

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
38

Mexico



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

The increasing presence of criminal groups and the struggle for territorial control causes Christians and church leaders living in those areas to face a constant risk of being targeted. This is particularly the case where Christians are perceived as being a threat to criminal operations and are not obedient to group demands. In indigenous communities, those who abandon the community religious beliefs also face rejection and punishments such as fines, incarceration and forced displacement. General societal intolerance of Christianity and its beliefs continue to grow, especially when Christians express faith-based opinions on marriage, family and life issues.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador

POPULATION

131,563,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

125,738,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

GOVERNMENT

Federal Presidential Republic



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	125,738,000	95.6
Agnostics	3,979,000	3.0
Ethno-religionists	1,395,000	1.1
Atheists	150,000	0.1

Source²

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (hereafter abbreviated to AMLO) took office in 2018. He was criticized for prioritizing the economy over health during the COVID-19 pandemic and for his increasingly authoritarian government. Human Rights Watch has [denounced](#) violations by military personnel including torture to obtain confessions, enforced disappearances, extra-judicial killings, and attacks on journalists and human rights defenders. Additionally, accusations have been made against the police, the National Guard and the government itself regarding [collusion](#) with drug leaders (Milenio, 15 May 2022). Despite the initial support for AMLO, in the midterm elections held in June 2021, AMLO's MORENA party [lost](#) much of its majority in the lower house of Congress and now has to rely on the support of allies to push its agenda (Americas Quarterly, 07 June 2021).

Mexico has no official religion, and no religious classes are taught in state schools. According to the law regulating religious organizations, church officials are

not allowed to publicly express political opinions or hold public office, and the state authorities cannot intervene in the internal life of religious associations. Intolerance towards Christians defending their faith-based opinions has increased, often influenced by a misinterpretation of the separation of Church and State.

The [Census of Population and Housing 2020](#) reported that 11,800,247 people live in indigenous households, although there were problems with under-registration due to COVID-19. In such communities, Christians face opposition where they reject the religious practices and customs of the ethnic group to which they belong. Since ethnic leaders are those who administer justice in their territories, the religious freedom of indigenous people is not duly guaranteed by local (state) authorities.

How the situation varies by region

Criminal networks have spread throughout Mexican territory and are no longer confined to the so-called "[narco-states](#)" (Riodoce, 5 January 2022). According to recent information, there are 148 criminal groups with an active presence throughout the country.

The violation of the rights of Christians inside indigenous communities occurs particularly in the southern zone, such as Chiapas, Guerrero, Hidalgo,

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)

Jalisco, Nayarit, Oaxaca, Puebla, Baja California, Yucatán, and Zacatecas.

National laws underpinning a radical view of Church-State separation and non-discrimination affect Christians throughout the country. However, church building vandalism and intolerance towards Christians sharing faith-based views on contentious issues are particularly high in states such as Colima, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Morelos, Mexico City, Mexico State, Oaxaca, and Veracruz.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Historical Christian communities

The Roman Catholic Church (which is the biggest denomination) and small Orthodox, Presbyterian, and Anglican communities make up this category. Catholics are particularly affected by the activities of criminal gangs and the corruption of local authorities, which could include violence actions against their religious leaders. Sometimes, historic churches are not free to teach or share their faith with members of the indigenous communities who follow ancestral traditions. This category struggles with the growth of secular intolerance, especially where attempts are made to prevent their faith-based opinions being heard in the public sphere.

Converts to Christianity

This category includes cross-denominational converts from historical Christian communities, converts from a criminal (mafia) background and Christians who have abandoned the religious practices of the indigenous community to which they previously belonged. Those ethnic rites could be ancestral or syncretistic (mostly related to the Roman Catholic faith). Indigenous converts often face significant pressure to abandon their new faith and may experience threats of violence, arrests, and even expulsion.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and the Renewalist movement – especially where they are involved in advocacy activities in indigenous communities – suffer retaliation from community members who refuse to accept the presence of other religious groups. In areas co-opted by organized crime, they also suffer the risk of being put under pressure or attacked for their active evangelism. They face criticism and threats for defending their faith-based opinions in the public arena.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Organized corruption and crime:

Transparency International ([CPI 2021](#)) ranks Mexico 124th out of 180 countries, with a 31/100 score (0= highly corrupt and 100= very clean). 2021 was the third most violent year in a row, judged by the number of violent deaths. In the WWL 2022 reporting period, the government's plan to control violence using military force proved once again to be ineffective. The high levels of impunity and corruption have led commentators to call Mexico a “[narco-state](#)” (Modern Diplomacy, 6 March 2022). Christians, who inform the authorities of illegal operations or act as human rights defenders, are considered a threat to the interests of criminal groups. They can quickly become targets for all sorts of reprisals, [attacks](#) (Agenzia Fides, 20 November 2021), [surveillance](#) (Aciprensa, 25 February 2022), [break-ins and robberies](#) to their worship places and homes (Aciprensa, 14 January 2022), [death threats](#) (La Región en Línea, 5 October 2020), kidnapping attempts, and even [killings](#) (El Imparcial, 25 February 2022). Criminal groups are showing an increasing level of cruelty when [acting against Church leaders](#) (MSN News, 9 October 2022).

Clan oppression:

The State intervenes minimally since it recognizes indigenous communities' right to autonomy. In such communities, ethnic leaders attempt to impose a lifestyle regulated by ancestral or syncretistic customs (mostly related to the Roman Catholic Church). If Christian converts reject such customs, they face community pressure through [forced displacement](#) (Aqui Noticias, 22 August 2022), fines, isolation, the blocking of basic community services, imprisonment, beatings, and the [destruction](#) of Christian property (Evangelical Focus, 18 January 2021). Through the State Commission on Human Rights, measures have been taken to guarantee the physical integrity and personal security of indigenous Christians belonging to non-

accepted church groups. However, these cases have not always been followed up satisfactorily.

Secular intolerance:

Ideological pressure groups and some government authorities seek to promote a secularist agenda which aims to restrict the participation of Christians in the public sphere, especially when they hold positions of public office. Christians experience increasing societal intolerance for expressing faith-based beliefs, including at work or school. Vandalism of church property is increasing, yet the authorities rarely carry out in-depth investigations, not considering it a “real problem” (Debate, 7 March 2021).



- Trafficking
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual

MEN

In a context of ongoing violence and organized crime, young men and boys are at risk of being killed. In areas controlled by criminal groups, indoctrination and forced recruitment is a danger. Those who resist face threats, abduction, and killing. Men face intense pressure and violence as the heads of families and churches, with leaders most frequently victims of fines and extortion. They are targeted for their community work and speaking out against illegal activity. Converts from indigenous backgrounds face beatings, harassment, and community rejection.

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community / networks
- Economic harassment via fines
- Forced to flee town / country
- Imprisonment by the government
- Military / militia conscription / service against conscience
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Ongoing organized violence presents many challenges, including femicides, increased family violence and trafficking. Criminals have exploited the COVID-19 pandemic to upscale activity with increased impunity. Girls may be trafficked under the “mask” of the dowry and are easy targets for abduction and sexual slavery by armed groups. Christian girls are targeted due to a presumed attitude of obedience, and are forced to maintain relationships with criminal group members. In indigenous communities, forced marriage is common, as is physical and verbal abuse for converts, and Christians are hindered from accessing healthcare.

- Abduction
- Denied / restricted healthcare
- Forced marriage

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	38	67
2022	43	65
2021	37	64
2020	52	60
2019	39	61

Mexico’s score increased by around two points, reflecting the highest levels of violence recorded during the reporting period. Criminal groups continued to target Christians wherever they were perceived to be a threat to a group’s illegal operations and took advantage of the weakness of State policies that allow corruption networks and impunity. Christians in indigenous communities increasingly face hostility due to their refusal to follow ancestral and traditional customs (mostly mixed with Roman Catholic practices). Religious intolerance driven by radical ideological groups against Christian expressions in the public sphere is also increasing.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

There is immense community pressure on Christians.

- June 2022:** Two Jesuit priests were [assassinated](#) in the locality of Cerocahui. The bodies of clergymen Javier Campos Morales and Joaquín César Mora were taken by armed men after their execution. The priests were killed when they tried to help an injured man, who was also executed. In the same area, some nuns from the same Jesuit community were threatened with rape due to their pastoral work with youth.
- January 2022:** Evangelical residents of San Pedro Chimaltepec reported the closure and looting of their church and the [imprisonment](#) of three people for not adhering to the religious beliefs of the community and who refused to participate in “community stewardship”. (Source: El Universal, 4 January 2022)
- January 2022:** The Electoral Court of the Judicial Power of the Federation (Upper Chamber) [declared](#) two cardinals, a bishop and two priests guilty of violating electoral law by encouraging Catholic Christians to vote in favor of certain candidates who defended life and family according to Christian principles. The Upper Chamber determined that the Ministry of Interior should decide what legal measures should be taken, which could range from a simple reprimand to a fine of three million pesos (about USD 150,000). (Source: Aciprensa, 20 January 2022)

