

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

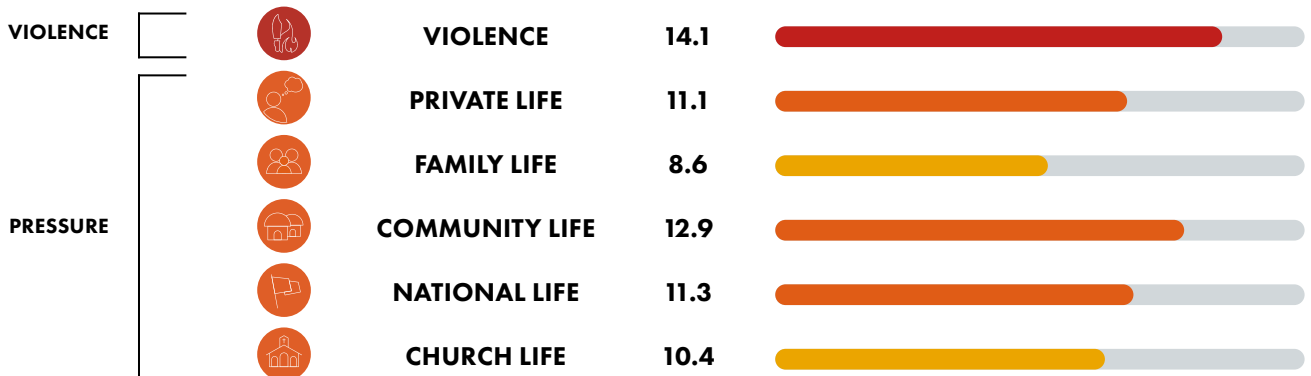
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

COLOMBIA

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
34



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

Church leaders are being threatened, extorted, and even murdered as a result of increased territorial control and violence. This is perpetrated by guerrillas and other criminal groups, especially in the most neglected areas of the country. In most cases, this violence is the direct result of Christians being involved in activities such as denouncing corruption and violence in sermons, defending human and environmental rights; youth work, peace-building, humanitarian assistance and any action defying the 'de facto' authority of local criminal groups which might endanger their illegal activities. In several indigenous communities, there is significant opposition towards Christian missionaries and converts, who, as a result, face imprisonment, closure of local churches, physical abuse, threats, harassment, and denial of basic rights.

As a result of growing secularism, there is increasing intolerance towards Bible-based opinions in the public sphere, especially about issues concerning life, family, marriage, and religious liberty. Christians speaking in public about their beliefs are sometimes accused of being discriminatory and using hate speech. For this reason, some of them choose to self-censor.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Gustavo
Francisco Petro Urrego

POPULATION

51,673,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

49,079,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	49,079,000	95.0
Agnostics	1,455,000	2.8
Ethno-religionists	317,000	0.6
Others	540,600	1.0

Source²

Colombia has struggled under a corrupt and weak legal apparatus for decades. This has allowed a thriving criminal network to spawn throughout much of the country, mostly funded by the trade in illegal drugs, weapons and human trafficking. The increased levels of control gained by criminal groups during the pandemic has made it easier for them to exert power over entire territories, and in the process, threaten and attack church leaders advocating for peace and opposing criminal activity. Churches have also been burgled and vandalized. In rural areas, such as Nudo de Paramillo and Catatumbo, armed groups require Christians to disclose all contacts, messages and other information stored on their mobile phones. This monitoring can put others and Christians themselves at risk.

According to the Colombia 2023 [Human Rights Report](#), government security forces were accused

of collaborating with or tolerating the activities of criminal gangs. It also stated that the judicial system was overburdened and inefficient and that corruption and intimidation of judges, prosecutors and witnesses were hindering judicial functioning.

In June 2022, [Gustavo Petro](#) of Historic Pact (a coalition of leftist parties) was elected president of Colombia for the period 2022-2026.³ Gustavo Petro's 54-page [government plan](#) states that it will protect religious diversity, and will guarantee all citizens the conditions for the exercise of equality and freedom of worship according to their religious and spiritual options.⁴

The main Christian denomination is the Roman Catholic Church, representing 90% of all Christians. Protestant church groups continue to show growth and become more visible, particularly where so-called 'Mega-churches' with congregations of thousands have become established in many major cities.

