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I used to get into fights,
and then I cut my hair."*

*"Somebody asked me
if I was a terrorist."*

*"People would say things like
'Get out of My Country'."*

"Some 6th graders make fun of my religion."

Hatred in the Hallways: A Preliminary Report on Bias Against Sikh Students in New York City's Public Schools

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About the Report

Since December 2006, the Sikh Coalition, with the help of several dedicated volunteers, has been conducting a first ever civil rights survey of New York City's Sikhs. The survey is intended to gather information on Sikhs' experiences with incidents of harassment, employment discrimination, language access and other issues that hinder full Sikh integration into New York's civic and political life.

This report is a preliminary release of data compiled from children in the Sikh community over the past six months. It should be noted that this release is indeed *preliminary*. We originally intended to release our survey data on civil rights issues facing both Sikh adults and children in September 2007. However, the hair cutting incident involving a Sikh boy on May 25, 2007 at a high school in Elmhurst, Queens, has compelled us to release our Sikh children's survey data now in the hope of garnering attention to the pressing and current issue of harassment of Sikh children in New York City schools.

Thus far, 205 children and 381 adults have completed the Sikh Coalition's civil rights survey questionnaire, which was provided in either English or Punjabi. Sikhs were surveyed throughout New York City, with a specific focus on the borough of Queens, home to the majority of New York City's Sikh population.

Copies of this report are available by contacting Neha Kaur at the Sikh Coalition (212-655-3095, Ext. 84)

Who are Sikhs?

On May 24, 2007, the NYPD reported that Harpal Singh Vacher, a Sikh boy, had been attacked at school and his hair forcibly cut off by a fellow student. The attack was unique in its impact. Harpal, a freshman at Newtown High School in Elmhurst, Queens, is a follower of the Sikh faith. In accordance with the mandates of his religion, Harpal had never cut his waist-length hair. Instead, he wore it up in a turban or a *patka* (head covering for younger boys) to school every day. Today, it lies just above his shoulders.

Sikhs like Harpal practice an independent religion that is nearly 500 years old, and has 26 million adherents worldwide. That makes it the world's fifth largest faith. Followers of Sikhism have been in the United States for just about 100 years, but remain a small minority. There are only about 50,000 in the New York area.

Still, Sikhs' visible identity, a manifestation of their inner commitment to the faith, makes Sikhs stand out. According to the requirements of the Sikh faith, many Sikhs do not cut their hair or shave their beards. Sikhs keep their long hair tied in a knot under a turban. Sikhs also have other distinctive articles of faith, including a steel bracelet and a small sword called a *kirpan*. All of these are considered to be God's gifts to Sikhs, and they treat them with great pride and respect.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Sikhs have repeatedly been misidentified as members of the Taliban or Osama bin Laden's anti-American network. In North America, the vast majority of those who wear turbans are Sikhs. As a result, recurring media images of alleged terrorists and negative portrayals of men in turbans have created an environment in which Sikhs are regularly singled out for harassment, verbal abuse and mistreatment by both private and at times public actors.

In the years since 9/11, the Sikh Coalition, a civil rights group dedicated to issues involving the Sikh diaspora, has worked to create an environment where Sikhs may live and work without fear or discrimination. This has been not been easy. During the past five years, over 500 incidents of discrimination or bias against Sikhs, primarily in the United States, have been reported to the Sikh Coalition's website ([The challenge for civil society in an environment where the Sikh articles of faith are commonly identified with terrorism is to ensure that Sikh children can focus on their education in school and not the fear of harassment or violence. As the recommendations in this report make clear, government, the public, and the media all have a significant role to play in this regard.](http://www.sikhcoalition.org>ListReports.asp) alone. While incidents of bias against Sikhs have decreased markedly since 9/11, as the data in this report shows, Sikh children still frequently face bigoted taunting and unwanted physical touching in schools.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

A Nationwide Problem: A Snapshot of Anti-Sikh Bias in America's Schools

- Two days after the attacks of 9/11, Arjun Singh, a high school junior, began to feel its aftermath in his hometown of Alpharetta, Georgia. Because of his long hair and turban, Arjun was singled out for harassment at the hands of fellow students. They put notes in his locker, verbally threatened to kill or hurt him, and called him an Afghani and a terrorist. When he reported the harassment to school officials, little was done to help, and his harassment continued for days afterwards.¹
- Eight-year-old Parteek Singh, a Sikh immigrant from Punjab, endured years of taunts, punching and verbal abuse from his classmates before he snapped. He usually responded to the calls of “raghead” or “diaperhead” with a quiet, passive resilience. When things got really bad, his parents would move him to a new school. But in February 2002, when the emotional abuse peaked in high school, things turned violent. Parteek slapped a classmate on the head, hitting his temple and fracturing his skull. Parteek ended up in juvenile detention, faced with a permanent charge on his record.²
- In the fall of 2005, seventh-grader Mandeep Singh’s daily routine included fighting off classmates who pulled and yanked at his *jurdha* (the topknot worn by Sikh men) while calling him “Bin Laden” and “meatball head.” Though Mandeep and the Sikh Coalition repeatedly complained to his school’s administration, nothing was done to stem the harassment for almost two years. It was only when the Sikh Coalition filed a formal complaint asking the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission to investigate the school that they responded, putting an end to the bullying almost immediately.³
- Fellow students at Kabir Singh’s school in Marlboro, New Jersey dared each other to touch his turban and call him names. In February 2003, students hit the seventh-grader twice on his head, leading to contusions and a severe injury that left Kabir confined to bed rest for weeks. Unconvinced that the school could do anything to ensure their son’s safety, Kabir’s parents sent him back to his native England to finish his schooling. Three years later, the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights found “probable cause” that Kabir’s school failed to meet its legal obligations when it did not take adequate measures to protect him from bias-based harassment.⁴

“In recent years, our nation’s Sikh American community has suffered numerous incidents of violence and discrimination. Unfortunately, too many mistakenly associate the Sikh articles of faith, in particular the turban, with terrorism.”

