

World
Watch
Research

Colombia: Full Country Dossier

January 2024



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Contents

Introduction	3
World Watch List 2024	3
Copyright note.....	4
Sources and definitions.....	4
WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Colombia.....	5
Brief country details	5
Map of country.....	5
Dominant persecution engines and drivers	6
Brief description of the persecution situation	6
Summary of international obligations and rights violations.....	7
Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period	7
Specific examples of positive developments	8
External Links - Situation in brief	8
WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Colombia	9
Links for general background information.....	9
Recent history	9
Political and legal landscape	11
Religious landscape	13
Economic landscape.....	16
Social and cultural landscape.....	19
Technological landscape	23
Security situation	24

Trends analysis	29
External Links - Keys to understanding	30
WWL 2024: Church information / Colombia	35
Christian origins.....	35
Church spectrum today	36
Areas where Christians face most difficulties	36
Christian communities and how they are affected	37
External Links - Church information.....	38
WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Colombia.....	38
Reporting period	38
Position on the World Watch List	38
Persecution engines	39
Drivers of persecution	41
The Persecution pattern.....	44
Pressure in the 5 spheres of life	44
Violence.....	53
5 Year trends	56
Gender-specific religious persecution / Female	58
Gender-specific religious persecution / Male	59
Persecution of other religious minorities.....	60
Future outlook.....	60
External Links - Persecution Dynamics.....	61
Further useful reports.....	61
External Links - Further useful reports.....	61

Introduction

World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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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 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- 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 can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Colombia

Brief country details

Colombia: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
51,673,000	49,079,000	95.0

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

Map of country



Colombia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	68	34
WWL 2023	71	22
WWL 2022	68	30
WWL 2021	67	30
WWL 2020	62	41

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Colombia:	
Main persecution engines	Main drivers
Organized corruption and crime	Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Organized crime cartels or networks, Government officials
Clan oppression	Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Government officials, Violent religious groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Secular intolerance	Government officials, Ideological pressure groups

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

Brief description of the persecution situation

Attempts to achieve peace in the country have been marred by the ongoing conflict between criminal groups and government forces. Thus the promises made by the administration under President Gustavo Petro (in office since August 2022) have not materialized - indeed, criminal groups still possess territorial control of many areas of the country. This is the context, in which church leaders continue to be threatened, harassed, extorted, and even murdered by non-state actors (such as guerrillas and other criminal groups), especially in rural and other neglected areas. In most cases, this violence was the direct result of Christians being involved in such activities as:

- Speaking publicly about the ongoing corruption and violence;
- Working in defense of human and environmental rights;
- Working among youth;
- Assisting in the country's peace-process;
- Opposing criminal activities in sermons;
- Any kind of action defying the de facto authority of local criminal groups or perceived as endangering their illegal activities.

Further, in some indigenous communities, there is hostility towards Christian preachers and indigenous converts, who, as a result, face imprisonment, physical abuse, denial of basic rights, and are often hindered from making use of their ancestral territory, among other forms of

punishment.

In addition, 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 or promoters of hate-speech. For this reason, some of them choose to self-censor in order to avoid becoming targets.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

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)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **August 2023 – Barranquilla:** Archbishop of Barranquilla, Pablo Emiro Salas, denounced cases of [extortion](#) targeting several priests under his responsibility. Threatening demands for money were made through letters and phone-calls that came from inside a local prison (Emisora Atlántico, August 2023).
- **April 2023 – Chocó:** When three brothers went to preach to a community in Pitalito, their entry was refused by indigenous leaders, who put them in a prison cell for 6 hours, as a form of punishment for "violating rights and culture". The leaders stated that if such attempts at preaching were repeated, this could lead to official action being taken.
- **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).
- **December 2022 – Santander:** The walls of the La Sagrada Familia Church were [painted with graffiti](#) together with the initials of the National Liberation Army (ELN). In the same municipi-

pality, a criminal organization sent death threats to the mayor of the city (InfoBase, 22 December 2022).

Specific examples of positive developments

- **June 2023 – Bogota:** The National Government signed an [agreement](#) with a variety of different church groups that gives civil recognition to church marriage ceremonies and permission to minister in prisons and hospitals. It is the second agreement that has been signed since the Statutory Law of Religious Freedom and Cults came into force in 1994 (Mininterior, 1 June 2023). The first agreement was signed in 1998. The signatories came from the following religious groups: Christian Center Church; the Christian Center Business Faith in Action; the Anglican Universal Apostolic Church (IUAA) Priestly Fraternity "The Good Shepherd"; the Anglican Catholic Church; the World Revival Center Church; the Inter-American Evangelical Church of Colombia; the Ancient Church in Colombia Old Catholics 1870 Archdiocese Mary Rose Mystic; and the Church of God Ministerial of Jesus Christ International.
- **August 2023:** Recognizing the significant role played by the Church in society, the government has once again invited church leaders to [be present at](#) official peace negotiations with the National Liberation Army, one of the guerrilla factions still active in Colombia (Aciprensa, 15 August 2023).

External Links - Situation in brief

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: extortion - <https://emisoraatlantico.com.co/local/la-paz-sera-siempre-lo-mejor-para-todos-pero-debe-ser-estructurada-pablo-emiro-salas/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: damaged - <https://www.wradio.com.co/2023/03/09/rechazan-actos-vandalicos-en-popayan-al-finalizar-las-marchas-del-8m/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: painted with graffiti - <https://www.infobae.com/america/colombia/2022/12/22/el-eln-dejo-un-grafiti-en-una-iglesia-en-barrancabermeja-y-asi-reacciono-la-comunidad/?outputType=amp-type>
- Specific examples of positive developments: agreement - <https://www.mininterior.gov.co/noticias/hecho-historico-en-la-libertad-de-cultos-despues-de-25-anos-gobierno-y-organizaciones-religiosas-firman-convenio-que-les-brinda-facultades-misionales/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: be present at - <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/100651/la-iglesia-acompana-el-nuevo-proceso-de-dialogo-entre-el-gobierno-colombiano-y-el-eln>

WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Colombia

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 Colombia report	AI Colombia 2022	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/south-america/colombia/report-colombia/	29 June 2023
BBC News Colombia profile - updated 14 February 2022	BBC Colombia profile	https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19390026	29 June 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI Colombia Report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/COL	29 June 2023
CIA World Factbook Colombia - updated 15 June 2023	World Factbook Colombia	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/colombia/	29 June 2023
Crisis24 Colombia report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Colombia report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/colombia	29 June 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2022 – covering 167 countries	EIU Democracy Index 2022 - Latin America pp.40-45	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/DI-final-version-report.pdf	29 June 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Colombia	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	29 June 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Colombia is not included	Democracy Index 2023	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Colombia	https://freedomhouse.org/country/colombia/freedom-world/2023	29 June 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2023 Colombia	https://freedomhouse.org/country/colombia/freedom-net/2023	18 January 2024
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Colombia profile	https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/colombia/	29 June 2023
Girls Not Brides Colombia report	Girls Not Brides Colombia	https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/colombia/	29 June 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Colombia country chapter	HRW 2023 Colombia country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/colombia	29 June 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 Colombia	https://www.internetworldstats.com/south.htm#co	29 June 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Colombia	https://rsf.org/en/colombia	29 June 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Colombia	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/col	29 June 2023
UNDP: Human Development Report Colombia	UNDP HDR Colombia	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/COL	29 June 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Colombia	IRFR 2022 Colombia	https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/colombia/	29 June 2023
USCIRF 2023 country reports – covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL, Colombia not included	USCIRF 2023	https://www.uscirf.gov/countries	
World Bank Colombia data 2021	World Bank Colombia data	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=COL	29 June 2023
World Bank Colombia overview – updated 7 June 2023	World Bank Colombia overview	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/colombia/overview#1	29 June 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Colombia - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Colombia	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e408a7e21ba62d843bdd90dc37e61b57-0500032021/related/mpo-col.pdf	29 June 2023

Recent history

Colombia became independent from Spain after a period of struggle in the years 1810-1819. The Santa Fe Independence Act was signed in 1810 and there followed six battles in the war of independence. The most famous was Battle of Boyacá fought on 7 August 1819, won by the revolutionary forces under Simón Bolívar.

In 2018, Iván Duque Márquez (of the Democratic Center Party became the youngest-ever president of Colombia (he was born in 1976). In August 2022, he handed over to his successor, Gustavo Petro, a former M-19 guerilla fighter, who won the [presidential election](#) in June 2022 (The Guardian, 20 June 2022) - see below.

Widespread dissatisfaction with President Iván Duque's administration increased greatly. Towards the end of 2019, nationwide [demonstrations](#) took place which were led by students, indigenous leaders and unions. The protests focused on political, social, economic and security issues (The Guardian, 4 December 2019). During the demonstrations that continued into 2020, the protestors were joined by [illegal armed groups](#). The commander of the ELN's Western War Front, confirmed in a video posted on social media networks, that ELN teams were active in the vandalism occurring during the September protests (La Opinion, 24 September 2020).

The lock-down measures introduced to combat the spread of COVID-19 also had a negative impact on the economy and in other areas. In April 2021, nationwide demonstrations took place once again, driven first by the [rejection](#) of a tax reform proposal and continued later in response

to the government's violent action against protesters (New York Times, 27 May 2021). Despite [dialogue](#) taking place between the government and Colombia's National Strike Committee (CNP), made up mainly of unions, the talks were abandoned when no concrete agreements seemed possible (La Prensa Latina, 6 June 2021).

Ivan Duque's main objective as president was to enforce security. The government partially complied with the [peace accords](#) (Oficina de Alto Comisionado para la Paz, 2016), renaming them "[Peace with Legality](#)" (Reincorporacion, January 2022), but it was unable to contain the increasing violence caused by guerrilla and paramilitary groups and criminal gangs (See below: *Security situation*).

The first round of [elections](#) to choose the president of Colombia for the period 2022-2026 were held on 29 May 2022. The vote was inconclusive and so a second round between Gustavo Petro, the candidate of the Historical Pact, a coalition of leftist parties, and Rodolfo Hernández, leader of the political movement League of Governors Anticorruption had to take place (CNN, 30 May 2022). In the second round, held on 19 June 2022, the [winner](#) was Gustavo Petro (CNN Español, 19 June 2022). Gustavo Petro, [assured](#) the population that the churches would be able to keep their doors open in total freedom without any additional taxation (Infobae, 15 June 2022). He pledged to work to promote religious freedom and equality at all levels of government and in all corners of the country.

Contact with the Andean Community, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Pacific Alliance has been strengthened. In April 2020, Colombia officially became the [37th member](#) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 28 April 2020). Colombia also joined other Latin American countries in the Forum for the Progress of South America (ProSur) in supporting initiatives for the adoption of a global response to pandemics (Andina, 26 May 2020).

In August 2022, the Gustavo Petro government withdrew from the Geneva Consensus Declaration, in which a group of approximately thirty nations express opposition to abortion. The reason for the withdrawal, according to the Colombian Foreign Ministry, was that the country now had a legal framework [allowing](#) the practice of abortion legally and safely (Semana, 22 August 2022). In November 2022, the government [ratified](#) the Escazú Agreement, a regional agreement of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean that mainly seeks to materialize Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development of 1992 and thus ensure (i) access to environmental information, (ii) access to environmental participation and (iii) access to environmental justice (Ámbito jurídico, 22 November 2022).

In February 2023, the Peruvian Congress declared President Gustavo Petro [persona non grata](#) for his statements against Peru's national police force during demonstrations against the government of the current president of Peru, Dina Boluarte. In the past, Petro had sided with former President Pedro Castillo, who is currently facing legal charges for the crimes of rebellion and conspiracy (BBC News, 18 February 2023). The relationship between Gustavo Petro and Nayib Bukele, president of El Salvador, is also tense. Some analysts [argue](#) that the two presidents are "in competition for regional leadership in Latin America, above all, in terms of ideological and political regional leadership" (VOA, 20 May 2023).

Political and legal landscape

Gustavo Petro, presidential candidate for the Historical Pact, [won](#) the elections in a second round with more than 50% of the vote (The Guardian, 20 June 2022). It is the first time that Colombia has a 'leftist' president. In addition, Francia Márquez, a defender of human and environmental rights, is the first Afro-Colombian woman to be elected as vice president. Gustavo Petro's 54 page [government plan](#) stated that the new administration would protect religious diversity and guarantee all citizens the conditions for the exercise of equality and freedom of worship according to their religious beliefs (Government Plan 2022- 2026, no date). Likewise, it indicated that all public policies related to equality and religious freedom would be harmonized with the Constitution and the law. The president-elect took office on 7 August 2022.

The main political issues in the first year of President Petro's mandate were:

- *Tax reform:* As of January 2023, the [tax reform](#), which was approved at the end of 2022, entered into force. This tax reform is expected to bring in close to \$20 billion pesos in the first year and reach \$23 billion pesos in 2026. It includes the elimination of tax exemptions, the expansion of the tax base, ending the deductibility of income tax royalties and the creation of health taxes on soft drinks and ultra-processed foods (Semana, 2 January 2023).
- *Relations with Venezuela* (i.e., the [re-opening](#) of trade and diplomatic relations as reported by El País on 26 September 2022): In January 2023, Gustavo Petro and Nicolás Maduro issued a [joint declaration](#) announcing, among other things, that Venezuela will be a guarantor country for Colombia in the process of maintaining bilateral peace. This declaration concluded negotiations on the Agreement regarding the Promotion and Reciprocal Protection of Investments and promised the opening of all border crossings (Presidencia de la República, 7 January 2023). 24 September 2023 marked [one year](#) since the full re-establishment of diplomatic, political and commercial relations between the two countries (Presidencia, 24 September 2023).
- *Cabinet instability:* [A ministerial crisis](#) emerged in 2023 with the unexpected dismissal of 10 of President Petro's 18 ministers. This is a sign of his cabinet's instability and ineffectiveness in pushing reforms (CNN, 26 April 2023).
- *Planned reforms:* The government is seeking to promote a package of reforms in Congress to modify the health, pension and labor systems. However, the political crisis as a result of corruption scandals involving Gustavo Petro and key political actors close to him have [delayed discussion](#) on these reforms and further exacerbated the political crisis in the country (El País, 5 June 2023). During one of his speeches, Gustavo Petro pointed out that "if the major reforms he presented to Congress are not approved, this could lead to a '[revolution](#)'" (El Nuevo Siglo, 1 May 2023).

