

2022

British Sikh Report

An Insight Into The British Sikh Community
Cost of Living Special



Impact of cost-of-living 'tsunami' on the Sikh community - Jagbir Jhutti-Johal OBE, Professor of Sikh Studies

Background

COVID-19 impacted the UK economy as a whole¹ and highlighted the socio-economic inequalities within society. Throughout the pandemic it was reported that minority ethnic groups have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19² with reference to health outcomes, access to working from home, access to education because of issues regarding access to technology and the internet, and access to outdoor green spaces.

In 2022 the inequalities exposed by COVID-19 are being further exacerbated by the impact of the UK leaving the European Union (Brexit), the climate crisis across the globe, the continuing stop-start strict lockdowns in China, and the war in Ukraine, all of which has resulted in increasing food, petrol and energy prices resulting in a cost-of-living crisis.



Packing bags for lorry drivers on Christmas Eve 2020

Energy Price Caps

In August 2022 it was reported that inflation, as measured by 'the Consumer Prices Index (CPI), rose by 10.1% in the 12 months to July 2022, up from 9.4% in June³. In September 2022, the British Government intervened under the new Prime Minister, Liz Truss, to introduce an Energy Price Guarantee to limit the price that suppliers can charge for each unit of energy for households until autumn 2024, with similar support for businesses until April 2023. A variety of grants and rebates also appear as part of the plan to reduce the impact of the energy price increases.

However, for a typical household, it still means that an annual bill will be about £2,500 from 1st October 2022, which is more than twice the amount it was in 2021:

The amount you actually pay depends on the amount of energy you use

How might your bill work out?



Examples are illustrative with prices based on energy price guarantee rates and customers with 2019 median usage, paying for dual fuel by direct debit.

Source: UK Government



'What the new Liz Truss energy plan means for you.'
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-62833623>⁴

Rising costs are already having severe impacts on poorer communities and those on benefits. 'Surging inflation means benefits for working families and the unemployed are at their lowest level in more than a decade.'⁵

Impact on wider society

Despite the current level of state intervention, great concerns remain about how vulnerable people, those with illnesses and disabilities⁶ and larger families will be hardest hit by the costs of living crisis.

*'A miserable winter is still on the cards for millions of households with inflation at a 40-year-high of 9.9 per cent, sending the price of consumer goods and fuel rocketing while wages stagnate'*⁷

A 2022 report by Joseph Rowntree Foundation⁸ highlighted:

- Low-income families have fallen behind on payments by an average of £1,600
- About 7 million households - equivalent to every family in the north of England - have missed out on essentials like heating, toiletries or showers because they couldn't afford it this year, or didn't have enough money for food last month
- 1.3m low-income households (11%) have used credit to cover essentials this year

The ONS⁹ highlighted that

- Around three in four adults (77%) reported feeling very or somewhat worried about the rising costs of living.
- Those most likely to report feeling very or somewhat worried about the rising costs of living included women (81%, compared with 73% of men); those aged 30 to 49 years (82%) and 50 to 69 years (77%), compared with 70% of those aged 70 years and above; disabled people (82%, compared with 75% of non-disabled people); and those living with a dependent child aged 0 to 4 years (90%, compared with 76% of non-parents or parents not living with a dependent child).

The impact of soaring energy and food prices are already being felt by many families on low incomes who are already being forced to make tough choices, but as prices continue to rise throughout the year many are turning to food banks and other charities for support. Food banks have reported an increase or significant increase in the need for their services since the start of 2022. The Trussell Trust in their mid-year statistics report reported that

*"Between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022, food banks in the Trussell Trust's UK wide network distributed over 2.1 million emergency food parcels to people in crisis. This is an increase of 14% compared to the same period in 2019/20. 832,000 of these parcels went to children."*¹⁰

Alongside this, a national charity Women's Aid reported that the cost of living is preventing women from fleeing domestic abuse.

"The current cost-of-living crisis has been devastating to survivors of domestic abuse."

"We know that domestic abuse and economic abuse go hand in hand, with abusers often controlling every aspect of a woman's life."