- Lucille E. Davy
Acting Commissioner,
NJ Dept. of Education

¹ See, Sikh Coalition Bias Database,

<http://www.sikhcoalition.org/hatecrime.asp?mainaction=viewreport&reportid=91>, retrieved on June 3, 2007.

² See, “Pushed Too Far,” Meeta Kaur, Sikh Spectrum, March 2003,

<http://www.sikhspectrum.com/032003/bullied.htm>, retrieved on June 3, 2007.

³ See, “An End to Bullying for Mandeep,” Sikh News Network, March 7, 2006,

<http://www.sikhnn.com/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=451>, retrieved on June 3, 2007.

⁴ See, “NJ Division on Civil Rights Files Discrimination Charge on Behalf of Sikh Student in Historic Case,” Sikh Coalition Community Advisory, February 19, 2007, <http://www.sikhcoalition.org/advisories/VirdeeCase01.htm>, retrieved on June 3, 2007.

Summary of NYC Sikh Children's Survey Results

The Sikh children's survey that gave rise to this preliminary report was intended to understand the challenges facing children who attend school in New York City. A total of 208 Sikh children attending New York City schools were surveyed. Most of the children surveyed were male (65.4%). Females made up 34.6% of the total. A little over half of the respondents (50.5%) reported that they keep their hair uncut in accordance with their faith, and 46% wear a turban or a *patka* (religious head covering for young boys) everyday.

Unsurprisingly, bias, discrimination and racist behavior were among some of their biggest concerns. Still, the frequency of this sort of behavior has been shocking by any standard.

77.5 percent of Sikh boys we surveyed who go to school in the borough of Queens report being teased or harassed on account of their Sikh identity. 58.4 percent of Sikh students report being teased or harassed at school on account of their Sikh identity. Amongst students who wear turbans or *patkas* (religious head covering for younger boys), this number spikes to 62.2%.

Two out of five Sikh children who wear turbans or *patkas* are physically harassed – beaten or touched on the head. Of those that complain to school personnel about harassment, teasing, or physical or verbal abuse, close to a third never receive any help.

The following are some key findings from our survey of over 200 Sikh children in New York City schools:

- *Sikh students in City schools are regularly misidentified as “terrorists.”*

Nearly one in five Sikhs, including those that do not wear turbans, were harassed because they were misidentified as terrorists. In schools in Queens, one of the most diverse districts in the country, almost a quarter of all boys targeted for teasing or harassment believe it happened because fellow students think they look like terrorists. A typical response was “When I was walking home from the subway, somebody asked me if I was a terrorist.”

- *Staggering numbers of Sikh students are physically harassed at school on account of their religion.*

