

## Sikh Coalition and the 2020 Census: Frequently Asked Questions

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The government uses information from the census to allocate more than \$600 billion worth of resources per year to communities across the country. This means that census data directly influences public funding for things like schools, roads, and parks; businesses also look at population data, which comes from the census, to decide where to locate and invest. And finally, the census count also determines representation in our democracy, including how local legislative maps are drawn, how many members of Congress your state gets, and how many electoral college votes each state casts in presidential elections. The more people who are counted, the greater voice their community has in our democracy.

In January 2020, United Sikhs announced that the U.S. Census Bureau will include “Sikh” as a write-in option for question nine (“What is your race?”) on the 2020 census. The Census Bureau has [independently confirmed](#) that the non-mandatory option to write in “Sikh” will be included as a distinct detailed population group under the “Asian” racial category (as opposed to the “Asian Indian” category). The Sikh Coalition fully recognizes and supports the importance of Sikhs in America being able to self-identify. We also want to ensure that every Sikh household understands the nuances of this change as we all work together to be represented accurately in the 2020 census. Accordingly, we have updated our community FAQ below to address questions pertaining to the Sikh write-in option.

As always, the Sikh Coalition values community questions and feedback on all of our programming. If you have any further questions about the census or require resources or assistance in English or Punjabi, please reach out to [community@sikhcoalition.org](mailto:community@sikhcoalition.org).

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### GENERAL QUESTIONS

- 1. What is the U.S. census?** Since 1790, the U.S. Constitution has required our government to conduct a census every 10 years. The goal of the census is to count every person in the country where they live, regardless of age or citizenship status. Filling out the census is simple and safe, and it is essential to ensuring that your local community is accurately counted--and given the appropriate amount of government funding and resources as a result!
- 2. Why does being counted for the census matter?** The government uses information from the census to allocate more than \$600 billion worth of resources per year to communities across the country. Census data directly influences public funding for things in your community, like schools, hospitals, roads, and parks; businesses also look at the data to decide where to locate, hire, and invest. And finally, the census count also



determines representation in our democracy, including how local legislative maps are drawn, how many members of Congress your state gets, and how many electoral college votes each state casts in presidential elections. The more people who are counted, the greater voice their community has in our democracy.

3. **What will the census ask?** The census is very simple to fill out and doesn't take much time. It asks how many people live in your home and whether it is rented or owned; it then asks about the age, sex, race, and ethnicity of each person in the home, and the relationship of each person in the home to the homeowner or renter. *Representatives of the U.S. Census Bureau cannot ask for social security numbers, information about citizenship, or political views; they will also never solicit fees or donations for their work. If you have been asked any of these questions, please report what happened immediately by emailing [community@sikhcoalition.org](mailto:community@sikhcoalition.org).*
4. **How and when can I be counted for the census?** Beginning in March of 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau will send letters to households asking them to fill out their census forms. If those forms are not returned or the information is not submitted over the phone or online by the beginning of April, Census Bureau workers will begin going door-to-door across the country to ask the questions in person. We recommend submitting your information online because it is very easy to do! The Sikh Coalition plans to help community members submit their census information by tabling at gurdwaras across the nation beginning in mid-March; if you would like to volunteer to help, please email us at [community@sikhcoalition.org](mailto:community@sikhcoalition.org).
5. **Is it safe to fill out the census?** By law, the U.S. Census Bureau cannot share private specific information with any government agency--it can only share statistics. This requirement to keep responses confidential means that the census should be safe for everyone, including U.S. citizens, U.S. permanent residents, recent immigrants, and undocumented persons. Understandably, many people have concerns and questions about the historical misuse of data by the Census Bureau and how data about identity will be handled by the Census Bureau; please see "REPORTING AND PUBLISHING OF DATA" and "IMPLICATIONS OF THE "SIKH" CODING") for more information.

## HOW TO IDENTIFY AS SIKH

6. **How do I identify myself as Sikh on the 2020 census?** In order to identify yourself or members of your household as Sikh on the 2020 census, you must write in "Sikh" as the answer to question 9 ("What is your race?"). You can choose to write this anywhere on the form and it will be coded, including under "Other Asian" or under "Some other race;" Sikh will be coded under "Asian" rather than "Asian Indian." **The rumors about a separate "Sikh" checkbox are NOT true. There will not be a separate checkbox labeled "Sikh."** In order to be counted as Sikh, you must write it in.



