

World
Watch
Research

Venezuela: Full Country Dossier

February 2022



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Introduction

World Watch List 2022

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
1	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	15.0	98	94	93	94	93
2	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	13.1	96	94	94	94	94
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.5	91	92	92	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.2	16.3	11.5	91	92	90	87	86
5	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	5.2	88	87	85	86	85
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.6	11.1	88	88	87	86	86
7	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.3	14.5	14.4	16.7	87	85	80	80	77
8	Pakistan	13.6	14.0	15.1	14.9	13.1	16.7	87	88	88	87	86
9	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.6	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	86	85	85	85
10	India	12.7	12.7	12.9	14.7	13.3	15.6	82	83	83	83	81
11	Saudi Arabia	15.1	15.1	15.0	15.9	16.7	3.1	81	78	79	77	79
12	Myanmar	12.4	11.5	13.8	13.4	13.1	14.8	79	74	73	71	65
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	14.3	13.6	15.7	8.5	79	79	85	87	87
14	Iraq	14.0	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	6.9	78	82	76	79	86
15	Syria	12.9	13.8	13.5	14.3	13.9	9.3	78	81	82	82	76
16	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.7	15.8	16.5	0.4	77	77	78	78	78
17	China	12.6	9.8	12.2	14.4	15.5	11.1	76	74	70	65	57
18	Qatar	14.2	14.1	11.1	13.0	14.3	7.2	74	67	66	62	63
19	Vietnam	11.3	9.7	12.7	14.1	14.5	8.7	71	72	72	70	69
20	Egypt	12.7	13.2	11.5	12.7	10.8	10.0	71	75	76	76	70
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	14.1	11.8	15.6	1.7	71	71	73	74	73
22	Algeria	14.0	14.0	11.1	13.4	14.1	4.1	71	70	73	70	58
23	Mauritania	14.3	13.9	13.1	14.0	14.1	0.9	70	71	68	67	57
24	Mali	9.4	8.2	13.9	10.3	12.8	15.0	70	67	66	68	59
25	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	13.3	15.7	0.6	69	70	70	69	68
26	Laos	12.0	10.3	13.2	13.3	14.1	5.9	69	71	72	71	67
27	Morocco	13.1	13.8	10.8	12.8	14.2	3.9	69	67	66	63	51
28	Indonesia	11.3	11.5	11.5	11.0	9.6	13.5	68	63	60	65	59
29	Bangladesh	11.8	10.7	12.9	11.3	10.2	11.3	68	67	63	58	58
30	Colombia	11.5	8.8	13.1	11.0	9.9	13.3	68	67	62	58	56
31	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.6	9.6	11.4	15.6	68	66	68	70	61
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.6	12.1	14.8	68	67	66	48	-
33	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.9	7.2	12.8	14.8	68	62	60	52	45
34	Bhutan	13.4	12.4	11.7	13.7	13.8	1.7	67	64	61	64	62
35	Tunisia	11.9	12.7	10.6	11.3	13.4	6.5	66	67	64	63	62
36	Oman	13.8	14.0	10.3	13.2	13.4	1.5	66	63	62	59	57
37	Cuba	12.3	8.1	12.6	13.2	14.0	5.9	66	62	52	49	49
38	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.3	12.3	9.8	66	65	63	65	62
39	Jordan	12.9	14.0	11.0	12.3	12.5	3.0	66	64	64	65	66
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	12.0	15.6	66	64	56	55	33
41	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	11.3	7.9	12.5	15.6	65	63	43	43	-
42	Turkey	12.6	11.5	11.4	13.2	11.6	4.6	65	69	63	66	62
43	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	10.8	10.3	12.6	65	64	60	61	59
44	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.4	65	64	60	54	38
45	Tajikistan	13.8	12.3	12.0	12.6	13.2	0.7	65	66	65	65	65
46	Brunei	14.8	14.5	10.3	11.0	13.2	0.6	64	64	63	63	64
47	Kazakhstan	13.4	11.6	11.1	12.6	13.5	1.7	64	64	64	63	63
48	Nepal	12.4	9.8	9.9	13.6	12.7	5.2	64	66	64	64	64
49	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	63	62	60	61
50	Malaysia	12.5	14.3	11.5	11.6	10.2	3.3	63	63	62	60	65

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
51	Kenya	11.7	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	11.1	63	62	61	61	62
52	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.9	11.4	11.3	9.4	7.8	63	62	65	58	57
53	Comoros	12.7	11.1	11.2	12.4	14.2	0.9	63	62	57	56	56
54	UAE	13.4	13.6	10.1	11.8	12.2	1.3	62	62	60	58	58
55	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	13.7	61	58	55	52	53
56	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.9	9.3	11.0	13.4	3.3	60	56	57	57	57
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.4	9.8	10.2	12.0	0.9	59	58	60	57	60
58	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	11.1	10.0	12.2	0.7	59	56	56	56	56
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.1	11.1	10.4	12.0	1.5	58	58	57	56	54
60	Bahrain	12.5	13.2	9.1	11.1	10.2	0.9	57	56	55	55	57
61	Nicaragua	9.1	5.6	11.1	11.8	11.3	7.6	56	51	41	41	-
62	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.6	12.3	2.2	56	57	60	60	51
63	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.6	55	53	56	48	40
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.1	52	48	48	43	-
65	Venezuela	5.6	4.5	11.2	9.4	11.1	9.6	51	39	42	41	34
66	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	10.1	11.4	7.8	51	46	43	42	-
67	Rwanda	8.1	5.5	6.7	10.3	10.1	9.3	50	42	42	41	-
68	Honduras	7.2	5.1	10.5	7.7	9.2	8.7	48	46	39	38	-
69	Uganda	8.1	4.6	7.4	6.7	9.1	11.7	48	47	48	47	46
70	El Salvador	7.7	4.6	10.7	5.7	9.1	7.2	45	42	38	30	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	2.4	44	43	41	42	-
72	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.7	44	43	43	43	-
73	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	2.0	43	47	45	46	-
74	South Sudan	5.7	0.9	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	43	44	44	-
75	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	7.9	2.0	42	42	42	43	-
76	Israel	9.8	8.4	5.6	6.6	6.6	4.3	41	40	38	39	40

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 1 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2022 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of In-country networks, Open Doors country researchers, External experts, WWR analysts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that – as in the previous reporting period – WWL 2022 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

WWL 2022 Situation in brief / Venezuela

Brief country details

Venezuela: Population (UN estimate for 2021)	Christians	Chr%
33,558,000	30,859,000	92.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

Venezuela: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2022	51	65
WWL 2021	39	-
WWL 2020	42	69
WWL 2019	41	71
WWL 2018	34	-

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Venezuela: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Political parties, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Organized crime cartels or networks, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Communist and post - Communist oppression	Government officials, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Political parties, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups
Organized corruption and crime	Government officials, Political parties, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Organized crime cartels or networks

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

The authorities do not allow government opposition or criticism. This means that church leaders, Christian groups and Christian organizations risk government action against them if:

- i) their religious activities involve denouncing irregularities and illegalities of the regime (including corruption and human rights violations);
- ii) they support opposition leaders;
- iii) they carry out humanitarian work.

Such government action can lead to threats, church attacks, defamation, arbitrary arrests, surveillance, censorship, limitation in the use of public services, and lack of access to goods such as food and medicines. Due to the socio-economic crisis in the country, the government takes advantage of the lack of basic goods and services needed by all citizens in order to manipulate them. Easy access to food, medicine and education is reserved for supporters of the ruling party.

Additionally, children face continual indoctrination in Socialist/Communist ideology in state schools thus violating:

- i) the right of parents to educate their children according to their Christian convictions;
- ii) the right of the Church in school education.

Christians have also faced threats and violence carried out by criminal groups (mainly Colombian guerrillas) acting with impunity (often in support of the regime) and hindering the social assistance provided by churches to the neediest.

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **6 January 2021/Barquisemeto:** The Christian coordinator of youth ministry Luigi Manganiello discovered some criminals who had broken into the De La Salle school in Barquisemeto. When the 49 year old [confronted](#) them, they beat him to death. This was the second time staff had been killed by groups entering the church-run vocational school (Religion Digital, 8 January 2021).

- **February 2021/Mérida:** A church-run rehabilitation center for drug addicts in Merida was broken into by members of a local criminal group. Four young male residents [were attacked](#): They were beaten, had cuts made on their skin in the shape of a cross, and were forced to eat pages of the Bible. According to the director of the Center, Pastor Cristian Dugarte, he had previously received threats from the criminal group demanding that the center cease activities in the area (Sandy Aveledo, 17 February 2021).
- **14 July 2021/Caracas:** In the La Vega Catholic parish, a catechist and a Caritas worker were [arrested](#) by the members of the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) and the Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM) on account of their human rights activities in the local community. Although the catechist was released on the same day, the Caritas worker was held longer (Aleteia, 17 July 2021).

