

WORLD WATCH LIST 2025

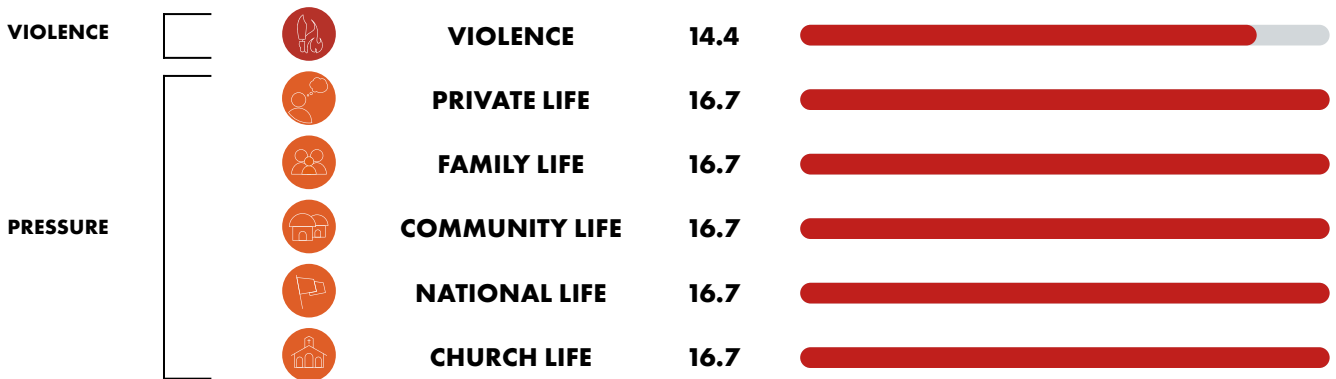
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
1

NORTH KOREA



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

There is no freedom of religion or belief in North Korea. The regime keeps a watchful eye on all its citizens. If Christians are discovered, they and their families are deported to labor camps as political criminals or killed on the spot. Christians do not have any place in society. Gathering with other Christians is therefore almost impossible and must only be attempted in the utmost secrecy.

The “anti-reactionary thought law”, enacted in 2020, included the Bible among the banned books mentioned in Article 28, showing that Christianity is still seen by the state as a grave danger. The churches shown to visitors in Pyongyang serve mere propaganda purposes.

Quick facts

LEADER

Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un

POPULATION

26,245,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

400,000 (OD estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Agnosticism

GOVERNMENT

Dictatorship, Single-party communist state



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	400,000	1.5
Agnostics	14,786,370	56.3
Atheists	4,022,399	15.3
Others	3,345,572	12.7

Source¹

In the early 1900s, the Great Pyongyang Revival began, and the capital of North Korea became known as the “Jerusalem of the East”. Hundreds of churches sprang up and missionaries set up educational institutions throughout the country. Under Japanese rule, the Church was increasingly persecuted. After the defeat of Japan in World War II, Kim Il Sung came to power and imposed a Communist (atheistic) regime. During the Korean War (1950-53) many Christians fled and, in the aftermath, tens of thousands of Christians were killed, imprisoned or banished to remote areas. The rest of the Church went underground.

Kimilsungism (worship of the ruling family) is the prescribed national religion. All citizens must attend

weekly self-criticism sessions and memorize more than 100 pages of ideological material. Influenced by Confucianism, North Korea developed a social classification system called Songbun, under which every citizen is divided into three classes; the core (28% of society), the wavering (45%) and the hostile (27%). Christians and their descendants are classed as hostile. Christianity is seen as a dangerous foreign religion that must be fought against. Open Doors estimates that tens of thousands of Christians are in labor camps. A 2020 UN report highlighted human rights violations against women in these camps, which include sexual violence, forced nudity, rape and forced abortion. Christian men also experience physical violence and maltreatment in labor camps.

No reliable data showing religious statistics is available. Open Doors estimates the number of Christians at 400,000. There are followers of Buddhism and Confucianism, whose philosophies are easy to follow internally without anyone noticing.

Kim Jong Un, in power since 2011, controls the parliament, government and military. He wants North Korea to be taken seriously and has worked to advance its rocket and nuclear technology. In a long-anticipated move, North Korea declared itself a “[nuclear weapons state](#)” in September 2022. There is an increased reverence to Kim Jong Un amongst North Koreans, almost at par with his father and

¹ Others include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Data source: Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024) (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

grandfather. Economically, North Korea is struggling under international sanctions, but the regime denies direct access to its citizens in need. Greater cooperation between the North Korean intelligence agency and Chinese police has resulted in increasing numbers of defectors, usually women, being identified and forcibly repatriated. [Facial recognition technology](#) in China has also made this easier. The country is currently going through severe food shortages due to a decrease in agricultural output and a flawed food distribution system.