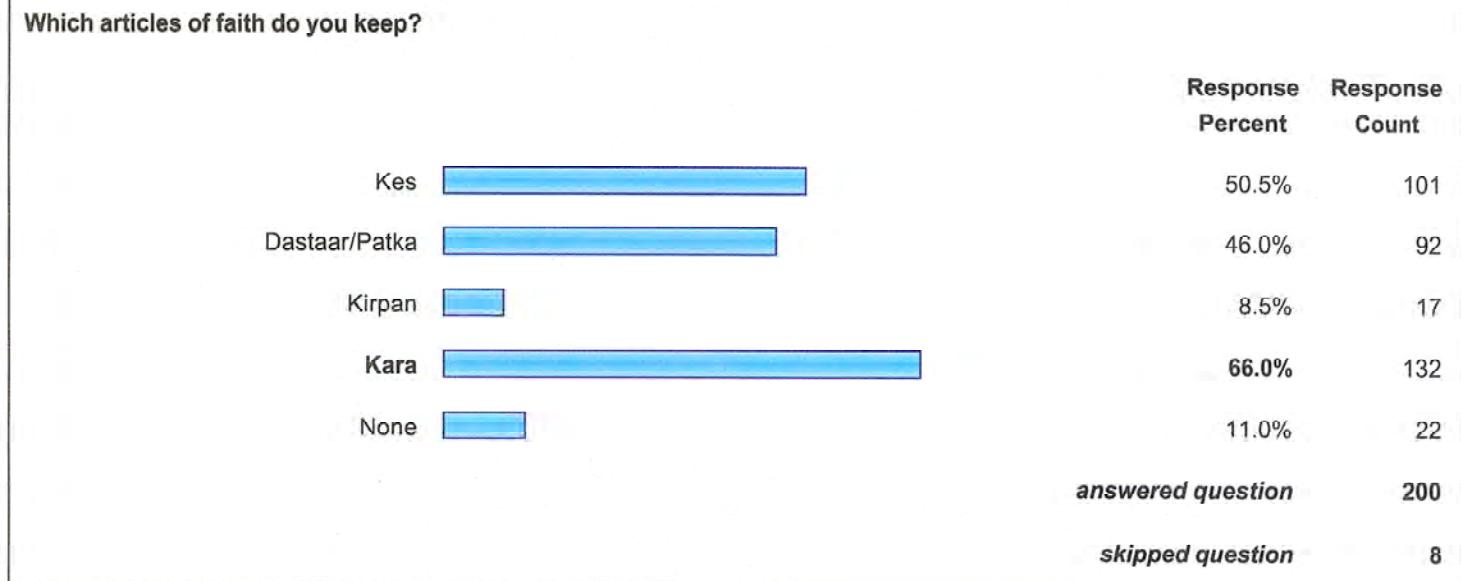
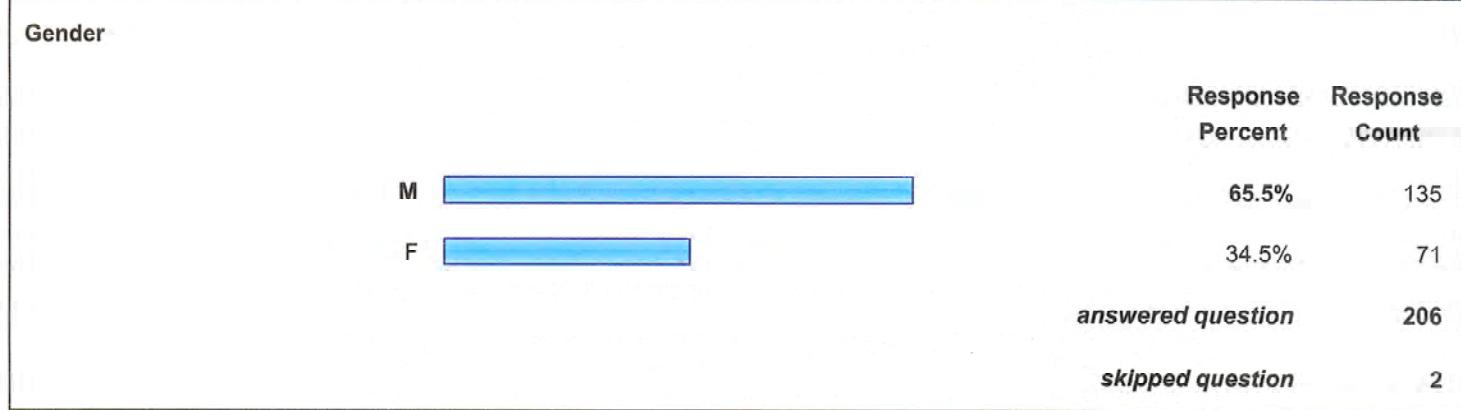
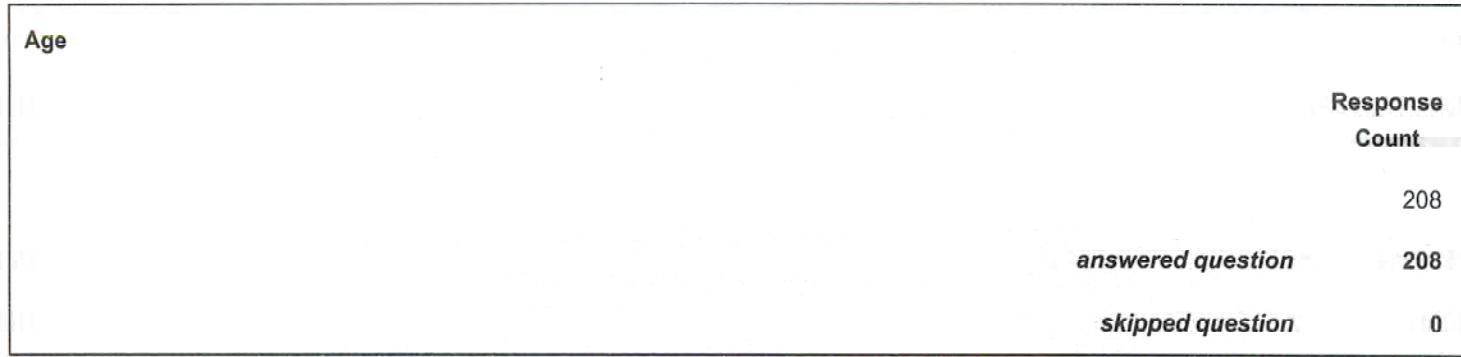
Of the Sikhs who wear turbans or *patkas* to school, 42% have been either physically hit or involuntarily touched because of their head covering. Over a third of Sikh boys studying in Queens, including those without turbans, have been physically harassed for being a Sikh. Some would rather change their appearance than deal with this strain. “I used to have a turban. I used to get into fights, and then I cut my hair,” one respondent said.

- *Though many Sikh students complain to school personnel about incidents of bullying or harassment, many get no help.*

When faced with bullying and harassment in schools, many Sikh students go to teachers, guidance counselors and school principals for help. In Queens, 59% of students who reported incidents spoke to someone about what had happened. Nevertheless, across the board, nearly a third of those requests for help go unheeded.

- *Attacks suffered by Sikh students are also a result of their South Asian or Punjabi ethnicity.* Post September 11, 2001, South Asians or those perceived to be South Asian have routinely been targeted for hate crimes and discriminatory behavior.⁵ Within the Sikh community, well over half (58.5%) of Sikh children who are harassed report that the abuse has to do with their identity as South Asians or Punjabis. “I used to wear a turban when I was small. People would say things like Get out of My Country,” one respondent said.

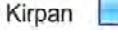
⁵ See generally “*We Are Not the Enemy: Hate Crimes against Muslims, Arabs, and other Perceived to be Muslim or Arab after September 11*,” Human Rights Watch, November 2002. Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/usahate/>.

NYC Sikh Children's Preliminary Survey Results for Five Boroughs

Have you ever been teased or harassed in school because of your Sikh identity?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Y		58.4%	115
N		41.6%	82
		<i>answered question</i>	197
		<i>skipped question</i>	11

If yes, why do you think this happened?

		Response Percent	Response Count
My Dastaar/Patka		47.2%	50
My Kirpan		3.8%	4
My Kara		12.3%	13
I'm Punjabi/South Asian		58.5%	62
Some students think I look like a terrorist		18.9%	20
		<i>Other (please specify)</i>	5
		<i>answered question</i>	106
		<i>skipped question</i>	102

Which of the following happened?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Name-calling		88.7%	94
Threats		10.4%	11
Physical hitting		6.6%	7
Someone disrespectfully touched my dastaar/patka		18.9%	20
		<i>answered question</i>	106
		<i>skipped question</i>	102

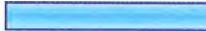
Who did it?

