

World
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Colombia: Country Dossier

December 2020



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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research@od.org

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Introduction

World Watch List 2021

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	94	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.2	94	93	94	93	89
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.3	9.8	92	92	91	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.4	15.9	16.3	16.3	12.4	92	90	87	86	78
5	Pakistan	13.9	14.2	15.1	14.9	13.5	16.7	88	88	87	86	88
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	11.1	88	87	86	86	82
7	Yemen	16.6	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	3.9	87	85	86	85	85
8	Iran	14.5	14.5	13.9	15.7	16.5	10.6	86	85	85	85	85
9	Nigeria	13.3	13.2	13.9	14.1	14.1	16.7	85	80	80	77	78
10	India	13.0	12.9	13.5	14.9	13.7	15.4	83	83	83	81	73
11	Iraq	13.6	14.6	14.2	14.8	13.8	11.5	82	76	79	86	86
12	Syria	13.3	13.9	13.5	14.5	14.0	12.0	81	82	82	76	86
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	13.7	13.6	15.7	9.1	79	85	87	87	87
14	Saudi Arabia	15.1	13.9	14.4	15.8	16.6	2.2	78	79	77	79	76
15	Maldives	15.4	15.5	13.9	15.8	16.6	0.4	77	78	78	78	76
16	Egypt	12.5	13.2	11.5	12.7	11.0	14.1	75	76	76	70	65
17	China	12.6	9.7	12.0	13.2	15.4	11.1	74	70	65	57	57
18	Myanmar	11.9	12.0	13.1	12.9	12.3	11.9	74	73	71	65	62
19	Vietnam	12.1	8.8	12.7	14.0	14.5	10.0	72	72	70	69	71
20	Mauritania	14.3	14.0	13.5	14.1	13.6	1.9	71	68	67	57	55
21	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	1.3	71	73	74	73	71
22	Laos	12.1	10.2	13.6	13.5	14.3	6.9	71	72	71	67	64
23	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.5	70	70	69	68	67
24	Algeria	13.9	13.9	11.5	13.1	13.4	3.9	70	73	70	58	58
25	Turkey	12.5	11.5	10.8	13.3	11.6	9.3	69	63	66	62	57
26	Tunisia	12.0	13.1	10.4	11.5	13.2	7.4	67	64	63	62	61
27	Morocco	12.6	13.5	11.2	12.4	14.1	3.7	67	66	63	51	49
28	Mali	9.4	8.2	12.7	10.3	11.5	15.4	67	66	68	59	59
29	Qatar	14.0	13.9	10.8	13.1	14.1	1.5	67	66	62	63	66
30	Colombia	11.4	8.8	12.4	11.0	9.7	13.9	67	62	58	56	53
31	Bangladesh	11.5	10.3	13.0	11.3	10.1	10.6	67	63	58	58	63
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.4	11.8	14.3	67	66	48	-	-
33	Tajikistan	14.0	12.3	11.9	12.5	13.2	2.2	66	65	65	65	58
34	Nepal	12.4	9.7	9.9	13.0	12.3	8.5	66	64	64	64	53
35	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.1	9.6	9.9	15.6	66	68	70	61	58
36	Ethiopia	9.9	8.5	10.7	10.3	10.8	14.4	65	63	65	62	64
37	Mexico	10.3	8.1	12.4	10.7	10.3	12.6	64	60	61	59	57
38	Jordan	13.1	13.9	11.4	11.6	12.4	2.0	64	64	65	66	63
39	Brunei	13.9	14.6	10.7	10.9	13.5	0.7	64	63	63	64	64
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	11.2	9.4	11.6	16.1	64	56	55	33	-
41	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	11.0	12.5	13.4	2.4	64	64	63	63	56
42	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.0	12.3	15.7	64	60	54	38	-
43	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	11.9	12.7	13.8	0.0	64	61	64	62	61
44	Oman	13.2	13.5	10.3	12.5	13.0	0.9	63	62	59	57	53
45	Mozambique	9.3	7.6	11.3	7.9	11.1	16.1	63	43	43	-	-
46	Malaysia	12.1	14.3	12.9	11.5	10.0	2.4	63	62	60	65	60
47	Indonesia	11.5	11.4	12.4	10.7	9.3	7.8	63	60	65	59	55
48	Kuwait	13.2	13.5	9.9	12.2	13.2	1.1	63	62	60	61	57
49	Kenya	11.7	9.2	10.5	8.0	10.3	12.8	62	61	61	62	68
50	Comoros	12.5	11.1	11.4	11.3	14.2	1.9	62	57	56	56	56

