

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

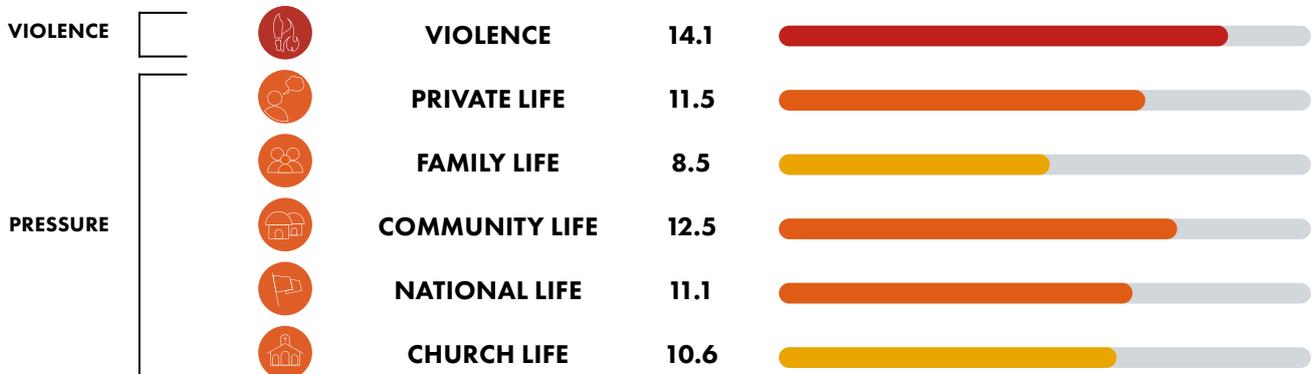
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

MEXICO

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
37



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 continue to grow, especially when Christians express faith-based opinions on marriage, family and life issues. Public expressions of Christian faith face strict legal scrutiny.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador

POPULATION

132,834,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

126,876,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

GOVERNMENT

Federal Presidential Republic



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Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	126,876,000	95.5
Agnostics	4,085,000	3.1
Ethno-religionists	1,407,000	1.1
Atheists	157,000	0.1

Source²

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (hereafter abbreviated to AMLO) took office in 2018. Despite his promises to tackle corruption and violence, the country continues to suffer from violence and insecurity. Additionally, accusations have been 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). Some sectors of civil society classify political measures adopted by AMLO (as part of his political plan called “Fourth Transformation”) as dictatorship, since he is attempting to end the autonomy of independent agencies designed to check presidential power (WSJ, 4 June 2021) and concentrated power in the Executive Branch (Expansión Política, 25 May 2021).

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 92.8% of all Christians according to WCD 2023 estimates. Protestant churches are gaining in membership and visibility, especially in rural areas. Pentecostal churches are becoming more influential, especially in the political context.

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

² Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Due to the increasing levels of violence against church leaders and their activities (both in rural and urban areas), Catholic leaders in particular have begun to speak out about the dangers they are facing and to request that the government introduce a more effective security strategy. In response, they have been harshly criticized by AMLO to the point of being called, among other things, “hypocrites” (Animal Politico, 30 June 2022). Likewise, Christian human rights activists and conflict mediators are being treated as criminals by state authorities when they refuse to accept agreements that include aspects of corruption (El País, 8 July 2022).

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 the indigenous communities who follow ancestral traditions. This category struggles with the growth of secular intolerance, especially where attempts are made to prevent their faith-based opinions 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 (CPI 2022) ranked Mexico 126th out of 180 countries for corruption. The high levels of impunity and corruption have led commentators to call Mexico a “narco-state” (La Silla Rota, 11 July 2023). Christians who inform the authorities of illegal operations, who preach about sin and social justice and/ or act as human rights defenders are considered a threat to the interests of criminal groups. They can quickly become targets for all sorts of reprisals, attacks, surveillance, extortion, break-ins and robberies to their worship places and homes, death threats, kidnapping attempts, and even killings. Criminal groups are showing an increasing level of cruelty when acting against Church leaders (MSN News, 9 October 2022).

Clan oppression

The State intervenes minimally since it recognizes indigenous communities’ right to autonomy. In such communities, ethnic leaders attempt to impose a lifestyle regulated by ancestral or syncretistic customs. If non-accepted Christians

reject such customs, they face community pressure through forced displacement, fines, isolation, the blocking of basic community services, imprisonment, beatings, and the destruction of Christian property. Through the State Commission on Human Rights, measures have been taken to guarantee the physical integrity and personal security of indigenous Christians belonging to non-accepted church groups. However, these cases have not always been followed up satisfactorily.

Secular intolerance

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



How are men and women differently affected?

Women

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

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied/restricted healthcare
- 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. Converts from indigenous backgrounds face beatings, harassment, and community rejection.

Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Economic harassment via fines
- 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
2024	37	68
2023	38	67
2022	43	65
2021	37	64
2020	52	60

Mexico rose 1.7 points overall. The extreme violence score increased slightly, and there was a particularly noticeable rise in pressure in the Private Sphere of Life due to new reports of indigenous Christians being impacted. The main threat to the Church is criminal groups that control certain parts of national territory. Committed Christians are seen as a potential risk to their illicit operations.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- January 2023 – Chihuahua:** The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights set up special [security measures](#) for eleven members of the Jesuit community of Chihuahua, who had suffered attacks and threats from criminal groups, preventing them from carrying out pastoral work. Two of their number had been assassinated in June 2022. (IACHR, 31 January, 2023)
- January 2023 – Hidalgo:** María Concepción Hernández Hernández, a member of the Iglesia Bautista Gran Comisión, was tied to a tree and [severely beaten](#) by the leaders of her village in the community of Rancho Nuevo. She was attacked after she visited a plot of land that she owns in response to a request from a neighbor who had asked her to remove two trees. Since 2015, the local authorities have prohibited members of the religious minority from accessing or using their land for cultivating crops.
- August 2023 – Chiapas:** Miguel Montoya Moreno, Vicar for Justice and Peace of the local diocese, publicly denounced the increase in [threats](#) by both criminal groups and government officials against pastors who speak out about serious violence. Moreno calls for an end to the criminalization of human rights defenders.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians abducted	Christians physically or mentally abused
2024	13	78	10	100*
2023	14	42	4	44

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

Private life

After the COVID-19 crisis, online platforms played a more significant role than ever; it became easier for criminal groups to target Christians who published material supporting non-violence and opposing illicit activities. Christians supporting faith-based views on social media about topics such as family, marriage, and the sanctity of life were criticized, mocked and targeted. In some indigenous communities, monitoring of non-accepted Christians increased greatly after the pandemic. 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 inside 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 within 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 the workplace, under the defense of “non-discrimination policies”, Christians face some pressure to follow postulates and participate in activities that may violate their conscience.

National life

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

Church life

Within 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, 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 the US State Department (IRFR 2022): “During 2022, the government’s National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) continued to document religious discrimination against “Luz del Mundo” (LLDM) members.” This included verbal harassment. There are also reports of discrimination against Jews and antisemitic content online.

Open Doors in Mexico

The ministry of Open Doors in Mexico focuses on:

- Biblical training
- Professional litigation
- Financial support
- Research



About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

Some of the photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