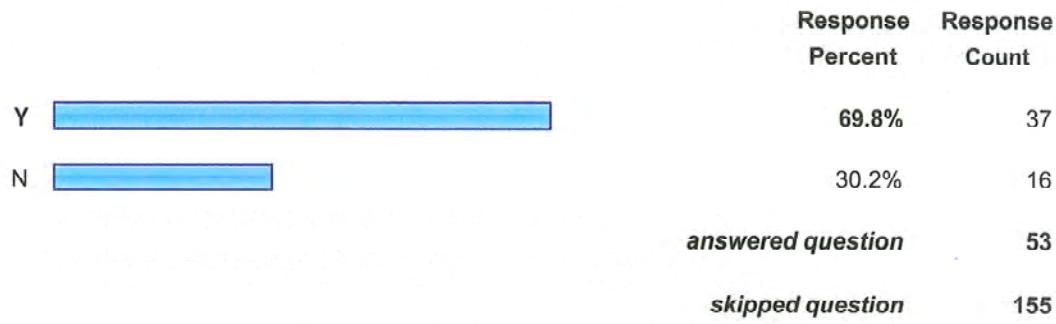
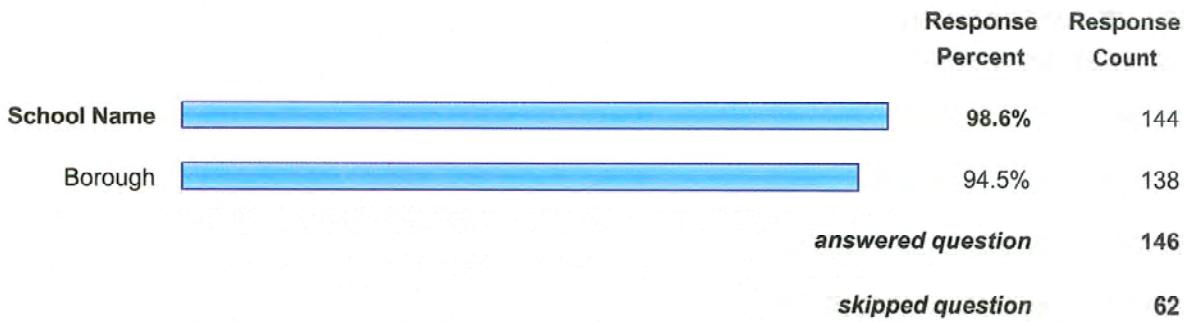
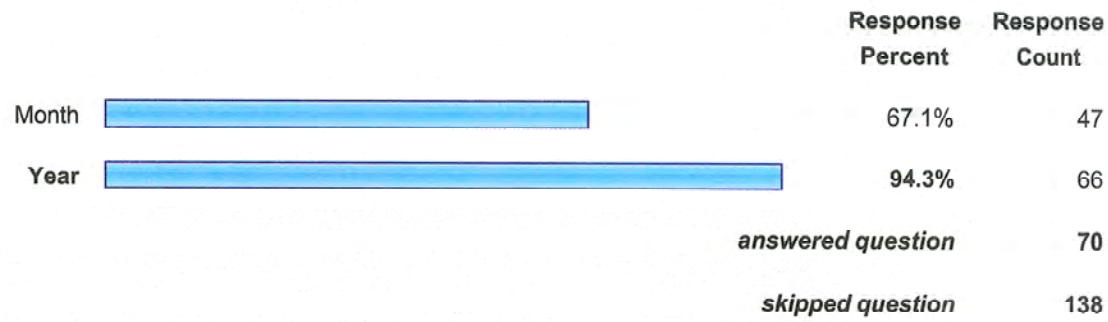
		Response Percent	Response Count
Student		99.1%	107
Teacher		2.8%	3
Other:		1.9%	2
	Other (please specify)		4
	<i>answered question</i>		108
	<i>skipped question</i>		100

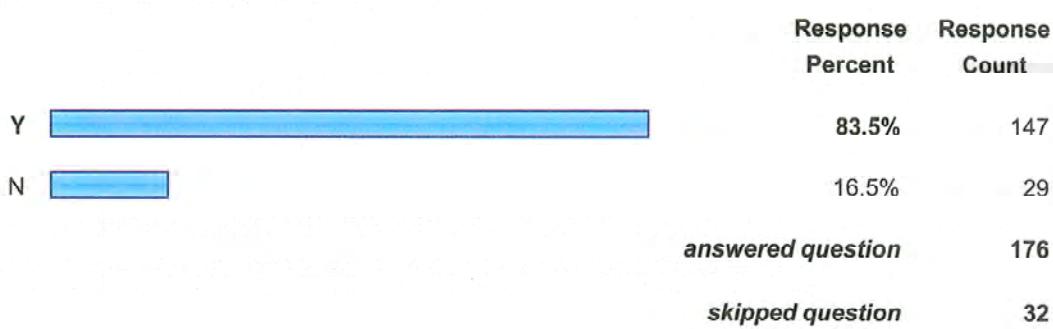
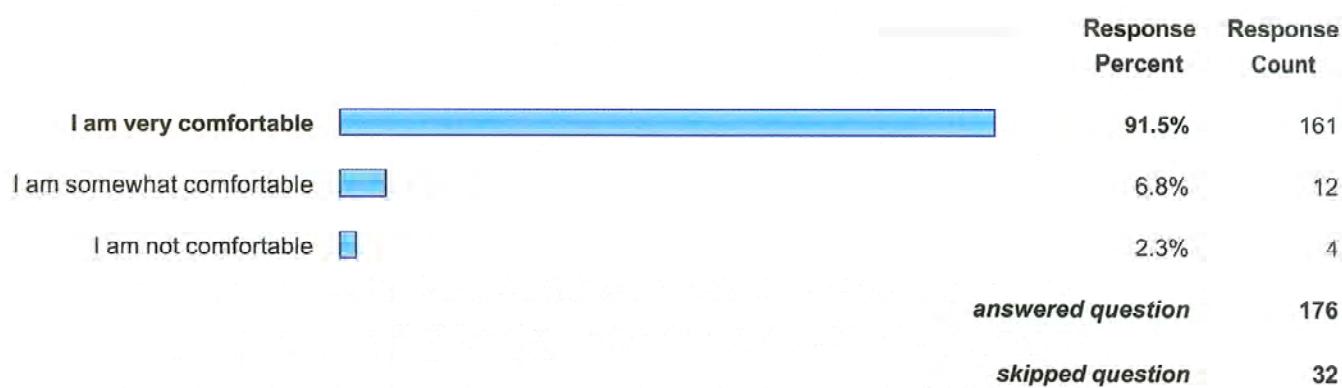
Did you tell someone about what happened?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Y		55.9%	62
N		44.1%	49
	<i>answered question</i>		111
	<i>skipped question</i>		97