*"The soaring energy and food costs will leave many women more vulnerable to abuse."*¹¹

A *Guardian* report highlighted how 'City workers have received double-digit wage rises while people on the lowest incomes were paid annual increases of just 1% in the last year, and how that means that better-paid workers will be able to protect themselves from the cost-of-living crisis.' The report also highlighted how Professional, scientific and IT sector workers also saw wage growth peak in February at 12.7%.¹²

The cost-of-living crisis will "deepen racial inequality" as soaring prices disproportionately impact people from ethnic minority groups. The *London Poverty Profile* revealed 27 per cent of households in the capital are living in poverty. For Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, the proportion of people living in poverty is far higher at 39 per cent - almost four in 10.¹³

Impact on British Sikh Community

What is clear is that we are again in a crisis which is having an impact on all communities and this is true for the Sikh community.

The above data from the ONS and Joseph Rowntree Foundation is also echoed by the British Sikh Report data collected in early 2022, before the latest increases in fuel prices were announced. Even then, the data highlights that Sikhs were experiencing the same issues as other members of the British population, and are likely to be doing so even more now.

32% of British Sikhs said that they were finding it difficult or very difficult to pay bills (40% of women

and 25% of men). 75% reported that their gas and electricity bills had increased, and 20% said that their rent or mortgages had increased. Over 70% reported being hit by increasing food and fuel prices, with 35% shopping around more than before to find the cheapest prices. 50% of women and 40% of men reported spending less on non-essentials. Over a third are using less gas and electricity, and also cutting back on non-essential car journeys. 41% reported finding it somewhat difficult to afford energy bills, and another 14% found it very difficult.

36% of women and 30% of men said that they would not be able to save any money in the coming year. 26% reported having had to borrow more this year than last year, and a similar percentage said that they would not be able to pay an unexpected bill of over £850. 11% reported a reduction in their income, and 23% are now using their savings to cope with living costs. 13% now have more credit in the form of loans, overdrafts and credit card debts, and 5% are also borrowing money from friends and family. 9% reported working longer hours to help cope with increasing costs.

The Sikh community is a successful community and the vast majority of members have not normally relied on food banks or charity. Instead, they have provided food and support to others in need due to the theological concept of *seva* and *vand chakana* (selfless service) which enable spiritual growth and facilitate moral and ethical living. They emphasize an individual's social responsibility to ensure the well-being of society.¹⁴

*In the midst of this world, do seva, and you shall be given a place of honour in the Court of the Lord. (Guru Granth Sahib: Ang 26)*¹⁵

However, in the current situation some Sikh families (1%) have said that they are starting to use foodbanks and are using them more.

Like in all communities conversations are being had by middle-aged Sikhs in well to do jobs on how they will support children and ageing parents through this cost of living crisis.

The Sikh community has also engaged in social action in the United Kingdom. The theological teaching of *seva* (selfless service) has always encouraged the notion of "Big Society" and social engagement. As a result, all Sikh *Gurdwaras* have used this ethical requirement as a means of bolstering local communities through civic engagement, whether it

be "inward civic engagement" aimed at improving the wellbeing of the Sikh community or "outreach or outward civic engagement" service for the good of the wider community. It was noted in the 2016 British Sikh Report that "Sikhs in the UK are estimated to donate about £125 million to charity per annum and spend over 65 million hours each year on voluntary activities."¹⁶

A distinctive Sikh activity of social action is *langar*. *Gurdwaras* in the Diaspora serve *langar* to non-Sikhs, performing a function analogous to food banks and soup kitchens who support homeless people and those working in low-paid jobs.¹⁷ In the United Kingdom, however, in recent decades we have seen a new role for *langar* in response to welfare cuts: *langar* is now being taken out of the *Gurdwara* by young Sikhs to feed the homeless. One organisation that has done this is Midlands Langar Sewa, which feeds the homeless in Birmingham. Their activity has branched out into other areas, such as Coventry and Leicester. In London, there is the Nishkam Sikh Welfare and Awareness Team (SWAT) which provides food to the homeless every day at various locations across the South East. Another example is Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara in Gravesend, which decided to take *Langar* to those who needed it when the country went into lockdown in March 2020, and *Gurdwaras* had to close their doors. They delivered *Langar* daily to vulnerable persons of all communities, as well as to NHS staff working long shifts, local care homes and a hospice. When lorry drivers became stuck at Dover at Christmas 2020, they also supplied thousands of meals to their lorries stuck on the M20 motorway. In total, over 160,000 meals were delivered during the lockdowns.

