

# SMU Journal of Undergraduate Research

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Volume 2

Article 9

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2019

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Jasleen Dhillon

*Southern Methodist University*, [jdhillon@mail.smu.edu](mailto:jdhillon@mail.smu.edu)

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### Recommended Citation

Dhillon, Jasleen (2019) "The Effect of the 2016 Presidential Election on Sikh-Americans' Perceptions of Safety in Texas," SMU Journal of Undergraduate Research: Vol. 4 , Article 9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25172/jour.4.1.9>

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# The Effect of the 2016 Presidential Election on Sikh-Americans' Perceptions of Safety in Texas

Jasleen Dhillon\*

[jdhillon@mail.smu.edu](mailto:jdhillon@mail.smu.edu)

## ABSTRACT

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, members of the Sikh-American community have been the subjects of random hate crimes in the United States because of their distinct identity, namely the turban. During and after the 2016 presidential election, many minority groups, including Sikh-Americans, were concerned over the rhetoric the then-candidate Donald Trump had been using. The focus of this research project was to study if the rhetoric used during the presidential campaign had any effect on how Sikh-Americans perceived their safety in a politically conservative state like Texas. The methods used to collect data were both qualitative and quantitative in nature. The qualitative portion was collected from one-on-one interviews with Sikh-Americans, and the quantitative portion was collected from surveys taken in gurdwaras (Sikh religious temples) located in both the Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston metroplexes. From the interviews and surveys, it was concluded that 27.6% of turban wearers felt threatened because of their appearance and felt a general feeling of discomfort from others' lack of knowledge of Sikhism. Despite not having a distinct appearance, 28.6% of the non-turban wearing male respondents felt threatened sometime before and after the presidential election for their religious affiliation. From the results, it can be concluded that many Sikh-Americans feel unsafe living in Texas as Sikhs because of religious misidentification and intolerance.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

November 9, 2016 – the results were out. Donald Trump was determined to be the overall victor of the election and the future 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. Looking at his running platform, many Americans were inspired by his ideals of “making America great again” and putting blue-collar workers first. On the other side, voters feared what a Trump presidency would mean for traditionally underrepresented minorities in America. Running a campaign riddled with controversy, Trump proudly boasted building a wall to stop Mexicans from bringing “drugs” and “rapists” into the country and calling for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” (Newsday Staff 2016). Many minority groups felt targeted against his campaign rallies. Members of the Black Lives Matter movement protested at his rallies and anti-fascists stormed the streets. The media erupted with news of different organizations that were protesting the election by focusing on the feelings of disconcerted voters, but through the influx of media fury, one certain group stood out as universally unrepresented – Sikh-Americans.

While small in numbers in the United States, Sikh-Americans have a distinct identity and culture that makes them a constant target for hate crimes. Migration of Sikhs into America started in the early 1900s with primarily farmers and working-class laborers who were ready to work

hard and start a new life (Cowards 2000, 260). Various waves of Sikh migration occurred throughout the next century. These waves include a second wave of higher education seeking Sikhs, a third wave of Sikhs entering after the Immigration Act of 1965, and a fourth wave of Sikhs escaping political persecution during the 1980s political upheaval in India (Cowards 2000, 260-261). One of the first locations to develop a strong Sikh community in the United States was the Queen's borough in New York City in the late 1960s (Cowards 2000, 266). Though Sikhs are a group that would stand to be injured by racist and anti-immigrant feelings, they are often neglected from news media coverage. To understand the mindset of the Sikh-American after the 2016 presidential election, this essay will analyze and discuss the perception of fear Sikh-Americans in Texas felt.