Specific examples of positive developments

The Venezuelan churches are greatly respected and trusted among the general population, not least due to their tireless humanitarian work in the face of regime hostility.

External Links - Situation in brief

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: confronted - https://www.religiondigital.org/america/Asesinan-religioso-lasallano-Venezuela-profesor-pastoral-juvenil_0_2303169666.html
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: were attacked - <https://sandyaveledo.com/con-tubos-palos-y-cuchillos-atacaron-a-evangelicos-en-merida-los-marcaron-y-les-hicieron-comer-la-biblia/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: arrested - <https://es.aleteia.org/2021/07/17/venezuela-iglesia-denuncia-detencion-arbitraria-de-un-miembro-de-caritas-y-una-catequista/>

WWL 2022: Keys to understanding / Venezuela

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International country report	AI 2021	https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/	
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/country_profiles/default.stm	
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2020	BTI 2020	https://bti-project.org/en/home.html?cb=00000	
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/	
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2020	EIU 2020	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/democracy-index-2020.pdf	
FFP's Fragile States Index 2021	FSI 2021	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	
Freedom House's 2021 Democracy index	Freedom House/Democracy 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2021 Global Freedom index	Freedom House/Global Freedom 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores	
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2020 report	Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2020	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores	
Garda World country report	Garda World	https://www.garda.com/crisis24/country-reports	
Human Rights Watch World Report 2021	HRW 2021	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021	
Internet World Stats 2021	IWS 2021	https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm	
RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index	World Press Freedom 2020	https://rsf.org/en/ranking	
Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index	CPI 2020	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/afg	
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators	HDI	http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries	
US State Department's 2020 International Religious Freedom country reports	IRFR 2020	https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/	
USCIRF 2021 country reports	USCIRF 2021	https://www.uscirf.gov/countries	
World Bank country report	World Bank	https://www.worldbank.org/en/where-we-work	

Recent history

In 1998, Hugo Chavez was elected president of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. His 'Bolivarian Revolution' brought a new Constitution, along with socialist and populist economic and social policies funded by high oil prices, and an increasingly anti-USA foreign policy. Shortly after taking power, he revised the Constitution to extend his power for “fulfilling” his promise of a radical transformation of the country. He appointed a new Congress, a new National Electoral Council and a new Supreme Court. He ruled for 14 years, from 1999 until his death in 2013.

Nicolás Maduro, Chavez's right-hand man and former vice-president, took over the presidency in 2013. The May 2018 presidential elections for the period 2019-2025 was won by Maduro and his United Socialist Party of Venezuela. Due to various irregularities identified by independent observers and the opposition, the legitimacy of the process was [questioned](#) both nationally and internationally. The National Assembly - the only major institution controlled by the opposition (until the end of 2020) declared the re-election invalid and in January 2019, Juan Guaidó, the president of the National Assembly [proclaimed](#) himself president in charge. His goal was not only to overthrow Nicolás Maduro, but also to install a transitional government and allow free elections. However, despite his broad international support, Mr Guaidó does not wield much power in practical terms, not to mention the corruption scandals and lack of transparency in the handling of Venezuelan assets abroad. In December 2020, Maduro [regained](#) control of the National Assembly through legislative elections boycotted by the opposition parties (AA, 7 December 2020).

Like most countries in the region, the first cases of coronavirus were identified in the country in March 2020, which led to the declaration of a state of emergency and various restrictions on movement. Collectives and the security forces used “[any means necessary](#)” (including violent abuse and other human rights violations) against those they accused of violating national lockdown measures (Reuters, 7 August 2020).

The economy has continued to deteriorate, worsening shortages of virtually everything from electricity and water to fuel and household supplies. Despite the COVID-19 restrictions, the difficult socio-economic context led to widespread [demonstrations](#) (OVCS, September 2021) and [large-scale emigration](#) (R4V, November 2021).

Political and legal landscape

The [Constitution](#) guarantees freedom of religion and worship as long as it does not oppose morality, good customs and public order (CNE, September 2021). Likewise, it guarantees the independence and autonomy of churches and religious confessions, with no limitations other than those derived from the Constitution and the law. Parents have the right to have their sons or daughters receive the religious education that is in accordance with their convictions. Nonetheless, the Constitution also states that no one may invoke religious beliefs or disciplines to evade compliance with the law or to prevent another from exercising their rights. In practice, regulations like the “Law against Hate for Peaceful Coexistence and Tolerance” are used to repress dissent. This law [limits](#) freedom of speech, including faith-based manifestations as long

contradict or criticize the government (Albaciudad, November 2017). Similarly, Administrative Ruling ONCDOFT-001-2021 has been questioned, since it obliges national and foreign non-profit organizations (NGOs) active in Venezuela to enter details in a special registry, [revealing](#) not only all donor organizations and their beneficiaries, but also personal information concerning their members (BDO, 17 May, 2021). Church leaders and confessional organizations have expressed concern since members or activities perceived as opposing the interests of the government may be sanctioned.

According to a [poll](#) carried out by Datincorp, 63% of respondents declare themselves dissatisfied with Nicolás Maduro in his performance as a politician, and 77% declared themselves dissatisfied with Guaidó (El Nacional, 9 August 2021). An IPSOS survey on the perception of government management showed that President Maduro only reached a [6%](#) approval level, on a par with Miguel Díaz-Canel of Cuba and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (VOA, 6 August 2021). The average citizen does not feel satisfactorily represented by either Maduro or the opposition.

Nicolás Maduro managed to consolidate power by undermining democracy and the rule of law. His political party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) took control of the National Assembly, the last independent branch of government, in January 2021. The PSUV and its allies [won](#) 256 out of 277 congressional seats in flawed elections held in December 2020 (BBC News, 5 January 2021).

The Center for Justice and Peace (CEPAZ) [reported](#) in July 2020 that President Maduro had approved the creation of irregular groups to carry out violent acts against dissents and blocked citizen access to justice and due process, and used the state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic to step-up opposition persecution. Indeed, both he and his supporters regard all forms of opposition as state treason and has used state security forces to [quash dissent](#) among politicians, military officers, civil leaders and others (Congressional Research Service, 8 December 2021).

On 27 September 2019, the United Nations Human Rights Council set up an Independent International [Fact-Finding Mission](#) for a period of one year, to assess alleged human rights violations committed in Venezuela since 2014. The mandate was extended by the Council on 6 October 2020 for an additional two years, until September 2022 (OHCHR, October 2020). A total of 55 Venezuelan officials are subject to EU sanctions following action taken against a further 19 [officials](#) in Venezuela accused of undermining democracy or carrying out rights abuses (US News, 22 February 2021). Most importantly, in November 2021, the International Criminal Court [opened](#) an investigation into crimes against humanity in Venezuela (The Guardian, 4 November 2021).

In the WWL 2022 reporting period, attempts were made by the political opposition (Unitary Platform) and the Venezuelan government to [resume](#) dialogue, this time in Mexico City, facilitated by Norway and accompanied by Russia and the Netherlands (DW, August 2021). A first round of negotiations was held on 13-15 August 2021. A second round, held on 3-6 September, achieved “a [partial agreement](#) for the social protection of the Venezuelan people”, aimed at defusing the economic crisis and humanitarian emergency gripping the country (AA, 7 September 2021).

In the days prior to the third round (starting on 24 September 2021), the Venezuelan government announced that Colombian businessman Alex Saab was to be part of its official delegation, despite the fact that he had been arrested in Cape Verde and was about to be extradited to the USA. This generated a lot of [tension](#) in the opposition ranks but Saab's participation was finally accepted (RTVE, 25 September 2021). However, after solving this issue, the third round of talks was postponed to 27 September due to a [diplomatic disagreement](#) with the Norwegian mediator about the human rights situation in Venezuela (Peoples Dispatch, 29 September 2021). Topic for discussion was the constitutional rule of law in the country (particularly in judicial and institutional areas) . No date was set for a further round of talks.

In October 2021, when Saab was extradited to the USA accused of money laundering, President Maduro reacted by [withdrawing](#) from any further negotiations with the Venezuelan opposition (Reuters, 18 October 2021). The proximity to the the local and regional elections in November 2021 increased the political tension between the - fragmented - opposition and the president.

In a situation where the government allows no dissenting voices, many Christians, especially those critical of the party's authoritarian practices and violations of democratic principles, are under surveillance and considered enemies of the country.

