

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2025

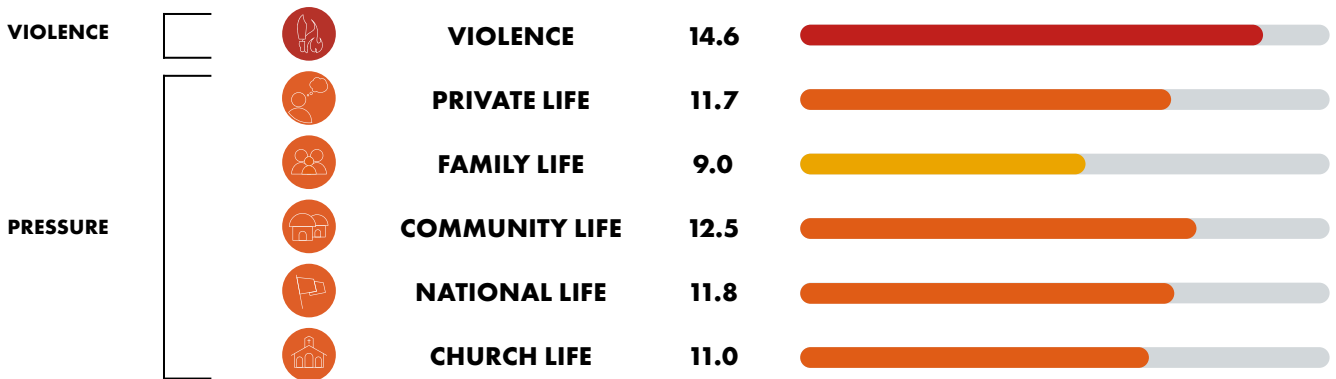
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

## MEXICO

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**31**



### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



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

## Key findings

The increased presence of various criminal groups and their struggle for territorial control has caused Christians and church leaders living in affected areas to face the constant risk of being targeted. This occurs whenever Christians are perceived as being a threat to criminal operations or have disregarded criminal group demands. In indigenous communities, those who decide to abandon the community's religious beliefs (often syncretistic practices related to Catholicism) face rejection and punishments such as fines, incarceration, restricted access to basic services and forced displacement. This happens without any proper investigation and support from state authorities. General societal intolerance of Christianity and its beliefs continues to grow, especially when Christians express faith-based opinions on marriage, family and life issues. Public expressions of Christian faith face strict legal scrutiny, especially in an electoral context.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo

### POPULATION

129,388,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

123,265,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

### GOVERNMENT

Federal Presidential Republic



## Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	123,265,000	95.3
Agnostics	4,330,000	3.3
Ethno-religionists	1,348,000	1.0
Muslims	128,000	0.1

Source<sup>2</sup>

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (hereafter abbreviated to AMLO) took office in 2018. Despite promises to tackle corruption and violence, the country saw a sustained increase in violence during AMLO's six-year term in government to the extent that this period has been classified as the **most violent** in history (Forbes, 13 November 2023). Accusations were made against the police, the National Guard and the government itself regarding collusion with drug leaders (Milenio, 15 May 2022), abuse of authority and human rights violations (El País, 21 March 2023).

In 2024, the presidential candidates signed the Commitment to Peace, a document prepared by the Conference of the Mexican Episcopate (CEM), the Society of Jesus, religious congregations, universities, companies and civil associations, which contains 117 proposals to outline a route for conciliation in the country (Forbes, 11 March 2024). On the whole,

Catholic church leaders are optimistic about the new president, Claudia Sheinbaum, who took office in 2024 in part because of her experience combating violence in the capital city (Crux, 4 June 2024).

Mexico has no official religion, and no religious classes are taught in state schools. This dates back to the Constitution of 1857, in which the official separation of State and Church was established. According to the law regulating religious organizations, church officials are not allowed to publicly express political opinions or hold public office, and the state authorities cannot intervene in the internal life of religious associations. Intolerance towards Christians defending their faith-based opinions has increased, often influenced by a misinterpretation of the separation of Church and State.

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

The largest Christian denomination in Mexico is the Roman Catholic Church, representing 95.6% of all Christians, according to WCD 2024 estimates. Protestant churches are gaining in membership and visibility, especially in rural areas. Pentecostal

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

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

churches are becoming more influential, especially in the political context.