Christian communities and church leaders are active in many of the poorer sectors of society, for instance, in education and in the provision of basic goods for the neediest families. The Catholic bishops of Colombia appealed for solidarity to combat the various crises throughout the country. For instance, the Church asked the governments of Colombia and Venezuela to resume binational relations in order to [respond](#) effectively to the challenges that care

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

² Others include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

³ CNN Español, 19 June 2022

⁴ Government Plan 2022-2026, undated

for migrants.⁵ In the same way, Christian networks and organizations constantly [raise attention to](#) the factors triggering social crisis in various communities in the country⁶ and make constant [calls for peace](#).⁷ The [report](#) of the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition also highlights the mediation capacities of church organizations - among others - in the reconstruction of the social fabric and the promotion of dialogue between different sectors of society. Among the commission's recommendations was a call made to the country's churches and communities of faith to continue working for a culture of peace⁸, despite this putting many Christians at particular risk.

Violence against women and girls, particularly sexual violence, is another factor of concern. Threats are made that prevent the victims from speaking out, thus obscuring the gravity of this problem. Forced recruitment of young adolescents (primarily boys) poses an ongoing threat to Christian communities. There are also increasing [reports](#) of the use of sexual violence by rival groups against men and boys in conflict zones as a means of torture, intimidation and coercion to gain territorial control⁹.

How the situation varies by region

Christians experience high levels of pressure and violence from criminal organizations and illegal armed groups in Antioquia, Arauca, Bolivar, Caquetá, Casanare, Cauca, Cesar, Chocó, Córdoba, Guaviare, Meta, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, Tolima, Valle del Cauca and Vichada.

Indigenous communities have their own traditional customs, so those who abandon the religious practices of the tribe face persecution. In Colombia, there are approximately 115 indigenous groups located in the 32 departments of the country.

Secular intolerance: This depends on the public policies implemented by the national government and on social attitudes, mainly encouraged by groups with ideologies against religion or Christianity. Secular intolerance is

present throughout the country, especially in urban areas such as Bolívar, Bogotá, Antioquia, Caldas, Risaralda, Quindío, Nariño, Valle, Cauca, Boyacá, Santander, Cundinamarca, Tolima and Huila.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Communities of expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation and therefore not scored.

Historical Christian communities

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest denomination making up this community. This category is in danger of attacks in areas controlled by drug cartels and organized crime groups. Historical Christian communities also struggle with increasing religious intolerance in society and the rejection of public manifestations of faith.

Converts to Christianity

This category includes cross-denominational converts, converts within indigenous communities, and converts from guerrilla groups and criminal organizations. Especially in the indigenous context, converts may be victims of harassment, expulsion, discrimination in community services and some forms of physical and psychological violence for abandoning the community's majority belief system. In the context of organized crime, converts could receive death threats, which could lead to displacement.

Non-traditional Christian communities

These communities consist mainly of Baptists and Pentecostals. They are affected by the pressure and violence exerted by organized criminal groups. Although the previous government administration recognized their important role in the implementation of the Peace Agreement and in humanitarian assistance in neglected areas, these Christian communities do not receive the same government benefits granted to historical Christian communities. In addition, when they participate in the political sphere, they face severe opposition from secularist pressure groups. They are not free to work within indigenous communities and face risks when doing so.

⁵ Aciprensa, 25 May 2022

⁶ Manos Unidas, 17 May 2022

⁷ El Tiempo, 12 January 2023

⁸ Comisión de la Verdad, June 2022

⁹ Reliefweb, June 2022

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Organized corruption and crime

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissidents, members of the National Liberation Army (ELN), drug cartels and other guerrilla groups fight for control of entire regions to ensure the continued operation of their illegal activities. This has led to church leaders and Christian groups being victims of systematic monitoring, abduction, threats, extortion, forced displacement, and killings, as well as attacks on Christian buildings. These measures particularly target Christians who actively oppose criminal activity, defend human rights and preach to combatants. Christians and Christian leaders experience threats when they do not agree to support national strikes. They are forced to participate in strikes by criminal groups, and this lends support to their corrupt activities and illicit businesses. Criminal groups also retaliate against former members who abandon crime as a result of their conversion to the Christian faith.

Secular intolerance

Increasingly, Christians face verbal attacks, social hostilities, and discrimination due to intolerance of Christian beliefs and practices. A strict interpretation of state secularism frequently places religious freedom and the right of conscience at odds with the right to non-discrimination. There is also pressure to remove from public office any officials who openly defend their Christian faith or affinity towards a specific church. Christian participation in the political sphere has been discouraged as a result.