The corruption scandal mentioned above and other issues have had a negative impact on the president's image: According to surveys by [Invamer Poll](#), by October 2023, 60% of Colombians disapproved of the Petro administration, compared to 32% who approved. The popularity of Vice President Francia Marquez fell significantly as well.

The current political crisis is also palpable at the social level. During the month of June 2023, in the midst of the corruption scandals involving the president, citizens took to the streets, in a so-

called “[Majority March](#)”, in protest against the reform package promoted by the government (Infobae, 20 June 2023).

Regional elections took place on 29 October 2023 and candidates for the president’s Historical Pact party [failed to win](#) mayorships in any of the nation’s main cities and won governorships in only two small provinces along Colombia’s southern border (AP News, 30 October 2023). This clearly shows a very poor level of support for Gustavo Petro in the remainder of his governing period.

The elections were [overshadowed](#) by increasing levels of armed conflict, criminality and corruption (Pares, 30 April 2023). According to a report by the Peace & Reconciliation Foundation: From 29 October 2022 to 25 October 2023, 325 victims of electoral violence were [recorded](#): Of the total victims (325), 37 were murdered, 51 suffered an attack and 236 were threatened (Pares, 26 October 2023).

Peace process

Towards the end of Ivan Duque's mandate, the implementation of peace agreements and the fight against corruption were the most dominant issues for the government. The peace process was slower than expected; in the period December 2021 - November 2022, the [Kroc Institute](#) reported the following regarding the status of implementation of the peace agreements (Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, 8 June 2023):

- “578 provisions make up the Final Agreement. As of November 2022, it was identified that 13% of the provisions had not yet started. 37% of the provisions were in a minimal state, which indicates that actions had been taken towards their execution, but there was no information to ensure that their implementation would be completed within the period provided for by the Final Agreement. On the other hand, 20% of the provisions were in an intermediate state. Finally, 31% of the provisions were complete, indicating that they were fully implemented. The state of general implementation shows that it has not yet been achieved that the intermediate level of implementation is the most predominant, which would allow us to foresee the viability of the total implementation of the Final Agreement.”

In Congress, all ex-guerrillas are grouped together in the political party called "Comunes". However, their presence in Congress is currently still a result of the Peace Agreement and not through any form of democratic voting. From 2026 onwards, they will need to [achieve](#) the necessary voter support to remain in Congress (El Tiempo, 1 October 2021).

Gender perspective

Military service is [mandatory](#) for men in Colombia for a period of 18-24 months (World Population Review, 2023). There are some [exemptions](#), such as physically or cognitively impaired people or some indigenous groups (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, accessed 26 May 2023). Other groups such as religious leaders are also exempt in peace time. According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Colombia), religious leaders expressed continued concern regarding a law requiring interagency commissions to evaluate requests for

conscientious objector status. Religious organizations reported mixed enforcement of the conscientious objector law, stating that some objectors were still required to serve in the military, although they were exempt from carrying a weapon. The Ministry of Defense reported that by the end of the year, it had approved 124 of 209 applications seeking conscientious objector status on religious grounds.

Men and women have equal rights in relation to marriage, divorce and guardianship of children. Legislation is insufficient concerning child marriage however, permitting marriage of children over 14 with parental approval (Civil Code 1974). 23% of girls are married by 18 and according to Girls Not Brides Colombia; such marriages are more prevalent among indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. As part of the 2016 peace agreement between the government and FARC, gender and women’s rights provisions were included in the peace deal. Progress in implementing these provisions has, however, been slow and women continue to face high levels of insecurity and violence; female human rights defenders are particularly vulnerable to attack ([Index on Censorship, 10 March 2023](#)).

Religious landscape

Colombia: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	49,079,000	95.0
Muslim	29,000	0.1
Hindu	12,400	0.0
Buddhist	2,300	0.0
Ethno-religionist	317,000	0.6
Jewish	5,000	0.0
Bahai	85,000	0.2
Atheist	149,000	0.3
Agnostic	1,455,000	2.8
Other	540,600	1.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

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

The [1991 Constitution](#) guarantees freedom of religion and states that every person enjoys the right to profess their own belief individually or collectively (Article 19). There is no official state religion; all religious denominations are equal by law; the state does however maintain a concordat with the Holy See. The Roman Catholic Church continues to enjoy privileged status compared to other religious denominations. The authorities maintain an [open dialogue](#) with representatives of the Catholic Church to discuss issues such as the defense of the Concordat Law, the protection of the right to religious and worship freedom, conscientious objection in

various contexts, as well as the participation of the Catholic Church in public policy on Religious Freedom and Worship (Vatican News, 27 April 2022).

In 1998, the Colombian authorities also signed an [agreement](#) (entitled Decree 354) with 13 non-Catholic Christian groups (El Herald, 2 August 2019). Among other things, this decree gives legally binding recognition of marriages and the guarantee that property used for worship cannot be seized by the state.

Churches that do not join those covered by [Decree 354](#) may choose to request recognition of their legal status and be registered in the Public Registry of the Ministry of Interior (Mininterior, February 1998). This allows them to collect funds, receive donations, establish religious education institutions, perform religious services (excluding legally registered marriages) and directly enter into agreements with public or private entities, foundations, national and/or international organizations for the development of social and educational projects. However, according to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Colombia) unregistered entities can carry out religious activities without penalty but may not collect financial support or receive non-monetary private donations. During preparations for the latest tax reform, an attempt was made to make churches pay [20% income tax](#) where they carry out activities not related to worship, but the inclusion of this article failed (El Comercio, 10 November 2022).

The role played by church and other religious leaders in the country is well-known. Since the [signing of the Final Agreement](#) between the government and FARC in September/November 2016 (The Guardian, 24 November 2016), religious communities (including Christians) have been considered valid social actors in the promotion of [dialogue and peace](#) (Semana, 10 February 2023). They have functioned as active participants in the drafting of some departmental and national public policies, although this has also caused criticism from secularists and made them targets for acts of aggression. In the latest presidential elections in 2022, the Catholic Church [called](#) for citizens to vote in a responsible manner and requested that all necessary measures be taken to mitigate the influence of armed groups (CEC, 16 June 2022).

Some church leaders also dared to [make known](#) their knowledge of alliances between illegal armed groups and certain sectors of the government army, as well as illegal activity occurring in various departments in the country. This earned them threats not only from criminal groups but also from members of the armed forces (Religión Digital, 24 February 2022). In the previous reporting period (WWL 2023), during the elections for mayors and governors, the Catholic Church, accompanied by academia and civil society, activated the [¡Pilas! campaign](#). Don't throw away the vote, for the common good. The objective was to raise awareness among citizens about the importance of conscious voting. (Vida Nueva Digital, 18 August 2023). They have also spoken out regarding the [legislative reforms](#) (El Tiempo, 7 June 2023), the [peace process](#) proposed by the government (El País, 11 January 2023), and about [ending all violence](#) (Vida Nueva Digital, 20 July 2023).

Sometimes, the involvement of religious leaders in social and political matters exposes them to various risks. On the one hand, despite public recognition of the significance of church ministry in society, there still exists a widespread hostility towards religious expression in public, especially if faith-based views are expressed by public officials, including high profile public

representatives. There was a move in 2022, rejected by the Supreme Court, to have a [cross removed](#) from the Full Chamber of the Constitutional Court "because its presence would violate the principles of secularism, human dignity, equality and due process" by demonstrating state bias towards Christian faith (OJS, 30 April, 2022). There have also been legal attempts to ban expressions of personal faith made by local government staff on social media networks, in the belief that this is necessary for adhering to the secular principle of Church-State separation.

In the name of Church-State separation, pressure groups continue to reject [faith-based statements](#) made by Christian leaders on the issues of abortion, family, marriage and religious liberty (CEC, 12 May 2022). Radical ideological pressure groups also attempt to [prevent](#) public forums taking place where content contradicts their views on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) (Semana, 25 April 2023). Such radical groups often use aggressive language, [vandalize](#) churches (Alerta Bogotá, 29 September 2022) and disrupt church services. In such cases, [police inaction](#) is usual (Religion Digital, 29 September 2022). The US State Department (IRFR 2022 Colombia) stated that in 2022 several acts of vandalism against places of worship (especially against Catholic churches) were reported to the local authorities. The Colombian Episcopal Conference also reported acts of vandalism against 15 Catholic churches in the departments of Córdoba, Cauca, Antioquia, Tolima, Boyacá, Sucre, Santander, and Bogotá. This vandalism included desecration of religious objects, theft of eucharistic chalices and paintings, and graffiti on church walls. The affected church communities reported the incidents to the police and publicized them on social media.

In the WWL 2024 reporting period, there have been a series of reforms to the Penal Code being prepared. One of these seeks to [remove](#) from the Penal Code all matters involving the violation of religious freedom, the disruption of religious ceremonies, damage or injury to person or things intended for use in worship and disrespect to the dead. As justification, it is claimed that very few complaints of such conduct have been recorded and can be dealt with through other legal means (El Espectador, 6 February 2023).

Meanwhile, insecurity in the country has a severe effect on the work of the church. In areas coopted by armed groups, the evangelistic work of Christians has exposed them to various forms of pressure and violence, such as organized smear campaigns and receiving death threats. Other measures for silencing them and putting them under pressure are forced displacement, mobility limitations, bans on holding church services and church burglary (see more in *Security situation*).

A special note about 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' in indigenous communities:

Within indigenous communities, the religious factor is an important component of their culture and identity and shapes their relationships with other people and even natural resources. As in many indigenous communities in Latin America, the religious practices are mostly related to syncretistic practices adapted from Roman Catholic rites. In some cases, they identify themselves as Catholics and indigenous leaders tend to be more receptive to the presence of Roman Catholic members than with Christians from other denominations. In many other cases, the spirituality of the ethnic group includes rites related to animism and takes on a hostile stand against local Christians. However, in all these cases, any type of preaching or religious activity requires permission from the leaders. Anything going against the customs of the ethnic group will be punished. Due to the general acceptance of Catholic traditions inside indigenous com-

munities, most 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' are of Protestant or Evangelical origin.

In indigenous communities, Christians face opposition where they reject the religious practices and customs of the ethnic group to which they belong, especially if they are related with animism rites. This has led to indigenous leaders often seeing Christian influences from outside as a destabilizing element. Since ethnic leaders are those who administer justice in their territories, religious freedom of indigenous people is not duly guaranteed by local (state) authorities where it concerns a religion differing from the community one. Therefore - and only with regard to indigenous people - those adhering to 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' refer in this country dossier to those Christians who refuse to follow the ancestral or traditional beliefs of the ethnic group to which they belong because it contradicts their faith. Thus, when syncretistic religious customs related to Roman Catholic rites (or ancestral religious customs that worship nature) are practiced in the indigenous community or participation in and attendance at animism rituals is required, they refuse to participate and consequently face hostility and rejection. The victims of hostile acts are believers and their families, including children, who can become victims of discrimination even in their schools. (See below: *Clan oppression*.)

Christian Solidarity Worldwide [notes](#) that most of the ongoing violations of FoRB taking place in indigenous communities can be directly linked to the 1998 Constitutional Court decision, Ruling SU-510, which gave primacy to the collective cultural right to protect traditions and culture over individual rights, specifically the right to FoRB. According to CSW, this decision was referenced especially by indigenous leaders who held the stance that nontraditional religions should not be allowed on indigenous lands. CSW mentions that indigenous individuals of religious minority groups experienced varying forms of discrimination by Indigenous community members and leaders. In several cases, indigenous Protestant Christians faced threats, harassment, bullying, arbitrary detention and torture from their fellow indigenous community based on their religious beliefs, driving them to flee their communities (CSW, 7 December 2022).

Additionally, the [United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (UNHCHR) mentioned that in the case of indigenous peoples and people of African descent, violence by non-state armed groups and criminal organizations, including disregard for their authorities, displacement and territorial dispossession, affect their physical and cultural survival. These groups force them to become associated with illicit economies and impose restrictions on their customs, forcing them to abandon the ancestral practices that underpin their well-being, cultural identity and autonomy (Reliefweb, 6 March 2023). According to Open Doors research, this also affects multiple dimensions of their religious freedom.

Economic landscape

According to UNDP's Human Development Report for Colombia:

- **Gross national income per capita (2021):** 14,384.
- **GNI per capita (2021):** 10,281 for women; 18,599 for men.
- **Inequality in income (2021):** 37.7%.
- **Population vulnerable to multidimensional poverty** is 6.2%.

According to the World Bank Colombia overview:

- "GDP strongly grew at 7.3 percent in 2022, but the economy overheated with activity above the potential, an accelerated inflation, and a high current account deficit. As the unwinding of repressed consumption comes to an end, continued monetary and fiscal tightening continues, and external demand remain weak, GDP is projected to grow by only 1.7% in 2023 with the economy headed towards a soft landing, which is needed to correct emerging domestic and external imbalances. Growth is projected to steadily increase to 2.0 percent in 2024 and 3.2 percent in 2025, as external demand resumes, and inflation and interest rates come down."
- "Only a modest reduction in poverty is estimated for 2022, as inflation -especially food-eroded labor income gains, offsetting an estimated 5 percentage points of growth driven reduction in the national poverty rate. The strong La Niña phenomenon has affected over 750,000 people and damaged dwellings, as well as health, education, road infrastructure, and crops. Poverty is projected to stagnate in 2023, as lower growth hampers the recovery in labor incomes."

According to World Bank's Global economic prospects (June 2023), Colombia's growth is projected to weaken from 7.5 percent in 2022 to 1.7 percent in 2023. The central bank began raising interest rates later than those of other LAC countries, which has contributed to a delayed peak in core inflation. Given high inflation and interest rates, consumption is expected to grow at a weak pace of 0.7 percent in 2023. As inflation subsides in response to monetary tightening and falling global energy and food prices, and as external demand gradually recovers, growth is expected to pick up to 2 percent in 2024.