How the situation varies by region

The various [prison camps and total control zones](#) can be seen as areas where Christians are facing the most difficulties but it is not easy to obtain up-to-date details.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

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

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

The Christians in this category are those who were living in the country before the Korean War (1950-1953) and their descendants. While many Christians either died in the war, fled to the South or were banished to isolated villages, a small percentage of the historical Christian communities were able to hide their faith and form an underground church. Due to the guilt-by-association principle, the descendants of known Christians face insurmountable social obstacles and are watched with suspicion.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

These converts come from a Communist or “Kimilsungism” background. Many of them became Christians during the famine of the 1990s when many people crossed the border to China and found help in Chinese churches. After [returning](#) to North Korea, they retained their new-found faith and shared it with trusted others.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

COMMUNIST AND POST-COMMUNIST OPPRESSION

Although North Korea is dominated by the personality cult of its leaders, it is still run according to Communist customs and societal control. Religion is seen as dangerous and Christians are part of the hostile class, according to Songbun (the country’s social stratification system).

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Kim Jong Un has amended the national oath to shorten references to his father’s and grandfather’s achievements and give extra emphasis to his own. On several occasions in 2020, Kim Jong Un failed to acknowledge his father or grandfather and did not visit their ‘shrines’ on the Day of the Sun, the highest celebration in the country’s calendar. This shows how much he has consolidated his power.

The above sources operate so closely together that they almost blend into one. The main perpetrators of both are government officials and the Workers’ Party of Korea, followed by citizens and extended family. The highest goal of the authorities is the survival of the country and its leader. As for citizens, neighbors are on the lookout for any suspicious behavior to report to the authorities.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Uncounted numbers of North Korean Christians are in labor camps for their faith, where female prisoners suffer sexual violence and rape. Many defectors are women, and North Korean women who defect to China are at risk of human trafficking. Repatriated female defectors and prisoners remain highly vulnerable to sexual violence during the interrogation process, as well as the ongoing practice of forced abortions. According to a country expert, “Christian female prisoners are exposed to more severe sexual violence... they are not even considered human beings.”

Female typical pressure points:

- Trafficking
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

The patriarchal society of North Korea means that state monitoring of the population is especially focused on the male heads of households. All male adults must belong to workplaces allocated by the government. They must confirm their attendance at work and cannot stop working for any private reason. Those with an identifiable Christian connection are consigned to the lowest positions in the military (military service is 10 years for men), in universities and workplaces, and they are denied Party membership. Men also suffer maltreatment and physical abuse in labor camps.

Male typical pressure points:

- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence – physical



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2025	1	98
2024	1	96
2023	1	98
2022	2	96
2021	1	94

North Korea retains its spot at the top in WWL 2025 with pressure in all Spheres of life remaining at the maximum level. The violence score increased when several groups of Christians were arrested and brought to labor camps. The regime is putting an ever stronger emphasis on ideological purity and viciously purges any perceived or real outside influence.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons, no details can be published here.

PRIVATE LIFE

Police and intelligence agents search homes without warning. If they find Christian materials, it is considered a crime against the nation, and the whole family can be banished, imprisoned or executed. Those who use an unregistered smartphone or radio to access unapproved media are punished. Christians only dare to listen to radio programs at night, hidden under blankets. Each act of worship, even though conducted by oneself, is perceived as an “act of extreme disloyalty”, as one country expert says. Citizens are trained to report anyone who might be an enemy of the regime, including family members. Teachers encourage pupils to denounce their parents if they see them behaving contrary to what they have learned. Because of this danger, Christian parents often wait until their children are teenagers before speaking to them about their faith.

FAMILY LIFE

Baptisms cannot be openly conducted because doing so would result in imprisonment or execution. As we saw in Private Life, sharing faith with one’s children is very risky. Christians will try to share Bible stories disguised as fairy tales. Some North Korean refugees have told us that when a Christian is exposed if a non-Christian spouse has high-ranking parents, they may attempt to forcibly divorce the couple and eliminate all records of the relationship. Otherwise, the whole family is interrogated and imprisoned due to the guilt-by-association principle. Kimilsungism is the most important subject from nursery to university. Even in a Ph.D. curriculum for a subject such as Nuclear Physics, 30% of the coursework involves the study of Juche ideology. Christianity is portrayed as a subversive ideology by American imperialists; Christians are viewed as traitors to the nation and spies. As one country expert said, “Children and youth naturally hate Christianity and Christians, as they have learned from school from early on”.