7. **Am I legally obligated to write in “Sikh” for myself and my household members on the U.S. census?** If you live in the United States, you are required by law to complete the census. Under Title 13 of the U.S. Code, you can be fined up to \$100 for refusing to complete the census, and up to \$500 for intentionally providing false answers. It is up to each individual person, however, to decide how they answer the census question regarding their race based solely on how they identify.
8. **Can I identify as “Punjabi” or something else?** It is up to every individual or the household to choose how to identify themselves. If you identify as Punjabi, you can write-in “Punjabi,” and that will receive a separate code. According to February 2020 updates from the U.S. Census Bureau, anybody who writes “Punjabi” will be aggregated as part of the “Asian Indian” tabulation category. You can also choose to check another box if that option is most applicable to you--ultimately, anyone can choose to write in their identity as they so choose, but how it is coded and published is determined by the Census Bureau.
9. **Do “Sikh” and “Punjabi” get reported as a sub-classification under Asian Indian race?** [Per the U.S. Census Bureau](#), Sikh will be coded under the “Asian” racial category rather than the “Asian Indian” racial subcategory. Per the Census Bureau’s website:

## Will Sikhs be counted as a distinct detailed group in the 2020 Census?

Yes. The U.S. Census Bureau has made considerable updates to the race and ethnicity code list for the 2020 Census based on extensive research and outreach over the past decade. “Sikh” will be included as a distinct detailed population group within the “Asian” racial category, and not classified as “Asian Indian” as it was in the 2010 Census when it was viewed as a religious response. The Census Bureau included “Sikh” codes as part of the draft 2020 Census code list within the 2018 Census Test Redistricting Data Prototype (see [technical documentation](#), Appendix D).

Hundreds of new codes have been added to reflect the ways that people self-identify. Examples of other newly coded groups include Russian, Jordanian, and Ghanaian. These detailed data will be collected through a write-in option on the 2020 Census race question. The Census Bureau follows U.S. Office of Management and Budget ([OMB standards](#)) for classifying data on race and ethnicity.

According to February 2020 updates from the Census Bureau, anybody who writes “Punjabi” will be aggregated as part of the “Asian Indian” tabulation category. Both “Sikh” and “Punjabi” will ultimately be included in the “Asian” count.



- 10. What if I practice Sikhi but am not ethnically Punjabi or South Asian?** The census questionnaire allows a person to report multiple races. This means that you can select or write in whichever race or races you identify with, and that you will be counted under whichever categories you choose. If you also choose to write in “Sikh” and choose (or write-in) another category, you will be counted under both.
- 11. How do I complete the census in a household of multiple races, ethnicities, or religions?** The 2020 census asks question 9 (“What is your race?”) for each member of the household rather than the household as a whole. If you have members of your household who are best described with a label other than “Sikh,” you can record separate answers for each of those household members accordingly.
- 12. How does the U.S. Census Bureau define “race” and “ethnicity?”** The Census Bureau defines “race” as a person’s self-identification with one or more social groups. An individual can report as White, Black or African American, Asian, American Indian and Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander. Survey respondents may also report multiple races or write in on their own. “Ethnicity” on the census, by contrast, explicitly refers to whether a person is of Hispanic origin or not. You can find more information about race and ethnicity on the 2020 census [here](#).

## REPORTING AND PUBLISHING OF DATA

- 13. Who will be able to view the Sikh 2020 Census data after it is collected?** Per Title 13 of the U.S. Code, the individual census data that you fill out is supposed to remain confidential and by law cannot be shared outside the U.S. Census Bureau. However, larger data sets that illuminate demographic information about other coded populations have previously been made public. As of February 2020, the Census Bureau has not provided clear and written answers pertaining to how larger Sikh demographic information--such as how many Sikhs are in the United States or different geographic regions--might be publicized. However, the Census Bureau has confirmed as of February 2020 that the plan is to include “Sikh” as a distinct detailed group within the “Asian” racial category, and not classify Sikh responses as “Asian Indian” as they were in previous censuses in all future data collections.
- 14. How were Sikhs identified in previous census reporting, and how and when was the census coding change made?** While people may have chosen to write “Sikh” under ‘race’ on previous census forms, that information was coded and kept internally. After years of advocacy by United Sikhs, this is the first time that the U.S. Census Bureau has determined to formally count “Sikh” write-in responses.
- 15. Will immigration authorities have access to my census data?** Immigration authorities, including Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), do not have access