On the other hand, according to data obtained until May 2023 by the National Department of Statistics and Informatics - DANE, "in 2022, multidimensional poverty in the country was 12.9%, 3.1 percentage points less than in 2021 (16.0 %)" (DANE, May 2023)

Unemployment and Economic growth:

- According to the [Unemployment Rates Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development](#), the unemployment rate fell to 9.7% in September 2023 (OECD, 14 November 2023).
- According to the [National Administrative Department of Statistics](#), in the third quarter of 2023, The Gross Domestic Product in its original series decreases 0.3% compared to the same period in 2022. So far in 2023, compared to the same period of the previous year, the Gross Domestic Product presents a growth of 1.0% (DANE, 15 November 2023). In [August 2023](#), the unemployment rate in Colombia and 13 principal cities was 9.4% (Camara de Comercio de Bogota, November 2023).
- The [Colombia report](#) published by the Circle of Latin American Studies (CESLA, November 2023) shows that in November 2023 the Colombian economy contracted by -0.3% in the third quarter. The sectors with the greatest contractions were construction (-8.0%), manufacturing industry (-6.2%), commerce (-3.5%), communications (-1.2%) and professional activities (-0.8%). Despite the poor performance of production, a downward trend in unemployment has been consolidated in 2023. Colombia had an annual inflation rate of less than 10% between 1999 and 2021. However, after the pandemic there was

accelerated growth in domestic consumption that produced inflation growth above 10%, after two decades of having it under control. Annual inflation was above 10% during the second half of 2022 and began its decline only in April 2023, but in October it was still at 10.48%. This behavior of consumption and its effects on inflation led the Bank of the Republic to raise the interest rate to discourage consumption that was largely financed with debt.

- The [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#) (OECD, November 2023) expects that GDP growth in Colombia will be 1.2% in the full year 2023 and that by 2024 the growth will be 1.4%. High interest rates and political uncertainty are the main factors hindering investment. In addition, there has been a tightening of financial conditions as financing costs have increased and lending criteria have become stricter. Private consumption, a key driver of the strong recovery after the pandemic, has also weakened. For the moment, the slowdown has not transferred to the labor market, where the unemployment rate is 1.5 percentage points below pre-pandemic levels.

In November 2022, the tax reform proposed by Gustavo Petro was approved. According to the president, the objective of this reform was to reduce tax benefits for the highest earners and make income redistribution possible to the most vulnerable. The reform basically makes those with more income pay [more taxes](#) (DIAN, November 2022). A proposed tax on church activities not directly involving worship was scrapped. The [main changes](#) were (CNN 4 November 2022):

- Prison sentences of between 4 and 9 years were introduced for tax evaders;
- A tax on single-use plastics was approved for the sale and import of products;
- A tax was placed on sugary drinks;
- An income surcharge for oil companies was created.

Humanitarian assistance from the Church and other civil society organizations to vulnerable sectors of the population has been possible. Aid has been distributed to the [migrant population](#) (CEC, 29 May 2023), to people with [low economic resources](#) (CEC, 13 April 13, 2023), and to victims of [natural disasters](#) (CEC, 19 January 2023), among others. This has helped ease the pressure on government resources in some areas. However, this work is seriously hampered by the presence of criminal groups in certain areas. These groups, in addition to being the cause of hostilities and mass displacement, are also the cause of [barriers and incidents](#) that limit the ability of humanitarian actors to access populations in need. Between January and July 2023, restrictions on mobility and access to essential goods affected more than 591,067 people, representing 98% percent of the people affected in humanitarian access events. The restrictions were registered in 12 departments, including Antioquia, Caquetá, Chocó, Magdalena, Nariño and Guaviare, due to the control exercised by Non-State Armed Groups (GANEs) and the deepening of governance over the communities (OCHA, 22 August 2023). In some rural areas, Christian families also face mobility restrictions imposed by criminal groups, which limit their access to their crops and other livelihood activities such as fishing.

Despite these issues, another way churches help the economy is by generating employment. According to the National Department of Statistics, 260,000 [formal jobs](#) have been generated by more than 5,000 religious organizations that have a presence in the country. Work among the elderly is a particular focus (Bluradio, 4 April 2022).

Gender perspective

In general, women remain the most economically vulnerable in Colombia with unemployment rates about [1.6 times](#) higher than that of men (World Bank Colombia data). Over the past decades, significant improvements have been made in relation to education opportunities for girls in Colombia, such that there is now gender parity and perhaps, an even slight margin in favor of women with regard to average number of years of education received. Whilst women continue to have fewer work opportunities, the number of women in the workforce is also on the rise. However, it remains challenging for women to attain high profile positions, such as governmental posts; candidates are also vulnerable to threats and attacks. Statistics from Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) suggest that about [70%](#) of women in politics in Colombia face various forms of violence including verbal, sexual and psychological violence (NIMD, 12 November 2022). Despite the challenges, elections held in 2022 saw record numbers of female candidates and women elected to Congress; Colombia is one of 13 countries in the world where 50% or more of women cabinet members also serve as heads of ministries ([IPU, 7 March 2023](#)).

Men also face economic challenges as the primary financial providers and are often targeted for extortion by criminal groups and fines. Ongoing investigations reveal the armed forces carried out widespread [extrajudicial killings](#) between 2002 and 2008, predominantly targeting civilians and men in particular, who they knowingly mislabeled as enemy combatants (BBC News, 27 April 2022).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the World Factbook Colombia:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Mestizo and White 87.6%, Afro-Colombian (includes Mulatto, Raizal, and Palenquero) 6.8%, Amerindian 4.3%, unspecified 1.4% (2018 est.).
- **Main language:** Spanish (official) and Amerindian language.
- **Urban population:** 82.4% of the total population (2023).
- **Literacy rate:** 95.6% of the total population.
- **Population below poverty line:** 35.7% (2019 est.).

According to World Bank Colombia data:

- **Education:** The school enrollment for primary (2021) is 106% and for secondary (2021) is 103%. The duration of compulsory education is 12 years (2022).
- **School Gender Parity Index (GPI) (2020):** 1.01. This refers to the ratio of girls to boys enrolled at primary and secondary levels in public and private schools.
- **Unemployment:** 10.7% (2022) Modeled ILO estimate.

According to UNDP HDR Colombia:

- **HDI score and ranking:** Colombia's HDI value for 2021 was 0.752, which put the country in the 'high' human development category, ranking 88 out of 189 countries and territories.
- **Life expectancy (2021):** 76.4 female and 69.4 male.

- **Gender inequality (2021):** Colombia has a 2019 Gender Inequality Index value of 0.424, ranking it 102 out of 162 countries. The labor force participation rate for women is 52.2%, compared to 78.0% for men.

The indigenous population

According to the most recent National Population and [Housing Census](#) published in 2018 by the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE, 30 June 2018), 4.4% of the Colombian population regard themselves as indigenous: 1,905,617 citizens (distributed in 115 native indigenous people distributed over a large part of the national territory), a rise of 1% compared to the 2005 Census. The State recognizes the autonomy and self-determination of indigenous groups, which means that the indigenous populations establish and regulate their norms of coexistence. Hence, ethnic leaders attempt to impose a lifestyle regulated by their ancestral customs and act as the only authority in the area.

Humanitarian emergencies

The COVID-19 crisis increased the vulnerability of the poorest sections of society. Faced with unemployment, it was the poorest communities and the informal sector which suffered most severely. The most vulnerable sectors, especially the rural and indigenous sectors, do not have minimum public services and social infrastructure. During the 2021 wave of protests, the [most affected areas](#) also ended up being the most vulnerable areas since roadblocks caused serious problems in the supply of food and medicine (Connectas, July 2021). State support is often minimal; in addition, endemic corruption between criminal groups and local authorities is so established that it adds to the continuity of multidimensional poverty and in some territories represents a serious obstacle to the distribution of aid. In most cases, violence is most acute in rural areas.

According to a report by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - OCHA, from January to March 2022, the humanitarian impact caused by armed violence greatly affected the [civilian population](#) (OCHA, 4 April 2022). The report highlights the lockdown measures suffered by more than 170 communities in Chocó, where 48,300 people live, the majority of whom are indigenous or Afro-Colombian, where not only access to basic goods and services and the effective enjoyment of rights was restricted by the presence of non-state armed groups, life-threatening anti-personnel mines (MAP) and unexploded ordnance (MSE). The departments of Chocó, Valle del Cauca, Antioquia and Arauca face triple-impact emergencies with high levels of displacement, confinement and natural disasters. Similarly, the OCHA reported that by August 2023, 30 thousand people were victims of forced displacement (OCHA, 21 August 2023). A number of NGOs have declared a humanitarian and human rights emergency throughout the country. According to the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) there are 7.7 million people in the country with humanitarian needs. According to the organization, humanitarian needs increase as the prolonged conflict continues to displace thousands of people. At the same time, Colombia hosts nearly 2.5 million Venezuelans fleeing that country's growing humanitarian crisis (El Tiempo, 1 June 2023).

Recruitment

In the first ten months of 2023, the Ombudsman's Office reported [166](#) cases of recruitment of girls, boys and adolescents. However, many families fear mentioning such recruitment due to possible reprisals (including displacement or murder) being carried out by the illegal armed groups (Defensoría, 15 November 2023). The Study on the Characterization of Children Disconnected from Organized Armed Groups in Colombia (2013-2022) carried out by UNICEF and the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF) reported that with the demobilization of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016, after the peace agreements with the government, the National Liberation Army (ELN) became the [largest recruiter](#) of children and adolescents in the country, with 406 cases registered between 2013 and 2022. The wave of Venezuelan migration, as well as the presence of the Colombian guerrillas in neighboring Venezuela, generated an increase in the recruitment of Venezuelan children (UNICEF & ICBF, May 2023).

Killings

For the period from 27 June to 26 September 2023, the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia [reported](#) (Reliefweb, 5 October 2023) that the OHCHR received 52 allegations of killings of human rights defenders (4 verified, 44 under verification and 4 inconclusive). This represents a 13% decrease compared with the previous period. Of the allegations received, 14 involved Indigenous leaders, 10 peasant leaders, 11 Afro-Colombian leaders, 4 women leaders and one leader of the LGBTQIA+ community. The concentration of violence in Valle del Cauca (9), Nariño (8) and Cauca (7) Departments, is particularly concerning. Likewise, Since the signing of the Final Agreement, the Mission has verified 394 killings of former FARC-EP combatants (11 women, 57 Afro-Colombians and 39 Indigenous Persons), 134 attempted homicides (11 women), and 33 deemed as missing (all men).

The Colombian Ombudsman's Office reported that between January and June 2023, [92](#) homicides were recorded against social leaders and human rights defenders. The murders occurred in 26 departments. Cauca was the most affected with a total of 17 cases, followed by Nariño and Antioquia, both with seven cases each. Meanwhile, Valle del Cauca and Córdoba registered six cases each, while Bolívar and Cesar presented five deaths each. (Defensoría, 21 July 2023).

Examples of public Christian ministry

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 for migrants (Aciprensa, 25 May 2022). In the same way, Christian networks and organizations constantly raise attention to the factors triggering social crisis in various communities in the country (Manosunidas, 17 May 2022) and make constant calls for peace (El Tiempo, 12 January 2023). 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 peace (Comisión de la Verdad, June 2022), despite this putting many Christians at particular risk (see below: *Security situation*).

The refugee/migrant situation

According to a [UNHCR Factsheet](#) published in May 2023:

- "Refugees and migrants of multiple nationalities travel or walk through Colombia from (1) the border points with Venezuela and Ecuador; (2) large Colombian cities, such as Barranquilla, Bogotá, Cali or Medellín, and/or (3) rural areas; heading towards the Gulf of Urabá to cross the border with Panama and reach Central or North America. In addition to the routes through the Darién Gap, there are also people attempting to cross along the Pacific Coast, via Juradó, and through the Caribbean Sea, via San Andrés and Providencia Islands."
- "The trend of people on the move passing through Colombia onwards to Panama and North America has continued to increase significantly in 2023. While in 2022, 248,284 people crossed from Colombia to Panama, in 2023 (Jan-Apr) 127,687 people have crossed, reaching more than 50% of all the movements registered in 2022. In addition, the country experienced an exponential increase in the Venezuelan population in transit during the last two years (150,327 people crossed into Panama in 2022 and 55,590 in 2023, compared to 2,819 in 2021), similar to the situation in 2021, when the peak was of Haitian nationals (82,000)."

The Government of Colombia announced on 8 February 2021 the [Temporary Protection Status](#) (TPS) that enables over 2.3 million Venezuelans to access rights and services over the course of 10 years in the country (UNHCR, March 2023).

Various church groups care for the neediest, including the migrant population. In the case of the Catholic Church, within the framework of the 115th Plenary Assembly of the Colombian Episcopate, it emphasized the importance to not forget this problem ([El Tiempo, 4 July 2023](#)). Also, a meeting of Catholic bishops on the border between Colombia and Venezuela was entitled "Charity on the border 2023" ([Vatican News, 18 September 2023](#)). Evangelical churches also support vulnerable communities ([El País, 12 November 2023](#)).

Gender perspective

Colombian men are traditionally the primary financial providers while women assume a greater share of domestic chores. A 2015 study on social acceptance of violence against women reveals that social attitudes concerning gender are changing; in 2014, 31% of respondents believed that men should be the head of the household, compared to 45% in 2009 ([OECD Library, 2020](#)). There are currently [no legal restrictions](#) against female headship (World Bank, Snapshot: Woman, Business and the Law 2023). Domestic violence nonetheless remains widespread in Colombia, and the rate of femicides reportedly increased during the COVID-19 lockdowns ([Statista, January 2023](#); [The Guardian, 25 January 2021](#)). In addition, about 45% of female domestic workers lost their jobs as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, according to Georgetown (GIWPS 2021 Colombia).

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 Colombia):

- **Internet usage:** 83.2% penetration rate – survey date: June 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 83.2% penetration rate – survey date: June 2022

According to the World Bank Colombia data:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions (2022):** 156 per 100 people

Data published by [OOSGA \(2023\)](#) reveals that men and women use social media at a near equal rate, with women topping certain age demographics. While male users account for about 48.7% of all Facebook users, female users account for around 51.4%. Mobile internet usage is also very similar, with 52% of men accessing the Internet through a mobile device, versus 48% of women ([Statista, 23 May 2022](#)). This shows that Christian men and women have a similar level of access to digital Christian resources and community. According to Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, about 93.8% of women in Colombia have access to a mobile phone (GIWPS 2021 Colombia).

