

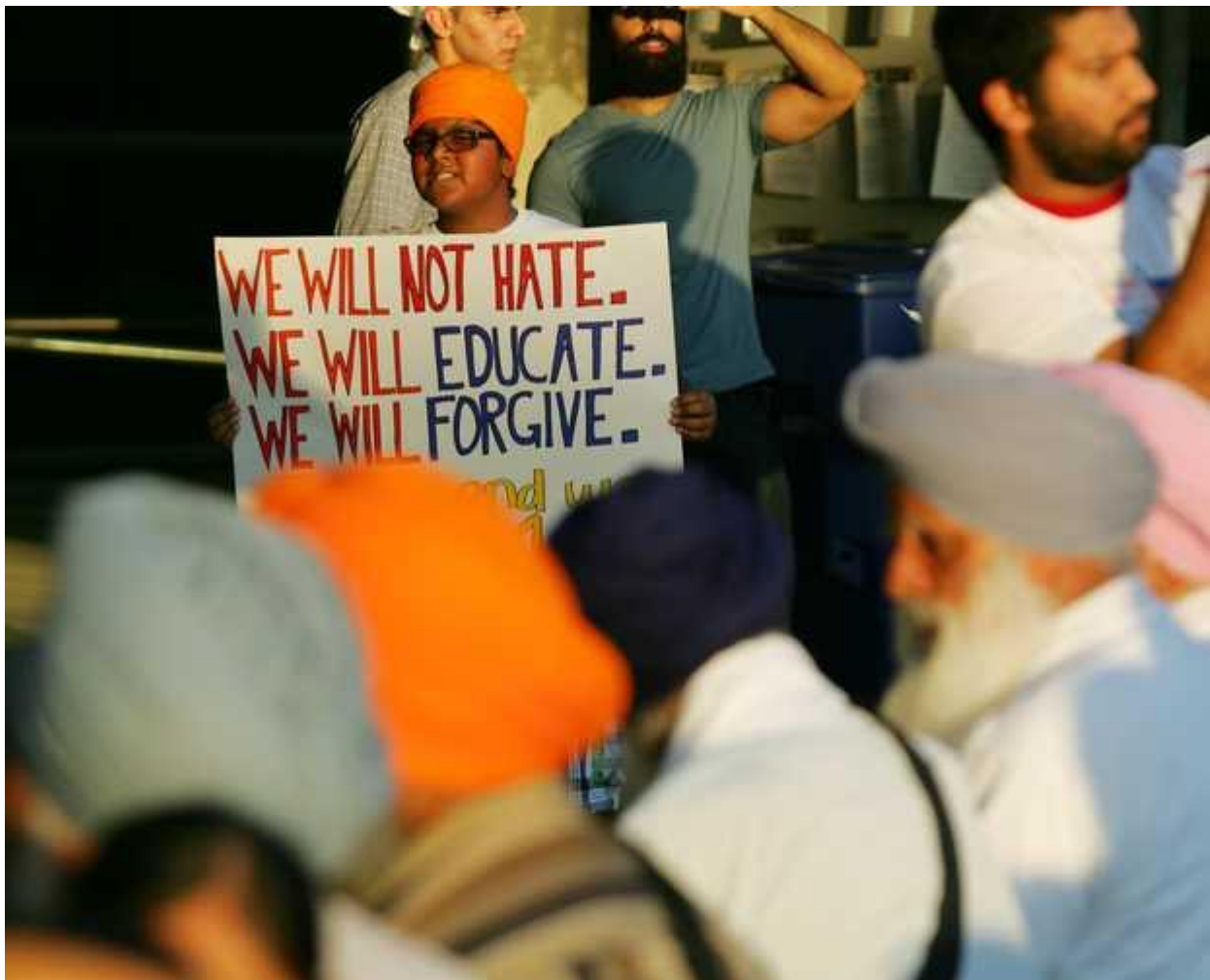
# Report: Fresno County Sikh students say they're bullied at school

<http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/03/13/3818923/sikh-community-alarmed-by-bullying.html>

By Ron Orozco and Carmen George

The Fresno Bee

March 13, 2014



Rajan Sidhu holds a sign in remembrance during a vigil in Fresno for the Sikh temple shootings in 2012 in Wisconsin. A new study reports that Sikh American youngsters are subjected to bullying in Fresno schools.

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Sikh students living in Fresno County say they are regularly bullied at school, and many of them say educators do nothing about it when such aggression is reported, according to a national survey being released Thursday.

[The "Go Home, Terrorist" report](#) on bullying against Sikh American schoolchildren is being released by the Sikh Coalition, which was created after 9/11 when Sikhs experienced violence and discrimination. The coalition works toward civil and human rights for all.