Religious landscape

Venezuela: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	30,859,000	92.0
Muslim	112,000	0.3
Hindu	740	0.0
Buddhist	42,300	0.1
Ethno-religionist	230,000	0.7
Jewish	7,400	0.0
Bahai	204,000	0.6
Atheist	78,600	0.2
Agnostic	1,657,000	4.9
Other	367,700	1.1
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

According to the World Christian Database 2021, although Christians make up over 92% of the population, it is important to note that an estimated 5% of the population identify themselves as agnostic/atheist.

The Catholic Church is one of the oldest and most established institutions in the country, as well as being the only church denomination with legal status. According to a poll carried out by Datincorp in 2021, churches enjoy the greatest levels of [trust](#) in society (El Nacional, 9 August 2021), mainly due to its humanitarian work, especially in the educational field.

Since Catholicism has the most historical roots in the country, the Catholic Church is the only denomination with a special agreement between the government and the Holy See in Rome. According to the US State Department (IRFR 2020), national law provides for Catholic chaplains to minister to the spiritual needs of Catholics serving in the armed forces. While there are no similar legal provisions for other religious groups, in practice there is also an evangelical chaplaincy. A large number of evangelical churches make up the Evangelical Council of Venezuela.

The government continues to seek rapprochement with factions of the evangelical church taking advantage of its fragmentation. In this way, the government seeks to [instrumentalize](#) the religiosity of the population, confuse believers with the use of religious references in political messages and thus improve its image and ensure electoral support (El País, 1 February 2019). As part of the ruling party's strategy for staying in power, it has [created](#) the office of 'Vice Presidency of Religious Affairs' and set up 'Pastoral Government Councils' throughout the country with the aim of integrating Christian groups in the running of regional and local governments (Alnavio, November 2021). The government also proposed founding an Evangelical Theological University, but, according to IRFR 2020, this initiative was rejected by both Catholic and Evangelical leaders, who stated that it was an attempt to “buy their conscience” and force them to support President Maduro.

It is important to remember that the Evangelical Church is made up of diverse groups, some of which support the ruling party, while others are neutral or stand clearly in opposition. The US State Department (IRFR 2020) reported that in response to the founding of the Venezuelan Interreligious Social Council by religious groups not associated with Maduro, the regime created its own National Religious Council. This included representatives of the Muslim, Jewish, Protestant and Afro-descendant communities, as well as the Anglican and Russian Orthodox Churches. According to the report, observers criticized the move as an attempt to politicize religious communities and create the appearance of support for the Maduro regime (as happens with the meetings between members of the Maduro regime and the Evangelical Christian Movement for Venezuela, a pro-Maduro organization). However, many evangelical and Baptist leaders of the Evangelical and Baptist churches refuse to recognize this movement and assume that its members receive benefits from the regime in exchange for political support. The government is known to provide churches allied to the regime easier registration and issuing of permits etc..

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government banned worship services until November 2020, a period of approximately 7 and a half months. As in many other countries, several churches [found ways](#) to provide spiritual care despite the ban (France 24, 14 September 2020). Catholic churches, for instance, [highlighted](#) the importance of visiting prisons, developing online resources and keeping the youthwork going (Vatican News, 2 July 2021). However, much depended on permits being granted by local or national authorities.

In practice, every person can profess their faith as long as it does not imply the slightest criticism of the government in power. Thus, any Christian religious leader, church or Christian group critical of the government, condemning corruption and human rights violations or denying the legitimacy of the president, is liable to be harassed by the government and regime sympathizers. Humanitarian aid distributed by Christian organizations has sometimes been deliberately blocked to prevent anti-government influence from spreading. Since the distribution of food or medicine is in government hands, this allows the regime to manipulate the population and obtain their support. Many desperate Christians have found that they must submit to the ruling party - against their will - in order to survive.

Economic landscape

According to [UNDP's full 2020 report](#) (page 343 onwards):

- **Gross National Income (GNI) per capita:** 7.045 (2019)
- **GNI per capita women/men:** 6,481 (women); 10,610 (men) (2019)
- **Income inequality:** 31.2%.
- **Poverty:** Data is not available

The Venezuelan economy, following a Socialist economic model, is going through one of the worst crises in recent history. There is no recent official information on the fiscal situation of the country. According to the [National Survey on Living Conditions 2021](#), real GDP shows a cumulative reduction of 74% in the period 2014-2020 (ENCOVI, September 2021). There has also been a collapse in oil income, persistence of high inflation that has turned into hyperinflation since 2017, generating reduction in employment and purchasing capacity and seriously impacting levels of poverty. In addition, the survey shows that direct transfers were 20% higher for the 10% poorest in 2019-2020 than in 2021 and that the percentage of households in a situation of deprivation is 65.2%. Among the factors causing multidimensional poverty, the survey identified insufficient income, lack of insurance, lack of electricity and home ownership, among others.

According to [Círculo de Estudios Latinoamericanos](#), citing the International Monetary Fund, the most recent drop in GDP is estimated to be 5% (CESLA, November 2021). Following the report, besides the worldwide COVID crisis, other main factors influencing the economic situation were:

- The collapse of oil production, aggravated by the effects of US trade and oil sanctions;
- The drop in consumption associated with the dramatic loss of the purchasing power of the bolivar currency;
- The absence of public and private investment
- The collapse of the credit market.

At the same time, there has been a notable increase in the 'dollarization' of the economy, including wages and salaries. Additionally, according to the [Venezuelan Finance Observatory](#), as of November 2021, the monthly inflation rate registered an increase of 6.0%, lower than that of October (8.1%). In accumulated and annualized terms, inflation rates stood at 616.9% and 769.0%, respectively (OVF, December 2021).

The international sanctions, especially those [imposed](#) by the USA, are a further factor to consider. These sanctions concern terrorism, drug trafficking, anti-democratic actions, human rights violations and corruption (Congressional Research Service, January 2021). The [UNHCR](#) has called for the lifting of international sanctions because they are causing a deepening of the current crisis, especially since the COVID-19 restrictions have further increased the scarcity of available resources (UNHCR, September 2021).

As a result of this economic situation, millions have fled the country. Many of the country's churches have become centers for food and refuge. Despite legal, administrative and logistical difficulties along with the risk of provoking government reprisals, the [food programs](#) and other forms of help carried out by churches have been invaluable as most other groups are no longer in a position to provide humanitarian aid (Aleteia, 27 October 2021).

In addition, the economic crisis has also seriously affected churches: The constant power cuts and the transport crisis have made it difficult for Christians to attend church services in many areas and some church leaders have been forced to leave.

Social and cultural landscape

According to [UNDP's full 2020](#) report (page 343 onwards) and the CIA Factbook:

- **The main ethnic groups:** unspecified Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Arab, German, African, Indigenous
- **The main languages:** Spanish (official), numerous indigenous dialects
- **The urban population is:** 88.3% of total population (2021)
- **The literacy rate is:** 97% (age 15 and over can read and write)

According to World Bank (data):

- **Education:** The school enrollment for pre-primary (2017) is 69.515%; for primary (2017) is 97.15% and for secondary (2017) 88.077%. The duration of compulsory education is 17 years (2020).
- **Unemployment (modeled ILO estimate):** 9.14% (2020).
- **Gender Parity Index:** 1.019 (2017). This refers to the ratio of girls to boys enrolled at primary and secondary levels in public and private schools.
- **IDPs/Refugee population by country or territory of origin:** 171,127 (2020)

In addition, the [UNHCR](#) reports: "A total of 5.1 million Venezuelans have left their country as of mid-2021, including 186,800 refugees, 952,300 asylum-seekers and 3.9 million Venezuelans displaced abroad" (UNHCR, 10 November 2021).

According to the [UN Global Human Development Indicators](#) (HDI 2020):

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)'s HDI value for 2019 is 0.711— which put the country in the high human development category—positioning it at 113 out of 189 countries and territories. Between 1990 and 2019, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)'s HDI value increased from 0.644 to 0.711, an increase of 10.4 percent.

- **Life expectancy:** Between 1990 and 2019, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)'s life expectancy at birth increased by 1.4 years (72.1 at 2019).
- **Gender inequality:** (I.e. the loss in human development due to inequality between female and male achievements in the three GII dimensions.) Venezuela has a GII value of 0.479, ranking it 119 out of 162 countries in the 2019 index.

According to the [National Survey on Living Conditions 2021 \(September 2021\)](#):

- The size of the Venezuelan population fell to 28.7 million due to the massive flow of people who left the country during the 2015-2020 period, the decrease in births and the increased risk of death. The report shows that the closure of educational centers due to the COVID-19 pandemic affected all levels of education, particularly primary school and university levels. In addition, in the period 2014-2021, formal employment fell by 21.8% (a loss of 4.4 million jobs): 70% were from the public sector and 30% from the private sector.
- Due to the Socialist ideology embedded in the one-party government structure, the regime seeks to control the whole of society. The economic problems (shortages and hyperinflation) together with the loss of the state's operational capacity led to the necessity of food distribution. Only 13.5% of households stated that they did not receive any social assistance. These food programs have been denounced by regime opponents as being mechanisms of social control and political-electoral manipulation.