According to Freedom on the Net 2023 Colombia:

- Internet access has slightly increased in Colombia. According to data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), internet penetration stood at just over 73% in 2021. In July 2021, the government passed an amendment to existing legislation that declared the internet an “essential public service.” It requires providers to guarantee service to their customers and avoid suspending the installation, maintenance, and adaptation of their networks.
- Colombia ranks relatively high on indicators of internet affordability, especially when compared with other countries in the region. In recent years, the government has taken steps to address digital disparities. In March 2023, the MinTIC announced the Connect ICT 360 plan, which aims to provide connectivity to 85 percent of Colombians by 2026, with a focus on implementing emerging technologies and encouraging new service providers in regions affected by the digital divide.
- The Colombian government does not regularly order the removal of content, nonetheless platforms have restricted political and social content in moments of social unrest. In addition, Events of high national interest, like presidential elections, frequently prompt heightened levels of manipulated online content.
- Self-censorship is a notable problem for journalists and likely affects online publications. Journalists sometimes practice self-censorship out of fear of violence by armed groups, legal action under libel laws, or the general climate of impunity.

According to Reporters Without Borders (World Press Freedom 2023 Colombia):

- "The government has been using social media to combat criticism from the traditional media, and senior officials have been accused of vilifying journalists. Previous cases of state surveillance and spying on journalists have yet to be addressed. Studies warn of growing disinformation and the public has become disenchanted with the media’s news coverage,

regarding journalists as biased. Connecting the country to the Internet has been held back by corruption within the Ministry of Technology, Information and Communication. Coverage of environmental issues including the impact of mining and deforestation exposes journalists to violence, as does coverage of topics related to armed conflicts, land claims, community organization, the rights of ethnic communities and Colombia's peace accords. Journalists' safety is also threatened when they cover stories involving corruption, the expansion of Mexican cartels, and alliances between politicians, armed groups and the private sector."

According to the [Ministry of Information Technologies and Communications](#), in the first quarter of 2023, total fixed Internet accesses in Colombia reached 9.03 million, that is, close to 300,000 new accesses than those registered in the same quarter of the immediately previous year, when a figure of 8.72 million was reached (MinTIC, July 2023).

During the COVID-19 crisis, Christian groups used online media and technology to continue evangelizing. The restrictions imposed on mobility and gathering for worship forced many church leaders and their congregations to become familiar with digital communication platforms in order to remain in contact. In the case of the Catholic Church, there is a special [platform](#) for the chaplaincy work of the Military Bishopric of Colombia (CEC, December 2022), and there have been special online [events](#) such as the Week of the Digital Evangelizer (Religion en Libertad, 5 May 2022), and there have even been, in cooperation with certain universities, [virtual communication courses](#) being offered with a focus on evangelization (Radio María, 16 April 2021). The risk of both virtual platforms and events open to the public, is that participants are frequently exposed to hostility from ideological pressure groups.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that 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 the Christians themselves at risk.

Security situation

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has [reported](#) that in Colombia there are seven non-international armed conflicts. Three of them are between the Colombian State and the following armed groups: the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC) and the former FARC-EP currently not included in the Peace Agreement. The other four conflicts are between armed groups. One is between the ELN and the AGC, and the remaining three between the former FARC-EP currently not covered by the Peace Agreement and the Second Marquetalia, the Border Commandos - Bolivarian Army, and the ELN, respectively. Similarly, they documented 400 alleged violations of IHL and other humanitarian norms, of which more than half corresponded to homicides, threats, sexual violence, use of explosive devices with indiscriminate effects, recruitment, use and participation of boys, girls and adolescents in hostilities, arbitrary deprivation of liberty, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, among other serious conducts (ICRC, March 2023).

The IACHR has also voiced its views over the violence related to the actions of non-state armed groups in Colombia. Recently, the organization expressed [concern](#) about the high levels of

violence in Colombia's Pacific region, and about the impact this violence has on the rights of indigenous peoples and of Afro-descendant and peasant communities. It mentioned that this kind of violence in the area stems mostly from factors linked to historical discrimination, armed conflict, and disputes among armed groups for control of illegal economic activities. Further, this violence takes place in territories with high rates of poverty and extreme poverty where the State is hardly present (IACHR, 1 September 2023).

The main perpetrators of violence are organized armed groups, namely the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC) or Gulf Clan, FARC units that did not accept the peace process and FARC members who have decided to return to fight the government. In addition to these groups, there are criminal groups referred to as "Organized Armed Groups" (GAO - formerly known as BACRIM). The variety of groups, some having connections with Mexican cartels, means there is a continual struggle for gaining territory and power.

As reported by [Indepaz](#), between 2008 and 2021, narco-paramilitary groups have consolidated their activity in 216 municipalities, 232 present an occasional presence. Between 2016 and 2021, the AGC have had a permanent presence in 131 municipalities, of which 44 belong to the department of Antioquia, twenty-three to Córdoba, twenty-one to Chocó and twelve to Sucre. During the first half of 2022, activity of this group (AGC) was identified in 326 municipalities, the highest recorded during the sixteen years of monitoring carried out by Indepaz (Indepaz, 25 November 2022).

The Coexistence and Citizen Security Line of the Peace & Reconciliation Foundation [identified](#) 196 criminal organizations, of which 5 (3%) are Organized Armed Groups (GAO), 61 (31%) are Organized Crime Groups and 130 (66%) are Common Crime Groups (Pares, 15 December 2023). Not to mention, the [2005](#) (smaller) criminal gangs that operate in the main urban centers of the country (El Colombiano, 13 June 2022). There are so-called 'invisible borders' demarcated by armed groups, especially in the Pacific area, South of Bolívar, Catatumbo and Bajo Cauca.

According to Insight Crime, the ELN operates in at least [23 of the 32](#) departments in Colombia (Insight Crime, 13 November 2023). The main strongholds of the ELN are the departments of Chocó, Bolívar, Norte de Santander, and Arauca. There they control part of drug trafficking, smuggling and extortion. To a lesser extent, but with strategic positions, the ELN is also in the departments of Antioquia, Cesar, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Nariño and Vichada. These departments are key for their coca crops, cocaine production or smuggling routes to Ecuador and Venezuela. On the other hand, the border with Venezuela has also become an important region for the ELN. The fighting between armed groups on the Colombia-Venezuela border has caused an increase in violence as well (Prensalatina, 2 February 2023).

Members of the Venezuelan Bolivarian National Armed Forces and the Bolivarian National Guard have participated in joint operations with ELN guerrilla fighters and have been complicit in their abuses. According to the Conflict Watchlist, the Pacific Coast and the border with Venezuela form the [epicenters](#) of conflict in Colombia where armed groups contest drug trafficking routes and engage in other illegal economies, such as resource extraction. Among these areas, there is a particular concentration of violence in Cauca, Antioquia, Norte de Santander, and Valle del Cauca departments, where over half of reported fatalities occurred in 2022 (ACLEDDATA, 8

February 2023).

The [United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (UNHCHR/Reliefweb, 6 March 2023) has aired his concern that violence committed by non-state armed groups and criminal organizations affects individual and collective life and disproportionately impacts indigenous peoples, people of African descent and rural communities. As well as committing massacres, forced displacements and imposing restrictions on mobility, these groups kill social leaders, threaten those who disregard their demands, control communications in the community, limit relationships with third parties, restrict and control productive activities including planting, harvesting, fishing and marketing of products, and do not recognize ethnic authorities. Such actions negatively affect the communities' food security and undermine their political and economic autonomy. In addition, these actions strengthen the development and exploitation of illicit economies and territorial control by non-state armed groups. High levels of violence against human rights defenders continued throughout 2022. OHCHR received 256 allegations of killings of human rights defenders, in 116 cases of which it verified a link between their death and their human rights work, and in 140 were found to be inconclusive.

The Institute of Studies for Development and Peace (INDEPAZ) reported in October 2023 that so far in 2023, 33 signatories of the Peace Agreement (all ex-combatants) had been [murdered](#) (Indepaz, last accessed November 2023). The assassination of leaders and ex-combatants has hindered the implementation of the Final Agreement and affected the general perception of its practicality. Likewise, the murder of leaders of the National Program for the Substitution of Crops for Illicit Use has continued. Levels of fear in many communities are high due to the presence of members of the ELN, FARC and other criminal groups. In this context, the legal framework and the policies to fight corruption are weak. Government security forces are also being [accused](#) of collaborating with or tolerating the activities of the ELN (El Colombiano, 21 February 2023).

According to the [United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA, 22 September 2023), during August 2023, various attacks against civilians took place. At least 87,000 people, 66% belonging to ethnic peoples (33% indigenous and 33% Afro-descendants), were victims of emergencies due to massive displacements and confinements in 55 municipalities belonging to 15 departments, and some people have suffered double impact. In addition, in at least 311 municipalities of the 32 departments of the country, a range of attacks against civilians were reported (kidnapping, forced recruitment, threats, homicides, sexual violence, massacres).

In some instances, violence has been reported because of abuses by the national police and armed forces. It is significant that the national police are not under the command of the Ministry of the Interior or Justice, but under the Ministry of Defense, a legacy of the country's long internal armed conflict. Calls for reform have often proposed that the police force be moved out of the Defense Ministry to ensure strict civil scrutiny and ensure that civilian courts handle serious abuse cases.

According to the [United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia](#) (UN Mission in Colombia, 26 September 2023):

- "In keeping with the dynamics observed during past months, while clashes between the public security forces and illegal armed actors have generally decreased, confrontations among illegal armed groups and criminal organizations looking to expand their reach and clashing over illicit rents continued. The impact of these confrontations on local communities was felt especially in Departments such as Antioquia, Arauca, Cauca, Chocó, Nariño and Valle del Cauca. However, there have also been reductions in key indicators, including mass displacements, confinements and killings of social leaders and human rights defenders."

Illicit crops and drug issues

When guerrillas or criminal groups take possession of a town or community for drug trafficking or plantation use, one of the first steps they take is to exert their authority over the local population through violence. Additionally, these groups seek to recruit young men, women and even children. Boys, girls and adolescents who live in the poorest and most marginalized communities in Colombia are being exploited to fuel the criminal expansion of the country's armed actors (El País, 25 May 2023). Guerrillas and other criminal groups controlling territory constantly try to silence those who represent an obstacle to their illegal activities. Community leaders, including church leaders, thus become victims of violence. For instance, in August 2023, a group of 13 Christians were [attacked](#) by ELN with rifles and explosives when they gathered in a rural area to pray and fast. The illegal group mistook the brothers' tents for a camp belonging to a hostile group and proceeded to attack (Cric, 3 August 2023). The risk is greater for leaders involved in promoting human rights, denouncing corruption and participating in politics or in activities that seek to influence the population (especially young people). Assassinations and threats transmit a clear message to the local population to [remain silent](#) (Amnesty International, 9 November 2023).

Households participating in the 'National Comprehensive Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops' continued to be subjected to threats and killings by criminal groups. This is especially worrying considering that in 2022, an increase of [13%](#) has been reported in the area planted with coca in the country, going from 204,000 hectares in 2021 to 230,000 hectares in 2022. The largest increase was recorded in Putumayo in its status as a department, in terms of municipalities, Tibú (Norte de Santander) occupies first place with nearly 22,000 hectares, relative stability compared to 2021. Tumaco (Nariño) y Puerto Asís (Putumayo) le siguen a Tibú en área de coca. Together they increased their area with coca by more than 65% (UNODC, 11 September 2023). Although the national government has allocated funds for developing municipalities prioritized for the implementation of the peace agreement, areas where most coca crops are grown have so far experienced no improvement in security conditions, road infrastructure or access to markets. Additionally, the economic vulnerability of these areas has risen since the COVID-19 crisis began.

Progress in peace negotiations

To boost security, the new government under President Gustavo Petro proposed a plan for "Total Peace" ([CNN, 15 November 2022](#)), a proposal to include both guerrillas and drug traffickers in negotiations. It resumed peace talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN), with the president of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, acting as guarantor. Due to the presence of the ELN in Venezuela, Maduro's participation is considered by observers to be a clever plan, since there would be no possibility of making progress in talks without the cooperation of the Venezuelan government ([El Espectador, 30 September 2022](#)). Cuba formally hosted the peace negotiations in May 2023 after the two previous cycles held in Venezuela (November 2022) and Mexico (March 2023) ([CNN, 8 March 2023](#)). Despite the fact that the dialogue table has suffered several episodes of crisis, including the suspension of the "ceasefire" with the Central General Staff (i.e., the FARC dissidents who did not participate in the 2016 Peace Agreement) ([Público, 23 May 2023](#)) and with the Clan del Golfo ([El País, 19 March 2023](#)). At the close of the third cycle of negotiations in Cuba, the delegations announced a six-month ceasefire, effective from 3 August 2023, in addition to an agreement on the participation of civil society in the process ([El País, 12 June 2023](#)). The fourth cycle of negotiations took place in August 2023, in the city of Caracas, Venezuela. One of the most notable achievements was the creation of humanitarian zones in areas identified as critical, where "humanitarian actions and dynamics" will be carried out. In these areas, progress will be made in the implementation of projects that will reflect the agreements reached to date at the negotiation table. These initiatives will not only involve government and guerrilla actors but will also open to the active participation of civil society, local communities and the business sector ([PARES, 6 September 2023](#)).

Church leaders assist peace efforts but face intimidation

Some church leaders head groups seeking to assist in peace efforts. As part of the reactivation of negotiations between the ELN and the national government, two members of the World Council of Churches (WCC) will be [accompanying](#) the bilateral ceasefire process between the government and four armed groups and will be delegates at the dialogue table with the ELN ([El Espectador, 6 January 2023](#)). The Roman Catholic Church, in particular, has sought to promote dialogue with armed groups in an attempt to end the continuing violence and insecurity. Currently, the Catholic Church has been present as a witness in the peace talks through Bishop Héctor Fabio Henao, who heads the delegation of the Episcopal Conference of Colombia for relations between Church and State. In addition, in the context of the peace talks, it has initiated a series of training sessions for priests, laymen and citizens in general, called "[pedagogy for peace](#)", that is, guidelines for understanding the role of the Church in the Monitoring Mechanism and Verification of the bilateral ceasefire ([El Tiempo, 28 July 2023](#)).