If yes, who did you tell?

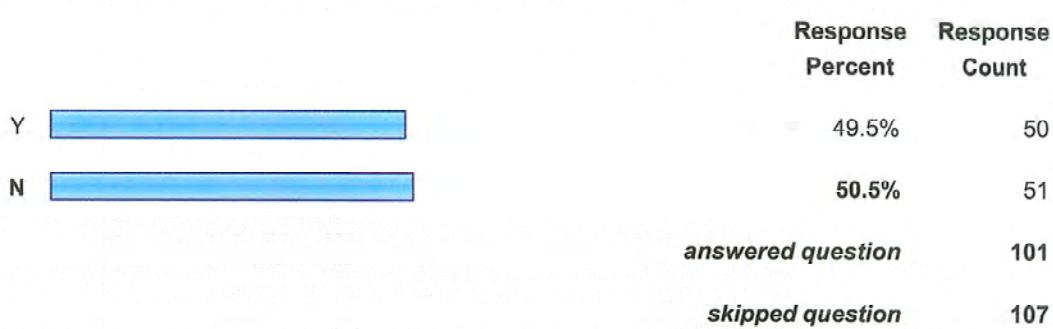
		Response Percent	Response Count
Teacher		67.7%	23
Guidance Counselor		29.4%	10
Principal		20.6%	7
	Other (please specify)		37
	<i>answered question</i>		34
	<i>skipped question</i>		174

Did he/she help you?**What is the name of your School and which Borough is it in?****Approximately when did this occur?****Has Sikhism ever been taught or discussed in your class or at your school?**

Do you think it would be helpful to have someone come to your class or school to talk about Sikhism?**Are you comfortable reading and writing English?**

Please use this space to tell us about any other problems that you have had at school or outside of school because of your Sikh identity. You may also list any suggestions here.

	Response Count
	46
<i>answered question</i>	46
<i>skipped question</i>	162

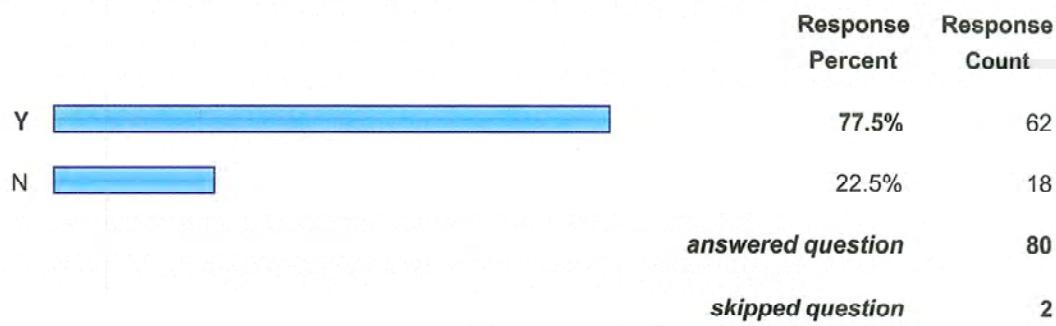
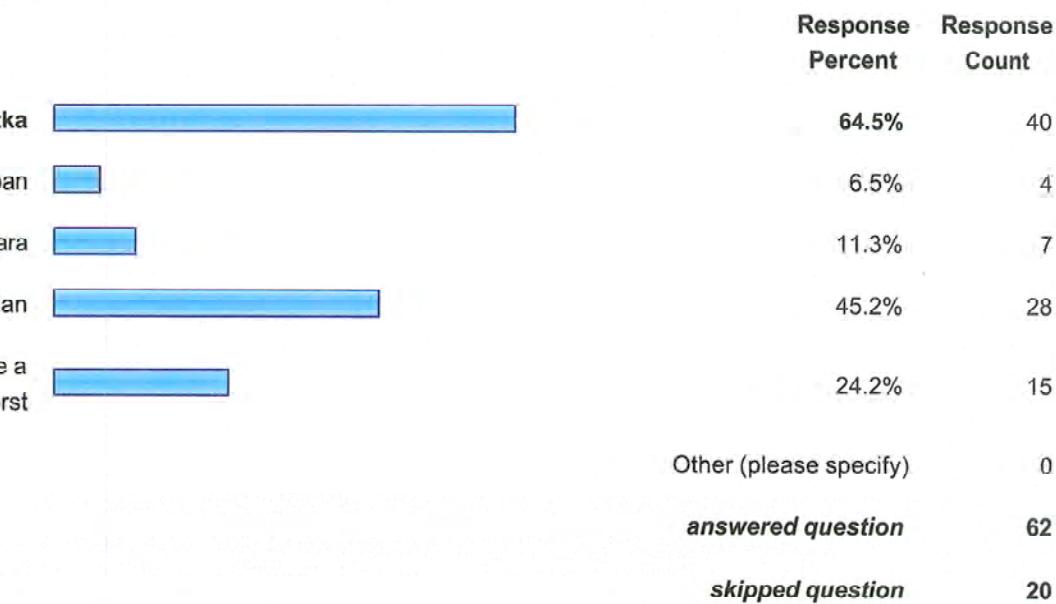
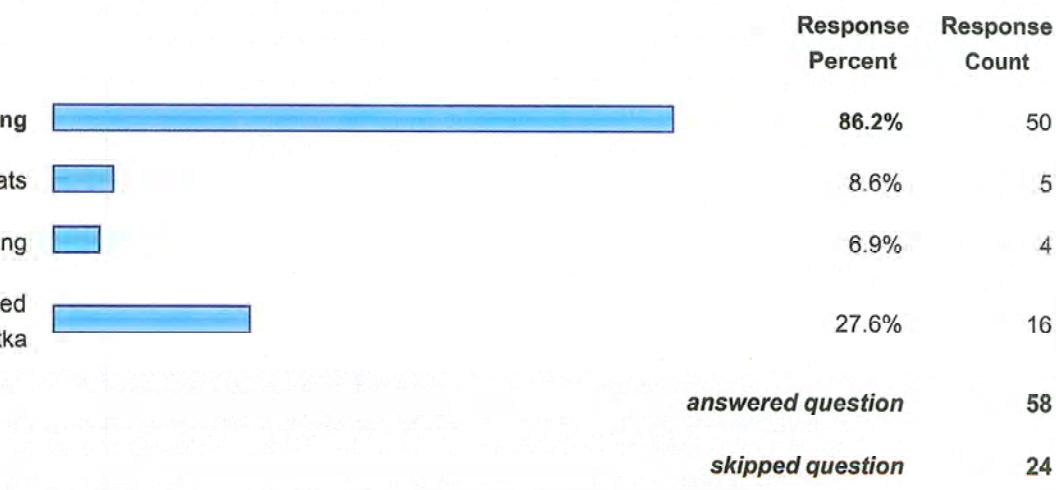
Can the Sikh Coalition contact you or your parent(s) about any problems or suggestions that you have listed in this survey?