Due to the severity of food insecurity in the country, in April 2021, the government finally [allowed](#) the World Food Program (WFP) to operate in the country (El País, April 2021). WFP's goal is to support 1.5 million Venezuelan schoolchildren by 2022-2023. The WFP is committed to provide nutritious meals, particularly in preschool and special education schools, as well as to invest in improving school canteens.

Faced with the current economic and social crisis, the general public has responded with discontentment and hopelessness. In addition to mass migration, in September 2021 alone, the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict (OVCS) [recorded](#) around 568 protests, which is actually a 52% decrease compared to September 2020 (OVCS, 26 October 2021). The reasons for the demonstrations are the lack of basic services, fuel, social security, increased transport costs and deficiencies in the health sector. Protests were particularly carried out by students, teachers and parents.

Because the state authorities use the vulnerability of the poor to control them, any assistance provided by churches is seen as a threat and was monitored and sometimes prohibited. Where churches work to improve the quality of life of the population or to provide spiritual assistance, the state regards this as a form of political intervention and competition, fearing that such activities could influence society and destabilize the government.

Technological landscape

According to World Internet Stats:

- **Internet usage:** 82.2% penetration – survey date: March 2021
- **Facebook usage:** 48.1% penetration – survey date: March 2021

According to the World Bank (country profile):

- **Mobile phone (cellular) subscriptions:** 63.4 per 100 people

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (updated May 2019):

- **Mobile phones:** Mobile penetration in Venezuela is below the average for South America, while growth in the sector has been set back by the ongoing economic recession. The number of mobile subscribers fell 5.6% in the first half of 2018 as subscribers terminated services in a bid to reduce discretionary spending. The phenomenon was also seen in the fixed-line segment, where fixed-line connections dropped by 7.4% in the year. Part of the decline is also related to the large number of people who have fled economic hardship.

According to the [Inclusive Internet Index 2021](#):

- Venezuela ranks 79th; is an upper-middle income country but its support for Internet inclusion more closely resembles that of lower-income group countries. In 'Readiness', the country ranks 104th globally as a result of low literacy rates, and weak and outdated policies. Venezuela has seen recent improvements in 'Availability', following private sector initiatives to make Wi-Fi available more widely.

According to Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2021:

- Venezuela scored 28 points and is classified as 'not free'. The key Internet controls reported were:
 - The blocking of social media or communications platforms
 - The blocking of political, social, or religious content
 - Manipulation by pro-government commentators monitoring online discussions
 - The arrest, imprisonment, or prolonged detention of bloggers posting political or social content. Some were physically attacked and killed (including in custody).
 - Online attacks against government critics or human right organizations

According to Reporters Without Borders (World Press Freedom 2021):

- Harassment of independent media has intensified since 2017. The National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) strips overly critical radio and TV stations of their broadcast frequencies, and coordinates ad hoc Internet cuts, social media blocking and confiscation of equipment. Foreign reporters are often arrested, questioned and deported. Many Venezuelan journalists have fled the country since 2018 because of the threats and physical danger. Most opposition print media have not survived all the various forms of harassment including newsprint shortages, while online media are subjected to repeated cyber-attacks that make their reporting more and more complex and expensive.

In the WWL 2022 reporting period, the Venezuelan parliament approved a legislative agenda that included a project for the [partial reform](#) of the Law of Social Responsibility in Radio, Television and Electronic Media (El País, 4 March 2021). The list of laws presented also included the [Cyberspace Law](#), first introduced in 2019 (Swiss Info, April 2021). These supplement the controversial "Constitutional Law against Hate, for Peaceful Coexistence and Tolerance" (known as the "Law against Hate") which was approved in November 2017 and which sets out [penalties](#) of 20 year prison sentences, closure of media outlets and substantial fines for media companies considered to be acting as government opponents (Actualidad Jurídica, Noviembre 2017).

The constant shortages of electricity have made the use of the Internet and online communication very difficult. In addition, since state authorities monitor all use of the Internet and social media, Christians who wish to openly speak up and post items criticizing the regime and human rights violations are easily targeted and become victims of possible retaliation.

Security situation

There are various armed groups operating in the country, for instance, the National Liberation Army, Patriotic Forces of National Liberation and FARC groups from Colombia (which operate mostly in border states). There are [indications](#) that extremist groups are also operating in the country, especially agents of Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Lebanese Islamist group. These groups appear to be involved in arms and drug trafficking, as well as money laundering to finance their operations (Infoabe, 26 October 2021). The cartel Los Zetas, in Mexico, El Envigado in Colombia and the Venezuelan cartel Los Soles have been accused of [strategically aligning](#) with Hezbollah to sell more drugs (Iranwire, 25 March 2021).

According to [Insight Crime \(November 2017\)](#), Venezuela also has home-grown organizations, such as a network of corrupt officials known unofficially as the 'Cartel of the Suns' and the guerrilla group called 'the Bolivarian Liberation Force'. Recent years have also seen the emergence of so-called 'mega-gangs' (megabandas), a new form of organized crime born out of the country's overcrowded, self-governed prison system. Corrupt members of the security forces have also been providers of weapons to the black market, to the particular benefit of Colombian guerrilla groups like FARC and the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN). Both ex-FARC members and the ELN have established a presence in states along Venezuela's shared border with Colombia. Insight Crime points out that the ELN [is active](#) in Táchira, Zulia, Apure, Trujillo, Anzoátegui, Lara, Falcón, Amazonas, Barinas, Portuguesa, Guárico and Bolívar (Insight Crime, November 2018) and carries out activities such as cattle smuggling, gasoline smuggling, extortion collection, food distribution, radio broadcasting, recruitment of minors, attacks on law enforcement officials, drug trafficking and illegal mining. In southern Venezuela, brutal armed groups known as 'trade unions' [dominate](#) illegal mining, manage electricity and fuel supplies and provide medical equipment to clinics in the cities they control (New York Times, 1 June 2021). As a consequence of the economic crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, many young people have left school to look for employment; this makes them easy prey for being [recruited](#) by criminal gangs and irregular armed groups for illegal and criminal purposes (EVTV, 2 December 2021).

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW 2021), the government and its security forces are responsible for extrajudicial executions and short-term forced disappearances and have jailed opponents, prosecuted civilians in military courts, tortured detainees, and cracked down on protesters. They used the COVID-19 state of emergency as an excuse to punish dissent and intensify their control over the population. The authorities have relied heavily on the use of "[colectivos](#)", gangs of armed para-police (Al-Jazeera, 9 May 2019) to disperse demonstrations and crack down on protesters. They have also been used to enforce the lockdown in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty, physically abusing those failing to comply.

Venezuela suffers from endemic corruption and criminal impunity. Corruption networks make it possible to co-opt various government authorities (see below: *Persecution engines*). According to Transparency International, Venezuela is ranked 176 out of 180 countries, with a score of 15/100 (CPI 2020). Related to this is the fact that insecurity has become one of the countries biggest issues. The [World Population Review 2021](#) scores Venezuela as the country with the highest crime rate in the world (83.76 points). The high crime rates have been made possible by corrupt authorities, a flawed judiciary system and poor gun control. (World Population Review, 2021). Similarly, the 2021 [Global Organized Crime Index](#) ranks Venezuela 18th out of 193 countries, 3rd of 12 countries in South America, with a 6.64 Criminality score. Venezuela is considered a 'narco-state', and part of the concern is that criminal networks supply funds to keep the Maduro dictatorship in place, since the current social chaos under President Maduro helps organized crime maintain territorial control.

According to the [Venezuelan Violence Observatory](#), Venezuela closed the year 2021 with an estimated 11,081 people killed by violent causes (a reduction compared to 2020), which corresponds to a rate of 40.9 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (OVV, December 2021). Violent deaths included homicides, resistance to authority and disappearances. The reduction in the annual level of homicides over the last few years is explained by the economy being in crisis, by the tighter control of drug trafficking routes, by the fact that criminal groups act as the local authorities having taken over control in many areas, and by the mass emigration.

As already mentioned above, the ruling party imposes Socialist ideology at all levels of society and does not tolerate any opposition. Hence, all forms of dissent face persecution and in this context, Christians, Christian organizations and churches linked to or supporting opposition groups face serious harassment and intimidation. At the same time, in areas controlled by criminal groups (especially the border regions), Christians often represent a threat to the activities and authority of these groups and run the risk of being victims of reprisals. This may take the form of child recruitment, death threats and killings. In such areas, Christian do not have any state authorities to turn to for help.

Trends analysis

1) The dictatorial regime remains powerful despite international sanctions

International sanctions imposed on the government due to its violations of human rights are not effective enough to cause a real change in national politics. Those who advocate a return to democracy are harshly repressed.