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
51	Cuba	10.9	7.7	11.8	12.9	13.4	5.4	62	52	49	49	47
52	Sri Lanka	12.2	9.1	11.7	12.2	9.7	7.0	62	65	58	57	55
53	UAE	13.4	13.3	9.7	12.0	12.4	1.1	62	60	58	58	55
54	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.6	10.6	62	60	52	45	47
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.2	10.4	12.0	1.3	58	57	56	54	48
56	Palestinian Territories	12.5	13.3	9.1	10.4	11.7	0.9	58	60	57	60	64
57	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	10.2	58	55	52	53	59
58	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.5	12.1	3.9	57	60	60	51	46
59	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.0	56	56	56	56	57
60	Bahrain	12.1	12.5	9.1	10.7	10.5	0.9	56	55	55	57	54
61	Azerbaijan	12.8	9.8	9.4	11.1	12.6	0.0	56	57	57	57	52
62	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	3.7	53	56	48	40	-
63	Nicaragua	6.9	4.6	9.9	11.3	10.0	8.1	51	41	41	-	-
64	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.9	48	48	43	-	-
65	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	12.0	47	48	47	46	53
66	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	5.9	47	45	46	-	-
67	Honduras	6.8	5.0	10.6	7.6	9.0	7.6	46	39	38	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	10.1	11.4	7.2	46	43	42	-	-
69	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	44	44	-	-
70	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	0.6	43	43	43	-	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	0.7	43	41	42	-	-
72	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	8.1	42	42	41	-	-
73	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.3	42	42	43	-	-
74	El Salvador	6.6	4.9	9.8	4.2	8.7	7.8	42	38	30	-	-

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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).
- The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.
- The WWL 2021 reporting period was 01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020.
- 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 including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2021 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of Open Doors field networks, research analysts, external experts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that the WWL 2021 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

WWL 2021 Short country profile / Colombia

Brief country details

Colombia: Population (2020 UN estimate)	Christians	Chr%
50,220,000	47,706,000	95.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

Colombia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	67	30
WWL 2020	62	41
WWL 2019	58	47
WWL 2018	56	49
WWL 2017	53	50

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

Secular intolerance	Government officials, Political parties, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Ideological pressure groups
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Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

Church leaders are being threatened, harassed, extorted and even murdered as a result of the increased territorial control and violence perpetrated by guerrillas and other criminal groups, especially in the most neglected areas in the country. In most cases, this violence is the direct result of Christians being involved in such activities as: a) denouncing corruption and violence, b) working for the defense of human and environmental rights; c) working among youth; d) assisting in the restoration of peace; e) opposing criminal activities in sermons; and f) any kind of action defying the “de facto” authority of local criminal groups or that might endanger their illegal activities. In indigenous communities, there is a significant opposition towards Christian missionaries 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, because of the growing radical secularism, there is an increasing intolerance towards Christian views in the public sphere especially about issues concerning life, family, marriage and religious liberty. Christians speaking in public are regularly targeted for supposedly being discriminatory and using hate-speech.

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **October 2019 – Tuluá:** An evangelical pastor and his family [received](#) death threats and had to flee. They are still unable to return to their home city (CSW, 7 October 2019).
- **March 2020 - Bogotá:** During a demonstration on International Women's Day, a group of feminists [violently](#) entered the La Sagrada Pasión church in Bogotá. The group painted slogans on the church walls promoting abortion and insulting priests and sang anti-Christian songs (Aciprensa, 9 March 2020).
- **March – August 2020:** Open Doors researchers reported that 24 cases were registered where Christians were warned by armed groups not to visit certain territories for religious purposes and to keep to the “invisible borders” the groups had imposed or be killed. The risk was even greater for Christian leaders and foreign missionaries. The cases were registered in Catatumbo (4), Chocó (2), Arauca (2), Buenaventura (1), Sierra Nevada (1), Córdoba (1), Caquetá (1), Urabá (2), Huila (1), Cauca (3), Lower Cauca (4) and Boyacá (2).
- **May 2020 – Santa Marta:** Open Doors researchers reported that in the Arhuaco indigenous community of Sierra Nevada, leaders punished two Christians who had met for prayer. They were beaten and made to do forced labor for a few days. Later, in July 2020, another Christian was jailed for a month for not complying with the rituals of the community and for refusing to renounce his Christian faith.