to census data; the census is meant to be filled out by U.S. citizens and permanent residents, as well as undocumented persons. Again, it is against the law for the U.S. Census Bureau to share any personal information with anyone, including immigration authorities, and the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in June 2019 that the Trump Administration would not be allowed to include a question about citizenship on the census. *If someone claiming to be from the Census Bureau asks about you or your family's immigration status, you are not obligated to answer them, and you should immediately report the incident to us by emailing [community@sikhcoalition.org](mailto:community@sikhcoalition.org).*

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE “SIKH” CODING

### 16. What are the possible benefits of the “Sikh” coding on the 2020 census?

- a. **Identity:** While individual Sikhs have and are entitled to their own views and opinions about whether their Sikhi constitutes a religion, race, ethnicity, or something more complex entirely, we certainly recognize and agree with the importance of being able to affirmatively identify as Sikh rather than as Indian or Asian American more broadly.
- b. **Data:** A definitive, government-driven count of how many Sikhs are living in the United States and where they are located will be a useful statistic for raising Sikh awareness, highlighting smaller Sikh communities across the country, and advocating for federal resources--including funding, educational content, and more--to serve our communities where they live. As of now, the U.S. Census Bureau has still not provided written answers on if, how, and where this data will be publicly available.

### 17. What are possible short-term concerns with the “Sikh” coding on the 2020 census?

The biggest potential immediate concern with the “Sikh” coding change on the 2020 census is the risk of an undercount. Listing “Sikh” as your race on the 2020 census requires a ‘write-in,’ which means that every Sikh who chooses to do so must literally write the word “Sikh” rather than simply checking a box or following a prompt. The ultimate count of Sikhs in this census, therefore, will inevitably fall short of the *actual* number of Sikhs living in the United States; this, in turn, can potentially create challenges for broader advocacy on behalf of the Sikh community.

### 18. What are possible long-term concerns with the “Sikh” coding on the 2020 census?

- a. **Government misuse of census data:** It is an unfortunate but indisputable fact that the U.S. government has misused census data in the past. The U.S. Census Bureau is prohibited by law from sharing data with other government agencies. This restriction, however, has been repealed under the justification of national security needs; census data was used to fuel the unjust internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, and also contributed to the decimation of Muslim-



majority immigrant communities in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. Ultimately, given past abuses, we cannot be fully sure that census data identifying where Sikhs live in the United States could not be used to monitor or harm those same populations in the future--either by the decision of the U.S. government, or at the urging of other countries.

- b. **Effects on Sikh migrants and asylum-seekers:** Blurring the lines between religion and ethnicity could have consequences for Sikh migrants and asylum-seekers, especially given the current political environment regarding immigration in the United States and the increasing numbers of migrants and asylum seekers from Punjab. It is unclear whether declaring “Sikh” a racial group may pave the way for more discriminatory practices by the U.S. government or possibly dilute current religious protections available.
- c. **Further unintended consequences, including for other racial, ethnic, and religious groups:** Recent domestic and foreign policies (e.g. the so-called “Travel Ban” in the United States or India’s Citizenship [Amendment] Act) have shown the dangers of government agencies blending religion and ethnicity or race. Racial, ethnic, or nationality-based labels can become stand-ins for policies that legalize religious discrimination. There is also a global historical precedent of dangerous policies arising from governments’ decisions to treat religious identities as racial or ethnic labels, as was the case for Jewish populations across Europe in the 20th century.

**19. Will the census coding change or affect the ability for one to argue that their articles of faith are religious?** We cannot say with complete confidence how this change in census coding and reporting may affect future case law. However, after our own legal analysis and consulting with several different legal professionals, we **do not** anticipate that the census coding change will significantly dilute religious protections under the law, including those for articles of faith. Regardless, the Sikh Coalition will continue to relentlessly fight for Sikh Americans’ right to practice their faith freely.

## OTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT FILLING OUT THE CENSUS

**20. What happens if I don’t respond to the census?** Federal law requires that individuals who receive the census questionnaire return their answers. You can be fined up to \$100 for refusing to complete the census, and up to \$500 for intentionally providing false answers. Taking a few minutes to fill out the census avoids this penalty--and it also helps to ensure that your community is given the resources it needs.