2) Strategies to silence and subdue opposition voices vary

The government uses a variety of repressive measures to make sure it quells criticism and stays in power. For instance, attempts have been made to legally justify the restrictions on fundamental freedoms, but at the same time, government alliances with criminal groups are being used to silence dissenting voices. Another tactic is the way that government assistance and other benefits are being offered to those who will openly support the Maduro government, but this only serves to increase the levels of distrust and social polarization. Such division is also growing within the Church.

3) The humanitarian crisis helps strengthen criminal groups

The humanitarian crisis in the country is the ideal breeding ground for criminal groups (guerrillas, paramilitaries, drug traffickers and others). They are able to operate with near total impunity, at times in complicity with the state authorities. The Colombian-Venezuelan border region is an area of particular concern, since the distribution of humanitarian aid there is very limited due to the high levels of violence.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: questioned - <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/05/21/612918548/venezuelas-maduro-wins-boycotted-elections-amid-charges-of-fraud>
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WWL 2022: Church information / Venezuela

Christian origins

Attracted by the mining and pearl fishing, the Spanish conquest of Venezuela began in eastern Venezuela with settlements first established on the Venezuelan islands and along the coast. Examples are: Nueva Cádiz and Macuro (Amacuro) founded in 1498; Cubagua (founded in 1500 and 1530), Nueva Toledo (in 1500), Nueva Córdoba (in 1523) and La Asunción (in 1524). All these cities were [founded](#) in the European search for gold, silver and precious gems (Redalyc, May-October 2006).

A group of Franciscan friars introduced Roman Catholicism with the founding of Cumaná in 1515. Despite attempts at peaceful evangelization, the indigenous people in the region opposed Christianity violently. However, in 1531, after the founding of the city of Coro in 1527 (the first capital of the Province of Venezuela), it was possible to set up the first Episcopal Headquarters of South America and the first Catholic diocese of Venezuela. The responsibility of evangelization was shared between diocesan priests and a number of religious orders such as the Capuchins (Aragonese, Catalans, Andalusians and Valencians), Franciscans, Observants, Dominicans, Augustinians and Jesuits. Although most indigenous people in the area embraced Catholic Christianity, those who lived in remote areas continued to practice their ancestral beliefs.

[Protestant missions](#) did not enter the country until the 19th century. The British and Foreign Bible Society started work in Venezuela in 1819. In the following decades, Anglicans, Lutherans, Plymouth Brethren and Methodists were able to establish congregations. In 1919 the first Pentecostal group established itself, with Baptists following in 1924 (Prolades, 15 October 2009).

Church spectrum today

Venezuela: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	32,600	0.1
Catholic	27,136,000	87.9
Protestant	2,240,000	7.3
Independent	1,627,000	5.3
Unaffiliated	252,000	0.8
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-429,000	-1.4
Total	30,858,600	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,400,000	4.5
Renewalist movement	6,392,000	20.7

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

The largest Christian denomination in Venezuela is by far the Roman Catholic Church, representing 87.9% of all Christians. However, Evangelical and Protestant churches are growing fastest in the country, especially in rural areas.

External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: founded - <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/543/54311007.pdf>
- Christian origins: Protestant missions - <http://www.prolades.com/encyclopedia/historical/chron-ven.pdf>

WWL 2022: Persecution Dynamics / Venezuela

Reporting period

1 October 2020 - 30 September 2021

Position on the World Watch List

Venezuela: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2022	51	65
WWL 2021	39	-
WWL 2020	42	69
WWL 2019	41	71
WWL 2018	34	-

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

Venezuela rose 12 points in WWL 2022. There was an increase both in pressure in all *spheres of life* and in violence, especially killings and church attacks. With the COVID-19 restrictions worsening the humanitarian crisis in the country, the government cleverly politicized the distribution of humanitarian aid, which caused much intimidation for those organizing church programs to help the vulnerable and poverty-stricken. The government targeted outspoken Christian leaders and activists for harassment as well as instigating smear campaigns. In addition, the lack of respect for the rule of law also facilitated criminal activity and impunity.

Persecution engines

Venezuela: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Not at all
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Very weak
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Very weak
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Medium
Secular intolerance	SI	Very weak
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Medium

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

The main Persecution engines (DPA, CPCP and OCC) are blended.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong)

According to the World Justice Project ([Rule of Law Index 2021](#)), Venezuela is ranked 139th out of 139 countries. President Maduro is trying to stay in power with little respect for democracy and the rule of law, even when his government is considered illegitimate by many members of the international community. The entire state machinery has been geared up to support the Socialist principles of the regime and monitor and punish any kind of opposition. The government has introduced an ID card to identify those who support the ruling party for receiving basic services and government benefits, including food and health care. The violation of citizens' rights also affects Christians, particularly church leaders when speaking publicly to denounce corruption and the violations of human rights. Churches and Christian organizations who provide basic humanitarian assistance to citizens are seen as competing with the state, which does not want civil society actors endangering its image of being the sole provider. Thus they have become victims of verbal and physical attacks, arbitrary arrests and administrative reprisals etc.. Christian property has also been damaged and various religious activities have been interrupted and/or prevented. President Maduro regularly accuses church leaders of being allied with the political opposition, of interfering in the political sphere, of misleading ordinary Christians and of spreading violence instead of peace.

Communist and post-Communist oppression (Medium)

The government, following the ideal of Bolivarian Revolution, rules according to Socialist-Communist principles, and seeks to control all areas of life in society, trying to ensure that all activities are favorable to the regime. When the Church stands firm in its convictions and defends its autonomy, it faces harassment from the government. The government attempts to fragment the Church by offering economic benefits in exchange for political support, particularly targeting the newer and smaller church denominations. Any dissident voice demanding the abandonment of Marxist ideology is censored and Christians actively engaged in community projects are swiftly labelled as enemies and traitors of the homeland. The repression worsens where church projects have international links, since this is viewed as being an “imperialist” attack on national sovereignty. To make sure society continues to be based on Communist principles, the state education system is used to indoctrinate children.

Organized corruption and crime (Medium):

As mentioned above in the section *Security situation*, due to the high levels of corruption in the country and the active presence of different kinds of criminal groups, Venezuela is considered a 'narco-state'. Criminal networks operate with ease due to corruption at all levels of government; they can act with impunity and often carry out government orders to silence dissenting voices. The state uses paramilitary gangs (“colectivos”) in various cities to monitor and intimidate all opposition, including the social demands highlighted by churches and church leaders. Colombian guerrillas involved in the business of migrant smuggling in the border region hinders the humanitarian work of the Church; they also try to indoctrinate and recruit minors. These criminal groups represent a risk for the Church, especially where church teaching directly opposes criminal activity.

Drivers of persecution

Venezuela: Drivers of persecution									
	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	-	-	-	VERY WEAK	VERY WEAK	MEDIUM	VERY WEAK	STRONG	MEDIUM
Government officials	-	-	-	-	Very weak	Medium	Very weak	Strong	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	Very weak	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	Very weak	Weak	-	Weak	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	Weak	Very weak	Weak	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	Very weak	Medium	Very weak
One's own (extended) family	-	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-	Very weak	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	Very weak	Strong	Medium
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	-	Medium	Medium
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-	Medium	Medium
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- Government officials (Strong):** Most government officials – at all levels - are followers of Socialist ideology, loyal to President Maduro and will do anything to keep him in power. They seek to repress voices that could endanger the stability of the regime, thus Christians who demand that President Maduro should step down are harshly treated; the authorities can limit the exercise of human and/or civil rights and put pressure on Christians that show disagreement with the regime. The main organs of repression are the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB), the Bolivarian National Police (PNB) and its Special

Actions Forces (FAES), the Scientific, Criminal and Criminal Investigations Corps (CICPC), the Bolivarian Intelligence Service National (SEBIN) and the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM).

- **Political parties (Strong):** The ruling party is the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). Although there are opposition political parties, these are systematically repressed. The ruling party remains in power thanks to the weakening of the rule of law and the irregular use of the entire state apparatus. The ruling party monitors and silences (at times violently) Christians who seek to weaken regime loyalty. Thus, many Christians face imprisonment, defamation, and physical, psychological and economic harassment.
- **Citizens (Medium):** The current state of crisis has caused many citizens to show their loyalty to the regime, either out of convenience or fear of reprisals. Such loyalty may include participating in acts of hostility against the Church, especially when religious leaders denounce human rights violations perpetrated by the Maduro government.
- **Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Medium):** These groups, particularly the Special Action Forces, assist government officials and the ruling party in their efforts to remain in power. They will use threats and violence to act against anyone seeking to undermine the government. The main groups are the so-called Integral Defense and Security Committees, 'colectivos'. ELN and ex-FARC members also belong to this category and operate in border regions.
- **Organized crime cartels or networks (Medium):** Narco cartels (from Mexico and Colombia) and smaller criminal groups are able to act with impunity, especially in rural and border areas, thanks to their close relationship with the government and their support to the authorities' political interest. Church efforts to build a culture of peace are obstructed because they interfere with the criminal interests of those groups.