COMMUNITY LIFE

North Korea applies *inminban*, the Communist neighborhood watch system. All that happens within a housing unit will be reported to the authorities. Random interrogation by the police or Secret Service is common for all citizens. One



of its purposes is to discover Christians, who are then executed or sent to prison camps or remote mountain areas, as they committed a political crime. Interrogation (and related torture) is one of the main aspects feared by escapees from North Korea, when they are forcefully repatriated, according to one country expert. Those with Christian relatives are closely monitored and prevented from accessing good schools, universities, the army, and the Workers’ Party. All North Koreans must bow to statues on the way to and from work or school and participate in practices such as self-criticism sessions and national ceremonies.

NATIONAL LIFE

The new anti-reactionary thought law together with Article 68 of the Constitution states that citizens “have freedom of religious beliefs” but that “no one may use religion as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State and social order.” More important than the constitution for the functioning of the state are the 10 Principles of Monolithic Ideology statutes of the Workers’ Party. These are the governing principles of the NK government and society. Based on the teachings of founding father Kim Il Sung, these rules are shaped to ensure the unwavering loyalty of the body politic to the Supreme Leader (Suryong) and the Korean Workers’ Party (KWP). The national media broadcast anti-Christian content, where Christians are portrayed as evil betrayers of the nation and missionary activities are referred to as “acts of terrorism.” As one expert said: “All North Korean media are under government control. They demonize Christians as robbers, swindlers, spies of the American enemy and traitors to the nation. Not only the mass media but also school

textbooks and other published books, movies, official documents and ideology study materials describe Christians in a negative manner.” Christians are arbitrarily arrested and punished without trial. Even foreign Christians who have faced court proceedings have been deprived of equal treatment and held in prolonged arbitrary detention.

CHURCH LIFE

All church activities are illegal in North Korea except for the services held in Pyongyang’s official churches, which are attended by tourists as “evidence” of North Korea’s freedom of religion. There have been cases where underground church groups were discovered and Christians were sent to camps or killed. Details cannot be published for security reasons. The regime is especially interested

in finding leaders, punishing them and interrogating them about the rest of the network. Tourists entering and leaving North Korea have their luggage checked to make sure they only bring in one Bible for personal use and that they do not leave it there (although there have not been many tourists to North Korea in the reporting period to begin with). Importing and production of Christian material is banned. According to the 2021 North Korean Human Rights White Paper of the Korean Institution of National Unification (KINU), public executions are becoming more frequent just for possessing a Bible. Distribution of Bibles is more harshly punished than possession. North Koreans cannot leave the country without government permission, which means attending conferences or meeting other Christians abroad cannot happen.

International obligations & rights violated

North Korea 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 on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
4. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

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

- Christians are arbitrarily executed for their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christians are deported to political prison camps, tortured, and forced into a life of hard labor (ICCPR Arts. 7 and 8)
- Every aspect of a North Korean’s life is constantly monitored and controlled by the state (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christians are not allowed to hold their beliefs and worship, either in public or private (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians are not allowed to gather or meet to worship (ICCPR Art. 21)
- Christians are categorized as “hostile” and discriminated against on the basis of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)

Situation of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2023 North Korea):

“Korea Future stated that both ordinary citizens and officials illicitly practiced Shamanism. Investigators documented many persons engaging both publicly and privately in Shamanistic practices, including traditional rituals, fortune telling, physiognomy (reading the fate of an individual based on facial features), exorcism, use of talismans, use of birth charts, and tarot cards. One source told RFA it was common for individuals to consult fortune tellers before planning weddings, making business deals, handling health matters, or considering other important decisions. Another source told Asia Press that government officials also consulted fortune tellers about their health and careers. NGOs reported authorities continued to take measures against the practice of Shamanism.”

Open Doors in North Korea

The scope of work focused in North Korea includes the following:

- Supplying persecuted North Korean believers through its networks in China with emergency relief aid (food, medicines, clothes, etc.).
- Training through radio broadcasting.
- Providing shelter, training and training materials to North Korean believers in China (who often travel back to North Korea).



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.

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.

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