These organisations cater overwhelmingly to individuals who are not Sikh. Such groups work with humility and the absence of ego, hence a lack of self-promotion or engagement in politics, because to do so would be to take away from the religious element of the activity, which is selfless service.

Vand Chakana: "Eat after sharing with others"

This principle encompasses acts of *seva* (selfless service) and compassion. People are encouraged to work hard and honestly for a living and to share the fruits of their labor.¹⁸ As we saw earlier, the highest objective of human life is the remembrance of God's name, so there is a great emphasis on *seva* and the concept of selflessness (*nishkamta*). Although the concept of selflessness is present in Hinduism and

other religions of India, the Sikh Gurus make selfless service the central tenet of the Sikh Dharam and link it to the ideal of God-realization. *Seva* mandates a complete dedication to giving without expecting any material or spiritual reward in return. Such service cultivates qualities such as altruism, commitment, and sincerity. It is those individuals who serve without any desire for reward who achieve liberation because they destroy their ego by cultivating humility and the ultimate union with God. Furthermore, there are many references in the Sikh Sacred Scripture that illustrate the importance of service to one's Guru - service which can be interpreted as service to the eternal Guru by following the teachings presented in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. It is emphasized that through this service, one can become closer to God and gain peace.

Sikhs are also taught that they must then share their earnings (*Vand Chakana*) with others.

O Nanak, in the world hereafter, one only receives what one gives to the needy in this world from their earnings and labour. (Guru Granth Sahib: Ang 472)

A minimum of a tenth is stipulated (*Dasvandh*), but it is also reminded that in essence, one's body, mind and wealth all belong to God, and therefore there is no limit to what can be shared with others.

However, this is not always possible due to personal circumstances and external factors. Harmeet Singh, the General Secretary of Sri Guru Singh Sabha Southall with reference to COVID-19 noted in 2020 how 'For Sikhs, donating 10 per cent of income is a core tenet of the faith, but as people lose jobs and struggle financially this becomes difficult.'¹⁹

This is true in 2022. As inflation erodes real disposable income people are giving less to charity because of the rising cost of living. Like all communities, members of the Sikh community have also been affected by rising inflation, higher food and fuel prices which is impacting their donations to *Gurdwaras* and Charities. Although as during the pandemic, faith communities are once again supporting members of their own and other faith communities, this time they themselves are also not immune to the rising costs of food and utility bills. The cost of producing langar to serve at the *Gurdwara* or distribute to the homeless is proving difficult due to rising energy and fuel costs and rising food prices alongside an increase in footfall.²⁰

In terms of volunteering to cook and distribute food, the cost-of-living crisis is having a negative impact

because less people are volunteering because they are working more to make ends meet.

Nevertheless, as inflation continues to rise and donations diminish Sikhs will continue to serve those in need because they will be reminded:

O Nanak, how shall I tell them this? Without the karma of good deeds, they are only destroying themselves (Guru Granth Sahib: Ang 147).

and failing to do so:

With great effort and exertion, the miser works to gather in the riches of Maya.

He does not give anything in charity or generosity, and he does not serve the Saints; his wealth does not do him any good at all. (Guru Granth Sahib: Ang 712)

It is highly likely that those Sikhs who have greater financial security will increase the level of their support for others due to the conscious attitude towards service and charity, and whilst the *sangat* (congregation) themselves may feel the pinch of financial stress and *Gurdwaras* are facing increasing overhead costs, Sikhs who can afford it will continue to do their duty and serve those who have been negatively impacted by this cost of living crisis.