Drivers of Communist and post-Communist oppression

- **Government officials (Strong):** Most government officials at all levels seek to prevent the spreading of any ideas and beliefs which contradict Socialist principles, even if this means suppressing fundamental liberties. Those Christians who develop socio-political initiatives in their communities are treated with suspicion and if their activities are not aligned with the regime's interests, they could be victims of sanctions and reprisals (mostly in the form of licenses and permits being denied). State school curricula also contain obligatory education in Marxist philosophy.
- **Political parties (Medium):** The ruling party and its government officials seek to establish Socialist principles firmly in society. Together, they seek to impose on citizens adherence to the ruling party and loyalty to its demands. Christians known for their opposition to the government are targeted and suffer constant harassment and limitations of their human rights.
- **Citizens (Medium):** As explained above (under *Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia*), for a variety of reasons, many citizens want to show loyalty to the ruling party. Many act as informers monitoring church activities and Christian initiatives in their localities.

- **Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Medium):** Paramilitary groups and regime sympathizers use pressure and violence to force citizens to follow the regime's Socialist ideals. They will block any Christian activity relating to aspects of democracy, human rights and political liberties. The main groups are listed above under *Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia*.

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime

- **Government officials (Medium):** The state apparatus has become a platform for organized crime and corruption. Both the authorities and criminal groups intimidate dissident voices (including Christians) and act with impunity due to the widespread collusion between officials and organized crime.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Both the ruling party and opposition groups have been accused of corruption. The former for mishandling public funds and for government institutions being coopted by criminal groups; the latter for their lack of transparency in the use of donations. In a way, the lack of trust in opposition groups has indirectly helped the regime to stay in power..
- **Organized crime cartels or networks (Medium):** Criminal groups act in collusion with the power elite. Thanks to rampant corruption, these groups are part of the repressive arm of the government, which allows them total impunity in exchange for intimidating the opposition, including Christians. Drug-trafficking networks are also taking advantage of the current political, social and economic crisis. The various criminal networks want to keep President Maduro's regime in power so that they can continue to carry out their illegal activities unchallenged. Christians are at risk where they denounce such criminal operations and try to protect ordinary citizens from their crimes.
- **Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Medium):** In addition to the paramilitary groups created by the dictatorial regime, this driver includes guerrilla groups such as ELN and ex-FARC members, both of Colombian origin and predominantly operating along the border with Colombia. Church activities in such areas are permanently risky, especially where Christian teaching openly opposes local criminal interests.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

As indicated above, the operation of the three main Persecution engines (DPA, CPCP and OCC) is blended, causing the dynamics of persecution to spread throughout the country. In the WWL 2022 reporting period, most cases of persecution against Christians occurred in Amazonas, Apure, Barquisemeto, Bolivar, Caracas, Mérida, Miranda, Sucre, Táchira, Zulia. Unreported cases in other cities are highly likely.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians: Since expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation, they are not treated as a separate category for scoring in WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities: The biggest denomination in this category is the Roman Catholic Church. However, there is also a small Orthodox and a growing Protestant community made up of the Lutheran, Calvinist, Presbyterian and Anglican churches. It is mainly Christians

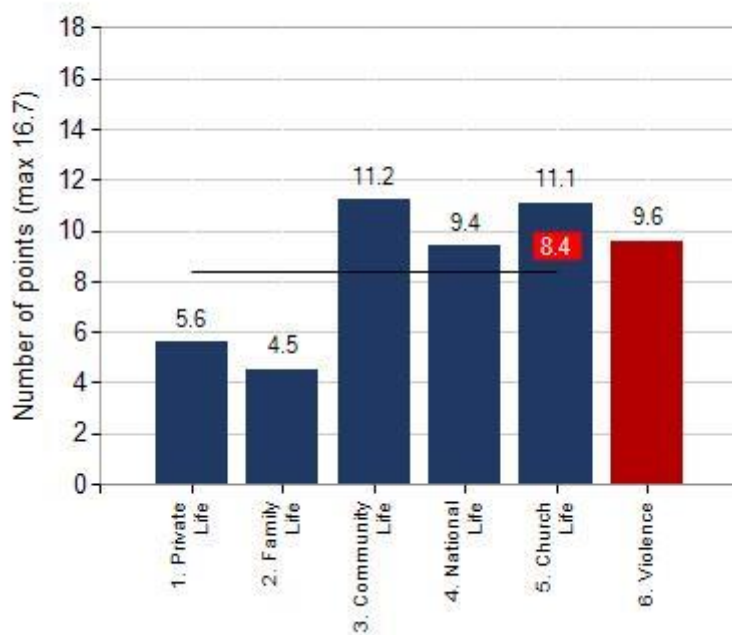
from this category who suffer intimidation and attacks for expressing Christian views and values which clash with the ideology of the regime and the interest of criminal groups, who sometimes act in collusion with authorities.

Converts: In Venezuela, this category mainly consists of Christians moving from one church denomination to another who then face criticism and rejection for abandoning the traditional faith of their families. However, it also consists of people who become Christians after abandoning the Socialist ideology of the ruling party. The latter are monitored and persecuted if they speak out or act against the regime.

Non-traditional Christian communities: This category is mainly made-up of Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals, Baptists, and Evangelicals. They represent an increasing minority but suffer the same repression as the historical Christian communities when they refuse to support the government. However, these church groups are more vulnerable to being put under pressure to support the regime in exchange for administrative and economic benefits. If they refuse, they are forced to operate illegally because official registration will be denied or indefinitely delayed.

The Persecution pattern

WWL 2022 Persecution Pattern for Venezuela



The WWL 2022 Persecution pattern for Venezuela shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Venezuela is at a high level, rising from 6.3 points in WWL 2021 to 8.4 points in WWL 2022.
- Pressure is highest in the *Community, Church and National spheres of life*. The very high pressure in *Church life* reflects the intense government repression of perceived regime opponents.

- The score for violence is 9.6 points, showing that the ruling party does not shy away from using violent methods where its interests are perceived as being under threat.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2022 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.00 points)

Due the lack of independent media in the country, the main way to follow Christian activist news and the real church situation is through social media. However, if Christians post faith-based opinions condemning regime activities, supporting humanitarian work, or showing interest in church leaders considered government opponents, they can face harassment, punishment or restricted access to food and other goods and services. The greatest risk is that, under the current legislation, any social media post not aligned with the government’s interest can be considered hate speech or subversive.

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.00 points)

'Colectivos', informers and state agents seek to quell any opposition to the authorities in the communities. Thus, Christians who reject the government and its anti-democratic activities are not free to share their faith-based opinions with their extended family or intimate networks for fear that this information will be leaked and lead to interrogation and reprisals.

Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (2.50 points)

Due to the high levels of intolerance and polarization in the country caused by the imposition of Communist principles, anyone sharing an opinion against the regime (even when it is about defending a religious belief) can be denounced, arrested and prosecuted by regime allies, even by those in one's own family. This fear leads to self-censorship.

Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (2.25 points)

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions introduced to combat it, Christians who were considered to be activists faced various risks when meeting with others privately. They could be arrested for supposedly inciting violence or planning acts of terrorism. Also, in the border region close to Colombia, various guerrilla groups and drug traffickers have assumed control of some areas, in collusion with the government. In these areas, the presence of such criminal groups often prevents Christians from gathering even for legitimate purposes unrelated to any specific religious activity.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.75 points)

Socialist ideology is a compulsory component of the state school curriculum. The children of Christians at these schools are thus forced to learn the guiding principles of Communism, defend them, and share them with their peers. Also, in rural and border areas taken over by guerrilla groups, children of Christians are forced to receive information distributed by guerilla for the purposes of recruitment. There are also reports of pressure being exerted on non-Catholic children to attend Catholic classes in private schools.

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.25 points)

State schools teach Socialist ideology that contradicts the Christian values which parents wish to instill on their children's minds and hearts. Fearing reprisals, Christian parents hardly dare to express their disagreement with the school compulsory curriculum or when their children are chosen to be part of the so-called "revolutionary youth camps". In areas where guerrilla groups are active (especially in border regions), Christian parents who try to prevent their children from being indoctrinated by criminal groups may face serious threats of violence.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.00 points)

When Christian parents are targeted for being considered opponents of the regime, children also suffer the consequences and are criticized, mocked, or used as 'bad examples' at school, for instance. The children of Christian parents sometimes face threats and other kinds of harassment as a way for the regime to put pressure on the parents and force their compliance. This also applies when Christian parents refuse to follow the rules imposed by criminal groups.

