

WORLD WATCH LIST 2025

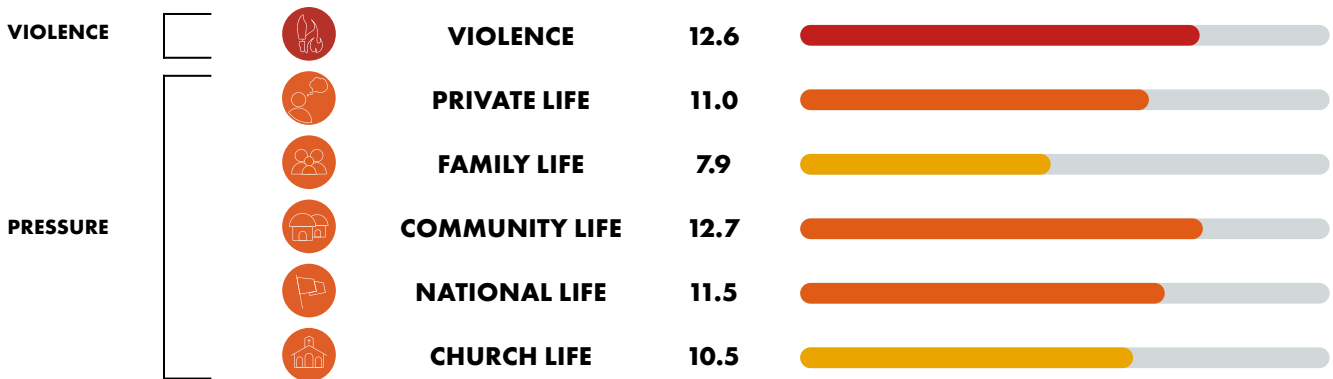
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
46

COLOMBIA



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



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

Key findings

Some church leaders are being threatened, extorted, and even murdered as a result of increased territorial control and violence. This is perpetrated by guerrillas and other criminal groups, especially in the most neglected areas of the country. In most cases, this violence is the direct result of Christians being involved in activities such as denouncing corruption and violence in sermons, defending human and environmental rights; youth work - including those converted from the ranks of criminal groups, peace-building, humanitarian assistance and any action defying the 'de facto' authority of local criminal groups which might endanger their illegal activities.

In several indigenous communities, there is significant opposition towards Christian missionaries and converts, who, as a result, face imprisonment, physical abuse, threats, harassment, and denial of basic rights.

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

Quick facts

LEADER

President Gustavo Francisco Petro Urrego

POPULATION

52,341,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

49,693,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	49,693,000	94.9
Agnostics	1,525,000	2.9
Others	512,700	1.0
Ethno-religionists	337,000	0.6

Source²

Colombia has struggled under a corrupt and weak legal apparatus for decades. This has allowed a thriving criminal network to spawn throughout much of the country, mostly funded by the trade in illegal drugs, weapons and human trafficking. The increased levels of control gained by criminal groups during the pandemic has made it easier for them to exert power over entire territories, and in the process, threaten and attack church leaders advocating for peace and opposing criminal activity (FoRB in Full, 11 November 2023). This type of intimidating action often also extends to the relatives of religious leaders (Caracol, 4 September 2022). Churches have also been

burgled and vandalized. In rural areas, such as Nudo de Paramillo and Catatumbo, armed groups demand that people, including Christians, reveal contacts, messages and other information stored on their mobile phones. This surveillance can endanger other people and Christians themselves.

According to the [Colombia 2023 Human Rights Report](#), government security forces were accused of collaborating with or tolerating the activities of criminal gangs. It also stated that the judicial system was overburdened and inefficient and that corruption and intimidation of judges, prosecutors and witnesses were hindering judicial functioning.

In June 2022, [Gustavo Petro](#) of Historic Pact (a coalition of leftist parties) was elected president of Colombia for the period 2022-2026. Gustavo Petro's 54-page [government plan](#) states that it will protect religious diversity, and will guarantee all citizens the conditions for the exercise of equality and freedom of worship according to their religious and spiritual options. The main Christian denomination in Colombia is the Roman Catholic Church, representing 88.8% of all Christians according to WCD 2024 estimates. Protestant church groups continue to show growth

¹ Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

² Others include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucian. Data source: Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

and become more visible, particularly where so-called 'Mega-churches' with congregations of thousands have become established in many major cities.

Christian communities and church leaders are active in many of the poorer sectors of society, for instance, in education and in the provision of basic goods for the neediest families. The Catholic bishops of Colombia appealed for solidarity to combat the various crises throughout the country. For instance, the Church asked the governments of Colombia and Venezuela to resume binational relations in order to [respond effectively to the challenges that care for migrants](#) and has made [constant calls for peace](#). In the same way, Christian networks and organizations constantly [call attention to the factors triggering social crisis](#) in various communities in the country. 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.

Violence against women and girls, particularly sexual violence, is another factor of concern. Threats are made that prevent victims from speaking out, thus obscuring the gravity of this problem. In several areas of the country, forced recruitment of adolescent youth (mainly boys) poses a constant threat to communities, which also affects Christians. There are also [increasing reports of the use of sexual violence by rival groups against men and boys](#) in conflict zones as a means of torture, intimidation and coercion to gain territorial control.

How the situation varies by region

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

Clan oppression: Indigenous communities have their own traditional customs, so those who abandon the

religious practices of the tribe face persecution. Some departments where indigenous Christians have been persecuted are Cauca, Magdalena, Cesar, Huila, Chocó and Boyacá.