Recently, the increased levels of control gained by criminal groups during the COVID-19 crisis made it easier for criminal groups to exert power over entire territories and in the process threaten church leaders. They are exposed to [death threats](#) whenever they advocate for peace and opposing criminal activity ([Aciprensa, 8 February 2022](#)), not to mention [extortion](#) ([Infobae, 15 August 2023](#)). This type of intimidating action often also extends to the relatives of religious leaders ([Caracol, 4 September 2022](#)). Similarly, church and social leaders who have spoken out publicly about the apparent collusion between authorities and criminal groups have been put

under [pressure](#) by some members of the army (Prensa Celam, 15 February 2022). Other measures for silencing and applying pressure are [forced displacement](#) (FoRB, 1 December 2020), [killings](#) (El Tiempo, 16 May 2023) and/or [attacks](#) (Infoinfusión, 02 July 2023). Churches have also been [burgled](#) and vandalized (El Espectador, 5 July 2023). Sometimes guerrillas paint graffiti on church buildings as a means of [intimidation](#) (Infobae, 22 December 2022). Churches have often had to change the [times](#) of their church services, since local gangs often set curfews, dictating when people are allowed to be out on the streets (Catholic News Agency, 2 September 2022).

Gender perspective

Forced recruitment of young adolescents (primarily boys) poses an ongoing threat to Christian communities ([BBC News, 5 August 2022](#)). Reports indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic was exploited by criminal groups to upscale recruitment and gang activity ([The New Humanitarian, 10 September 2020](#)). Refusing to join gangs is not an option, causing many to flee for fear of reprisals (Open Doors International, [Gender Specific Religious Persecution report](#), 1 March 2021). As highlighted in a 2018 World Watch Monitor report, Christian women and girls are at times double vulnerable to sexual assaults by armed groups based on their religion and gender ([World Watch Monitor, 7 March 2018](#)). There are also an increasing number of 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 control ([Reliefweb, June 2022](#)).

Trends analysis

1) The fragility of state institutions contributes to the worsening of violence in the country

Colombia is immersed in a multidimensional crisis related to the active presence of various criminal groups: These have capitalized on the inefficiency or disinterest of government authorities, which in turn influences political stability. The main factor of concern is the ongoing violence preventing the eradication of illegal activities and encouraging impunity for criminal leaders. The churches' work among the most needy in society have made Christians particularly vulnerable when they are perceived as challenging the authority and territorial domination of criminal groups which control many parts of the country.

2) The state does not adequately guarantee the rights of the indigenous population

The deterioration of the national situation has a direct impact on the most vulnerable sectors of the population, such as the autonomous indigenous communities. However, their problems and needs tend to be hidden; they are vulnerable to criminal violence, especially due to their geographical location. Due to the staunch defense of ethnic group customs and the threats by local criminal groups, Christian activities and church work can be very difficult and dangerous, with little or no protection from state authorities.

3) Less tolerance of Christian faith in the public sphere

With institutions and authorities in society increasingly perceived as lacking legitimacy, hostility towards manifestations of Christian faith and the defense of traditional Christian teaching has

increased, especially in the public space. Thus, on the one hand, there is vandalism against Christian buildings motivated by militant pressure groups, and on the other hand -sometimes with government support - groups are aggressively promoting intolerance towards faith-based views, especially in relation to issues of family, marriage and religious freedom.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: presidential election - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/20/former-guerrilla-gustavo-petro-wins-colombian-election-to-become-first-leftist-president>
- Recent history: demonstrations - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/04/colombia-protest-duque-bogota>
- Recent history: illegal armed groups. - <https://www.laopinion.com.co/colombia/comandante-urriel-del-el-n-confirmando-infiltracion-en-ultimas-marchas-en-el-pais-203073>
- Recent history: rejection - <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2021/05/27/espanol/protestas-colombia.html>
- Recent history: dialogue - <https://www.laprensalatina.com/strike-committee-suspends-protest-dialog-with-colombian-government/>
- Recent history: peace accords - <http://www.altocomisionadoparalapaz.gov.co/Documents/proceso-paz-farc-acuerdo-final.pdf>
- Recent history: Peace with Legality - <https://www.reincorporacion.gov.co/en/News/Lists/News/view%20news.aspx?ID=184&ContentTypeId=0x0100F718BAB968397F4F8B06A3C5C3E15DA2>
- Recent history: elections - <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2022/05/30/elecciones-colombia-quien-gano-quien-perdio-jornada-electoral-primera-vuelta-resultados-orix/>
- Recent history: winner - <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2022/06/19/elecciones-colombia-conteo-votos-lidera-petro-rodolfo/>
- Recent history: assured - <https://www.infobae.com/america/colombia/2022/06/15/las-iglesias-mantendran-las-puertas-abiertas-sin-que-se-les-adicione-ningun-impuesto-gustavo-petro/>
- Recent history: 37th member - <https://www.oecd.org/colombia/>
- Recent history: allowing - <https://www.semana.com/politica/articulo/colombia-se-retira-de-la-declaracion-del-consenso-de-ginebra-que-luchaba-contra-el-aborto/202218/>
- Recent history: ratified - <https://www.ambitojuridico.com/noticias/analisis/que-implica-para-colombia-la-ratificacion-del-acuerdo-de-escazu#>
- Recent history: persona non grata - <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-64693339>
- Recent history: argue - <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/causas-consecuencias-encuentros-choques-twitter-petro-bukele/7101173.html>
- Political and legal landscape: won - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/20/former-guerrilla-gustavo-petro-wins-colombian-election-to-become-first-leftist-president>
- Political and legal landscape: government plan - <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nEH9SKih-B4DO2rhjTZAKiBZit3FChmF/view>
- Political and legal landscape: tax reform - <https://www.semana.com/economia/macroeconomia/articulo/reforma-tributaria-que-cambios-empezaron-a-regir-desde-este-primero-de-enero/202311/>
- Political and legal landscape: reopening - <https://elpais.com/america-colombia/2022-09-26/colombia-y-venezuela-se-abren-la-puerta-economica.html>
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- Political and legal landscape: revolution - <https://www.elnuevosiglo.com.co/articulos/05-01-2023-dar-fuerte-batalla-por-reformas-insto-petro-nuevos-ministros>
- Political and legal landscape: Invamer Poll - <https://miningpress.com/pdfjs/web/viewer.php?file=/public/archivos/ZPzCbPlu9zXQPq7BMCj3wToUxunXQbYkcguCLJ4c.pdf&title=INVAMER+POLL%3A+MEDICI%C3%93N+%23157+%28OCTUBRE+2023%29>
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- Political and legal landscape: failed to win - <https://apnews.com/article/colombia-regional-elections-leftist-president-6a236eb5b8aa604807c7f06ad85d237d>
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- Political and legal landscape: recorded - <https://www.pares.com.co/post/quinto-informe-de-violencia-pol%C3%ADtico-electoral-29-de-octubre-2022-25-de-octubre-2023>
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WWL 2024: Church information / Colombia

Christian origins

Christianity came to Colombia through Spain's conquest and colonization from 1492 onwards. The Roman Catholic Church was able to establish itself as the sole Christian denomination. After Colombia gained independence from Spain in 1810, the Vatican in Rome established formal relations with the new state in 1835. The Roman Catholic Church took on an increasing political presence in the country which caused much friction with the political leaders of the time. As a result, Catholics were persecuted and religious communities such as the Jesuits were expelled from the country in 1851 and 1861.

In 1877 the radical government's attempts to establish a 'neutral' educational system degenerated into civil war with the active participation of several bishops and clerics. In 1886 the relationship between Church and State was settled in a new constitution which recognized the Catholic Church as the basis for national unity.

The loss of Catholic hegemony began with the arrival of the Presbyterian Church in the middle of the 19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century Baptists and other Protestants arrived. In the 1960s the religious landscape began to change visibly due to social, economic and cultural changes caused by modernization, urbanization and literacy. Pentecostalism came from the USA and soon became very popular. This new branch of Christianity was formally recognized in 1991 in the new Constitution of Colombia.

Church spectrum today

Colombia: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	11,500	0.0
Catholic	44,148,000	90.0
Protestant	1,942,000	4.0
Independent	2,645,000	5.4
Unaffiliated	501,000	1.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-169,000	-0.3
Total	49,078,500	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,359,000	2.8
Renewalist movement	16,696,000	34.0

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

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 main Christian denomination in Colombia is the Roman Catholic Church, representing 90% of all Christians according to WCD 2023 estimates. Protestant church groups continue to show growth and become more visible and influential, particularly where so-called 'Mega-churches' with congregations of thousands have become established in many major cities.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

- **For Organized corruption and crime:** According to the violence data gathered by organizations such as PARES and JUSTAPAZ and the reports from Open Doors researchers, Christians experience high levels of pressure and violence from criminal organizations and illegal armed groups in the following areas: Antioquia, Arauca, Atlántico, Bolívar, Caquetá, Casanare, Cauca, Cesar, Chocó, Córdoba, Guaviare, Huila, Magda-lena, Meta, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, Santander, Sucre, Tolima, Valle del Cauca, Vichada.
- **For Clan oppression:** Especially in indigenous communities with the most traditional customs and, in consequence, with less acceptance of other (Christian) rites than those of their own ethnicity, those who abandon the religious practices of the tribe face persecution. In Colombia there are 115 indigenous groups, of which 22 were recently included in the last

[census](#) carried out in 2018 (DANE Informacion para todos, 16 September 2019). These native peoples are located in the 32 departments of the country. According to Open Doors researchers, indigenous Christians face the highest levels of discrimination, intolerance and violence in Cauca, Cesar, Choco, Huila, Magdalena, Norte de Santander.

- **For 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 often opposing Christianity. Secular intolerance is present throughout the country, especially in urban areas such as Antioquia, Bogotá, Bolívar, Boyacá, Caldas, Cauca, Cundinamarca, Huila, Nariño, Quindío, Risaralda, Santander, Tolima and Valle.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation. These communities are therefore not scored as a separate category in WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities

This category consists mainly of Roman Catholic churches and small Orthodox and Protestant communities. These groups are in danger of attacks in areas controlled by drug cartels and by other forms of organized crime and guerrillas. They also struggle with the increasing religious intolerance in society and its increasing rejection of faith-based views in public debate, not to mention the obstacles and risks of church-work within indigenous communities (particularly as experienced by Protestant Christians). In sporadic cases, some Protestant groups face opposition from historical churches (such as the Catholic Church), as part of the dynamic of the Persecution engine *Christian denominational protectionism*.

Converts

For Colombia, this category includes converts within indigenous communities and converts to Christianity 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 majority belief-system within the community to which they belong. Converts are also affected by criminal networks in the same way as Christians belonging to Historical and Non-traditional Christian communities, especially if they are former members of illegal groups.

Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is mainly made up of Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations. They are also affected by the pressure and violence exerted by organized criminal groups and guerrillas, in the same way as Historical Christian communities. Although the government has recognized their important role in the implementation of the FARC peace agreement and its humanitarian assistance in neglected areas, these denominations do not receive the same government benefits granted to the country's historical churches and those churches which signed a covenant

with the state. In addition, where they try to participate in the political sphere, they face severe opposition from secularist pressure groups. They are not free to work within indigenous communities and face risk when doing so.

External Links - Church information

- Areas where Christians face most difficulties: census - <https://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/boletines/grupos-etnicos/presentacion-grupos-etnicos-2019.pdf>

WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Colombia

Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

Position on the World Watch List

Colombia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	68	34
WWL 2023	71	22
WWL 2022	68	30
WWL 2021	67	30
WWL 2020	62	41

Colombia dropped 2.5 points (rounded to 3) due to a reduction both in pressure and in the still extreme violence score (which dropped from 15.4 points in WWL 2023 to 14.1 points in WWL 2024, despite 16 Christians being killed). There were lower numbers of Christians sentenced, sexual abuse, and businesses attacked, and there were reductions in pressure in the *Private, Family, and Community spheres of life* due to fewer reports involving the Persecution engines *Clan oppression* and *Christian denominational protectionism*. The active presence of criminal and guerrilla groups continued to create a climate of fear among Christians.

Persecution engines

Colombia: 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	Strong
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Medium
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Not at all
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Strong

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.

Organized corruption and crime (Strong)

The Corruption Perception Index (CPI 2022) ranks Colombia #91 out of 180, with a 39/100 score (0 = highly corrupt and 100 = zero corruption). Despite the initial efforts in the implementation of the FARC Peace Agreement in 2016 and other more recent efforts to reach peace agreements with ELN and other "[Illegal Armed Groups](#)" (El País, 4 January 2023), criminal groups such as drug cartels and other guerrilla factions fight for control of entire regions to carry out their illegal activities. This situation has become particularly evident in areas such as the Pacific coast and Colombia's border with Venezuela, where illicit markets related to smuggling, illegal crops, drug trafficking and illegal mining are being disputed by several criminal groups attempting to control these areas. This has caused a worsening of the general humanitarian and security situation and has led to both church leaders and Christian groups being victims of systematic monitoring, abduction, threats, extortion, forced displacement and killings, as well as there being attacks against public Christian properties and direct threats against pastors' children (concerning rape or forced recruitment). These measures are especially addressed to Christians who actively oppose criminal activity, speak out defending human rights, preach to combatants and civilians, carry out prayer activities in particularly violent areas, or who are known to discourage young people from joining criminal groups.

Criminal groups also retaliate against former guerrilla members who abandon crime as a result of their conversion to Christian faith. The strengthening of criminal networks and their active presence in many areas of the country after the COVID-19 lockdown has allowed them to continue to be the de facto authorities in areas of the country where state activity is virtually non-existent. Many have continued to impose lockdown measures in the territories under their control. Also, the high levels of corruption allow them to act with impunity which means they

continue to threaten the peace. For instance, criminal groups put pressure on churches and church leaders to show support for certain political candidates during the elections.