Block 2.10: Christian spouses and/or children of Christians have been subject to separation for prolonged periods of time by circumstances relating to persecution. (2.75 points)

Christians arbitrarily detained, or who had to leave the country to stop being targeted, are forced to live separated from their families for prolonged and indefinite periods. During those times, it is impossible to return to their homes either because they could be imprisoned or because they are prohibited from entering the country. In some cases, Christian activists opt to send their families out of the country to keep them safe.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (3.25 points)

Christians have been forced to take part in pro-government events (especially marches) against their Christian conscience. Most of them do so out of fear of being dismissed or targeted by the regime. In a few other cases, Christians have been pressured into attending activities involving the adoration of Santeria deities so as not to lose state benefits and services. Also, due to the severity of the economic crisis, the government can force people (often the poorest) to take part in events contrary to their Christian beliefs in order to survive. At workplaces and in educational settings, similar pressure can be applied.

Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.00 points)

State schools and universities are often the only options for many students, despite the pressure to learn and follow Communist principles. Especially at universities if students are Christians and politically active, they can be targeted for reprisals in the form of suspension or expulsion, or are harassed to such a degree that they simply give up their studies. Similarly, it was reported that Christian students refusing to participate in Santero rites could also be victims of reprisal.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.00 points)

In general, religious affiliation as such is not a determining factor or a cause to be discriminated against in public or private employment; this only happens against those considered to oppose the government, e.g. when a Christian is active in politics or in the defense of a social cause. On repeated occasions, the president has indicated that there cannot be in managerial or government positions people who are against the revolution and against him. In that sense, those who are not members of the party or disagree with the totalitarian and anti-democratic measures can be harassed and even dismissed from their positions. Similarly, it will not be easy for them to access alternative employment.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.00 points)

Special groups, such as the 'colectivos' and 'compatriotas cooperantes', are sent to interrogate political dissidents, including Christians who speak up openly against the government or are engaged in church-based or civil society initiatives. The aim is to discourage any activity that could endanger the regime's interests, especially if it is related to humanitarian work funded by international donors. Also, in areas where criminal groups dominate, Christians involved in humanitarian assistance and similar projects are forced to seek permission from those groups for carrying out such projects.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (3.75 points)

Although, the Constitution establishes that the state shall guarantee the freedom of religion and worship, there other legal provisions included in the criminal code and administrative regulations (as explained above in: *Political and legal landscape*) which can lead to faith-based opinions being considered hate speech or plans for a coup, where they go against ruling party interests.

Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (3.75 points)

Due to corruption and rampant impunity within the state apparatus, state and non-state agents (e.g. members of criminal groups) who have exerted pressure or committed acts of violence against Christians critical to the regime (or Christian human rights defenders), have not been properly prosecuted nor punished. In this context, Christians that have been victims do not have any credible or effective authority to turn to. The lack of security and undermining of citizens confidence in state institutions, such as the legislative and judicial powers, have forced thousands of Venezuelans, including Christians, to flee the country.

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (3.50 points)

Political parties that do not align with the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PUSV) are heavily restricted and cannot participate in the political life of the country freely. Hence, Christian political parties cannot function. Christian civil society organizations, especially those dedicated to social assistance or humanitarian aid, face harassment and constant scrutiny, especially about their funding. Since the provision of food and other services is a way for the government to exert control over the population (through the so-called "national card"), the regime is wary of any competition and will block it.

Block 4.3: Christians have been forced by law or in practice to act against their conscience, e.g. regarding military service or in certain professions. (3.25 points)

Threats against the right to conscientious objection occur mainly in the fields related to education, health, administration of justice and police, etc.; Some Christians feel forced to act against their conscience in order to receive basic goods and survive. For instance, teachers in public schools are forced to teach and follow Communist principles and alter country history in a way that emphasizes the heroism of Hugo Chavez.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (3.75 points)

Every time the Venezuelan Church raises its voice in protest, it becomes a target not only of the government but also of regime sympathizers and allied criminal groups. Christians who openly reject Communist ideology and denounce regime abuses are under constant threat of being arrested or otherwise 'silenced'.

Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (3.50 points)

With the exception of the Roman Catholic church, which enjoys full legal recognition, other religious groups must be registered with the Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) as a 'non-profit civil association' in order to receive authorizations, licenses and some economic benefits. Even though full legal church status is denied by law to non-Catholic denominations, the DJR imposes arbitrary registration requirements on them and the success of the process depends largely on their regime support. Thus, due to deliberate bureaucratic delays, the registration process can last more than a decade for churches considered to be aligned with the opposition. Most of these churches are thus forced to operate illegally and permanently risk action being taken against them by the authorities.

Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (3.50 points)

Through the work of local authorities, criminal groups and sympathizers of the regime, the government is able to constantly monitor churches' teaching and preaching to check if there is any criticism of the regime or Communist ideology. Some churches have had their activities disrupted as a result.

Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

Given that the aim of the regime is to remain in power and exert total control, Christian leaders have faced reprisals where they have been critical of the government, vocal about human rights, or working in humanitarian aid projects. Pastors have been accused of terrorism and hate-speech and faced smear campaigns against them. Criminal groups have actively collaborated in intimidating opposition voices, including Christian religious leaders not only when they do not align themselves with the regime, but also when their church ministry is seen as a threat to their criminal activities.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following 5 points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:

- Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.
- In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.
- If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.
- In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).
- In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.
- Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.

3. For further discussion (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at:

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

4. The use of symbolic numbers: In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

5. The symbol "x" in the table: This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

Venezuela: Violence Block question	WWL 2022	WWL 2021
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	4	2
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	24	10
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	6	2
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	2	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	9	10
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	3	5
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	6	0

In the WWL 2022 reporting period:

- **Christians killed (6):** The incidents involve local criminal groups murdering Christian religious leaders who openly opposed their illegal activities.
- **Churches attacked (24):** Most of the incidents involved criminal groups threatening and attacking churches. With a similar purpose, some attacks by regime sympathizers were also reported.
- **Christians arrested (6):** All incidents included Christians suffering arbitrary arrest, accused of carrying out humanitarian or pastoral work deemed unacceptable by the authorities, or for participating in protest marches.

- **Christians forced to leave the country (6):** This mostly involved Christians, particularly church leaders, who had been victims of reprisals for their humanitarian and pastoral work among the needy.

5 Year trends

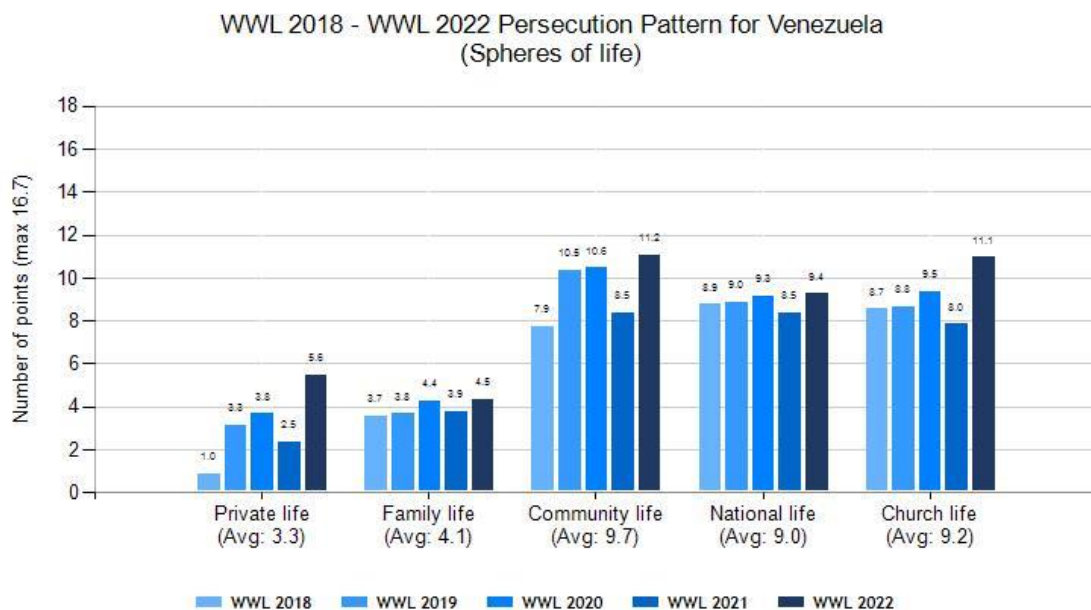
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Venezuela: WWL 2018 - WWL 2022 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2022	8.4
2021	6.3
2020	7.5
2019	7.1
2018	6.0