Despite calls from Catholic leaders in particular for a government security strategy under AMLO, continuing high levels of violence against church leaders and their activities (both in rural and urban areas), means that Christian leaders that help victims of violence and [Christian organizations providing humanitarian assistance face violent intimidation](#). Many of these organizations cannot carry out their activities without authorization from the local criminal group in control, who threaten or make violent reprisals against those who speak out against their illicit activities.

Evangelical church leaders reported the closure of numerous evangelical churches to safeguard the safety of their pastors and parishioners in the face of the wave of violence in some southern municipalities. Pastors and their families, who are particular targets, have had to flee their homes and take refuge in the mountains to avoid being caught up in clashes between rival cartels (El Sol de México, February 17, 2024).

## How the situation varies by region

**Main areas for organized corruption and crime:** Criminal networks have spread throughout Mexican territory and are no longer confined to the so-called “narco-states” (Texas Public Policy Foundation, 22 September 2022). According to national media, there are 159 criminal groups with an active presence throughout the country (Reversos, 12 June 2023) and following US-Congressional Research Service, there is at least one cartel operating in each state (CRS, 07 June 2022).

**Main areas for clan oppression:** The violation of the rights of Christians inside indigenous communities occurs particularly in the southern zone, i.e. in Chiapas, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Jalisco, Nayarit, Oaxaca, Puebla, Yucatán, and Zacatecas.

**Main areas for secular intolerance:** Christians throughout the country are affected by national laws underpinning a radical view of Church-State separation and non-discrimination. However, the vandalism of church buildings and the intolerance towards Christians sharing faith-based views on contentious issues are particularly high in states such as Colima, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Morelos, Mexico City, Mexico State, Oaxaca and Veracruz.

## Who is affected?

### COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

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

### HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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

### CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

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

### NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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



## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2023 ranked Mexico 126th out of 180 countries for corruption. High levels of impunity and corruption have led commentators to describe Mexico as a "narco-state" (La Silla Rota, July 11, 2023). Christians who report illegal activities to authorities, preach about sin and social justice or act as human rights defenders are often seen as threats to criminal groups' interests. They can quickly become targets for various forms of retaliation, including surveillance, extortion, raids and robberies at their places of worship and homes, death threats, kidnapping attempts and even murder. Criminal groups display increasing levels of brutality when targeting church leaders (MSN Noticias, October 9, 2022).

### CLAN OPPRESSION

The state intervenes minimally, as it recognizes the autonomy of indigenous communities. Within these communities, ethnic leaders often enforce lifestyles governed by ancestral or syncretic customs. Christians who are not accepted and refuse to follow these customs face community pressure in the form of forced displacement, fines, isolation, denial of basic community

services, imprisonment, beatings and destruction of their property. The situation worsens when alliances are formed between indigenous leaders and criminal groups, further increasing the vulnerability of non-accepted Christians in these areas. Through the State Human Rights Commission, measures have been taken to ensure the physical integrity and personal safety of indigenous Christians belonging to non-accepted religious groups. However, these cases have not always been followed up effectively.

### SECULAR INTOLERANCE

Ideological pressure groups and some government authorities promote a secularist agenda aimed at restricting Christians' participation in the public sphere, especially when they hold public office or when church leaders make political statements. There is also some social and political opposition to the Church's mediation efforts with criminal groups to negotiate ceasefires in certain areas of the country. Christians face increasing social intolerance when expressing faith-based views, even at work or school. Vandalism against church property is on the rise, but authorities rarely conduct thorough investigations, often dismissing such incidents as "not a real issue."





# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Ongoing organized violence presents many challenges, including femicide, increased family violence and trafficking. In some indigenous communities, girls may be trafficked under the “mask” of the dowry and are easy targets for abduction and sexual slavery by armed groups. Girls and young women, including Christian girls, may be coerced into relationships with members of criminal groups. In several indigenous communities, forced marriage is common, as is physical and verbal abuse of converts. These dynamics perpetuate cycles of violence, insecurity and socio-economic issues for women and girls.

### Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Forced marriage
- Trafficking
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

## MEN

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

### Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2025	31	71
2024	37	68
2023	38	67
2022	43	65
2021	37	64

Mexico’s overall score rose by 3 points (after rounding decimals), driven by increases in both violence (gaining 0.5 points to reach the extreme level of 14.6 points) and pressure, with notable rises in all spheres of life except Community life.

