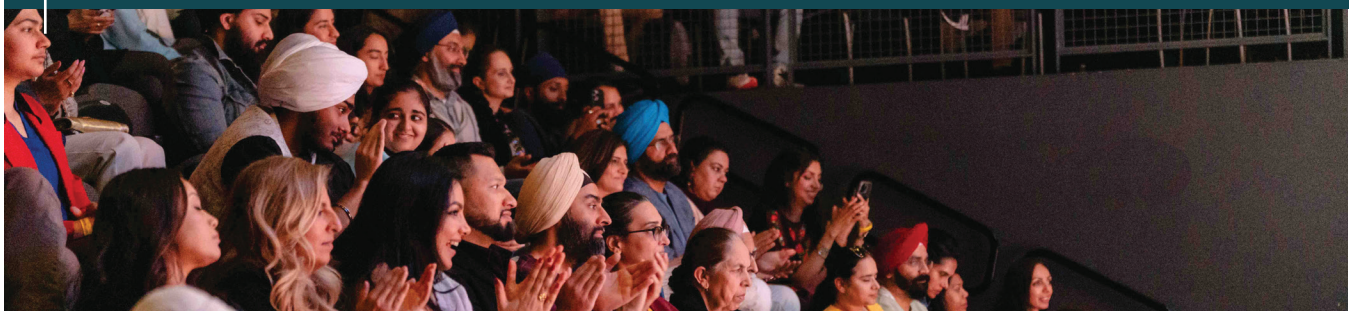
COMMUNITY DATA SPOTLIGHT
SIKH AMERICAN LEGAL DEFENSE AND EDUCATION FUND



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TOPICS Sikh, Race and Faith, Hate Crime

ABOUT

The Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF) is the nation's oldest Sikh American civil rights organization focused on building leadership and capacity in the Sikh American community. The mission of the organization 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. SALDEF, based in Washington, D.C., envisions a United States in which Sikh Americans are respected and recognized as a vibrant and integral part of the fabric of this nation and are appreciated for their shared values of service, social justice, and an unshakeable belief in freedom and equality for all.

DATA NEEDS

SALDEF believes that federal data must encompass more detail and nuance on the diversity of the South Asian communities in the United States, for which compilation of disaggregated ethnic data constitutes an important milestone. In the experiences of Sikhs, a religious minority within the Indian diaspora, faith is the historical basis for discriminatory treatment if not overt state-sponsored violence against them, both within India and abroad. Caste-oppressed individuals, including Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus, are victimized by on the basis of their caste assignment at birth; they are subjected to structural discrimination by employers, higher-positioned coworkers, landlords and others of higher caste within India, and increasingly within the United States.

Federal agencies have failed to gather information about religious or faith-based constructs such as caste, and the lack of data translates into a lack of resources to rectify those harms. Federal data systems must collect and publish statistics on many aspects of the Sikh community, including:

- **Hate crime data.** Sikh advocates and community members emphasize the need for crime statistics from the Department of Justice and the FBI. Sikh Americans are among the most targeted communities per capita in hate crimes and hate incidents. Detailed data on Sikh Americans is needed to push for a stronger cultural emphasis in law enforcement and reporting of hate crimes and incidents. The DOJ's inclusion of an anti-Sikh hate category was a significant victory, yet much work remains to rectify noncompliance by municipal and county-level agencies and to mitigate systemic underreporting.
- **Locations.** To advocate for fellow Sikhs, SALDEF needs to know where Sikh communities are located (Census American Communities Survey and Decennial Census). SALDEF proactively seeks out Sikh communities across the United States by using data from the Census Bureau's American

Sikh youth conducting SikhVOTE voter outreach and education efforts at their local Gurdwara

Community Survey. This information is cross-checked with SALDEF's own data-gathering on the locations of gurdwaras (houses of worship that serve as community centers) throughout the country. While Census and ACS data are hugely important, the inability of survey respondents to specify Sikh identity alongside national origin remains a major barrier to engaging and advocating for Sikh community **members who may need help the most.**

- **Employment data.** To better assess economic insecurity and workplace discrimination, data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Department of Transportation must be made available. SALDEF is actively pushing for better reporting from federal departments overseeing industries in which many first-generation Sikhs are employed, including the departments of Agriculture and Transportation. These data have a secondary purpose as another source to help advocates locate large communities within the United States.
- **Heightened immigration enforcement.** U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) policies remains a significant concern (DHS/CBP and DHS/ICE administrative data). SALDEF is regularly in contact with DHS enforcement agencies and consistently reviews data released by CBP and ICE. Sikh-specific data is not available, however. Such data would be important in informing SALDEF's regional focus areas and would be used to cross-reference anecdotal reports from released asylum-seekers. These datasets continue to suffer from substantial underreporting, coincident with the prevalence of heightened enforcement reported by community members.
- **Violence.** Growing threats of violence against Sikhs drives a need to understand firearm-based crime (DOJ/ATF). In recent years, SALDEF has more directly confronted the entwined threats of gun violence and hate crimes against Sikhs. SALDEF is exploring the potential of using data from the DOJ's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) to assess violence against Sikh Americans.

The difficulty in expressing Sikh identity along vectors of national origin remains a huge stumbling block for organizations like SALDEF to push community members to engage more deeply in federal systems. Until federal data systems can capture the faith- and caste-based identities of South Asians, the data will continue to mask predictable outcomes, including exclusion from employment, housing or other opportunities by members of our own diaspora. This consequential request is intended to resolve one of the most enduring gaps preventing equity for Sikhs and other South Asians in federal data-gathering systems.

2024 SikhLEAD D.C. internship program cohort at the U.S. Capitol (Photo: Les Talusan)

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SALDEF
Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund

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