NYC Sikh Boy's Preliminary Survey Results for Queens

Age	Response Count
	82
<i>answered question</i>	82
<i>skipped question</i>	0

Gender	Response Percent	Response Count
M	100.0%	82
F	0.0%	0
<i>answered question</i>	82	
<i>skipped question</i>	0	

Which articles of faith do you keep?	Response Percent	Response Count
Kes	48.7%	37
Dastaar/Patka	72.4%	55
Kirpan	10.5%	8
Kara	67.1%	51
None	11.8%	9
<i>answered question</i>	76	
<i>skipped question</i>	6	

Have you ever been teased or harassed in school because of your Sikh identity?**If yes, why do you think this happened?****Which of the following happened?**

Who did it?

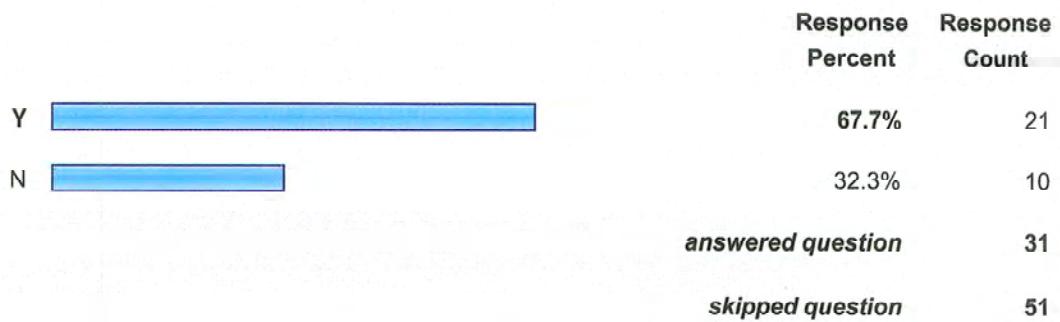
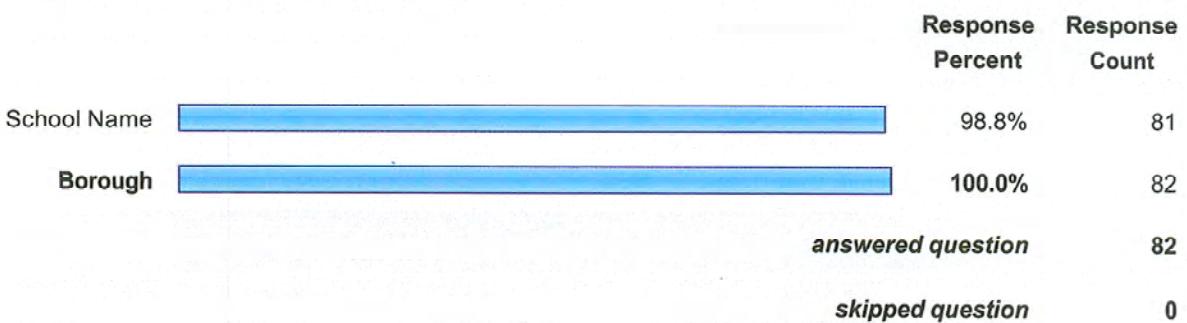
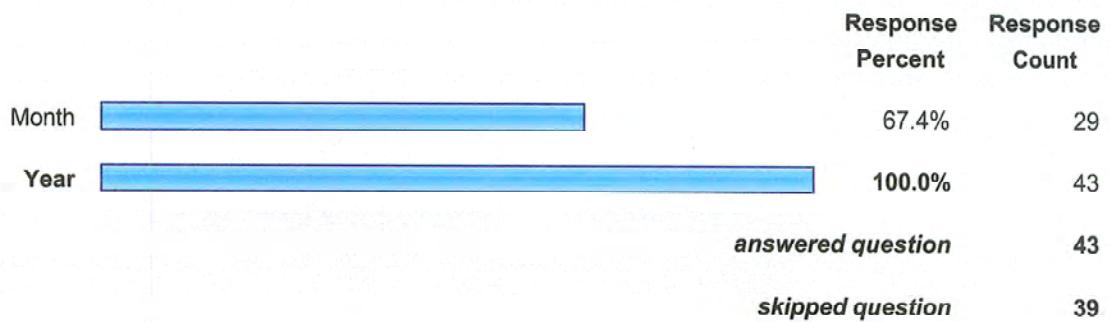
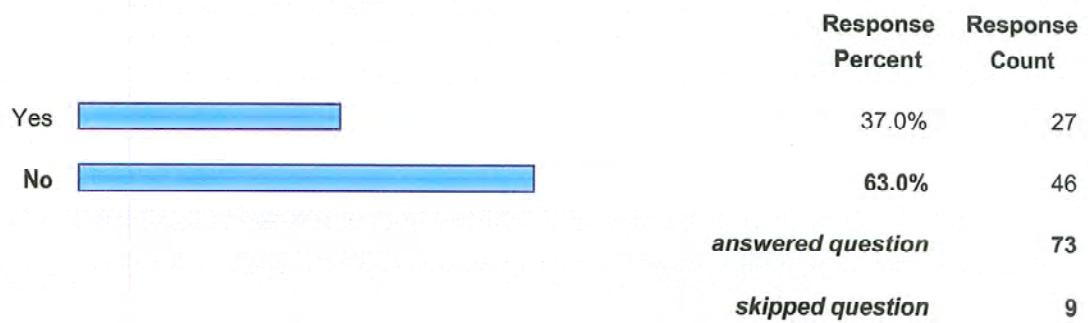
		Response Percent	Response Count
Student		100.0%	60
Teacher		1.7%	1
Other:		3.3%	2
Other (please specify)			3
<i>answered question</i>			60
<i>skipped question</i>			22