These variations are primarily attributed to the social control imposed by organized crime across all states of the federation, particularly during the electoral context. This environment even led to WWL 2025 recording the highest number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons. When the Church is seen as a destabilizing factor for criminal activities, it becomes more vulnerable to being a frequent target of these groups.

Additionally, the country continues to report concerning levels of rejection of religious minorities within indigenous communities, compounded by noticeable social displays of secular intolerance toward the Church’s message in other contexts.

## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **November 2023, Oaxaca:** In San Juan la Lana (Tuxtepec), four evangelical Christians in an indigenous community were arrested and threatened with eviction.
- **March 2024:** Protesters participating in marches on International Women’s Day [vandalized churches](#) in various states: In Oaxaca, participants tore down fences that had been erected to protect the Cathedral. In Durango, a statue of Saint John Paul II, located outside a church, was attacked. In Leon there were confrontations between protesters and religious groups and eggs were thrown at the facade of León cathedral.
- **May 2024, Chiapas:** On May 13, 2024, a catechist aspiring to become a deacon and his family—including his sister-in-law, who was also a children’s catechist—were murdered by members of a criminal cell of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel. The attack was prompted by the catechist’s refusal to collaborate with the cartel and his calls during church services for the Catholic congregation to reject the group’s illegal activities, which the cartel interpreted as an act of betrayal. After being killed, their bodies were burned along with their home. (Infobae, May 16 2024)

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians abducted	Christians internally displaced
2025	24	193	116	852
2024	13	78	10	74

*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

The widespread use of online platforms played a more prominent role than ever, making it easier for criminal groups to target Christians who shared content promoting non-violence, opposing illicit activities, or threatening their illicit interests. Christians supporting faith-based views on social media about topics such as family, marriage, and the sanctity of life were criticized, mocked and targeted. In some indigenous communities, monitoring of non-accepted Christians has significantly increased in recent years. Where Christian religious symbols were found, they were likely to be destroyed and the Christians using them punished. Converts from criminal groups or indigenous backgrounds risk being denounced by their family members and face reprisals.

### FAMILY LIFE

Indigenous Christian children have been threatened with separation from their parents or prevented from being educated by them after their parents convert to Christianity and abandon traditional community

beliefs. Organized crime is also a cause of separation within families since the danger of attack can be so high that some Christian family members are forced to look for a safe place to live elsewhere. The recruitment of children by criminal groups has skyrocketed; they were being used to transport drugs in food and medicine and to join self-defense groups. Forced displacement is also a frequent threat to non-accepted Christians living in indigenous communities. Christian parents also face difficulties educating their children according to their religious beliefs due to mandatory content and some legal regulations.

### COMMUNITY LIFE

Christians are closely monitored in both indigenous communities and areas dominated by organized crime. Within some indigenous communities, Christians face harassment, fines, threats and forced displacement when refusing to participate in community activities that contradict the Christian faith. Criminal gangs extort protection money from church leaders and other Christians to allow

them to conduct their activities undisturbed. In some workplaces, under the defense of “non-discrimination policies”, Christians face some pressure to follow postulates and participate in activities that may violate their conscience.

### **NATIONAL LIFE**

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

is often used to promote a climate of self-censorship against Christians when they intend to manifest their faith-based views in the public sphere.

### **CHURCH LIFE**

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

## **International obligations & rights violated**

### **Mexico has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights 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)

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

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

## Situation of other religious minorities

According to [USCIRF'S International Religious Freedom Report 2023](#), Claudia Sheinbaum, the presidential candidate for the ruling Morena Party, was the subject of antisemitic attacks on social media because of her Jewish heritage. In July, former President Vicente Fox Quezada criticized her for “being a Bulgarian Jew” and in September, for “being Jewish and a foreigner at the same time.” Also in July, the National Human Rights Commission condemned Fox’s “messages of hatred and discrimination, which do not contribute to the political debate, violate minorities, and are not part of the freedom of expression of the former president.”

Jewish community representatives who evaluated online antisemitic messages, symbols, and language from October 7 to December 27 found that 22 percent of the conversations about Jewish people had antisemitic undertones, a 6 percent increase from January 1 to September 30, reportedly related to the Hamas terrorist attack against Israel on October 7 and the ensuing Israeli response.

### Open Doors in Mexico

The ministry of Open Doors in Mexico focuses on:

- Biblical training
- Professional litigation
- Financial support
- Research





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## 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.

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