


“Where are you
really
from?”



**A NATIONAL SIKH
SCHOOL CLIMATE
REPORT**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In 2014, the Sikh Coalition released a comprehensive bullying report, based on surveys, focus groups, and interviews of Sikh students in four states, which showed how pervasive bullying was among Sikh youth.

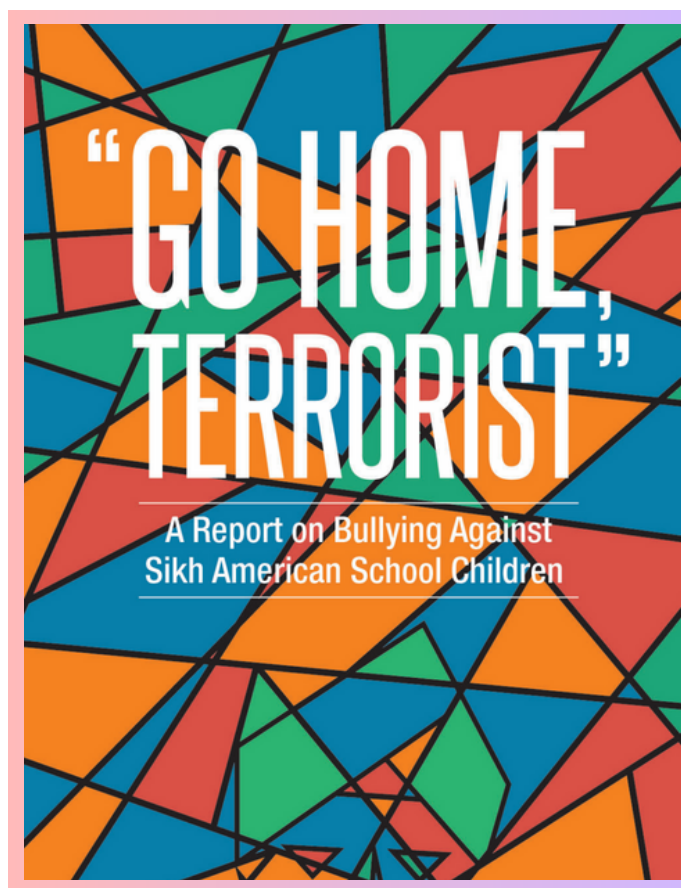
The report was titled “Go Home, Terrorist,” a reference to students bullied for their Sikh articles of faith, which had been conflated with the overwhelming negative media images after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Sikh student advocates, allies, decision-makers, and community members widely used the report to push for inclusive policies and standards intended to make Sikh students safer in classrooms.

Ten years later, data shows that Sikh students continue to be bullied and at rates higher than ever—but in 2024, the bullying is often more subtle and nuanced.

“Where Are You *Really* From?” they are asked, the implication of this—and so many other words and behaviors—being that Sikh students simply don’t belong.

In February and March of 2023, more than 2,000 Sikh students between the ages of 9 and 18 who attended school in the United States completed the Sikh Student Survey.



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The survey asked respondents about their experiences in school, especially as it related to their Sikh identity. They were asked questions about bullying, their interactions with both peers and staff, their knowledge of bullying reporting procedures, the microaggressions they face, and whether school policies and classroom conversations allowed them not just to practice their faith freely, but to share and celebrate it.

The Sikh Student Survey was widely distributed in gurdwaras, in Khalsa schools, via email listservs, and on social media to reach a diverse geographic and demographic sample.

“WHERE ARE YOU REALLY FROM?” THEY ARE ASKED, THE IMPLICATION OF THIS— AND SO MANY OTHER WORDS AND BEHAVIORS—BEING THAT SIKH STUDENTS SIMPLY DON’T BELONG.

The final dataset for the study consisted of 1,975 respondents from 30 states plus Washington, DC, and approximately 700 school districts. Of the students who completed the study, 54.5% identified as Male and 44.8% identified as Female. Middle school students (6th to 8th grades) made up 37.5% of respondents, while elementary school students in grades 3 to 5 made up 35.5% and high school students (9th to 12th grades) made up 27%.