**21. I will be away from home or out of the country while the census is being conducted--what should I do?** We recommend that you complete the census questionnaire online before leaving the country. If you cannot complete the census in the



United States, we advise that you submit your responses on a secure internet connection to ensure that your private information is not exposed.

**22. Do I include individuals that live part-time in India or abroad in the household size question?** The census should be filled out in accordance with you and the members of your household's "usual residence," which is defined as the place where you live and sleep most of the time.

**23. Will the census ask what language I speak? Is the census available in Punjabi?**

The U.S. Census Bureau conducts a variety of surveys and may ask about language at another time, but the 2020 census will not ask about which language you speak. The census form itself will not be available in Punjabi, but there is a [Punjabi language guide](#) that you can use to help you complete the form; the Sikh Coalition is working to provide several other helpful Punjabi available resources.

## HISTORY

**24. Is this the first time that the U.S. Census Bureau is collecting religious data?** The Census Bureau has not officially tracked any religious data since the 1950s, but before then, there were religious affiliation questions asked for approximately a century. In 1906, the Census of Religious Bodies was independently created to build off previous data collection efforts in the 1800s. This census effort was focused on gathering information about religious organizations in the United States, rather than an effort to collect data on individuals associated with one particular religion. The Census of Religious Bodies was conducted every 10 years until 1946 before the funding was discontinued by Congress before 1956.

The discontinuation of the Census of Religious Bodies resulted from the public debate over the Census Bureau asking questions about religion. Those opposed questions about religion raised concerns about the protection of religious liberty and privacy, and questioned whether the government was overstepping the constitutional boundaries separating church and state. Those who favored them, by contrast, saw value in learning about people's religious affiliations in states and localities, and argued that the data could help religious leaders in planning for future building programs and activities. In the 1960s and 1970s, there were other attempts to include specific questions about religious affiliation--but those efforts were stopped by loud opposition from religious and civil rights groups.

Through 2010, the Census Bureau has been allowed to ask questions about religious practices only on a voluntary basis in some population and household surveys, but it had not opted to do so. Up until now, the only information the Census Bureau had officially collected and published about religion and religious bodies is county-by-county



economic data on places of worship and other establishments operated by religious organizations.

- 25. If the U.S. Census Bureau cannot legally ask about religion, how has the “Sikh” coding been created?** The “Sikh” code was created because United Sikhs and others have spent years asking the Census Bureau to officially count and identify the Sikh community. The code defines Sikhs in the United States more broadly as a “distinct population” rather than just members of a religious group. This distinction is significant because it means that those who choose to write in “Sikh” are willingly sharing that information with the Census Bureau--rather than being required to do so, which would be against the law.

## THE SIKH COALITION AND FURTHER INVOLVEMENT IN THE CENSUS

- 26. Why is the Sikh Coalition helping the community to be counted for the census?** The Sikh Coalition constantly works to elevate the profile of Sikhs in the United States, and an accurate census count is essential to ensuring that our community is appropriately resourced and accurately represented. Accordingly, we are working to increase Sikh American participation in the census, share resources in Punjabi, and serve as an information resource to Sikh communities across the nation. This is also the first step in our larger effort to increase Sikh American civic engagement in 2020, including work to come later this year to “Get Out The Vote” in advance of the presidential election.
- 27. What can I do to help others be counted for the census?** The Sikh Coalition is looking for community members to help us table at gurdwaras across the country to help Sikh Americans fill out the census in a safe and supportive environment. If you would like to volunteer to help, please email us at [community@sikhcoalition.org](mailto:community@sikhcoalition.org). Additionally, you can seek employment with the U.S. Census Bureau if you speak Punjabi. Again, email us at [community@sikhcoalition.org](mailto:community@sikhcoalition.org) for more information--and be sure to let us know if you or someone in your sangat is already volunteering or working with the Census Bureau so that we can amplify the good work!
- 28. Who do I contact if I have questions about completing the census?** Reach out to [community@sikhcoalition.org](mailto:community@sikhcoalition.org) if you have any questions about the census; you can also visit our website [here](#), or see the U.S. Census Bureau’s official guide to the census in [English](#) and [Punjabi](#).