In conclusion, the reality is that currently rapidly increasing living costs may be a greater financial challenge for some Sikhs than the Covid pandemic, and it is also clear that like the rest of the UK population many Sikhs, especially pensioners and those on Universal Credit will feel the increased living costs. Middle income Sikhs are not immune to the cost-of-living crisis and will also struggle to afford the 80% energy price cap hike. In an interview in late August, the then Chancellor, Mr Nadhim Zahawi highlighted that:

*"If you are a senior nurse or a senior teacher on £45,000 a year, you're having your energy bills go up by 80% and will probably rise even higher in the new year – it's really hard."*²¹

In her first speech as Prime Minister, Liz Truss has made it clear that tackling energy prices will be one of her priorities, and action is being taken to ensure that the impact isn't felt as strongly as it could be. However, it will take some time before we know whether the steps taken have been enough to help people cope with the other aspects of the costs of living crisis.

According to the British Sikh Report 2022 survey 60% of respondents have a graduate level qualification or above and 62% are in full time employment, with a further 9% in part time employment and 10% are self-employed.

1. British Sikhs have: an 81% employment rate, compared to about 75% for the country (based on the ONS' Labour Force Survey).
2. The top sectors in employment for British Sikhs in 2022 are Public Service, Charity and Social Work (7%); Healthcare (14%); Teaching and Education (9%); Accountancy and Financial Management (6%); and IT and Technology (8%).²²

Whatever someone's status is it is clear that greater support will be required, and whilst the 'make-do and help others' Sikh attitude is helpful as part of the 'Big Society' approach, some Sikhs will undoubtedly fall through the gaps because of the general assumption that all Sikhs are financially well off. It is imperative that we look beyond stereotypes and assumptions about Sikhs, and this is where the changing data about British Sikhs is fundamental to a better understanding of a diverse, dynamic and complex community such as the British Sikh community.



Langar being prepared and delivered at Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara (Gravesend) and delivered to vulnerable persons, NHS staff and lorry drivers stuck at Dover during the lockdowns.



Notes

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- ² Butcher, Benjamin & Massey, Joel. 19 June 2020. 'Why are more people from BAME backgrounds dying from coronavirus?' BBC <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52219070>. Also See 'Covid-19 and how it affects Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people and communities'. *Race Equality Foundation* <https://raceequalityfoundation.org.uk/health-care/lockdown-2-briefing/> [Accessed 21 July 2022]
- ³ King, Andy. 17 August 2022. 'Consumer price inflation, UK: July 2022.' *Office for National Statistics* <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/consumerpriceinflation/july2022> [Accessed 30 August 2022]
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- ⁵ 'Charities underpin the UK's social safety net as cost of living crisis bites.' *Financial Times* <https://www.ft.com/content/4a1c4833-30e5-47e3-acd0-4588c83b53c0> [Accessed 8 August 2022]
- ⁶ Otte, Jedidajah. 20 Jul 2022. 'I see price rises of 25-50%: how inflation is affecting people with a disability or illness.' *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/jul/20/how-inflation-disability-illness-uk> [Accessed 30 August 2022]
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- ⁸ Joseph Rowntree Foundation. 29th June 2022. New evidence of the 'year of financial fear' being endured by UK's low-income families. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/press/new-evidence-%E2%80%98year-financial-fear%E2%80%99-being-endured-uk%E2%80%99s-low-income-families> [Accessed 21 July 2022]
- ⁹ Office for National Statistics. 10 June 2022. 'Worries about the rising costs of living, Great Britain: April to May 2022.' <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/worriesabouttherisingcostsoflivinggreatbritain/apriltomay2022> [Accessed 21 July 2022]
- ¹⁰ The Trussell Trust End of Year Stats 2022. <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/> [Accessed 1 August 2022]
- ¹¹ Lggulden, Caroline. 1 August 2022. 'I visited this refuge centre in Leeds twice a week – they helped rebuild my life, reveals Mel B.' *The Sun*. https://www.thesun.co.uk/tvandshowbiz/19390252/women-refuge-centre-leeds-domestic-violence-melb/?utm_medium=Social&utm_campaign=sunmaintwitter&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1659421865-1 [Accessed 1 August 2022] Also see Davidge, Sarah. 'The cost of living is preventing women from fleeing domestic abuse.' <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/the-cost-of-living/> [Accessed 8th August 2022]
- ¹² Pullan, Phillip. 8th August 2022. 'City workers get double-digit wage rises while lowest-paid see 1% increase.' *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/aug/08/city-workers-get-double-digit-wage-rises-while-lowest-paid-see-1-increase> [Accessed 8 August 2022]
- ¹³ Mcrae, Isabella. 28 Jul 2022. 'Cost of living crisis 'deepening racial inequality' with 4 in 10 non-white Londoners in poverty.' *The Big Issue*. <https://www.bigissue.com/news/social-justice/cost-of-living-crisis-racial-inequality-poverty-london/> [Accessed 1 August 2022]
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- ¹⁸ "One who works for what he eats, and gives some of what he has - O Nanak, he knows the Path." *Ibid.*, 1245
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- ²⁰ Monday 4 April 2022. 'Food, fuel and faith: The impact of the cost of living crisis in Cardiff's Sikh community.' <https://www.itv.com/news/wales/2022-04-04/how-the-cost-of-living-crisis-is-affecting-cardiffs-sikh-community> Also see 3 June 2022 'Gurdwara offers free meals amid cost of living crisis.' https://www.asianimage.co.uk/news/north_of_england/20185524.ramgarhia-gurdwara-bradford-offering-langar-amid-cost-living-crisis/ [Accessed 1 August 2022]. See also Religion and Media Centre Podcast with Harmeet Singh Gill <https://t.co/oDVprXEpDK>
- ²¹ ITV News. 27 August 2022 Chancellor Nadhim Zahawi warns middle-income earners will struggle with rising energy bills too <https://www.itv.com/news/2022-08-26/chancellor-suggests-those-on-45000-could-struggle-with-sky-high-bills> [Accessed 1st September 2022]
- ²² British Sikh Report survey data 2022 and ONS LFC [Accessed 5th September 2022]