Specific examples of positive developments

- The National Liberation Army (ELN), the largest active guerrilla group in Colombia, announced it would observe a unilateral [cease-fire](#) for one month from 1 April 2020 in an effort to help stem the spread of the COVID-19 virus (BBC News, 30 March 2020). Although this gave many church leaders working in areas affected by armed conflict a brief respite, it did not make a significant impact on reducing violence. Many other armed groups took advantage of the instability generated by the pandemic to intensify their attacks.
- Since the implementation of the Comprehensive Public Policy on Religious Freedom and Worship (2017) at the national level, various municipalities have made progress in promoting and protecting religious freedom. A number of initiatives have been started to implement public policies that include the right to religious freedom and there is genuine interest in involving religious organizations as strategic social actors in the drafting of municipal and departmental public policies.

External Links - Short country profile

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: received - <https://forbinfull.org/2019/10/07/en-la-linea-de-fuego-frente-a-la-ldrc-salimos-de-la-ciudad-para-no-volver/#more-4267>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: violently - <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/feministas-pintan-y-atacan-iglesia-en-colombia-durante-marcha-del-8m-54264>
- Specific examples of positive developments: cease-fire - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-52090169>

WWL 2021: Keys to understanding / Colombia

Link for general background information

- [Colombia country profile - BBC News](#)

Recent history

Colombia became independent from Spain after a period of struggle in 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.

Current President Ivan Duque of the Democratic Center Party won the elections in June 2018, and is tasked with dealing with the many challenges arising from the implementation of the Agreement for the Final Termination of the Conflict between the Colombian State and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) [signed](#) on 2016, during the presidency of Juan Manuel Santos (High Commissioner for Peace, 24 November 2016). The peace process is still being hindered by difficulties with the processes of the [JEP](#) court system (AS/COA, August 2018), by guerrilla groups such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) and rebels from the FARC who have announced that they will resume the five decades long armed conflict.

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 in 2020, the protestors were joined by [illegal groups](#) such as the ELN (La Opinion, 24 September 2020). The widespread dissatisfaction with President Iván Duque's administration [increased](#) between August and October 2020 (Valora Analitik, 29 October 2020). The compulsory isolation measures which were introduced to combat the spread of the Covid-19 virus also had a negative impact on the economy and in other areas.

In addition to being affected by the aforementioned issues at national level, Christians also faced insecurity, intolerance and discrimination by state and non-state actors such as radical secular movements and ideological pressure groups. During the COVID-19 crisis, churches were not free to carry out normal religious activities due to the restrictions imposed by the government. However, many were active in providing spiritual and humanitarian aid to those in need.

Political and legal landscape

In November 2019, thousands of citizens [protested](#) against various political reforms and rumors of cuts to pensions and public education and called for a general strike (Al-Jazeera, 26 November 2019). In response, the president set up a "[national dialogue](#)" (Semana, 3 July 2020) and for four months he spoke with strike leaders and others to discuss the issues at stake. Many of the protesters' demands were deemed "unfeasible" by the government. Although many citizens threatened to restart the demonstrations, these did not materialize due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Apart from the protests, the implementation of peace agreements and the fight against corruption are still the most dominant issues for the government. The peace process is slower than expected and between December 2018 and November 2019 the overall [progress](#) in implementation was estimated to be only 6% (Kroc Institute Report 4, 16 June 2020). According to the FARC party, up to the beginning of October 2020, 230 ex-combatants had been [killed](#) since the signing of the peace accords (Infobae, 13 October 2020). 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 (See *Security situation* below).

The legal framework and the policies to fight corruption are weak. According to the Colombia 2019 [Human Rights Report](#), government security forces were accused of collaborating with or tolerating the activities of criminal gangs, which included some former paramilitary members (US State Department, 11 March 2020). The report also stated that the judicial system was overburdened and inefficient, and that the corruption and intimidation of judges, prosecutors and witnesses was hindering judicial functioning. Multilateral organizations, such as the [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights](#) (IACHR, 26 March 2020) and the [United Nations](#) (UN, 9 May 2020) have also called attention to the limited security measures and impunity for crimes that prevent the guaranteed protection of community leaders and people who defend human

rights in the country. Corruption has also infiltrated some Traditional Indigenous Authorities, affecting the processes of the Special Indigenous Jurisdiction that governs the processes within the indigenous communities and territories in Colombia.

In the regional electoral process held in October 2019, arguments supporting the secular nature of the state were employed to limit and [oppose](#) the participation of Christian candidates (El Espectador, 16 August 2019). At the same time, it was argued that if Christians were given greater political influence, they would use government resources to address the interests of their own religious groups.

As a reaction to the flow of refugees from Venezuela, the [Quito Process meetings](#) have continued in order to develop a coordinated response by Latin American and Caribbean states (ReliefWeb, 30 January 2020). Relationships with the Andean Community, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Pacific Alliance have also been maintained and strengthened. In April 2020, Colombia officially became the 37th member of the [OECD](#) (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 28 April 2020). Finally, Colombia [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).