The report comes from information gathered by independent researchers at bullying forums held in Boston, Fresno, Indianapolis and Seattle in 2012 and 2013. More than 500 Sikh students, male and female, completed surveys.

In the Valley, forums were held in June 2012 at Gurdwara Nanak Prakash in Fresno as well as the Gurdwara in Selma. A total of 180 surveys were completed. (A Gurdwara is a Sikh place of worship).

Fresno had the second highest percentage of students saying they had been bullied -- 54.5% -- after Indianapolis at 55.8%. Boston was third at 48%, while Seattle had 45.5%.

The report also showed bullying increased for turban-wearing Sikhs who ascribe to religious beliefs to keep their hair untrimmed.

Simran Kaur, advocacy manager of the Sikh Coalition who works in Fresno, said the Valley percentage was "staggering" since the national average for students ages 12 to 18 who are bullied in school is 32%.

"It shows that those wearing turbans are targeted, and it is a serious problem that we have been overlooking," Kaur said.

The report also shows the Valley has the highest percentage -- 51% -- of Sikh students saying schools didn't take any action after they reported bullying.

Kaur said the Sikh Coalition will use the report to advocate that schools enact anti-bullying policies as well as collect data and create a better understanding of Sikhs in the classroom. Sikhism is the world's fifth-largest religion.

### **School reaction**

Kaur said the coalition reached out to at least five school principals or administrators in Fresno Unified School District last year, asking to do outreach for Sikh awareness month in November. But the organization did not receive any invitation to present information.

Kaur said she was surprised by the lack of response because a letter was sent to school superintendents and administrators last year by state Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson, encouraging schools to conduct "appropriate commemorative exercises to promote awareness of the contributions of Sikh Americans to California's history."

The letter from Torlakson goes on to say the "Sikh population in California includes large communities in the agricultural towns of the Central Valley. Members of the Sikh community have testified to the State Board of Education that Sikhs have been targets of hate crimes and that young Sikhs have been subjected to bullying because of the different styles of clothing that they wear."

Susan Bedi, spokeswoman for Fresno Unified, said all of the district's more than 100 schools -- serving more than 72,000 students -- are involved in some kind of bullying prevention program.

Fresno Unified has at least six programs that help prevent bullying on campuses, she said. But Bedi wasn't sure Wednesday if any of the programs specifically highlight bullying problems involving Sikhs or children who wear turbans.

"Our district and our schools are committed to an environment where bullying is not tolerated," Bedi said. She added that a 2013 state audit report highlighted one of Fresno Unified's bullying prevention programs as a "best practice in preventing bullying and encouraging respectful and responsible behavior among students."

Kaur said parents with children at Fresno Unified often approach the Sikh Coalition to report bullying instead of reporting it to the child's school.

"We are not sure why they are not approaching the schools directly -- it could be a comfort with reaching out to a Sikh civil rights organization, it could be due to language barriers, etc.," Kaur said. "Regardless, this report highlights the importance of ensuring schools have a reporting system that is easy to access for all parents and students."

Fresno County Superintendent of Schools Jim Yovino said area schools "work diligently to address bullying at every grade level and are sensitive to the concerns of the Sikh community. We hold meetings throughout the Valley with Sikh community leaders to discuss this issue and spread awareness, including an annual Sikh Awareness and Appreciation Month meeting at both Kerman and Selma Unified School Districts."

### **Striving for understanding**

More than 30,000 Sikhs live in the central San Joaquin Valley, where followers have worked to create a better understanding of their religion.

In August 2012, Gurdwara Singh Sahib in west-central Fresno held a special service after a gunman opened fire at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wis., killing six worshippers and seriously wounding three others.

Last May, the Nanaksar Sikh Temple in southwest Fresno encouraged a spirit of unity in the community after an elderly man and longtime volunteer at the temple was attacked by a transient near the worship house.

Ike Grewall, a Valley Sikh activist, said the bullying report's numbers for the Valley are alarming.

"I am aware of the bullying that goes on," he said. "What bothers me is the high number.

"Just because we wear turbans, we aren't terrorists or the Taliban. We are Sikhs."

Hardev Singh Gill, general secretary of the Sikh Council of Central California, said the council presented a bullying seminar in Selma in 2012.

He believes Sikhs and others need to continue such outreach to create better understanding, especially in schools.

"The (Sikh) child is part of two cultures -- their hair, a different look, different pronunciation," he said. "They face a lot of difficulty.

"But if I am a Sikh or a Muslim, it doesn't mean I should be treated differently. In this century, this should not be happening.

"We know about what is happening. This report is to make other people aware. Those who are not aware of our problems should be made aware."