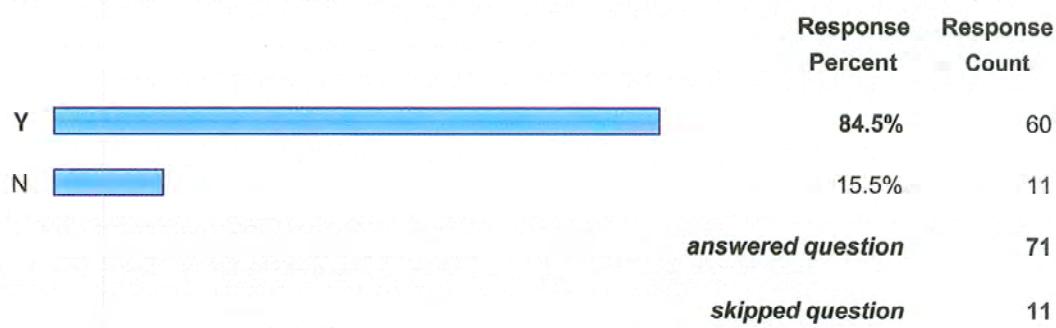
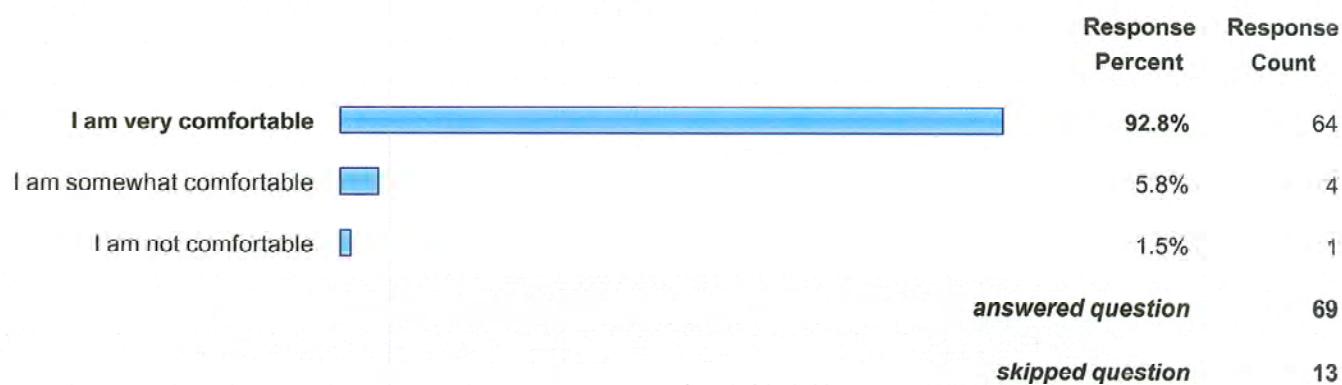
Did you tell someone about what happened?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Y		59.0%	36
N		41.0%	25
<i>answered question</i>			61
<i>skipped question</i>			21

If yes, who did you tell?

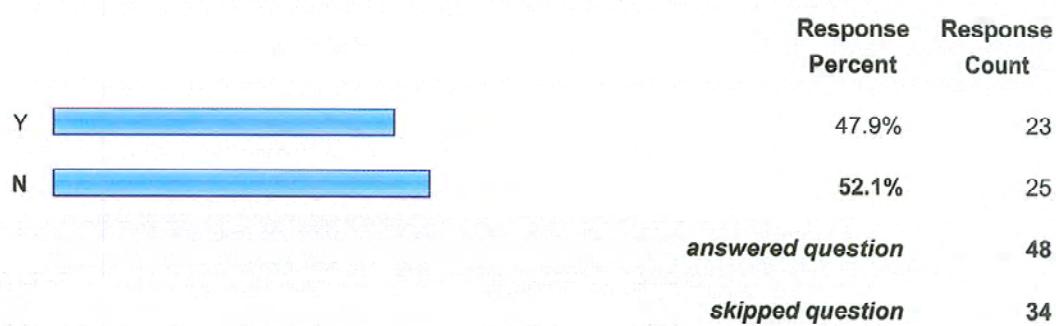
		Response Percent	Response Count
Teacher		65.0%	13
Guidance Counselor		20.0%	4
Principal		25.0%	5
Other (please specify)			20
<i>answered question</i>			20
<i>skipped question</i>			62

Did he/she help you?**What is the name of your School and which Borough is it in?****Approximately when did this occur?****Has Sikhism ever been taught or discussed in your class or at your school?**

Do you think it would be helpful to have someone come to your class or school to talk about Sikhism?**Are you comfortable reading and writing English?**

Please use this space to tell us about any other problems that you have had at school or outside of school because of your Sikh identity. You may also list any suggestions here.