Criminal groups also increased church monitoring to make sure anything that could harm their interests was prohibited, and they increased their harassment against Christians considered to be police informers or involved with other rival criminal groups. If Christians refuse to follow criminal group orders, they are perceived as a threat. During the WWL 2024 reporting period, Christians faced attempts as extortion, harassment, surveillance, interrogation, restrictions on movement, death-threats, in-country and out of country forced displacement, attacks on both private property and church buildings, sexual harassment, abduction and killings.

While indigenous communities are often the most affected by organized crime since their territory is frequently co-opted by drug traffickers and guerrillas, some indigenous leaders rely on criminal groups to intimidate indigenous Christian converts and thus force them to return to the community's syncretistic religious practices. Further, the level of violence in such places is also very high as a result of clashes between government troops and criminal groups and due to fighting between different criminal groups.

Clan oppression (Strong)

As described above concerning 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' in indigenous communities (see: *Religious landscape*), religion is an important component of indigenous culture and identity. The communities' religion is often based around syncretistic practices adapted from animist rituals and Roman Catholic rites. Any type of preaching or religious activity requires permission from the leaders and anything going against the customs of the ethnic group will be seen as a threat and punished. Such punishments (especially of converts to 'non-accepted forms of Christianity'), which may also involve their families, can include imprisonment, imposition of fines, physical abuse, denying access to basic services and goods, employment discrimination and confiscation of property, among other things. Obtaining protection from the government in these circumstances is difficult; state access to rural areas is often not possible and this has reinforced the concept of indigenous autonomy and the power of local leaders.

Secular intolerance (Medium)

The religious sector is considered an important element in supporting the implementation of the FARC peace agreement, negotiations with other guerrilla groups and social and humanitarian assistance during emergency situations in the country, such as that caused by COVID-19. But increasingly, Christians face verbal attacks, social hostility and discrimination due to intolerance towards faith-based 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 been discouraged as a result.

Drivers of persecution

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

- Organized crime cartels or networks (Strong):** There is a strong link between crime cartels and revolutionary and paramilitary groups; their motives for targeting Christians are very similar and they act mainly in rural areas where the presence of the state authorities is weak. These groups (Gulf Clan, Black Eagles, Los Rastrojos, Los Paisas, Caparrapos, La Constru, Los Costeños, the Border Command and many others) fight each other for territorial control and target Christians and Christian organizations who carry out activities such as preaching against crime and injustice, promoting peace and working in support of the FARC peace agreement, advocating for indigenous people's rights, and helping against drug addiction, among other humanitarian-related activities. More recently, Christians have been targeted when they try to provide humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable sectors of society and refuse to support the illegal interests of criminal groups. Christians

are especially viewed as a threat when they defy criminal group orders.

- **Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Strong):** These groups (such as FARC dissidents, the ELN and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia) closely monitor church activities and impose restrictions on them. They threaten, displace and attack Christians for working in support of the FARC Peace Agreement, for promoting human rights and opposing violence, for assisting displaced persons, for helping with land restitution claims, for not following orders about coca cultivation, for encouraging the participation in elections in favor of those who defend Christian values, and for refusing to comply with orders to participate in anti-government demonstrations. These groups accuse Christians of betrayal if they are perceived to be involved with the government or with rival criminal groups and aim to discourage any growth of local churches.
- **Government officials (Medium):** Many government officials have directly and indirectly allowed criminal action to take place against Christian leaders and churches in areas under criminal group control, especially where the authorities are in collusion with organized crime cartels and other criminal groups. The authorities' indifference towards the hostilities faced by Christians in this context is at times openly denounced by Christian leaders, but the fear of reprisals generally leads to self-censorship.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Corruption among members of the political class helps promote the cover-up of criminal group activities and they have also been hindering progress in the implementation of the FARC Peace Agreement. Their decisions reinforce impunity, allowing organized crime cartels to continue with their illegal activities and exert violence against Christians in the most neglected areas of the country. Furthermore, in local elections, criminal groups use violence and intimidation to influence the 'Christian vote' to help achieve party goals.

Drivers of Clan oppression

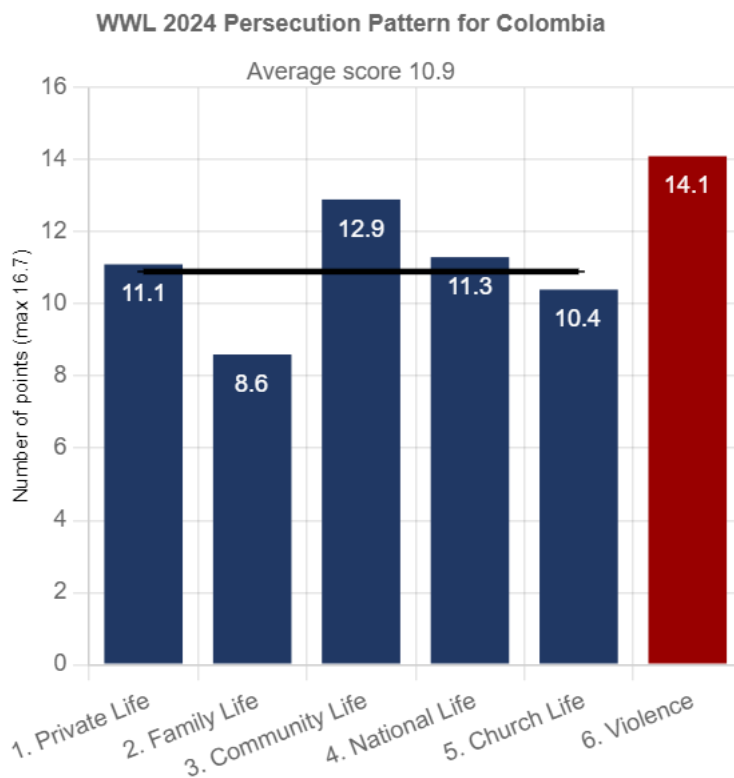
- **Ethnic group leaders (Strong):** These leaders remain loyal to their traditional beliefs and are likely to oppose anyone spreading non-accepted forms of Christian faith in the indigenous communities. Restrictions take the form of constant monitoring, cutting basic services, arrests, threats, violence and of reporting Christians to the ethnic religious authorities.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Shamanism, ethno-religions and similar cults, although not strictly classified as religions, are manifestations of a kind of 'spirituality' that reject Christianity. In some indigenous communities, adherents will attempt to impede Christian activities and force Christians to be part of their ancestral ceremonies. Pressure increases whenever there are restrictions imposed on travel, since many adherents of 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' then find themselves isolated and almost totally at the mercy of the indigenous authorities.
- **One's own (extended) family (Strong):** Belonging to the indigenous community is expected to have a higher priority than family ties, thus any family member abandoning the religious syncretistic practices of the community to become an adherent of a 'non-accepted form of Christianity' is liable to be labeled a traitor and face rejection from their wider family.

- **Citizens (Medium):** Members of indigenous communities must be faithful to the tribe and their customs. Therefore, they are bound to denounce any practice that may hinder the stability of the community, including the activities of converts to a 'non-accepted form of Christianity'.
- **Government officials (Medium):** The authorities collaborate by either allowing or ignoring discrimination and violence aimed at Christians who refuse to follow the syncretistic practices of the indigenous communities. The authorities regard some Christian leaders as enemies of the cultural identity of the ethnic group and in consequence, as a threat to the preservation of indigenous customs.
- **Revolutionary or paramilitary groups (Medium):** Although ethnic groups are also victims of paramilitary groups at times, there are nevertheless occasions when guerrillas have teamed up with indigenous leaders to harass converts to a 'non-accepted form of Christianity'. This cooperation aims to defend ethnic group leaders' interests and to force - most often by violent means - those Christians to stop practicing their non-accepted faith in the community.
- **Organized crime cartels or networks (Medium):** Organized crime cartels have sometimes acted in complicity with indigenous leaders to intimidate adherents of a 'non-accepted form of Christianity' in the communities. Such cooperation aims to defend ethnic group leaders' interests and to put those adherents under strict control, thus preventing them from spreading their Christian faith inside the community.

Drivers of Secular intolerance

- **Ideological pressure groups (Medium):** These groups harass, ridicule and censor Christians when the latter express faith-based points of views that disagree with their interests. This is particularly the case if they are public officials who wish to uphold their Christian beliefs or doctors claiming the right to conscientious objection. Also, they have carried out violent demonstrations outside churches as a way of showing their rejection of faith-based views on the issue of abortion. Some of these groups are pushing for new mandatory contents and school activities on issues of sexuality in school curricula which overrides parents' rights concerning the education of their children according to their own faith-based values.
- **Government officials (Medium):** It is common that state authorities, including some ministries and some judges at local and national court level, support the interests of political pressure groups in opposing any presence of faith-based views in public debate. As a result, the judicial authorities tend not to give Christians the same protection and equal opportunities allotted to other groups when it comes to protecting the right to freedom of expression.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Some political parties demand radical Church-State separation with no participation of Christians in the political arena. As a result, they actively hinder political initiatives coming from Christian politicians or politicians supported by Christian groups. They also promote non-discrimination initiatives that potentially undermine the free expression of Christian citizens.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Colombia shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Colombia remains at a very high level, but dropped slightly from 11.1 points in WWL 2023 to 10.9 points in WWL 2024. This small drop was due to slight reductions in almost all *spheres of life* caused by less pressure from rebels in negotiation with the government and by a lower record of incidents related to *Clan oppression*.
- All *spheres of life* scored 8.6 points or above (out of a maximum of 16.7 points), with pressure highest in the *Community sphere of life* (13.1 points) due to the influence of various criminal groups in many parts of the country.
- The score for violence remained extremely high, though falling from 15.4 points in WWL 2023 to 14.1 points in WWL 2024. Violent incidents in the categories of killings, attacks on public and private Christian properties, death threats and physical abuse, continued to plague Colombian society.

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 2024 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 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.25 points)

For Christians to meet up with fellow believers is particularly risky in indigenous communities or in territory controlled by organized crime. If they do, they are quickly accused of not following community norms or of not complying with curfews or other rules imposed by criminal groups and of conspiring against the ethnic or criminal leaders. This includes meetings which are not for worship purposes. Due to the humanitarian and security crisis existing in the country's Pacific Coast, control and monitoring increased there, making it even more difficult for Christians to be in contact with each other and it is necessary to ask permission from criminal leaders in order to be able to meet with other Christians.

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)

Christians face various levels of risk. Where organized crime is dominant, it is highly risky for anyone to make a public call for peace or for resisting involvement in criminal activities. Any kind of communication or publication is monitored and easily identified by criminal groups. This is always a particular concern during electoral periods or when national security issues are discussed on social media. Criminal groups attack Christians who do not support their demands or refuse to endorse their political standpoint. Christians may also face hostilities from ideological pressure groups when they defend their faith-based opinions online.

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (2.75 points)

In the indigenous community worldview, the concept of loyalty to one's ethnicity prevails over family ties. Thus, a member of a family who converts to Christianity or belongs to a 'non-accepted form of Christianity' will normally be rejected by the extended family and accused before the ethnic leaders. The same goes for areas dominated by criminal groups, especially when a family member's faith clearly opposes the criminal activities of local groups. Similarly, there were some situations where the new Protestant faith of a family member was not accepted by his/her wider Roman Catholic family, particularly those living in rural areas of the country.

In the context of growing hostility towards faith-based views on such issues as abortion, family and marriage etc., a Christian may find that he/she has no freedom to discuss such issues outside the immediate family.

Block 1.6: It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian material on the Internet. (2.50 points)

In some indigenous communities (e.g., Arhuaco ethnic group), access to Christian media is difficult. When it is possible and an adherent of a 'non-accepted form of Christianity' uses it to spread the Christian faith, he will be punished by the ethnic leaders because it could influence other indigenous members to convert. In some areas co-opted by criminal groups, accessing or using Christian material with contents that could affect the interests of these groups (e.g., de-

nunciations of illegal activities or encouragement for conversion to Christianity) will be punished. In these cases, Christian content is considered harmful for criminal groups exerting their authority in an area, especially books which present Jesus as a solution for the problem of violence.

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. (3.25 points)

In areas such as Antioquia, Arauca, Chocó, Norte de Santander, Valle del Cauca, Nariño in which the social control exercised by criminal groups is evident, they also influence the educational content taught in schools with the purpose of indoctrinating students to facilitate the work of recruiting minors. Christian children cannot refuse to receive this type of content in schools without facing reprisals against them and their families.

In indigenous communities, schools have become a source of pressure for those adhering to 'non-accepted forms of Christianity'. Since the educational legislation of 1994, the Associations of Traditional Indigenous Authorities (AATIs) were granted full authority to emphasize ethnic education with an animist worldview, thus frequently contradicting biblical values. Indigenous Christian families struggle with this difficult situation and often choose not to send their children to school, which clearly limits their future possibilities. Also, such parents could be involved in legal proceedings that would cause them to temporarily or permanently lose legal custody of their children.

Elsewhere in Colombia, the content approved for education bears a significant secularist influence and promotes attitudes that consider religious beliefs to be discriminatory, intolerant and unwelcome in the public sphere. Pressure is exerted on Christian children to learn through the "Coexistence Manual" about concepts which go against their Christian faith and values. Examples of such concepts are: "Recreational sexuality", "sexual orientation", "gender identity", "sexual diversity", "sexual and reproductive duties" (a term that includes abortion), as well as "freely choosing a sexual partner". Children who want to continue their studies successfully are forced to participate in such classes. Also, state schools do not always provide alternative religious classes for those Christians that are not Catholic. To obtain good grades, sometimes non-Catholic schoolchildren are obliged to join in Catholic activities organized by the school and are required to learn Catholic doctrine.

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. (3.25 points)

Adherents of a 'non-accepted form of Christianity' who have been expelled from indigenous communities are often forced into separation from their families (wives and children) as a punishment for not giving up their faith. There are even cases, as mentioned above, in which children are separated from their families to prevent them from being raised as Christian believers. There have been sporadic cases where the pressure to comply with non-Christian activities and rituals has led some parents to send their children away to relatives where there is more freedom for Christians not belonging to the traditional faith of the community and where

they could receive a more neutral education.