It is important to note that in the political context, religious communities (including Christians) are now being considered valid social actors in the promotion of dialogue and peace. They have functioned as active participants in some departmental and national public policies, although this has also caused criticism from secularists and made them targets for acts of aggression.

Religious landscape

Colombia: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	47,706,000	95.0
Muslim	26,500	0.1
Hindu	12,200	0.0
Buddhist	2,200	0.0
Ethno-religionist	315,000	0.6
Jewish	5,000	0.0
Bahai	82,000	0.2

Atheist	140,000	0.3
Agnostic	1,400,000	2.8
Other	531,300	1.1
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

The [1991 Constitution](#) guarantees the 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, nonetheless, the State maintains a concordat with the Holy See and an internal legal agreement entitled [Decree 354](#) (Mininterior, 19 February 1998) with 13 non-Catholic Christian groups (El Heraldo, 2 August 2019). Among other things, this decree gives legally binding recognition of marriages and the guarantee that properties 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. This will allow 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 Colombia 2019 [International Religious Freedom Report](#), unregistered entities may still perform religious activities without penalty but may not collect funds or receive donations. The situation implies a disadvantage for these churches since they do not enjoy the same benefits granted to recognized churches (US Department of State, 10 June 2020).

At the [national](#) level, one of the most outstanding initiatives is the Comprehensive Public Policy on Religious Freedom and Worship (Mininter, 6 March 2018), which identifies religious entities as strategic allies in shaping society. This initiative also aims to guarantee that the individual and collective rights of religious entities (including Christians and church organizations) will be protected in the exercise of their activities.

The State has continued to recognize the religious sector as being an important element in establishing peace in the country and has called for the active participation of churches and faith-based organizations. However, the significant role played by churches has placed them in additional danger. Religious leaders involved in politics and social activism are frequently targeted for attack. Despite public recognition of the religious sector, there still exists a general rejection of public religious expression, especially if these come from public officers, including the [president](#) (El Espectador, 7 August 2020). In the WWL 2021 reporting period, the courts have attempted to ban expressions of personal faith made by local government staff on social media networks, in the belief this is necessary for adhering to the secular principle of Church-State separation. A case also emerged of a Christian judge who was [accused](#) of prevarication for

not marrying two women because it went against his beliefs (Cuarto de hora, 2 September 2020).

From mid-March to 15 July 2020, social isolation measures were imposed throughout the nation in attempt to counter the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Throughout this period, church activities were suspended even though various sectors of the economy could resume operations from mid-April onwards. Although the government authorized the mobility of religious leaders, illegal armed groups maintained strong mobility limitations in rural areas despite state permission. Since September 2020, the [reopening](#) of Catholic churches for religious services was authorized in all municipalities, regardless of the level of COVID-19 infection in response to the Legislative Decree 1168 (Vatican News, 01 September 2020). Due to the lockdown, many Christians were unable to receive pastoral care and relatives were at times unable to [bury](#) their dead according to Christian rites due to the practice of mandatory cremation (El Tiempo, 29 June 2020). It is worth noting that some (mainly Protestant) churches refused to [obey](#) all the restrictions imposed and were fined as a result (La Silla Vacía, 22 March 2020).

A special note about 'non-accepted Christians' in indigenous communities:

In indigenous communities, Christians face opposition where they reject the religious practices and customs of the ethnic group to which they belong. This has led to indigenous leaders seeing Christianity 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 - the term '*non-accepted Christians*' is used in this dossier to refer 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 and ancestral religious customs that worship nature are practiced in the indigenous community, 'non-accepted Christians' are those who refuse to participate and consequently face hostility and rejection. (See details below concerning *Clan oppression*.)

Economic landscape

According to [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300 onwards):

- The gross national income per capita for Colombia (2018) is 12,896, increasing by about 74.5% percent between 1990 and 2018.
- The estimated GNI per capita for women is 10,236 and for men, is 15,656.
- The Inequality in income is 36.2%
- The population vulnerable to multidimensional poverty is 6.2%

According to [World Bank's April 2020 update](#) overview/data:

- The incidence rate of poverty based on the national poverty line corresponded to 27% of the population (49,648.685) in 2018 (comparable to 26.9% in 2017).

Colombia is the only country that exceeds 20% [unemployment](#) within the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development member countries, and it also leads the negative forecasts for the labor market during the year 2020 (OECD, 10 August 2020).