## 2. HISTORY OF THE SIKHS

The story of Sikhism starts with Guru Nanak Dev Ji, a spiritual man in Punjab who believed in dismantling the inequality and conflict he saw between Hinduism and Islam. He visualized the idea of One God that sees all of His creations as equals; for that to be true, humans could not operate in any caste-based or social hierarchical system (Singh 2006, 17). Because of this, Sikhism believes all religions are equal in front of God and that every religion is

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\* Mentor: Dr. Shira Lander, Professor of Practice and Director of Jewish Studies

a different path to the same God. Following Guru Nanak Dev Ji teachings, Sikhism has had nine other teachers, or gurus, that have added to the teachings of the religion. Each guru has added a layer of values that each Sikh must live by: repeat God's name, work, give to charities, live honestly, and stand up against injustice (Singh 2006, 20).

A common and sometimes misunderstood aspect of the Sikh religion is the turban. The turban represents a symbol for a Sikh's connection with their faith; it is a reminder of the history of Sikhism and the values they must always uphold, no matter what the cost. The turban is one of the main symbols in Sikhism and is adopted by both Sikh men and women, even after they come to America. A turban is kept on top of the head to cover and protect long, uncut hair underneath. Since the migration of Sikhs to America, the turban had been seen as "strange" by others who had never seen a turban before (Ahluwalia 2010). For this reason, many Sikhs wind up cutting their hair when they immigrate to America; having cut hair lets Sikh blend into traditional American society. When the planes hit the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, the "strangeness" that many turbaned Sikhs felt from the general population escalated to new heights. The turban has been confused for radical "Islamic" terrorists, and the incorrect association and misidentification of the two has led to hate crimes against many Sikhs. The first victim of a 9/11-related hate crime was Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh gas station owner in Mesa, Arizona, who was fatally shot by Frank Roque, a man that wanted to 'kill a Muslim' (Kaur 2016). Since then, there have been numerous attacks against Sikh-Americans in the United States. One of the most horrendous acts was the shooting of six Sikh-Americans in a Wisconsin Sikh temple on August 5, 2012 by a white supremacist (Thompson 2017).

During the 2016 presidential election campaign, then contender Donald Trump, now president, raised controversy when he mentioned banning Muslims from entering the United States and potentially banning all Syrian refugees because "they could be ISIS" (Johnson 2017). He suggested closing mosques in 2015, creating a database of all Muslims in the United States, and had been quoted for saying "people [are] coming out of mosques with hatred and death in their eyes" (Johnson 2017). One of the most infamous quotes by Trump was on March 9, 2016 on CNN when he said "I think Islam hates us. There's something there that — there's a tremendous hatred there. There's a tremendous hatred. We have to get to the bottom of it. There's an unbelievable hatred of us" (Johnson 2017). After so much anti-Muslim rhetoric, there was a backlash against those who look Muslim. Unfortunately for many Sikh men, 70% of all Americans cannot identify a Sikh man as a Sikh and about half of all Americans associate the turban with Islam; for this reason, many Sikhs experience hate crimes across the nation ("Turban Myths..." 2013). The purpose of this research study is to understand if Sikh-Americans living in Texas have perceived a changed level of safety since the presidential election and examine any increases or decreases in hate crime-related activities geared towards them.

### 3. METHOD

For this research, quantitative and qualitative data points were desired for multiple reasons. First, the use of both forms of data were necessary to analyze numerical data

along with personal, narrative-style data. The combination of these two forms would give a holistic viewpoint of the mental condition of Sikh-Americans' after the election. Second, the more data that is collected for the study, the less likely the data would be skewed by specific people operating on the fringes of the bell curve.

For the survey portion of the research, questions were phrased in a way for the typical Sikh-American to think about his/her identity as a Sikh. Each person's level of involvement in the religion (i.e. wears a turban, keeps a beard) reflected different portions of the survey each participant had to complete. The surveys were reserved for those between the ages of 18 and 35 and with U.S. citizenship; these requirements were created as a preemptive weed out from other variables, such as immigration status or 'un-Americanness.' This age range was chosen because it would better target youth that are completely assimilated into American culture and therefore more 'American.' The goal was to get a person that talks, acts, and interacts as a 'normal American' with the only differing characteristic being religious affiliation. The following are examples of the type of questions asked:

1. How often do non-Sikh people ask questions/comment about your turban?
2. How often are the questions/comments negative?
3. Yes or No: I have felt threatened sometime before the election for the way I look.
4. Yes or No: I have felt threatened sometime after the election for the way I look.
5. Disagree or Agree: I fit into American society well.
6. Disagree or Agree: I feel safe living in America as a Sikh.