The number of IDPs in the country remains high due to violence in the growing number of areas controlled by criminal and guerrilla groups. In such areas, the dominant criminal group has the authority to decide who can live in their zone; as a consequence, those Christians who are not welcome in the community have been forced (via threats or direct orders) to leave their families and be involuntarily separated from them for long periods. In addition, Christians are sometimes forced to leave their homes in order to protect their children from being recruited by criminal groups, but this has been made especially difficult by the restrictions on travel imposed by such groups (e.g., in Valle del Cauca).

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.00 points)

In order to prevent any 'destabilization of indigenous identity', ethnic leaders often threaten parents belonging to a 'non-accepted form of Christianity' and try to prevent them from passing on their faith to their children. Christian parents are frequently put under pressure to ensure that ancestral traditions are maintained through teaching about animism, charms and shamanism.

In some areas controlled by criminal networks, Christian parents face important challenges to prevent their children from being indoctrinated or recruited by ELN, dissident FARC guerrillas and other criminal groups because any opposition could lead to their assassination or expulsion from their land and homes. The intention of these groups is to influence the youth so that a criminal attitude becomes embedded in society. The forced recruitment of children increased noticeably during the last few WWL reporting periods.

Elsewhere in Colombia, parents face difficulties raising their children according to Christian convictions because of the promotion in schools of compulsory sexual education which in many aspects goes against traditional Christian teaching. The Constitutional Court has already ruled that school regulations must respect gender identity issues and the chosen sexual orientation of their students; this can jeopardize the whole ethos of Christian denominational schools and the right of parents to raise their children according to their convictions. This can be especially challenging in cities such as Bucaramanga, Cali, Medellín, Cartagena, Villavicencio, Santa Marta, Barranquilla and Bogotá. Even when parents choose a Christian school for their children, neither the institution nor the parents can legally prevent the promotion of content that contradicts their religious beliefs.

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

Children of Christian indigenous parents often face pressure in an attempt to make them reject their parent's faith. Sometimes these children are excluded from community activities, are mocked, threatened with forced marriage and mistreated to prevent them from spreading any 'non-accepted Christian' influence. This both discourages possible new conversions and puts pressure on parents to renounce their Christian faith. Sometimes the pressure becomes so great that the family feels forced to leave the area.

In some areas co-opted by organized crime, illegal armed groups recruit children from an early age. Christian children are particularly vulnerable since this is often done to put pressure on families and make them stop their Christian activities and stop resisting orders given by the local criminal 'authorities'. This intimidation targeting Christian parents can cause forced displacement.

Elsewhere in Colombia (especially in urban areas), due to the growth of intolerance towards faith-based views in society, some Christian children are mocked when they defend faith-based point of views regarding abortion, family, marriage and sexuality in classes, and refuse to participate in activities supporting the interests of political pressure groups. Also, in some rural areas, there are sporadic cases where non-Catholic children are discriminated against by being given lower marks than they deserve because they belong to a non-Catholic denomination.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.4: Christians been hindered in sharing community resources because of their faith (e.g. clean drinking water). (3.25 points)

In some indigenous communities, those following 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' are not regarded as being true members of the ethnic group, they are not part of the community census and are excluded from basic resources (often including access to clean water and health facilities) or from financial benefits (even those granted by state), as a way to pressurize them into stopping their activities. This happens, for instance, in Cauca, Huila, Caquetá, Cesar y Magdalena. The travel restrictions imposed by some criminal groups has made it even more difficult for Christians to go and request basic resources from neighboring communities.

In other areas, criminal groups have prevented Christians from receiving government aid or humanitarian aid from other civil society actors and have accused Christians of being informers. This is particularly the case in Chocó, Antioquia, Valle del Cauca. Criminal groups have directly blamed Christians for passing on sensitive information to other groups when obtaining food (such as fish or crops). Criminal groups are keen to ensure that Christian leaders in particular remain loyal to their authority and regularly threaten them with attack, abduction or death should they not be compliant. Also, as a way of intimidating churches, criminal groups sometimes cut off the electricity and water supplies to hinder religious activities.

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

Given the importance of community life within ethnic groups, Christians are expected to participate in community events and to take part in religious festivities in indigenous communities. If they refuse, they are viewed as traitors and punished (this has happened, for example, in indigenous communities in Magdalena and Cauca). Punishments include imprisonment, beatings, forced labor, isolation, displacement, etc. By not attending community rituals, Christians have sometimes been blamed for natural disasters that occur. There is also evidence that, in some indigenous territories, the traditional authorities have forged alliances with armed groups to ensure full participation in ceremonies and activities.

Although criminal groups do not hold their own religious ceremonies or organize community events as such, leaders of such groups can call on the community to make announcements or impose 'new rules'. When Christians refuse obedience, they risk receiving heavy fines and increased threats of displacement and loss of property.

Elsewhere in Colombia, there were cases reported of Christian workers being placed under pressure by their companies to ignore their traditional Christian values and participate in activities promoting the interests of certain political pressure groups.

Block 3.12: Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons (e.g. jizya tax, community tax, protection money). (3.25 points)

In some cases, Indigenous authorities use a system of fines (either in the form of money or harvest products) for Christians who refuse to participate in community practices and festivities which go against their Christian faith (such as ancestral traditions or even certain festivities based on Catholic rites). Sometimes, when ethnic groups collude with criminals, the fines or quotas are substantially higher for such adherents of 'non-accepted forms of Christianity'.

In a broader context, criminal groups demand protection money (sometimes in the form of quotas or even vaccines) from pastors, priests, and other Christians in exchange for not exercising violence against them and for allowing them to continue their religious duties. Since several years, life in most of the rural areas of the country is de-facto under the control of criminal groups. The situation is even more difficult where territory is in dispute between various criminal groups and all of them demanded 'quotas' to finance their illicit activities; such 'quotas' could include the recruitment of children. Regions like Cauca, Choco, Antioquia, Meta, Putumayo, Huila, Caqueta, Magdalena, Tolima, Norte de Santander, Guaviare, Nariño, Valle del Cauca and Bolivar were greatly affected by this.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)

In order to limit Christian activities, ethnic leaders make use of monitoring and control mechanisms within the indigenous communities. Thus, adherents of 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' have faced continual interrogation when they refuse to participate in (or make payments for) community activities or when they carry out any kind of activity related to a faith different from the one followed by the community.

In areas where there is hardly any state authority in existence, criminal groups have become the de facto local authorities. In this capacity, they often carried out interrogations to force Christians to inform them about their activities, to look for possible alliances with them, and to obtain information about the movements of other groups, including the security forces. Due to corruption networks, it is possible that in some cases, state officers collaborate with criminal groups and carry out the interrogation of Christians considered to be suspicious.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (3.50 points)

In some indigenous communities, the discrimination and mistreatment of adherents of 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' go unpunished because the ethnic and religious leaders act as both instigators and judiciary. The affected Christians are left unprotected.

Elsewhere, impunity is a widespread phenomenon due to links between criminal leaders and corrupt officials. If a criminal investigation is carried out, the authorities often fail to take into account that Christians are much more vulnerable to criminal attack where their religious convictions are considered a threat by criminal groups and where their refusal to obey criminal orders increases their risk of being attacked. It is also the fear of possible reprisals which discourages Christians from seeking help from the state authorities.

Also, in contexts related to radical secularism, signs of intolerance that trigger attacks against churches and Christians have not been properly investigated. In some cases, Christians are being punished instead of being considered victims. Thus, the mistreatment of and discrimination against Christians has become normal practice and is not regarded by the authorities as something that needs to be held in check.

Block 4.4: Christians have been hindered in travelling for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)

Given the position of authority that both indigenous leaders and criminal leaders enjoy in their areas of influence, they control entry and exit from their territories as it suits their interests. Thus, in some indigenous communities, entry and exit is restricted as a form of punishment for those adhering to 'non-accepted forms of Christianity', placing them in a position of risk when they meet with other Christians in areas outside the community. Often, the uncertainty of not being able to return to their homes and of possibly losing contact with their families hinders the faith of new converts, as does the lack of contact with faith communities in neighboring territories.

In areas like Antioquia, Arauca, Atlántico, Bolívar, Boyacá, Caquetá, Córdoba, Chocó, Guaviare, Meta, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, Santander, Sucre, Valle del Cauca, criminal leaders prevent Christians (especially church leaders) from travelling. This was particularly the case in the WWL 2024 reporting period. The movement of Christians is seen as being potentially damaging to local illegal interests and because Christians on the move are suspected of acting as informers for the state authorities or other rival groups.

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (3.25 points)

Given the levels of corruption, state authorities allow criminal groups - directly or indirectly - to hinder the activities of civil society organizations, especially those working with young people in drug and crime prevention programs or with migrants. The work done by Christian civil society organizations in those areas is seen as competing with the criminal groups dominating the area and as a form of defiance of their authority. The local dominant criminal group wants to be the

only one who can give permission to carry out projects, meetings, or activities in the area under its control. This also represents a challenge to the functioning of Christian political parties not allied with the dominant criminal groups in such areas.

Additionally, sometimes, given the autonomy of indigenous leaders to prevent the emergence and development of organizations that they do not consider aligned with their traditions, it makes sense for them to avoid giving any form of support to politicians of Christian faith.

Faith-based organizations are also continually scrutinized by pressure groups and risk lawsuits if an organization's projects, statements and publications are seen as opposing the group's interests or are seen as breaching the principle of Church-State separation.

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.00 points)

According to indigenous customs, anyone whose faith differs from the community faith has no right to express their views and opinions in public. The reason is that such people might encourage other indigenous people to follow their religious convictions. The voice of Christians is vetoed since their opinions are assumed to always have a religious motivation, even when the matter of debate is not necessarily linked to church or faith matters.

Also, Christians in areas co-opted by a criminal group or guerrillas are not free to express any faith-based opinions which contradict the group's philosophy or which concern the implementation of the FARC Peace Agreement, human rights or environmental issues. The Christian message is thus severely restricted. Since criminal leaders use church informers (e.g., in Arauca, Catatumbo and Cauca), sometimes Christians do not feel safe to share their political opinions with others inside churches, let alone in the wider community.

As a sign of the growing intolerance at the national level, Christians have experienced pressure in both traditional media and social media networks when expressing their faith-based views on issues including abortion, family, marriage, sexuality and parental rights. This situation is provoking a self-censorship among Christians.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (3.25 points)

In rural areas controlled by criminal groups (such as in Antioquia, Arauca, Cesar, Valle del Cauca, Chocó, Córdoba, Norte de Santander and others), intense surveillance of all preaching and church activities is carried out, including any Christian materials used or distributed. The infiltration of churches by informers (members of criminal groups or their relatives) is common practice and their purpose is to report anything opposing the local criminal group's interests. Pastors must also be very careful with the information stored on their cell phones since it is common practice for armed groups to require Christians to disclose at checkpoints all contacts, messages and other information stored on their mobile phones. It is becoming increasingly difficult for churches in areas dominated by one or more criminal groups because the prohibitions are constantly being increased. Any preaching mentioning social issues can also lead

to serious consequences.

Regarding indigenous communities, any preaching carried out by 'non-accepted Christian groups' will be reported and punished according to ancestral customs. Also, in rural areas, there are sporadic cases where the preaching of minority churches is monitored by the largest one (usually by Roman Catholic believers). One intention of such monitoring is to discourage anyone from joining a different church or denomination.

In cities like Bogota, Cali and Cartagena, there is increasing social scrutiny by pressure groups of Christian preaching related to the defense of marriage and family and the way churches seek involvement in the public sphere.

Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)

Christian leaders and their families who belong to 'non-accepted Christian groups' are particularly targeted for harassment in indigenous communities. They are often shunned by their community and made to live in very poor conditions. When they share their faith, they are accused of attacking the identity and stability of the dominant ethnic group.

In territories co-opted by criminal groups, Christian leaders and their families are frequently victims of fines, threats and travel restrictions, especially if their activities are related to the defense of human rights, environmental issues, work with young people, strengthening civil society organizations, the implementation of the FARC Peace Agreement and negotiation of peace with other armed groups, assistance for internally displaced persons, assistance with land restitution claims, discouraging coca cultivation and the refusal to collaborate with criminal groups. Since church leaders are often notable public figures, attacks on them are an effective way of intimidating the whole population living in a particular area. Pastors' children also tend to be a favored target, for instance for human trafficking, forced recruitment or rape to discourage pastors from continuing their church ministry.

In urban areas, verbal attacks are common where church leaders defend Bible-based views on topics related to marriage, family, the sanctity of life, and the presence of the Church in the public sphere. When there are elections in the country, they also regularly face hostile criticism when commenting on political initiatives and promoting Christian values.

Block 5.18: Churches have been hindered in establishing, managing, maintaining and conducting schools, or charitable, humanitarian, medical, social or cultural organizations, institutions and associations. (3.25 points)

Mostly, Christian organizations are not allowed to operate in indigenous communities. In those communities, Christian indigenous schools, health centers and related projects are forbidden both by indigenous authorities and by the Colombian government because they are considered to be a threat to the indigenous culture. Those Christians promoting such projects face reprisals from the ethnic leaders - including the use of violence. Church-affiliated organizations involved in youthwork and the rehabilitation of young drug-addicts are frequently targeted by criminal groups (since they see such programs as a threat to their interests). Also, due to the high level of insecurity and violence in the border areas, some Christian organizations have been unable

to carry out humanitarian assistance for migrants (especially for those coming from Venezuela).

Elsewhere, educational institutions run by churches or other Christian organizations are sometimes under pressure - via threats of closure or fines - to accept the guidelines established by the Ministry of Education in matters relating to sexual education. Faith-based organizations concerned with issues surrounding abortion, family life and marriage have often faced hostile opposition from militant pressure groups. The pressure is so great that many organizations working in the educational field now prefer not to be linked to churches.

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (3.25 points)

Despite some efforts by the central government to promote a culture of respect for religious liberty, non-state actors impede churches and Christian organizations from getting due protection when speaking out against the persecution they experience. In indigenous communities, anyone from 'non-accepted Christian groups' who speaks out against their oppressors, faces threats, beatings, forced displacement, loss of property and arrest, among other measures. It is difficult to report incidents to state authorities and obtain legal justice as ancestral identity rights are given priority over matters of religious freedom.

