

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

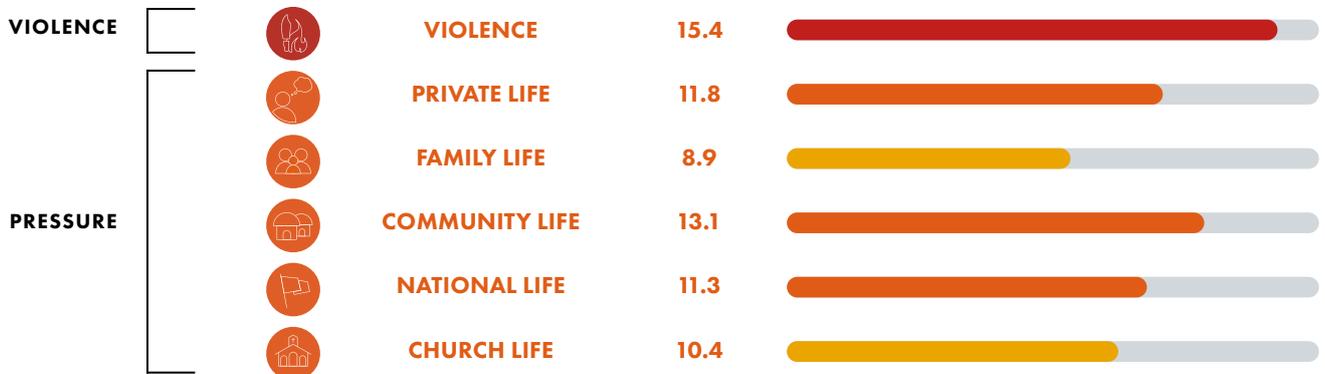
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
22

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).

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; working to defend human and environmental rights; working with the youth; assisting in the restoration of peace; opposing criminal activities in sermons; any kind of action defying the 'de facto' authority of local criminal groups which 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. Christians among these communities, who do not follow the traditional/ancestral

religious rites and customs, also face imprisonment, closure of local churches, physical abuse, threats, harassment, 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 to avoid becoming targets.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Gustavo Francisco Petro Urrego

POPULATION

51,513,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

49,002,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



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Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	49,002,000	95.1
Agnostics	1,388,000	2.7
Ethno-religionists	320,000	0.6
Others	532,300	1.0

OTHERS include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

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.

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 corruption and intimidation of judges, prosecutors, and witnesses was hindering judicial functioning.

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, protesters were joined by [illegal groups](#) such as the National Liberation Army (ELN).

The [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

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

² Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

Strike Committee (CNP), made up mainly of unions, the talks were suspended by the CNP because concrete agreements were not reached.

The first round of [elections](#) to choose the president of Colombia for the period 2022-2026 was held in May 2022. The vote was inconclusive, so a second round was held on 19 June 2022. The [winner](#) was Gustavo Petro of Historical Pact, a coalition of leftist parties (CNN Español, 19 June 2022).

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, Bolívar, Caquetá, Casanare, Cauca, Cesar, Chocó, Córdoba, Guaviare, Meta, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, Tolima, Valle del Cauca, Vichada.

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

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. Non-Roman

Catholic denominations in indigenous communities face rejection and reprisals for promoting a different faith. 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 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 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, where they try to participate in 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:

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissidents, members of the ELN, and other guerrilla groups fight for control of entire regions to ensure the 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 threats 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 the 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 and traditional 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 in 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 fear 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
- 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 extreme pressures such as beatings, harassment, threats, and forced labor.

- 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
2023	22	71
2022	30	68
2021	30	67
2020	41	62
2019	47	58

The rise in the total score by three points was primarily due to the high number of violent incidents targeting Christians during the reporting period, especially killings. Pressure increased on average, mainly due to the active presence of criminal groups in many areas of the country, hindering Christian activities (at the individual and collective level). In Colombian society in general, intolerance of Christian views in public debate has notoriously increased, and indigenous Christians continue to face great obstacles inside their communities of origin.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **February 2022:** Bishop Rubén Darío Jaramillo denounced the activities of armed groups in the Buenaventura region and told how he had received several [death threats](#). He has been banned from entering some places in the Buenaventura port area (Agenzia Fides, 8 February 2022).
- **March 2022:** A group of hooded men [broke into](#) the Primada Cathedral during a Sunday service, shouting slogans. (Aciprensa, 21 March 2022).
- **June 2022:** According to in-country sources, five indigenous Christians were beaten with whips and detained for several hours in jail cells by the indigenous authorities in Cauca. They were accused of spreading Christian teaching which contradicted the traditional school curriculum approved by the indigenous community. They were forced to sign a document stating their acceptance of the educational model imposed by the community.

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians internally displaced
2023	37	6	377	124
2022	96	45	683	598

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 strengthening their presence throughout the country. Opposition typically leads to harassment, 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 that contradict their Christian principles. The harassment of Christians in indigenous communities can result in children being separated from their Christian parents.

Community life

Indigenous authorities use a system of fines (typically either money or harvest products) for Christians who do not participate in community religious practices related to ancestral or traditional ethnic beliefs. Additionally, Christians are excluded from accessing basic resources e.g., clean water and healthcare, as well as ostracized from wider society and their families. Christian children are vulnerable to a forced marriage to an older person as a reprisal for abandoning 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

could increase the risk of forced recruitment of their children. These 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, 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.

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 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. Especially if they work on human rights, the environment, among youth, 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. 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 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 2021 International Religious Freedom report](#), the Jewish community reported comments promoting anti-Semitism on some social media sites after the Confederation of Jewish Communities of Colombia met with a presidential candidate in May 2021 as part of a series of meetings with all presidential candidates.



Church leader Franciso (right) and his wife Luz (left) take comfort in knowing their daughter Valentina (cover) is safe from the risk of attacks by guerillas as she stays in an Open Doors' Children's Center.

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: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- 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 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