	Response Count
	14
<i>answered question</i>	14
<i>skipped question</i>	68

Can the Sikh Coalition contact you or your parent(s) about any problems or suggestions that you have listed in this survey?

Taking Positive Measures: The State of New Jersey

As home to some of the most culturally diverse student bodies in the country, New Jersey's Department of Education has taken exemplary steps to ensure Sikh students' safety in public schools.

In a strongly worded memorandum to all school principals at the opening of the last academic year, Lucille E. Davy, Acting Commissioner of New Jersey's Department of Education, reinforced New Jersey's commitment to a safe environment, conducive to learning.¹ She identified specific incidents of Sikh students being bullied because of their hair and turbans, and advised each principal to re-examine their school's culture to ensure that the learning environment is one of acceptance and respect for all students.

On September 6, 2002, the state passed a law requiring each school district to adopt a policy prohibiting harassment, intimidation, and bullying on school property, at school-sponsored functions, and on school buses (*N.J.S.A. 18A:37-13 et seq.*). On August 3, 2005, the New Jersey State Board of Education adopted regulations on intimidation, harassment and bullying at *N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.9*.

When a fourth grade Sikh student was repeatedly taunted and grabbed by another student on the school bus, his school's principal held educational sessions on Sikhs and Sikh practices for students and teachers. The incidents then stopped.

To encourage schools to follow through on the state's commitment to safe schools, New Jersey provides school administrators with a host of resources. The department's social studies webpage <http://www.nj.gov/njded/aps/cccs/ss/> tells teachers how to incorporate information about Sikhs and other cultural groups into social studies classes. The department has also begun exploring the possibility of including information on Sikhs and Sikh practices in the mandatory school curriculum in New Jersey in order to enhance appreciation for diversity.

"A safe and civil environment in school is necessary for students to learn and achieve high academic standards. Harassment, intimidation, or bullying, like other disruptive or violent behaviors, is conduct that disrupts both a student's ability to learn and a school's ability to educate its students in a safe environment."

- Lucille E. Davy
Acting Commissioner,
New Jersey Department of Education

¹ See, Memorandum from Lucille E. Davy, Acting Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Education, September 13, 2006, available at:

http://www.sikhcoalition.org/advisories/documents/CommissionerletteronBullyingHarassmentofEthnicGroups_9-13-06_.pdf, retrieved on June 3, 2007.

Recommendations for Government, Media, and Parents for Ending Bias Against Sikh Children in Schools

To the Department of Education

1. Begin regularly meeting with community organizations to begin addressing the issues of bias against Sikh children.
2. Ensure that all teachers, executives, and all other school personnel are aware that Sikh children have been especially vulnerable to bias and harassment in schools.
3. Advise all school safety personnel that Sikh children have been especially vulnerable to bias and harassment in schools.
4. Educate all New York City school children on Sikhs and Sikh practices as a means of encouraging appreciation for diversity.

To the Media

1. Acknowledge that constant and frequent images of turbans, beards, and terrorism since 9/11 have the unintended but real effect of promoting ignorance that leads to bias and violence against Sikhs.
2. Use a part of your media outlet's resources to promote social education on Sikhs in order to discourage bias against Sikhs and encourage appreciation of diversity.

To Parents

1. Encourage your children to appreciate and understand their Sikh classmates.
2. Teach your children that words directed at Sikhs like "terrorist" "Bin Laden" or "Taliban" are epithets of the worst kind for a Sikh.
3. Go to www.sikhcoalition.org to learn more about our community and the issues we face.

Acknowledgments

This report is dedicated to the Sikh children of New York City's public schools. You are our community's joy. We look forward to a future where bias or harassment based on your Sikh faith will not get in the way of your schooling.

The Sikh Coalition would like to acknowledge the support of the New York Foundation and North Star Fund in funding the community organizing work that led to the creation of this report.

This report was drafted by Neha Kaur, Advocacy Director and Staff Attorney at the Sikh Coalition. Amardeep Singh, Executive Director, and Amit Gohil provided primary edits to the report. Mehtab Kaur, Community Advocate, created the survey that is the basis of this report. Mehtab Kaur was also primarily responsible for conducting the survey and organizing survey volunteers. In addition, for two months, Simran Kaur was responsible for conducting the survey and organizing survey volunteers.

The Sikh Coalition would like to thank the following dedicated community volunteers for their assistance in administering the surveys: Abhu Kaur; Aman Singh; Amandeep Singh; Baljit Kaur; Dilpreet Kaur; Gunisha Kaur; Harminder Kaur Bhalla; Heer Kaur Ahluwalia; Kawal Singh Khanduja; Neha Kaur; Preet Singh Bagga; Ranbir Singh Bhalla; Renita Kaur Khanduja; Sandeep Singh Chawla; Savneet Singh; Simran Kaur.

The Coalition would also like to thank the management committees of the Sikh Cultural Society, Richmond Hill, Queens; Baba Makhan Shah Lubana Gurdwara, Richmond Hill, Queens, and the Sikh Center of New York in Flushing, Queens for their cooperation in allowing us continued access to community members for our survey and civil rights work.