How are men and women differently affected?

Women

In Colombia, cases of conflict-related sexual violence by armed groups continue, and indigenous and Afro-Colombian ethnic groups are especially at risk. Within some indigenous communities, Christians who refuse to follow indigenous rites and customs may face pressure, community ostracization, and discrimination in accessing health services and education. In areas under criminal control, girls fear rape and sexual harassment. Christian girls may be more targeted by criminal groups for their perceived sexual purity and obedience.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Forced to flee town/ country
- Targeted seduction
- Trafficking
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

Men

Christian men face high levels of threats and violence, particularly in regions of armed conflict. As family providers, they can face extortion and death. Illegal armed groups pose one of the greatest threats to Christian men and boys, who are exposed to abduction, forced recruitment and violence. They risk indoctrination and mandatory participation in the activities of these groups. Church leaders are at particular risk, especially if they speak out against criminal groups. Within some indigenous communities, converts face pressure, physical punishment, ostracism, threats and forced labor.

Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via fines
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Forced to flee town/country
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Trafficking
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	34	68
2023	22	71
2022	30	68
2021	30	67
2020	41	62

Colombia dropped 2.5 points due to a reduction in the violence score in some categories such as sentences, sexual abuse and businesses attacked (dropping from 15.4 points in WWL 2023 to 14.1 points, despite 16 Christians being killed) and in reductions in pressure in the Private, Family and Community spheres of life due to fewer records regarding Clan oppression and Christian denominational protectionism engines. Nonetheless, the active presence of criminal and guerrilla groups deeply impacts the climate of fear and vulnerability of Christian communities in the country.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **December 2022 – Santander:** The walls of the La Sagrada Familia Church were [painted with graffiti](#) and the initials of the National Liberation Army (ELN). In the same municipality, a criminal organization sent death threats to the mayor of the city (InfoBase, 22 December 2022).
- **March 2023 – Cauca:** In the city of Popayán, three churches were [damaged](#) on International Women’s Day. At the end of the marches, protesters painted graffiti and offensive messages on the walls of the San Francisco and Santo Domingo churches in the city center and on the La Milagrosa church in the Prados del Norte neighborhood (WRadio, 9 March 2023).
- **April 2023 – Chocó:** While three Christians went to preach to a community in Pitalito, entry was restricted by indigenous leaders, who put them in the dungeon for 6 hours, as a form of punishment for “violating rights and culture.” They reiterated that if the case was repeated, this could lead to possible sanctions.
- **August 2023 – Barranquilla:** Archbishop Pablo Emiro Salas denounced cases of [extortion](#) that 4 priests of the region are facing and rejected the case of extortion against the Priest of Puerto Colombia Jaime Barrios; he reports that extortions are given through letters and calls that come from inside a local prison (Emisora Atlántico, August 2023).

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians abducted	Christians internally displaced
2024	16	42	8	100*
2023	21	37	11	124

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.

Private life

Christians face varying levels of risk in the private practice of their faith, such as rejection, harassment, threats, restrictions and expulsion, among others. Christians may face hostilities from ideological pressure groups when they defend their faith-based opinions. Christians face persecution when they meet with fellow believers in indigenous communities or in territories controlled by organized crime.

Family life

Within areas controlled by criminal networks, Christian parents risk their children being indoctrinated or recruited by ELN, dissident FARC guerrillas, and other illegal groups. Opposition typically leads to harassment, violence, prolonged separation from family members or displacement from the community. In the indigenous context, schools aim to maintain the cultural identity of the ethnic group, so Christian students are forced to participate in animist activities. The harassment of Christians in indigenous communities can result in children being separated from their Christian parents. In both indigenous schools and government-run schools, the right of parents to raise their children according to their religious beliefs can be violated through compulsory classes that contradict their Christian principles.

Community life

In some indigenous communities, Christians are restricted from accessing basic resources, such as drinking water, education and healthcare, as well as ostracized from wider society and their families. They are also pressured to make contributions (typically money or produce) for community religious practices related to ancestral or traditional ethnic beliefs. In the context of organized crime, criminal groups often demand extortionate fees; church leaders can be particularly vulnerable. Refusal to pay can lead to violence and an increased risk of forced recruitment and/or displacement. These groups have also been known to steal desperately needed government and humanitarian aid in order to coerce Christians to accept their rule.