In areas where organized crime is extremely active, when Christians denounce their aggressors and seek state protection, criminal groups often respond with violent reprisals, discouraging any similar future attempts.

Elsewhere in society, it is becoming more frequent that when Christians are victims of acts of intolerance carried out by pressure groups, government officials pay little attention to their reports, claiming that hostile opposition to religion is part of the right to freedom of expression. Radical groups also vandalize church buildings, which generates economic damage and demoralizes Christian communities.

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 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. 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 WWL chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

Colombia: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	16	21
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	42	37
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	3	6
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	1
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	8	11
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	1	57
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)?	100 *	377

Colombia: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
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?	44	33
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	25
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	100 *	124
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	2	4

In the WWL 2024 reporting period, violent incidents against Christians for faith-related reasons remained at an extremely high level.

- **Christians killed (16):** This category is representative of the seriousness of the persecution situation in the country and reflects the high risk faced by church leaders mostly working in areas dominated by criminal groups and being attacked by them.
- **Churches attacked (42):** Most of the cases were related to attacks perpetrated by criminal groups as a way to intimidate Christians and pressurize them into adhering to their rules. Also, there were some incidents where militant pressure groups vandalized churches as part of their advocacy for women's rights.
- **Christians abducted (8):** Part of the violence perpetrated by armed groups in the country is kidnapping. The incidents recorded here are of church leaders being victims of organized crime when their social influence was perceived as being a threat to the illicit interests of those groups.
- **Christian forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country (100*):** In this reporting period, all incidents involved Christians fleeing their homes due to the high levels of violence perpetrated against them (including their children) by criminal groups.

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.

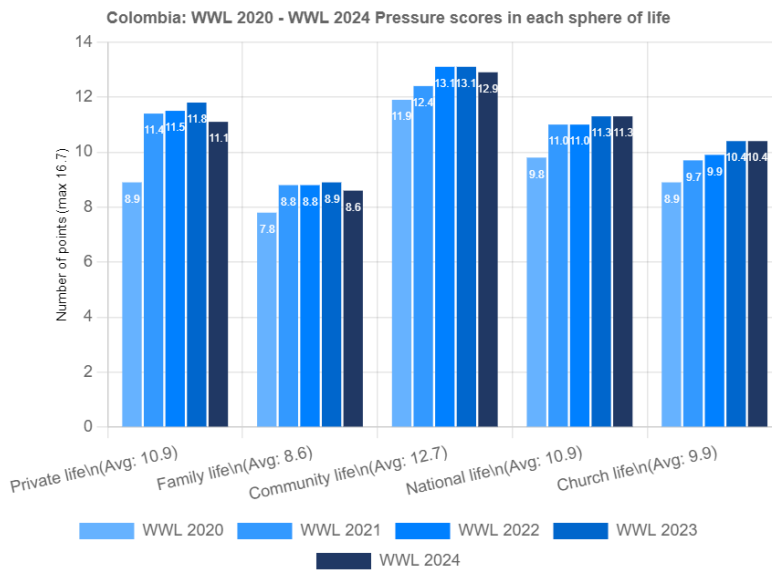
5 Year trends: Average pressure

Colombia: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	10.9
2023	11.1
2022	10.9
2021	10.7
2020	9.4

The table above shows that the average pressure on Christians rose consistently from WWL 2020 to WWL 2023, due to the greater control exerted by armed groups in more - mostly rural - areas of the country. Nevertheless, for WWL 2024 there is a slight decrease caused by a reduction in pressure in some areas of the country due to the peace negotiations continuing between the ELN and Colombian government. A further reduction was due to the fewer reports related to the drivers of *Clan oppression* and *Christian denominational protectionism* in some areas of the country.

In general, Christians are seen as enemies of criminal interests and the expanding control of armed groups is restricting both the day-to-day running of churches and the free exercise of individual's faith.

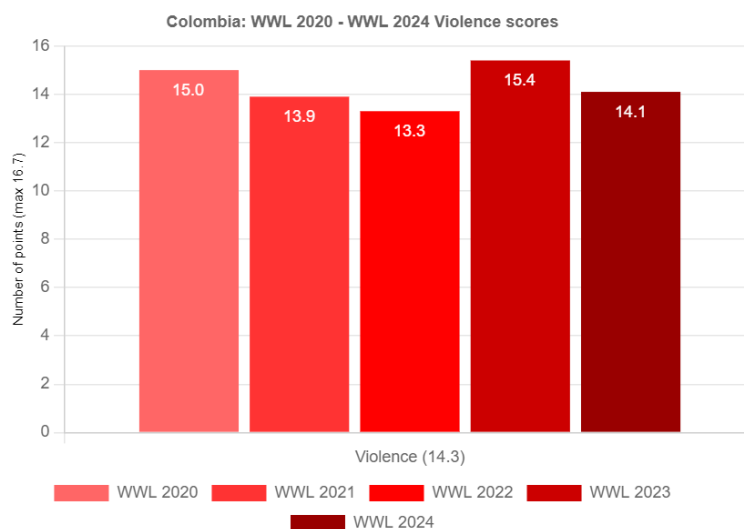
5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



Over the five WWL reporting periods, the general trend has been one of rising pressure. However, compared to the previous period, in WWL 2024 the pressure decreased slightly in *Private, Family and Community life*, due to the lower incidence of situations related to *Clan oppression* and *Christian denominational protectionism* in some areas.

The graph shows the difficulty for Christians and religious leaders to freely express their faith in their daily lives due to the interference from mainly non-state actors. This situation has arisen through the high levels of insecurity caused by criminal groups in areas with little state presence, FARC fighting units being re-established, and newer criminal groups (even guerrillas) emerging and fighting with others to gain control of territory. They have taken advantage of the climate of social and political instability to strengthen their presence and de facto authority. The rise in pressure has also been influenced by the growing hostility (in society in general but also in some government authorities) towards public manifestations of Christian faith. *Secular intolerance* is clearly on the rise.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The chart above shows that the scores for violence have consistently been at an extreme level, with the highest peak in the previous reporting period, WWL 2023. These extreme levels are the result of:

- i. The delays and failures in the complex implementation of the FARC Peace Agreement and the lack of concrete results in negotiations with other armed groups;
- ii. The expansion of criminal and guerilla groups in ever larger areas of the country, taking advantage of the climate of social and political instability to strengthen their presence and de facto authority;
- iii. The violent repression of Christian converts in indigenous communities.

It is highly probable that many incidents targeting Christians were not reported out of fear of reprisals.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	-
Security	Abduction; Targeted Seduction; Trafficking; Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

More than seven years after the 2016 Colombian peace agreement, violence remains rife in Colombia; cases of abduction and sexual violence against women, especially outspoken female leaders, continues in rural areas where armed groups use these as a weapon of war to generate fear and silence entire regions ([Human Rights Watch, 2023](#)). Across the country, femicide rates remain alarmingly high with the death of 410 women in 2023 ([Colombia Femicide Report, Observatorio Colombiano de Femicidios, 2023](#)). Women belonging to indigenous and Afro-Colombia ethnic groups are [disproportionately affected](#) by conflict-related violence (ONU Mujeres, Colombia, accessed 23rd November 2023).

Furthermore, Christian women may be promised in marriage to non-Christian men in order to eradicate their faith, or be abandoned by their husbands, separated from their children, threatened, ridiculed and ostracized by the community. This exposes them to forced displacement where they are vulnerable to criminal groups, trafficking and sexual exploitation. In areas under criminal control, the guerrilla indoctrination of children also affects Christian girls, since they not only have to accept the violent ideologies imposed despite their faith, but their vulnerability exposes them to becoming victims of abduction, rape, sexual harassment and trafficking. Such criminal activity worsened during the pandemic, and spiked rates of forced recruitment and forced prostitution were observed ([USDS, 2022 Trafficking in Person Report: Colombia, 2022](#)).

In gang-held territories, some girls are ‘bought’ from their parents or brothers on pain of death. Other young Christian girls are targeted for seduction, with criminal group leaders gifting items such as motorcycles or expensive cell phones. This phenomenon commonly affects Christian families who are put under enormous pressure to surrender their young women, targeted for their perceived purity and obedience, to cartel leaders for sexual purposes – or even marriage. This serves to both satisfy the sexual desires of the criminal commanders, as well as to put pressure on believers and silence the work of churches. “It has been found that illegal armed groups are showing a tendency to recruit children of Christians because they consider them more vulnerable, innocent, and, in the case of girls, purer (virgins),” a country expert explains. When the girls refuse, they either resort to violent threats or abduction and forced marriage; “... the forced union between an adolescent and a member of criminal groups is not always presented in the form of 'marriage', but rather due to violence that characterizes their actions, they simply separate a girl or adolescent from their home and force her to live with

them, as if they had married,” another expert asserts.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Denied inheritance or possessions; Discrimination/harassment via education; Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Economic harassment via fines
Political and Legal	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites; Imprisonment by government
Security	Abduction; Forced to flee town/country; Violence – death; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Christian men face a higher level of threats and violence in regions of armed conflict, partly because they represent the head of the family (or of the church, if they are pastors or priests). As the providers for the family, men face being extorted to provide finances for armed groups, and often their sources of income (for example boat engines or arable land) are destroyed or appropriated by militia, leading to economic difficulty and debt. Non-church leaders face the risk of being killed, while pastors or priests may be physically assaulted, kidnapped, extorted for financial gain, forced to leave their regions, or even killed. Exemplifying these dangers, in March 2021, the Bishop of Buenaventura reported that armed groups had threatened him with a bomb-attack for denouncing the high levels of violence and drug trafficking in the region ([Verdad en Libertad](#), 8 February 2022). This is one of many such cases.

Within some indigenous communities in particular, converts to non-accepted forms of Christianity face extreme pressure. They may be beaten, harassed, threatened or sent away to do forced labor in a different territory. "Indigenous converts must live in absolute secrecy because if they join churches or make their faith public, they are at risk of being tortured, expelled, incarcerated, and even their families may run the same risk," an expert explains.

Christian men and boys are also exposed to abduction, forced recruitment and violence at the hands of criminal armed groups. As a country expert explains, "children of Christian parents can be harassed with proposals to join the ranks of armed groups. Armed groups are present in public places and schools, this is part of a strategy to indoctrinate children and try to include them as members of the group ... this pressure on Christian children is also a way of putting pressure on Christian parents for the pastoral work they carry out." They are subject to indoctrination and mandatory participation in the activities of these groups which may include perpetrating abductions, surveillance activities, sexual abuse, killings and trafficking. Not only is there a high risk of recruitment for combat purposes, but also "for the transport of illicit substances and weapons," an expert explains. "In most cases, armed groups

convince children by offering them money or food, taking advantage of their socio-economic conditions related to poverty, inequality and lack of opportunities.” More than 18,000 children are thought to have joined guerilla groups over the last 20 years ([BBC News, 5 August 2022](#)).

In light of threats and reprisals, many see forced recruitment as an “inescapable destiny,” one expert explains. Even if the children are able to escape the clutches of these gangs, they will face life-long threats from former gang-members and risk abduction in the future. The forced recruitment of Christian men and boys also impacts women and the strength of the family unit, as she must raise children alone and survive economically. As an expert shares: “This type of situation fosters structural poverty in areas under the control of organized crime and due to the need to provide basic goods to the family, children must leave the school, which makes it much easier to convince them to continue the criminal life.”

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Colombia):

- “According to the Times of Israel, presidential candidate Rodolfo Hernández issued an apology in June [2022] 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.”

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Organized corruption and crime

The current government is failing to fulfill the promise of peace made during the electoral campaign and is increasing citizen disappointment over the continuous acts of violence perpetrated in many departments (in both rural and urban areas) in the country. Without concrete results in the negotiations with armed groups, criminal structures will continue to benefit from the ongoing instability and will increase their social control over areas of the country where there is little state presence. The effect of impunity, disinterest and networks of corruption, favor a climate of violence in which the Church is viewed by criminal groups with suspicion for its pacifist and humanitarian work and in which Christians are at risk for opposing local criminal activities. This will continue as long as the Church is not seen as being a particularly vulnerable community by state authorities.

Clan oppression

The attitude of some indigenous communities towards 'non-accepted Christians' continues to be of great concern. This is because there are no legal guarantees that recognize these Christians as indigenous members despite the community not professing the same faith. It is vital that authorities and civil society organizations become more aware of the challenges of being an indigenous Christian in these circumstances . This becomes all the more urgent when one considers that criminal groups often work together with ethnic leaders, which can increase the danger for 'unaccepted Christians'.

Secular intolerance

Hostility towards expressions of Christian faith in public is becoming more noticeable in the country, both in the major cities and in other areas. Although violence is not so frequent, the pressure shown through seemingly subtle acts becomes more frequent and more dangerous due to their long-term influence on the way Christians and church leaders act in society. Intolerance towards faith-based political participation and towards public expressions of traditional Christian faith in general is increasing and provoking self-censorship. Despite some government efforts to implement policies in favor of religious freedom, Christian leaders are likely to continue to be sidelined by many government officials and pressure groups, when decisions are made relating to issues such as abortion, marriage and family. This situation will not improve as long as the right to freedom of expression and religious freedom are not fully guaranteed by the authorities.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: Illegal Armed Groups - <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-01-05/a-whos-who-of-the-illegal-armed-groups-in-colombias-latest-ceasefire.html>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Human Rights Watch - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/colombia>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Colombia Femicide Report - <https://observatoriofemicidioscolombia.org/index.php/reportes>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: disproportionately affected - <https://colombia.unwomen.org/es/onu-mujeres-en-colombia/las-mujeres-en-colombia>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: USDS, 2022 Trafficking in Person Report: Colombia, 2022 - <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2021/colombia/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: Verdad en Libertad - <https://verdadenlibertad.com/persisten-amenazas-contra-la-vida-de-obispo/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: BBC News, 5 August 2022 - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-62413672>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Colombia>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- [LATIN AMERICA – Organized corruption and crime – 2018](#)

External Links - Further useful reports

- Further useful reports: LATIN AMERICA – Organized corruption and crime – 2018 - <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Latin-America-Organized-corruption-and-crime-2018.pdf>