralized point of contact or central source of information to distribute information to the community to answer questions or explain what was happening. This largely fell on national organizations, with limited local government contacts and primarily federal relationships, to act as intermediaries.

The lack of relationships and language fluency presented other problems when seeking to obtain services and support for the impacted community along three major lines: victim services, outside organizations, and youth response.

Government service providers did not have the relationships or cultural and language fluency to provide their full range of support services to impacted families or the larger community in Indianapolis. Victim services were not available and the community was dependent on the national organizations to leverage a network of providers and share information in Punjabi and facilitate the relationships and continuing needs. For example, SALDEF worked with AAPI mental health professionals around the country to identify Punjabi speaking providers from across the country who could virtually support victims or would be willing to travel to Indianapolis to work with victims, understanding years of support may be needed.

Other non-governmental organizations and parties encountered similar challenges. The lack of fluency and trust within the community created suspicion. For example, when the Red Cross came in and tried to speak with older family members, it was unclear if they were working on behalf of the victims or on behalf of FedEx. Thus, there was hesitancy about working with organizations outside of the Sikh community and the national Sikh American organizations were called in to mediate issues and serve as trusted go-betweens and organizers.

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<https://www.npr.org/2021/04/16/987929888/9-killed-others-injured-in-shooting-at-fedex-warehouse-in-indianapolis>

It is important to note that meaningful steps have been taken to address many of these concerns in recent years. We have been proud to see the Department of Justice (DOJ) publish information on their hate crimes page in Punjabi, and that there is a real and ongoing commitment at DOJ to collaborate with community advocates to produce resources that are not only translated but are actually thoughtfully designed to be useful to our community. We have also had success in persuading the FBI to disaggregate its hate crime statistics and report specific anti-Sikh numbers, which it began to do in 2015. We continue to advocate for closer relationships between local law enforcement and Sikh community centers in their jurisdictions, as well as training officers in recognizing the distinct articles of the Sikh faith.

We underscore that the experiences our community has faced are not unique to us, but shared by others throughout the Arab, Muslim, Sikh, and South Asian community. We face continuing common problems of cultural fluency, bias, language accessibility, and lack of trust due to years of neglect and/or perceived hostility and profiling. However, many agencies and individuals have engaged in models of bridge building and community-oriented outreach that should be highlighted and replicated throughout all levels of government across the country.

We are happy the Subcommittee is paying closer attention to the struggles, discrimination, and hate that our community has faced. We look forward to continuing our work striving together with the members of the Subcommittee and all of your colleagues to build an America where Sikh Americans are celebrated for our contributions, our resilience, and the depth of our faith in our country's better angels.

Respectfully submitted,

Kiran Kaur Gill  
Executive Director