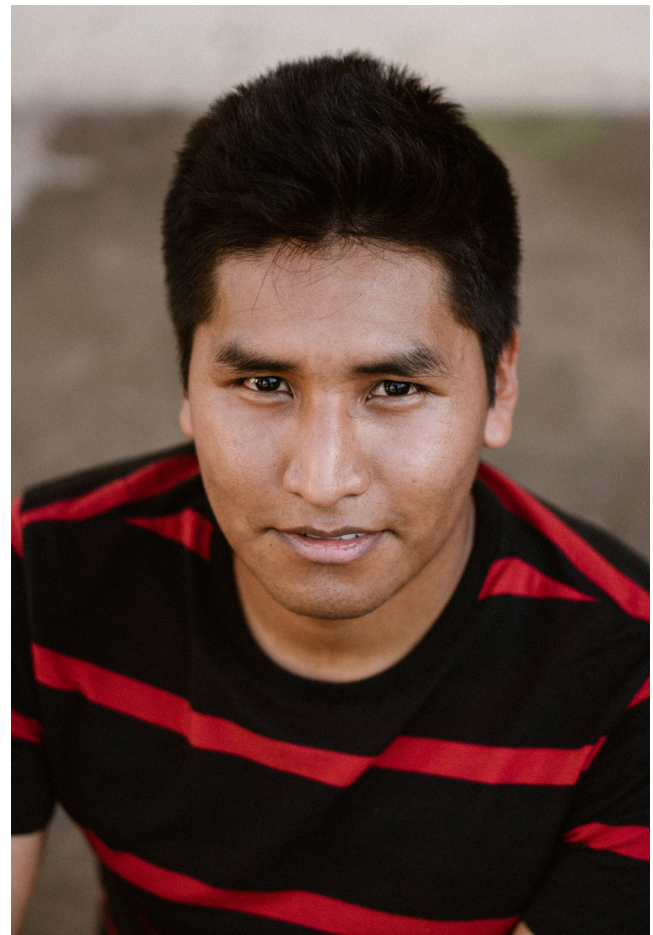
National life

In indigenous communities, violations against Christians often go unpunished because indigenous customs are constitutionally protected, and autonomous ethno-religious leaders are both instigators and those who impart justice in their own community. Affected Christians cannot seek court justice because indigenous communities are often entitled to their own jurisdiction. Elsewhere, as criminal groups are *de-facto* authorities in many areas of the country, Christians cannot fully exercise their rights, including freedom of expression and

movement, and are at the mercy of these illegal groups often acting with impunity. Additionally, Colombian society is increasingly intolerant of public expressions of Christianity, which affects Christians' rights to conscientious objection and freedom of expression. Christians have been accused of being "discriminators" and "anti-rights".

Church life

Churches are frequent targets of threats by criminal groups, indigenous leaders, and ideological pressure groups. Christian leaders and their families are particularly targeted for harassment in some indigenous communities, and usually Christian activity is prohibited. In territories co-opted by criminal groups, Christian leaders and their families are often the most frequent victims of violence, monitoring, and mobility restrictions, especially if they work on human rights, the environment, among youth, implementing the Peace Agreement, or discouraging coca growth. In areas under the control of these groups, pastors' children can be a special target for human trafficking, forced recruitment, or rape to discourage pastors from continuing their work. There is increasing social scrutiny of Christian preaching related to the defense of marriage and family and the way churches seek involvement in the public sphere.



International obligations & rights violated

Colombia has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Colombia is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christians are targeted by militias for expressing their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian children are harassed because of their parents' faith (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians face restrictions in employment in the public sector and experience discrimination in the private sector (ICCPR Arts. 25 and 26, and ICESCR Art. 6)
- Christians face harassment and violence if they discuss their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

Situation of other religious minorities

From the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Colombia): "According to the Times of Israel, presidential candidate Rodolfo Hernández issued an apology in June after audio from a 2016 radio interview surfaced, in which Hernández, mayor of Bucaramanga at the time, said he was the follower of a "great German thinker" named Hitler. In the apology, Hernández clarified that he meant to refer to Albert Einstein."



Open Doors in Colombia

Open Doors strengthens the persecuted church in Colombia, by offering:

- Biblical training / distribution of training materials / development of Biblical materials
- Trauma counseling
- Advice on ethnic education
- Community development: training of the Biblical worldview; agricultural tools; and, stewardship
- Physical infrastructure improvement
- Productive projects
- Education programs (children center / scholarship)
- Emergency persecution relief aid



About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

Some of the photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