Secular intolerance: This depends on the public policies implemented by the national government and on social attitudes, mainly encouraged by groups with ideologies against religion or Christianity. Secular intolerance is present throughout the country, especially in urban areas such as Bolívar, Bogotá, Antioquia, Caldas, Risaralda, Quindío, Nariño, Valle, Cauca, Boyacá, Santander, Cundinamarca, Tolima and Huila.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

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

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

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

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

These communities consist mainly of Baptists and Pentecostals. They are affected by the pressure and violence exerted by organized criminal groups. Although some recognize the important humanitarian work they carry out, these Christian communities do not receive the same government benefits granted to historical Christian communities. In addition, when they participate in the political sphere, they face severe opposition from secularist pressure groups. They are not free to work within some indigenous communities and face risks when doing so.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

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

CLAN OPPRESSION

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

SECULAR INTOLERANCE

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

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

In Colombia, cases of conflict-related sexual violence by armed groups continue, and indigenous and Afro-Colombian ethnic groups are especially at risk. Within some indigenous communities, Christians who refuse to follow indigenous rites and customs may face pressure, community ostracization, and discrimination in accessing health services and education. In gang-controlled territories, some girls are 'bought' from their parents or brothers under penalty of death, or seduced with expensive gifts. In some areas, the sexual purity of young girls is desired by criminal leaders, which puts additional pressure on Christian families.

Female typical pressure points:

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

MEN

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

Male typical pressure points:

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

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2025	46	66
2024	34	68
2023	22	71
2022	30	68
2021	30	67

The lower score was primarily due to a decrease in the violence score, which fell from 14.1 points to 12.6, owing to fewer recorded cases of Christians killed for faith-related reasons during a period marked by the initiation and subsequent failure of negotiations between the main guerrilla groups and the government.

There were also reductions in the Private, Family, and Community spheres of life, attributed to fewer recorded incidents specifically related to the Clan Oppression engine, although the persecution dynamics remain concerning due to the rejection of certain forms of Christianity in indigenous communities. Thus, although the overall score reflects a reduction, the levels of violence and intolerance (including those stemming from secular groups and interdenominational conflicts) affecting Christians in the country have not significantly changed, nor can it be considered an improvement.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- March 2024 – Cesar:** According to internal sources, indigenous leaders ordered a week of traditional imprisonment for four Christians who had attended the evangelical church located in the municipality. During some days of imprisonment, they were given partial portions of their food to intimidate them into renouncing their faith. These Christians have also been harassed by the community because they are accused of being the cause of the impoverishment of the land and are treated as criminals.
- April 2024 - Bolívar:** The judge Ramiro Flórez, who is also a pastor, was disqualified for 15 years from holding any public office. In 2020, the judge [refused to marry two women, arguing personal objections of conscience](#) and citing reasons of Christian morality and religious principles, and although they were given the option of having their union registered with another judge, the couple refused. Since then, a long judicial process began against him that ended with the decision of dismissal and disqualification by the National Judicial Discipline Commission.
- June 2024, Norte de Santander:** Father Ramón Montejo was [murdered](#) by two men who stabbed him while he was on his way to carry out his pastoral duties. After a struggle, they ran him over with his own vehicle, leaving his body abandoned on the road. The priest was a delegate of the diocesan commission for reconciliation and peace, and he also provided humanitarian services in support of peace in the region.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians internally displaced	Christians physically or mentally abused
2025	6	46	262	121
2024	16	42	100*	100*

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the country's corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*.

PRIVATE LIFE

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

FAMILY LIFE

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

COMMUNITY LIFE

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

NATIONAL LIFE

In indigenous communities, violations against Christians often go unpunished because indigenous customs are constitutionally protected, and autonomous ethno-religious leaders are both instigators and those who impart justice in their own community. Affected Christians cannot seek court justice because indigenous communities are often entitled to their own jurisdiction. Elsewhere, as criminal groups are de-facto authorities in many areas of the country, Christians cannot fully exercise their rights, including freedom of expression and movement, and are at the mercy of these illegal groups often acting with impunity. Additionally, Colombian society is increasingly intolerant of public expressions of Christianity, which affects Christians' rights to conscientious objection and freedom of expression. Christians have been accused of being "discriminators" and "anti-rights".

CHURCH LIFE

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



International obligations & rights violated

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

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

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

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

Situation of other religious minorities

From the IRFR 2023 Colombia: A Bucaramanga police officer and follower of LaVeyan Satanism filed a lawsuit for the right to keep his hair long in accordance with a provision of the LeVeyan Bible, which he said encourages followers to do so. In October, the 10th Administrative Court of Bucaramanga denied the suit, concluding that freedom of expression cannot always be protected and cited a related regulation on uniforms. (...)

President Petro used social media numerous times following Hamas' terrorist attack against Israel. He compared the actions of the Israeli government to the Nazi regime. The Confederation of Jewish Communities in Colombia (CJCC) strongly criticized President Petro's social media postings for failing to denounce the Hamas attack and called the comparison with the Nazi regime "disgraceful." (...)

Following the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, the CJCC reported an increase in antisemitic comments and calls for the expulsion of Jews via social media. Unknown individuals painted antisemitic graffiti in multiple locations around Bogota including outside the Israeli and U.S. embassies. On October 17, two individuals attempted to break into Bogota's Abou Bakr Alsiddiq Mosque and caused minor damage to the building's exterior. Witnesses said the perpetrators demanded Muslims leave the country because they were "only here to cause problems."

Open Doors in Colombia

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

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



ABOUT THIS BRIEF

- The content of this document is based on the more detailed WWL Persecution Dynamics per country published annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2025 Open Doors International.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the WWL Persecution Dynamics per country, accompanying Background Information per country and the latest update of WWL Methodology. These are also available at the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).
- The WWL 2025 reporting period was 01 October 2023 – 30 September 2024.

Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.

Open Doors Sverige
sweden@od.org | 019-31 05 00
www.open-doors.se