Growth was on track to accelerate further in 2020, but the COVID-19 crisis is expected to significantly affect private consumption and investment. Among other factors, the COVID-19 restrictions and the global economic contraction caused the economy to enter a deep recession. Increased government spending is expected to mitigate, in part, the impact of the crisis in 2020, including the fallout on businesses and workers. Oil prices also fell and there were reductions in global demand.

Like everyone else in the country, Christians also suffer from the economic setbacks. In some rural areas, Christian families face travel restrictions imposed by illegal groups, which limit their access to their crops and other livelihood activities such as fishing. Even though fraught with challenges and danger, church humanitarian [assistance](#) to vulnerable sectors of the population has been possible. This has helped ease the strain on government resources in some areas caused by the COVID-19 crisis (Vatican News, 15 April 2020). On the other hand, despite the recent authorization to reopen churches, many churches have not restarted their congregational activities due to the high costs of complying with biosecurity protocols. Many churches received fewer donations during the lockdown period.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300) and the [World Factbook](#) (December 2019):

- **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
- **Urban population:** Approximately 81% of the total population
- **Literacy rate:** 94.7% .
- **National poverty level:** 27%.

According to [World Bank's April 2020 update](#) overview/data:

- **Education:** The school enrollment for pre-primary (2011) is 55.53%; for primary (2018) is 114,527% and for secondary (2018) is 97.506%. The duration of compulsory education is 12 years.
- **School Gender Parity Index (GPI) (2018):** 1.013. This refers to the ratio of girls to boys enrolled at primary and secondary levels in public and private schools.
- **Unemployment:** 9.961%
- **IDPs/Refugees:** 189, 454 (2019). Colombia has received a massive influx of Venezuelan immigrants. Approximately 1.8 million Venezuelans are resident in Colombia as of December 2019, according to [official](#) government statistics.

According to the [UN Global Human Development Indicators](#) (2019):

- **HDI score and ranking:** Colombia's HDI value for 2018 is 0.761, which put the country in the high human development category, positioning it at 79 out of 189 countries and territories.
- **Life expectancy:** 77.1 years (2018). Between 1990 and 2018, Colombia's life expectancy at birth increased by 7.4 years.
- **Gender inequality:** Colombia has a 2018 Gender Inequality Index value of 0.411, ranking it 94 out of 162 countries.

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 villages), 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.

In the WWL 2021 reporting period, the COVID-19 crisis increased the vulnerability of the poorest sections of society. Faced with the possible collapse of the health system and the rise in unemployment, it was the poorest communities and the informal sector which have [suffered](#) most severely (Análisis Carolina, 24 February 2020). Approximately 5.7 million people, 47% of the labor force, work in the informal sector.

Christians are a majority in the country and 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. Especially in the WWL 2021 reporting period and the COVID-19 situation, this social involvement has put many Christians at particular risk, as discussed in the Section "Security situation" below.

Technological landscape

According to [World Internet Stats](#) (accessed June 2020):

- **Internet usage:** 70.6% penetration - survey date: December 2019
- **Facebook usage:** 56.9% penetration – survey date: December 2018

According to [World Bank's country profile \(2018\)](#):

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 129.9 per 100 people.

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net Report 2019](#):

Colombia ranks as a "partly free" country. Even though there is a rise in Internet access, factors such as the poor infrastructure, low digital literacy, high costs, excessive surveillance and insecurity for journalists remain serious concerns. According to [Reporters Without Borders'](#) 2019 World Press Freedom Index, Colombia continues to be one of the western hemisphere's most dangerous countries for journalists (RSF, 11 March 2020). Coverage of such subjects as the environment, public order, armed conflicts, corruption or collusion between politicians and illegal armed groups elicits systematic harassment, intimidation and violence.

During lockdown, Christian groups have used online media and technology to continue evangelizing. The restrictions imposed on travelling and gathering for worship have forced many Christian leaders and their congregations to become familiar with virtual communication platforms in order to remain in contact. Such online platforms have also exposed them to insulting and intolerant action by ideological groups and others during online Christian events open to the wider public.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that in rural areas, such as Nudo de Paramillo and Catatumbo, where it is possible to use cellphones, armed groups require Christians to disclose all contacts, messages and other information on their phones. This monitoring can put others and themselves at risk.

Security situation

According to the [2019 Report](#) of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the national homicide rate in 2019 was 25 per 100,000 inhabitants, indicating the existence of a level of endemic violence (UNHCHR, 4 February 2019). The most affected departments were Antioquia, Cauca and Norte de Santander, although Insight Crime's [report](#) also includes Putumayo and Nariño as the Colombian departments most impacted by the spike of violence (Insight Crime, 18 February 2020).