For the interview portion of the research, questions were phrased to gain a deeper understanding of how an individual Sikh operates under post-election stresses (assuming they have any). For this portion, turbaned Sikh men were preferred because they are often more likely to fall prey to a hate crime for their recognizable turbaned identity. The following are examples of the type of questions asked:

1. Bullying is defined as use of superior strength or influence to intimidate someone. Have you ever been bullied for being Sikh?
2. Have you ever felt threatened for being a Sikh? If so, when? Has the experience changed your perception on the current political climate?
3. Do you think the media plays a part in defining what a turbaned man or woman stands for religiously or socially?
4. Do you change the way you interact with non-Sikh people to avoid conflict?
5. Would you consider Texas a religiously tolerant state?
6. What do you think needs to be done for hate crimes to come to a stop?

Research was collected from two major areas in Texas: Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston. These two areas were chosen because of their high concentration of Sikh-Americans in the surrounding suburbs. In order to survey the largest number of Sikhs in the smallest amount of time, surveys were taken personally at Sikh gurdwaras on Sundays. An electronic link was also available for the survey to be sent by survey participants to other potential participants who could not attend gurdwara.

#### 4. RESULTS

A total of 70 surveys were collected from both the DFW and Houston areas. Out of the 70 surveys, 4 individuals were selected for interviews and all 4 participated in said interviews. All those who entered the temples and identified as Sikh took the surveys, which includes males and females who do wear turbans and who do not wear turbans. Since there was such a diversity of respondents, the data was interpreted in categories. The said categories are turban wearing Sikhs, non-Turban wearing males, and non-Turban wearing females (since no turbaned females took the surveys). Out of the 70 respondents, 33 were male, 30 were female, and 7 preferred not to answer.

##### *Turban Wearing Sikhs (all males)*

When asked if turban wearers fit into society well, 75.9% reported in the affirmative and 17.2% reported in the negative (the rest being neutral). When asked about their turbans in public by non-Sikhs, 4 of the respondents stated that at least half the time the comments were negative. After the presidential election, 27.6% of turban wearers felt threatened because of their appearance; this percentage is a reduction from the 48.3% of turban wearers feeling threatened before the election, but what can be noted is an increase in the intensity of fear. Fear was measured on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 meaning least fearful and 5 meaning most fearful). Before the election, those who experienced fear rated it between 3 and 4; after the election, those who experienced fear rated it 4 and 5. About 51.7% of turbaned Sikhs feel safe living in America as a Sikh and 37.9% see Sikhs as being a generally safe minority in Texas. Of the respondents who keep their hair long, over 60% wear a turban on a daily basis, while the others wear their hair in visible buns as a style statement. When asked why one should wear a turban, one respondent stated "I want to uphold and preserve the Sikh identity. The turban represents equality and justice." Another respondent stated "I am incomplete without [my turban]. It's my cultural and religious connection to my heritage."

Most of the interviews conducted were with turbaned Sikh men between the ages of 19 and 27. When asked if he has ever felt threatened for being Sikh, a respondent stated, "I work in a pretty prestigious place here in Houston and my friends always treated me with respect, even though I wear a turban. After the election though, I started noticing random people around work look at me differently. Obviously, it wasn't my friends because they know who I am, but it was the other people, the janitorial

people or people from other departments who didn't know me that started staring." Another respondent shared his experience by saying "Nothing bad ever really happened to me while I was growing up, but I do remember getting stared at a lot and the staring sometimes makes me uncomfortable, but you get used to it. I get a lot of questions about my turban, and the questions can be ignorant, but they've never been malicious."

