

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

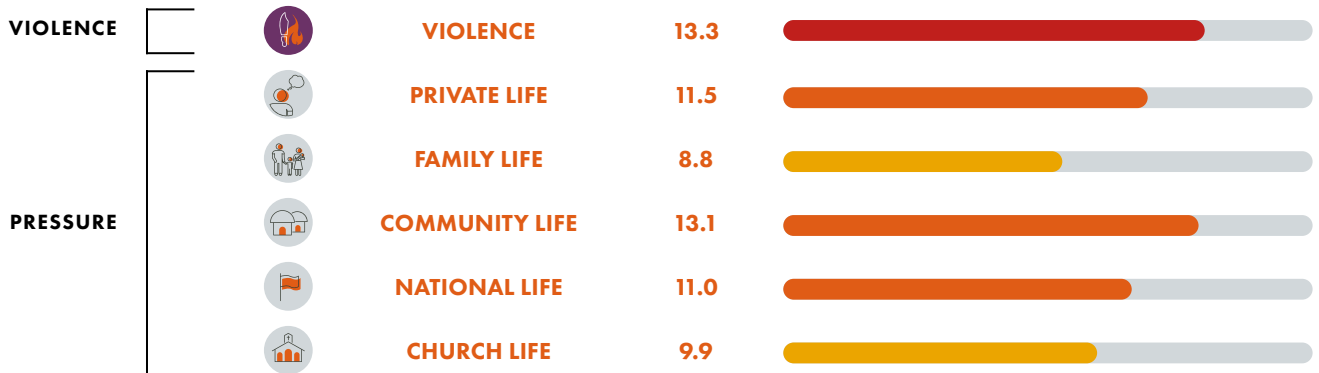
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**30**

## Colombia



### 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).<sup>1</sup> Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

## Key findings

Church leaders are being threatened, extorted and even murdered as a result of the increased territorial control and violence. This is perpetrated by guerrillas and other criminal groups, especially in the most neglected areas in the country. In most cases, this violence is the direct result of Christians being involved in activities such as: denouncing corruption and violence; working to defend human and environmental rights; working with the youth; assisting in the restoration of peace; opposing criminal activities in

<sup>1</sup>World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

sermons; any kind of action defying the ‘de facto’ authority of local criminal groups, that might endanger their illegal activities. In indigenous communities, there is significant opposition towards Christian missionaries and converts, who, as a result, face imprisonment, physical abuse and denial of basic rights. As a result of growing radical secularism, there is increasing intolerance towards Christian views in the public sphere, especially about issues concerning life, family, marriage and religious liberty. Christians speaking in public about their beliefs are sometimes targeted for supposedly being discriminatory and using hate speech. For this reason, some of them choose to self-censor in order not to become targets of these accusations.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Ivan Duque Marquez

### POPULATION

50,576,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

48,011,000 (94.9%)<sup>2</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

### GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



## Context

| Main Religions     | Number of adherents | Percentage |
|--------------------|---------------------|------------|
| Christians         | 48,011,000          | 94.9       |
| Ethno-religionists | 314,000             | 0.6        |
| Agnostics          | 1,439,000           | 2.8        |
| Others             | 536,500             | 1.1        |

*OTHERS include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Source<sup>3</sup>*

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 illegal drugs, weapons and human trafficking trades. According to the Colombia 2020 [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 the corruption and intimidation of judges, prosecutors and witnesses was hindering judicial functioning.

President Duque is tasked with dealing with the many challenges arising from the implementation of the Agreement for the Final Termination of the Conflict between the Colombian State and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), [signed](#) in 2016. The peace process is still being hindered by difficulties with the processes of the [JEP](#) court system and rebels from the FARC who have announced that they will resume the five decades-long armed conflict.

Towards the end of 2019, nationwide [demonstrations](#) took place led by students, indigenous leaders and unions. The protests focused on political, social, economic and security issues. During the demonstrations that continued in 2020, protestors were joined by [illegal groups](#) such as the ELN.

<sup>2</sup>Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

<sup>3</sup>Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

The mandatory COVID-19 isolation measures also had a negative effect on the economy. The [nationwide demonstrations](#) resumed in April 2021, driven firstly by the rejection of a tax reform proposal and then in response to the government's violent action against protesters. Despite [dialogue](#) commencing between the government and Colombia's National Strike Committee (CNP), made up mainly of unions, the talks were suspended by the CNP because concrete agreements were not reached.

## How the situation varies by region

### Organized corruption and crime:

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

### Clan oppression:

Indigenous communities have many traditional customs and therefore less acceptance of other (Christian) rites, so those who abandon the religious practices of the tribe face persecution. In Colombia there are 115 indigenous groups. These native people are located in the 32 departments of the country.

### Secular intolerance:

This engine of persecution depends on the public policies implemented by the national government and on social attitudes within society, mainly encouraged by intolerant 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

Roman Catholics are in danger of attacks in areas controlled by drug cartels and organized crime groups. They also struggle with the increasing religious intolerance in society and its 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 are victims of harassment, expulsion, death threats, and other physical and psychological forms of violence for abandoning the community's majority belief system.

### 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 government recognizes 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 the historical Christian communities. In addition, where they try to influence the political sphere, they face severe opposition from radical feminist and secularist groups. They are not free to work within indigenous communities and face risk when doing so.





## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Organized corruption and crime:

FARC dissidents, members of the ELN and other guerrilla groups fight for control of entire regions to ensure continued operation of their illegal activities. This has led to both 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 are particularly addressed to Christians who actively oppose criminal activity, speak out defending human rights, preach to combatants, carry out prayer days in particularly violent areas and discourage young people from joining criminal groups. Christians and Christian leaders experience threat when they do not agree to support national strikes. They are forced to participate in strikes by criminal groups who have political interests at stake. Criminal groups also retaliate against former guerrilla members who abandon crime as a result of their conversion to Christian faith.

### Clan oppression:

Religion is an important component of culture and identity within indigenous communities and the introduction of ideas contrary to these ancient beliefs is seen as a threat. Punishments by local authorities towards indigenous converts can include imprisonment, fines, physical and psychological abuse, denial of access to basic resources, the confiscation of property and forced labor.

### Secular intolerance:

The religious sector is considered an important element for supporting the implementation of the FARC peace agreement and social and humanitarian assistance during the COVID-19 crisis in the country. But 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. Society and institutions reject Christian professionals' assertion of the right to conscientious objection. 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 of the country has diminished as a result.



# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Cases of conflict-related sexual violence by armed groups continue in Colombia, with indigenous and Afro-Colombian ethnic groups particularly at risk. Within indigenous communities, Christians who refuse to accept indigenous rites and customs may be forced into marriage, abandoned by husbands, separated from children and ostracized by communities. This exposes them to forced displacement, risking trafficking and sexual exploitation. In areas under criminal control, girls risk rape and sexual harassment. Christian girls, targeted for their perceived purity and obedience, can be ‘bought’ from their parents on pain of death.

- Abduction
- Forced marriage
- Forced to flee town/country
- Trafficking
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - sexual

## MEN

Christian men face high levels of threat 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, at their hands. They are subject to indoctrination and mandatory participation in the activities of these

groups. Church leaders are in a particularly high risk vocation, especially if they speak out against criminal groups. Within some indigenous communities, converts face extreme pressures such as beatings, harassment, threats and forced labor.

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks (2)
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Forced out of home - expulsion
- Forced to flee town/country
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence - death
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - verbal

## WWL 5 year trend

| WWL Year | Position on Open Doors World Watch List | Persecution score out of 100 |
|----------|---|------------------------------|
| 2022     | 30                                      | 67.69                        |
| 2021     | 30                                      | 67.22                        |
| 2020     | 41                                      | 62.18                        |
| 2019     | 47                                      | 57.76                        |
| 2018     | 49                                      | 56.40                        |

*During the reporting period, an increase in oppression at a community level has resulted in a slightly higher score. Criminal groups have fought for territorial control, especially in areas with recently elected political authorities. Hostilities towards indigenous Christians increased, as did intolerance towards expressions of faith in public square.*

## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **In March 2021**, Bishop Jaramillo received death threats. A priest had been informed that money was offered to assassinate him. In social media, a message also circulated about a bomb being used to target the bishop.
- On International Women’s Day on **March 8 2021**, a radical group of feminists broke down the doors of the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Tolima while parishioners were inside, and covered the walls of the building with graffiti.

- **In July 2021**, 23 Christians were detained by indigenous leaders in Seynwra area after leaving the community to meet with other Christians to pray in a nearby area.



| WWL Year | Christians killed | Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed | Christians physically or mentally abused | Christians internally displaced |
|----------|-------------------|--|--|---------------------------------|
| 2022     | 7                 | 96   | 683                                      | 598                             |
| 2021     | 16                | 20   | 62                                       | 247                             |

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see [here](#) for full results. 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 varied levels of risk in the private practice of their faith, such as violence, harassment, restrictions and expulsion. Christians may encounter harassment from ideological pressure groups when they defend their faith-based opinions. Christians face persecution when they meet up 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 and dissident FARC guerrillas, and other illegal groups. Opposition typically leads to violence or expulsion from the community. In the indigenous context, schools aim to maintain the cultural identity of the ethnic group at the expense of Christians, whom they view as outsiders. In both indigenous schools and government-run schools, the right of parents to raise their children according to their religious beliefs is often violated through compulsory classes. The harassment of Christians in indigenous communities can result in children being separate from their Christian parents.

**Community life**

Indigenous authorities use a system of fines (typically either money or harvest products) for Christians who participate in community practices that contradict local tribal faith. Additionally, Christians are excluded from accessing basic resources such as clean water and healthcare. They may be ostracized from wider society and their families. Christian children are vulnerable to forced marriage with an elder, as a reprisal for abandoning the tribal customs. Criminal groups often demand protection money from church leaders in exchange for not exercising violence against them. On occasion, the fees demanded by criminal groups include the recruitment of their children. Criminal groups are also 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, Christians are vulnerable to criminal attack because their religious convictions are considered a threat by criminal groups. Society is increasingly intolerant of public expressions of Christianity.

**Church life**

Christian leaders and their families are particularly targeted for harassment in indigenous communities and all 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. This is especially true if they work on human rights, the environment, among youth, on implementing the Peace Agreement or discouraging coca growth. Pastors' children are a special target for human trafficking, forced recruitment, or rape to discourage pastors from continuing their work. Society is increasingly intolerant of the Church's expression of beliefs and involvement in the public square.





## International obligations & rights violated

Colombia has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in 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

According to the US State Department's 2020 International Religious Freedom report, the Jewish community reported continued comments promoting anti-Semitism on some social media sites, including its right to exist. The monument to the State of Israel in Bogota was smeared with a painted swastika and the word 'Israel' crossed out.



# Open Doors in Colombia

Open Doors strengthens the persecuted church in Colombia, offering the following support:

- 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: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology, as well as the complete WWL 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

*All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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