Violence is caused by organized armed groups, namely the ELN, the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC), FARC units that did not accept the peace process and FARC members who have decided to return to war. In addition to these groups, there are criminal groups referred to as "Organized Armed Groups" (GAO - formerly known as BACRIM). The variety of groups and the relationship of some with Mexican cartels generates continuous confrontations for power and has created so-called "invisible barriers" especially in the Pacific area, South of Bolívar, Catatumbo and Bajo Cauca (Antioqueño and Chocoano).

According to the United Nations, in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, these illegal armed groups and criminals have [imposed](#) their own social control measures (UN News, 14 July 2020), such as the establishment of illegal checkpoints and the [commissioning](#) of acts of violence against people who breach confinement (Human Rights Watch, 15 July 2020). Many of these activities have not been reported and registered not only out of fear of retaliation but also due to the travel restrictions imposed by the government.

In this context, the Institute of Studies for Development and Peace (Indepaz) has [recorded](#) that from 1 January - 28 September 2020, 221 social leaders or human rights defenders have been assassinated, in addition to 10 relatives or people related to social leaders and 47 ex-FARC combatants involved in the peace process (Indepaz, 24 November 2020).

Although the ELN guerrilla group declared a unilateral ceasefire covering March 2020 due to the pandemic, this did not decrease the levels of insecurity in the country. Families participating in the National Comprehensive Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops continued to be subjected to threats and killings. This is especially worrying considering the fact that coca cultivation decreased from 169,000 hectares in 2018 to 154,000 in 2019 (-9%), according to the

[UN report](#) "Monitoring of territories affected by illicit crops 2019" prepared by the UN Office against Drugs and Crime. Nonetheless, cocaine production remains stable, although there were notable increases in Norte de Santander and in Valle del Cauca. (UNODC, 28 July 2020).

Violence often increases during elections - particularly targeting political candidates - as happened during the local election process in October 2019. Electoral violence [affected](#) 230 people in 28 of the 32 Colombian departments, according to Peace and Reconciliation Foundation (PARES, 16 October 2019). Among the acts of violence against candidates were murders, kidnappings, threats, disappearances and attacks.

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. Additionally, these groups seek to recruit young men and women and even children, especially those located in the poorest and neglected areas of the country. 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, hence become victims of violence. The risk is greater the more such leaders are involved in promoting human rights, denouncing corruption and participating in politics or in activities that seek to influence the population (especially young people).

On many occasions, Christian leaders have called upon the authorities to give special attention to the poorest and most neglected communities to introduce measures to reduce the level of criminal activity. Far from being taken seriously, such requests have made these Christian leaders vulnerable to attack. In the absence of "normal" criminal activities during the COVID-19 crisis, criminal groups have sought [other means](#) to secure funds, including theft, trafficking of medicines, extortion, forced recruitment and threats, targeting Christians (and others) who do not align with their criminal philosophy (BBC News, 23 April 2020).

Trends analysis

1) The COVID-19 crisis increased the vulnerability of certain social sectors

The instability in the health service and in society in general (generated by the Government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis) has particularly affected groups that were already vulnerable, such as indigenous peoples, human rights defenders, social and religious leaders, migrants and low-income citizens. This has often left them at the mercy of criminals who exercise local control of some areas of the country. When Christians are the victims of crime, their faith is often not recognized by the authorities as being a major cause of vulnerability.

2) The implementation of the Peace Agreement does not seem to be a priority despite the increase in violence

Despite the COVID-19 lockdown measures, violence and insecurity in the country have increased. Because the government's main priority is health care, the continued implementation of the Peace Agreement has been neglected. This process is becoming more urgent because

criminal groups are now able to act with increasing levels of impunity and have gained more territorial control, taking advantage of the current COVID-19 crisis. This has increased the risk of Christian activities being hindered in areas where guerrilla and other criminal groups act as the sole authority.

3) There is little tolerance for public expressions of Christian faith

Although the critical eye of society is directed to any type of action in the public sphere, intolerance increases when it comes to Christian groups, especially if they are deemed to have connections with government circles or seek political representation. Despite the scale of the humanitarian relief carried out by churches during the COVID-19 crisis, this situation has not improved.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: Colombia country profile - BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-19390026>
- Recent history: signed - <http://www.altocomisionadoparalapaz.gov.co/Documents/proceso-paz-farc-acuerdo-final.pdf>
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- Recent history: demonstrations - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/04/colombia-protest-duque-bogota>
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- Political and legal landscape: national dialogue - <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/conversacion-nacional-en-colombia-en-que-quedo/655527>
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- Political and legal landscape: Quito Process meetings - <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/special-update-quito-process-v-technical-meeting-human-mobility-venezuelan-citizens>
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- Political and legal landscape: joined - <https://andina.pe/agencia/noticia-paises-prosur-acuerdan-fortalecer-coordinacion-contra-covid19-799031.aspx>
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- Religious landscape description: Decree 354 - https://www.mininterior.gov.co/sites/default/files/decreto_354_de_1998.pdf