##### *Non-turban Wearing Sikh Males*

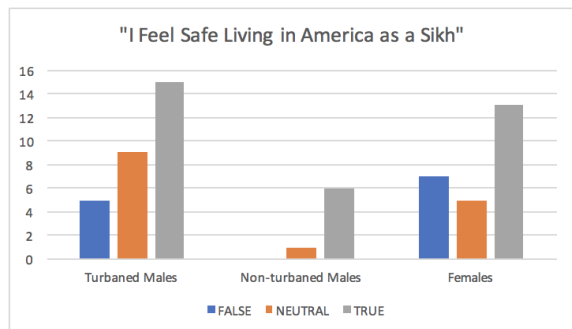
Non-turban wearing Sikh males generally do not face physical or verbal hate crimes because of their religious ambiguity. For that reason, their answers didn't demonstrate any obvious religiously based fear. All males regarded themselves as fitting into American society well and feeling safe living in America as a Sikh. However, despite their ambiguity, 28.6% of the respondents felt threatened sometime before and after the presidential election. This can be attributed to their identity as a minority in Texas instead of their religious affiliation. When asked about hate crimes to a non-turban wearing male, a respondent stated, "Nothing bad has happened to me after the election, but I do feel like something could happen later on if the racist stuff keeps happening."

##### *Non-Turban Wearing Sikh Females*

The responses for Sikh females varied more than the other two groups in respect to the 1 to 5 range questions. When it comes to feeling safe in American society, 60% felt they fit in well and were safe, while 8% did not feel safe. Of the respondents, 40% felt threatened as a Sikh sometime before the election and 28% felt threatened sometime after. Fifty-two percent of respondents felt safe living in America as a Sikh, but 40% also said they do not see Sikhs as being a generally safe minority in Texas. All females except for one identified as a Sikh in public (the outlier female refers to herself as a Sikh in private). When asked about religious tolerance, one female respondent stated, "I would say Texas is a tolerant state, but in the cities... I would say the rural parts of Texas wouldn't be the same just because there wouldn't be as much religious diversity."

##### *Voting Habits*

For the 2016 presidential election, 10 turbaned males voted for Hilary Clinton, 4 preferred not to answer, and 1 voted for Donald Trump. For non-turban wearing males, 10 voted for Hilary Clinton, 5 preferred not to answer, and 1 voted for neither. For non-turban wearing females, 15 voted for Hilary Clinton and 1 voted for neither.



Data from respondents' responses to the survey statement "I feel safe living in America as a Sikh."

## 5. WHAT DO THESE RESULTS MEAN?

Looking at the percentages of Sikh-Americans that feel unsafe living in their state, even one person is too many. From the data, turbaned men feel a great deal more fear than non-turbaned males and females. This can be attributed to the outward display of a turban and the risk of a hate crime that comes with it. After the September 11 terrorist attacks, those who affiliated with a religion misunderstood by the general Christian public felt uncertain of their place in the country and their identity. Post-9/11 tensions have simmered for the past 15 years, but were reignited by the presidential election. From the results, it is evident post-9/11 tensions still exist. Regardless of level of religious affiliation, the majority of Sikhs sense the prejudice felt toward turban wearing Sikhs. There are only 500,000 Sikhs in the United States, but the rate of hate crimes committed against them is comparable to those against Muslims (Ahluwalia 2010).

From the results, it is evident many Sikhs view themselves in Texas as relatively unsafe after the presidential election. However, these sentiments have not changed much since 9/11 for some of the respondents in the survey. So, one question does remain: why do Sikh-Americans still stay in Texas if they feel unsafe or see themselves as targets? Perhaps they see Texas as their home. Perhaps turbaned Sikhs have grown used to the questions about their religion and know how to deflect hatred. Or perhaps they feel the bad times will leave and another era will start. Whatever their sentiments may be, it is worthy to note that with each negative comment that comes with the turban, every respondent stated the way to stop hate crimes is to spread education about Sikhism one person at a time. More research should be done in this area to learn more about this topic in the future.

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