The clear majority of the students said that they keep their *kes*, or unshorn hair (72.6%), and wear a *kara*, or a steel or iron bracelet (84%), while more than half (57%) reported that they cover their hair as part of their Sikh identity.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

78%

of Sikh students reported experiencing at least one incident that meets the definition of bullying, yet only 49% self-reported being bullied.

63%

of Sikh students said that comments were “sometimes” made in the presence of teachers and school staff, and that those adults “almost never” or “never” intervened.

50%

of Sikh students report that educational materials, school holiday policies, and school or sports uniform policies are not at all inclusive of Sikhi.

82%

of Sikh students reported experiencing at least one microaggression, but the majority did not identify this behavior as bullying.

Sikh students continue to be bullied at alarmingly high rates.

During the 2022–2023 school year, 77.5% of students reported experiencing at least one bullying victimization incident (“actual”). These incidents are measured by the *Multidimensional Peer Victimization Scale-Revised*, a 20-item bullying scale that measures how often students faced incidents that can be characterized as one of the four types of bullying: verbal, physical, social, or cyber. This number is considerably higher than the 49.2% of students that self-reported being bullied (“perceived”).

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The gap between actual and perceived bullying suggests that Sikh students may not recognize or be willing to acknowledge certain discriminatory behaviors as bullying.

Sikh male students with religious head coverings are highly likely to be bullied.

Of the students who wore a *dastaar*, *patka*, or other religious head covering, 76.8% report at least one bullying incident. Wearing a religious head covering predicted higher rates of physical victimization specifically, and broadly, male Sikh students reported higher rates of physical victimization than female Sikh students. The data shows that male Sikh students are generally facing higher rates of discrimination and more violent forms of bullying in schools.

Sikh students somewhat understand how to report bullying, but often face inaction when they do.

Even though 73.9% of Sikh students said that they know the procedure, protocol, or policy for reporting bullying at their school, 45.7% responded that they have “never” or “almost never” reported a bullying incident. In addition, 53.6% of Sikh students don’t know or are unsure of options to report bias-based bullying specifically. Importantly, of the participants who said that comments were at least “sometimes” made in the presence of teachers and school staff, 62.8% said that those adults “almost never” or “never” intervened.

Alarmingly, Sikh students are bullied by school staff.

Of the Sikh students who reported being bullied in school, 10.9% report being bullied by a staff member. In addition, students specifically identified that staff bullied them for their accents or by mocking or disrespecting their articles of faith. In any context, bullying or discriminatory behavior by the very adults charged with educating and protecting students is wholly unacceptable.

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Sikh students are less safe in less inclusive schools.

When asked about inclusion of *Sikhi* (Sikhism) in educational materials, school holiday policies, school uniform policies, and sports uniform policies, more than 50% of Sikh students report that each of these items is “not at all” inclusive of their religion. Additionally, results indicate that less inclusivity significantly predicts more bullying incidents.

Sikh students who are bullied face poorer mental health outcomes.

When asked questions about the frequency of depressed mood and anhedonia (lack of interest, enjoyment, or pleasure from life experiences) and mental health related outcomes (self-confidence, helplessness, and feelings of being left out), results indicate that bullying incidents and perceived peer-initiated bullying are significantly related to higher scores on the *Patient Health Questionnaire-2* as well as lower self confidence, more helplessness, and more feelings of being left out.

Sikh students face high rates of microaggressions, but may not recognize them as bullying.

82% of Sikh students reported experiencing at least one microaggression, defined as a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group (such as a racial minority).

However, the majority of Sikh students who reported enduring microaggressions did not self-report being bullied. Also, 73.4% of students who said they were never bullied reported at least one microaggression. Taken together, this may mean that Sikh students do not recognize microaggressive behavior as bullying—but regardless, the students who faced higher levels of microaggressions did report worse mental health outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study inform more than 50 specific recommendations for federal and state officials, school administrators, and educators across 4 key categories.