Executive summary

Welcome to the British Sikh Report 2022. This is the ninth in our series of strategic documents created by Sikhs about Sikhs, and for everyone with an interest in the lives of Sikhs in Britain.

The last 12 months have seen immense change throughout the United Kingdom. Having emerged from the pandemic, we are now in the midst of a costs-of-living crisis which is impacting everyone within society, and we have looked at both of these areas within this report. A new head of state in King Charles III and our third Prime Minister in 3 years has added to this feeling of great flux, and the potential impact of this on collective identity is something that we hope to explore in our next report.

BSR is a very well established source of robust and unrivalled statistical information about Sikhs living in Britain. This highly influential annual document has been quoted by MPs and Peers, referred to in research and white papers regarding faith in modern society, and used by public authorities and private companies in identifying the needs of British Sikhs.

Our experienced team has worked with a large and diverse group of Sikh organisations throughout the country to create the questionnaire and collect the data. We are deeply grateful to everyone who has helped us along the way and volunteered their valuable time during such a challenging period of time.

The findings from this year's report include:

- *Costs of Living Crisis*
 - *38% of Sikh women and 25% of Sikh men are finding it difficult to pay their bills*
 - *88% of British Sikhs have had their costs of living increase over the last month*
 - *36% of Sikhs are cutting back on non-essential car journeys*
 - *35% of Sikhs are shopping around more to save money*
- *Covid-19 pandemic*
 - *59% of British Sikhs have had Covid-19 since the start of the pandemic*
 - *21% of British Sikhs believe they have long Covid*
 - *29% of Sikhs knew at least 5 people or more who died of Covid during the pandemic*
 - *29% of Sikhs volunteered during the pandemic*

British Sikhs are a strongly proud community with a distinct identity, and whilst some of their concerns are clearly unique to Sikhs, others reflect national trends as can be seen across these pages. As such, this document provides an unparalleled snapshot of what it means to be a Sikh in Britain today.

We hope that you find the British Sikh Report 2022 enlightening, interesting, and most of all, insightful.

You can read and download the full report at britishsikhreport.org