- Religious landscape description: International Religious Freedom Report - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/COLOMBIA-2019-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>
- Religious landscape description: national - https://www.mininterior.gov.co/sites/default/files/cartilla_politica_publica_integral_de_libertad_religiosa_y_de_cultos.pdf
- Religious landscape description: president - <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/posible-desacato-de-duque-por-no-eliminar-trino-de-la-virgen/>
- Religious landscape description: accused - <https://cuartodehora.com/2020/09/02/denuncia-al-juez-que-se-nego-a-casar-a-pareja-de-mujeres-en-cartagena/>
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- Religious landscape description: obey - <https://lasillavacia.com/las-iglesias-del-estado-negacion-al-telesermon-75913>
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- Economic landscape: World Bank's April 2020 update - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/colombia>
- Economic landscape: unemployment - <https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?queryid=36324>
- Economic landscape: assistance - <https://www.vaticannews.va/es/iglesia/news/2020-04/colombia-pobreza-pandemia-iglesia-primer-a-linea.html>
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- Technological landscape: Reporters Without Borders' - <https://rsf.org/en/colombia>
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- Security situation: report - <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/overview-violence-social-leaders-colombia/>
- Security situation: imposed - <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1068371>
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WWL 2021: 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 became very popular and this new Christian diversity was recognized in 1991 in the new Constitution of Colombia.

Church spectrum today

Colombia: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	10,700	0.0
Catholic	43,400,000	91.0
Protestant	1,805,000	3.8
Independent	2,550,000	5.3
Unaffiliated	500,000	1.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-559,000	-1.2
Total	47,706,700	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		

Evangelical movement	1,300,000	2.7
Renewalist movement	16,250,000	34.1

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

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 91% of all Christians according to WCD 2020 estimates.

Protestantism has gained great strength in the country, particularly where so-called 'Mega-churches' have become established in many cities with congregations of thousands and big budgets. This has been a major reason why they have been influential in the political arena.

WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Colombia

Reporting period

1 October 2019 - 30 September 2020

Position on the World Watch List

Colombia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	67	30
WWL 2020	62	41
WWL 2019	58	47
WWL 2018	56	49
WWL 2017	53	50

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

In WWL 2021, Colombia rose 5 points, retaining the upward trend of the previous four reporting periods. Although the score for violence decreased slightly (from 15.0 to 13.9 points), there was an increase in average pressure from 9.4 to 10.7 points. As a consequence of the struggle for territorial control in many rural areas between criminal groups (ELN, Aguilas Negras, FARC, ex-FARC, GAO, other criminal, paramilitary and narco-trafficker groups), criminal leaders have

imposed greater control on Christians and churches to intimidate them and silence them. This has especially been the case in areas with recently elected political authorities. Criminal groups have also been able to take advantage of the COVID-19 restrictions.

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](#) 2019 ranks Colombia 96th out of 180, with a 37/100 score (0= highly corrupt and 100= very clean). Despite a certain amount of progress in the implementation of the FARC peace agreement, FARC dissidents, members of the ELN and other guerrilla groups (referred to as "[Organized Armed Groups - GAO](#)" - Actualidad, 12 May 2019) fight for control of entire regions to carry out their illegal activities. During the WWL 2021 reporting period this was especially happening in [areas](#) (Mision de Observacio Electoral, Colombia 2019) where there were recently [elected authorities](#) (International Crisis Group, 25 October 2019). This context 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 Christian buildings and direct threats against pastor's 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 days in particularly violent areas and 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. This is possible through the corruption and impunity caused by the [alliances](#) established between the leaders of these groups and some state authorities (RCN Radio, 27 July 2019). The effectiveness of the authorities was further [weakened](#) during the COVID-19 lockdown because in many areas the police and military presence was non-existent (La Vanguardia, 7 July 2020). In some areas, those who exercised true local control were the criminals who operated in the zone and they forced Christian leaders to guard entry and exit points, to prevent virus transmission. 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 informants for the police or other rival criminal groups.

While indigenous people are often most affected by organized crime since their territory is commonly co-opted by drug traffickers and guerrillas, some indigenous leaders rely on criminal members to intimidate indigenous Christian converts to force them to return to the community's syncretistic 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 criminal groups.