1. Prioritize initiatives, legislation, and policies that support and increase protections for Sikh students against bias-based bullying. Decision-makers at all levels have a responsibility to pay special attention to addressing bias-based bullying in schools. Examples of these kinds of recommendations include:

- Establish clear guidance in compliance with Title VI and Title IV of the *Civil Rights Act* to address religious bullying;
- Require school districts to adopt codes of conduct that specifically prohibit religious harassment;
- Create state legislation facilitating culturally inclusive K-12 curriculum materials alongside funding and training for educators to implement that curricula;
- Advocate for the development and implementation of clear and inclusive religious accommodation policies at the state and school district levels; and
- Train all student-facing school staff on recognizing and addressing school bullying, bias-based bullying, microaggressions, and harassment.



2. Provide additional resources and support to educators in facilitating student safety and wellbeing. Educators must be given the opportunity and adequate support to ensure that students have a safe and inclusive learning environment. Examples of these kinds of recommendations include:

- Establish a federal recognition program to honor educators and administrators who are leading the way in creating safe schools and inclusive learning environments;
- Support initiatives and funding to recruit diverse applicants for educator and administrator positions;
- Propose the establishment of cultural curriculum review committees, advisory boards, or commissions within or in collaboration with state departments of education;
- Enhance cultural inclusivity in classrooms through an approach that can account for time and resource constraints faced by educators; and
- Include Sikh awareness training for staff and educators to ensure understanding of the articles of faith and practices of Sikh students and parents.



3. Prioritize accurate, timely, and mandatory data collection. While this report sheds new light on the extent of bullying faced by Sikh students, the true scope of bullying as a policy problem cannot be understood or addressed without accurate or timely information. Examples of these kinds of recommendations include:

- Make the collection of local education agencies' and public schools' policies on religious harassment a mandatory data element (beginning with the 2024–25 Civil Rights Data Collection);
- Support the *Strengthening Educator Workforce Data Act*, which would require the collection and disaggregation of educator and principal data to help address educator and administrator shortages and diversity gaps; and
- Collect school-specific data on bullying and harassment in order to understand where, when, and how students experience bullying and harassment, as well as ascertain whether adults respond to reported incidents.



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4. Allocate resources to better support the mental health needs of Sikh students. This approach is essential given the link between bullying and mental health—for Sikh students and others who face bullying. Examples of these kinds of recommendations include:

- Ensure that student mental health initiatives by the Department of Education (DOE) and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) provide cultural competency training for mental health professionals so that they can meet the needs of diverse student populations;
- Support federal and state legislation which attempts to reduce the presence of police and school resource officers in schools, and increase the availability of certified school counselors, social workers, and other behavioral health personnel;



- Include cultural competency training for mental health professionals in any legislation that provides for student access to mental health so that the needs of diverse student populations can be met; and
- Ensure that mental health resources are readily available in schools and that students have access to mental health support as needed.

CONCLUSION

The Sikh Student Survey data provides a number of serious conclusions. Sikh students, especially male students who wear *dastar*, *patka*, or other religious head coverings, continue to experience high rates of bullying. The vast majority of Sikh students face microaggressions in school, regardless of gender, whether or not they maintain articles of faith, and whether or not they consider this behavior to be bullying.

**WE HAVE A COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY
TO PROTECT SIKH STUDENTS WITHIN
EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS.**

Far too many educators and school staff are active participants in the bullying of Sikh youth. Both bullying and microaggressions are related to poor mental health outcomes for students. And while students do somewhat understand reporting, they also see a high degree of unresponsiveness from teachers when they do speak up or ask for help.



ENTRY FROM 2024 'CHARDI KALA' ART CONTEST

One thing is certain: whether as policy-makers, educators, advocates, allies, or community members, we have a collective responsibility to do better to protect Sikh students within educational institutions.



THE
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