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians mentally or physically abused	Christians’ private property damaged or confiscated	Christians internally displaced
2023	42	44	3	71
2022	45	40	80	405

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

After the COVID-19 crisis, online platforms played a more significant role than ever; it became easier for criminal groups to target Christians who published material supporting non-violence and opposing illicit activities. Christians supporting faith-based views on social media about topics such as family, marriage, and the sanctity of life were criticized, mocked and targeted. In indigenous communities, monitoring of converts increased greatly after the pandemic. Where Christian religious symbols were found, they were likely to be destroyed and the Christians using them punished. Motivated by their loyalty to the community, immediate family members denounce converts to the indigenous leaders.

Family life

Indigenous Christian children have been threatened with separation from their parents or prevented from being educated by them after their parents convert to Christianity and abandon traditional community beliefs. Organized crime is also a cause of separation within

families, since the danger of attack can be so high that some Christian family members are forced to look for a safe place to live elsewhere. The recruitment of children by criminal groups has skyrocketed; they were being used to transport drugs in food and medicine and to join self-defense groups. Forced displacement is also a frequent threat to non-accepted Christians living inside indigenous communities.

Community life

Christians are closely monitored within both indigenous communities and areas dominated by organized crime. Within the indigenous communities, Christians face harassment, fines, threats and forced displacement when refusing to participate in community activities that contradict the Christian faith. Criminal gangs extort protection money from church leaders and other Christians to allow them to conduct their activities undisturbed. In the workplace, under the defense of “non-discrimination policies”, Christians face some pressure to follow postulates and participate in activities that may violate their conscience.

National life

Article 24 of the Constitution provides for freedom of religion or belief, but also restricts the manifestation and teaching of one's own religion, as well as promoting its observance in a political context. The right to conscientious objection is limited by law and tribunals. Given the levels of corruption, state authorities allow criminal groups to hinder the activities of civil society organizations, especially those working with young people in drug and crime prevention programs or with migrants. In addition, due to legislation regarding indigenous autonomy, ethnic customs usually prevail in religious conflicts when indigenous Christians are involved. The non-discrimination and radical secularism legal framework is often used to promote a climate of self-censorship against Christians when they intend to manifest their faith-based views in the public sphere.

Church life

Within indigenous communities, “non-accepted Christians” considered religious leaders are particularly targeted for harassment along with their families. Those who speak out against their oppressors face threats, hostilities, forced displacement and detention. In areas where organized crime is dominant, when Christians denounce their aggressors, criminal groups often respond with violent reprisals. Leaders and their families are the most frequent victims of the imposition of taxes, fines, or extortion. Christian preaching and teaching is closely monitored by pressure groups (sometimes supported by government officials) who label religious leaders as “haters”, “discriminators” or disrespectful of secularism.



International obligations & rights violated

Mexico 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 \(CRC\)](#)

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

- Christian converts from indigenous communities experience pressure and violence from their family and community to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian children from indigenous communities are harassed because of their parents' faith (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christian leaders are monitored, and their activities are actively watched (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian female converts from indigenous communities are at risk of forced marriage (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)

Situation of other religious minorities

According to the [US State Department](#) (IRFR 2021):

- During 2021, the government's National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) received three complaints of religious discrimination, compared with two in 2020. Two were directed at public servants purportedly discriminating against Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims.

According to [Observatorio Internacional de Libertad Religiosa](#) (29 March 2022):

- Three armed people assaulted a group of around 40 Jehovah's Witnesses inside a place of worship in Puebla. The criminals entered on Sunday afternoon (27 March 2022), brandishing weapons, and then stripped those present of their valuables.

According to [Ciudadanía Express](#) (31 January 2022):

- A Mexican court ordered that a blood transfusion should be applied to the youngest daughter of a couple of the Rarámuri ethnic group, despite the parents refusing such treatment on religious grounds.



Graduates from the Bible Training Center.

Open Doors in Mexico

The ministry of Open Doors in Mexico focuses on:

- Biblical training
- Professional litigation
- Financial support
- Research

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.