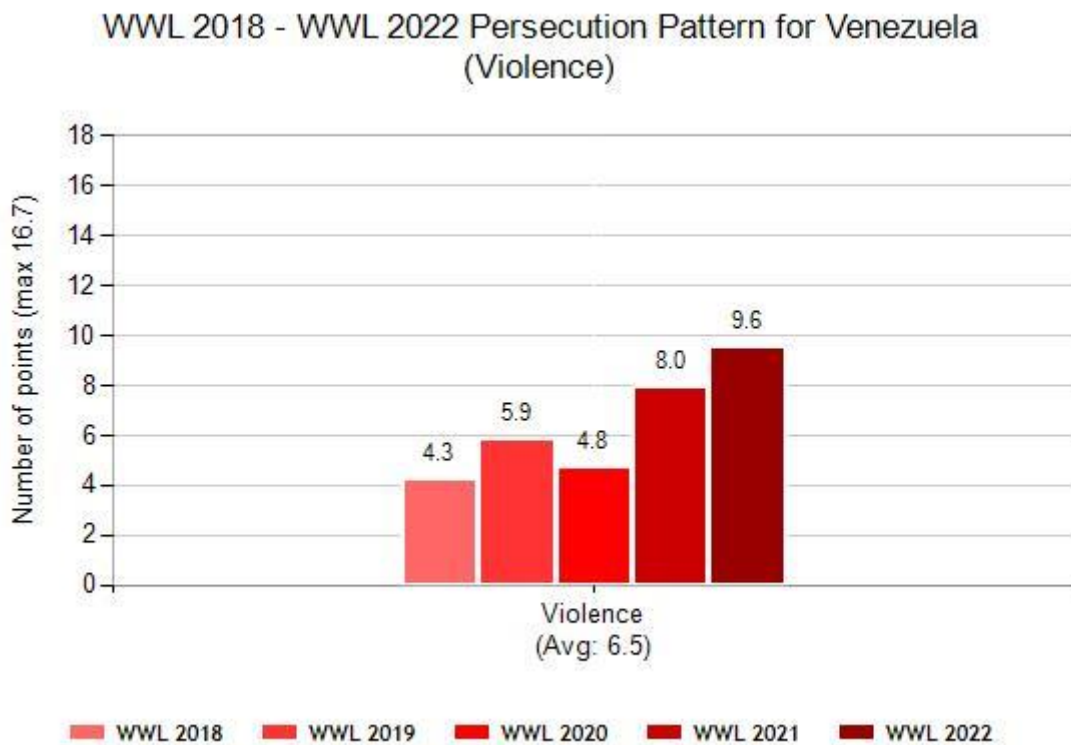
The table above shows that the average pressure on Christians has consistently been above 6.0 points over the last five reporting periods, rising to its highest peak in WWL 2022 due to increased hostilities and retaliation against any action deemed destabilizing by the government.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The last five reporting periods show a variation of the pressure in all spheres of life. This is because the levels of repression against churches and church leaders depend on the current political interests of the regime. For instance, in the previous reporting period (WWL 2021) more humanitarian work carried out by churches was allowed so as to enhance the president's image in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The chart above shows that the score for violence has increased sharply in the last two reporting periods. There have been a greater number of violent incidents against Christians not just from the government seeking to silence opposition voices, but also from criminal groups intimidating Christians who defying their 'authority' over the areas under their control.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	-
Security	Trafficking; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

Within the context of Venezuela’s ongoing complex humanitarian emergency, Christian women face several vulnerabilities. Young girls are trafficked and can end up trapped in prostitution networks, exchanging sex for food or medicine ([The Borgen Project, 20 February 2020](#)). Christian women are often better paid because their purity is presumed, and desired. As a country expert explained: “In this difficult context, desperation causes moral boundaries to be ignored in order to survive. Also, faced with the fear of raising children in such a problematic country, a small number of women are accessing clandestine abortions at the expense of their Christian beliefs.”

Many young women are choosing to escape Venezuela in light of economic and social factors. Within the context of displacement they are exposed to organized trafficking and exploitative criminal groups, where once again, their presumed purity can increase their perceived economic value.

While many women and girls are leaving Venezuela, it is primarily young men that depart to seek economic opportunities, including from Christian families and communities. Left alone, women become more vulnerable and at increased risk of prostitution as a means of survival. State support is not a viable option, given that most government services are offered to those who support the ruling party ([El Pais, 20 April 2021](#)); Christian families who refuse to align with the government do not receive state support and as a result fall into destitution.

In rural areas, female church leaders face intimidation from guerillas. "The commanders take more advantage of intimidating and limiting their actions," a local expert shares, "thinking that because they are women they will be more afraid."

In summary, Christian women and girls are vulnerable to sexual exploitation in all contexts in Venezuela – whether on the move when fleeing the country, upon arrival in new countries, or when left alone and vulnerable by absent male family members.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Economic harassment via fines
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government
Security	Abduction; Forced to flee town/country; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – death; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Within Venezuela's context of extreme violence and instability, Christian men and boys face a greater breadth of pressure than women and girls. Most notably, young men are at particular risk of being targeted by criminal gangs and guerrilla groups, especially along the Colombian border. They are also more likely to be recruited into the ranks of the Bolivian Guard or Venezuelan army, enticed by the promise of food and medicine. "They [armed groups] take advantage of the difficult economic and social situation," an expert explains, "separating them from their families and forcing them to commit crimes. Christians who refuse to participate are targeted for harassment and attack, together with their families."

In light of such pressure, exacerbated by the economic and political crisis, many men and boys are forced to leave the country in order to find work to support their families. While on the move, they are vulnerable to being captured and exploited by criminal groups ([El Nacional, 30 April 2018](#)). Their families who they leave behind also become vulnerable, as highlighted in the female gender profile above.

Church leaders, who are predominately male, suffer the highest levels of persecution, with Catholic leaders typically most vulnerable. As a country expert explained: "For Christian leaders advocating for the protection of human rights, the struggle is twice as hard since it is easier to recognize them as enemies of the regime, therefore, they not only face the social and economic crisis but also the direct reprisals of the government." According to the US State Department (IRFR 2020): "Church leaders reported that [Bolivarian National Intelligence Service] officials continued to intimidate priests who criticized Maduro in their sermons".

Church leaders also face threats and economic exploitation from criminal gangs, particularly if they are involved in outreach efforts to young people, which could threaten gang recruitment levels. Pressure is greatest in areas on the country's border, where criminal groups fight for territorial control. In February 2021 an attack was reported on a church-run center involved in outreach to young people caught in gangs and drugs (See above: *Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period / February 2021 / Mérida*).

Reflecting the seriousness of threats against church leaders, in the WWL 2022 reporting period several were killed.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2020):

- "Representatives of the Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela (CAIV) said criticism of Israel in Maduro-controlled or -affiliated media continued to carry anti-Semitic overtones, sometimes disguised as anti-Zionist messages. They said Maduro-controlled or -associated media and supporters again denied or trivialized the Holocaust and promoted conspiracy theories linking Israel and Jews to the COVID-19 pandemic."

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

- **Dictatorial paranoia:** As long as the political opposition does not present a more serious and stronger image, its weaknesses will be exploited by the regime to stay in power, assuming efforts by the international community to reinstall a democratic government remain unsuccessful. Unity and firmness among the opposition voices, including the different sectors of the Church, will be required to make visible not only the joint efforts at defending democracy and human rights, but also the support for those who, on grounds of faith, have become victims of dictatorial repression.
- **Communist and post-Communist oppression:** Freedom of speech, religious liberty and freedom of conscience is likely to continue to be restricted since it opposes the Communist ideology of the ruling party. Schools are likely to continue promoting loyalty to the president and rejection of all views opposing him. It is likely that most churches will continue to be seen as enemies of the regime and any Christian humanitarian work will continue to be hindered by the authorities.
- **Organized corruption and crime:** The humanitarian crisis, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, has reinforced the influence of criminal groups active in the country and with it, an increasing impunity through their links with corrupt authorities. The Church will thus remain particularly vulnerable to threats and attacks from such groups, especially where Christians work in peace-building initiatives, in drug-rehabilitation programs and give humanitarian support to migrants.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: Rule of Law Index 2021 - <https://worldjusticeproject.org/our-work/research-and-data/wjp-rule-law-index-2021>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: The Borgen Project, 20 February 2020 - <https://borgenproject.org/sex-trafficking-in-venezuela/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: El Pais, 20 April 2021 - <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-04-20/el-sistema-patria-un-nuevo-sistema-de-control-social-en-venezuela.html>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: El Nacional, 30 April 2018 - https://www.elnacional.com/venezuela/sucesos/jovenes-venezolanos-son-reclutados-por-grupos-irregulares-frontera_233011

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Venezuela>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Venezuela>