Clan oppression (Strong):

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. However, any type of preaching or religious activity requires permission from the leaders. Anything going against the customs of the ethnic group will be punished.

Since there is a strong religious presence in these communities due to the indigenous influence of their worldview on daily life, the introduction of an idea or custom contrary to these ancient beliefs is seen as a threat. Anyone who openly gives up these beliefs will face punishment from the local authorities and from most of the community. Such punishments (especially of converts), which may also involve their families, can include imprisonment, imposition of fines, physical abuse, denying access to basic goods and the confiscation of property. Obtaining protection from the government in these circumstances has been made more difficult by the COVID-19 crisis, which has reinforced the concept of indigenous autonomy and the power of local leaders. 'Non-accepted Christians' face severe opposition because of their faith and have not had the possibility of leaving their community without losing their land rights.

Secular intolerance (Medium):

Although the religious sector is considered an important element for supporting the implementation of FARC peace agreement and the social and humanitarian assistance during the COVID-19 crisis in the country, there are other issues causing Christians to face verbal attacks, social hostilities and discrimination. When it comes to matters relating to abortion,

gender orientation, same-sex marriage/adoption, freedom of conscience, and the active participation of Christian in the public and political square, Christian faith-based opinions or actions are greeted with hostility, especially when they contradict the demands of pressure groups such as the LGBTI and radical feminist movements.

In addition, there are attempts to legitimize religious intolerance against those making public expressions of faith during the exercise of their functions in private and public institutions. This opposition is based on a radical interpretation of State secularism and the right to non-discrimination. For instance, Christian professionals who have tried to make use of their right to conscientious objection have been criticized and put under serious pressure. There is also pressure to remove from public office any officials who openly defend their Christian faith or affinity towards a specific church. The participation of Christians in the political life of the country has diminished as a result. Christians who do not have a position in favor of abortion or the requests of the LGTBI community are accused of being intolerant.

Drivers of persecution

Colombia:									
Drivers of persecution per engine	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	-	-	-	STRONG	WEAK	-	MEDIUM	-	STRONG
Government officials	-	-	-	Medium	Weak	-	Medium	-	Strong
Ethnic group leaders	-	-	-	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	-	-	-	Strong	-	-	Very weak	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	Weak	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	Weak	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	Weak	-	-	Medium	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	-	-	-	Medium	Weak	-	Medium	-	Weak
One's own (extended) family	-	-	-	Strong	Very weak	-	Weak	-	Medium
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	-	Medium
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	Strong
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	Very strong
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.)	-	-	-	Weak	-	-	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 (Very 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 State's presence is weak. These groups (Gulf Clan, Black Eagles, Los Rastrojos, Los Paisas, Los Urabeños, Caparrapos, La Constru, Los Costeños, The Boarder Commandos and many others), fight each other for territorial control and target Christians and Christian organizations that carry out activities promoting peace, human rights for indigenous people and help against drug addiction. More recently, Christians have been targeted when they try to provide humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable sectors of society. Christians are viewed as a threat to criminal interests, especially when they defy criminal group orders.
- **Government officials (Strong):** Many government officials have directly and indirectly allowed criminal action against Christian leaders and churches in areas under gang control. Both the authorities and criminals can then act with impunity, especially because some authorities are in collusion with organized crime cartels and other criminal groups. The authorities' indifference towards the hostilities faced by Christian in this context is often denounced by Christian leaders, however, the fear of reprisals is permanent because of the high levels of corruption in the country.
- **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 the orders regarding the promotion of coca cultivation and for providing material and spiritual assistance during the COVID-19 crisis. These illegal groups accuse Christians of betrayal if they are perceived to be involved with the government or other criminal groups, and are very interested in discouraging the growth of local churches.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Corruption among members of the political class helps promote the cover-up of criminal group activities and they hinder progress in the implementation of the 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 the last local elections, there was evidence that corruption was so strong that criminal groups could justify their violent actions as a form of support for a political party; they used violence and intimidation to influence the "Christian vote" to help achieve party goals.

Drivers of Clan oppression:

- **Ethnic group leaders (Very strong):** These leaders remain loyal to their ancestral beliefs and oppose anyone spreading Christian faith in the indigenous communities. (They also restrict anything related to Christian denominations not deemed acceptable to the community.) 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 the indigenous communities, adherents will attempt to impede Christian activities and force Christians to be part of their ancestral ceremonies. Pressure increased during the COVID-19 lockdown period, since many 'non-accepted Christians' found 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 a Christian is liable to be labeled a traitor and face rejection from their wider family. This has caused particular hardship for converts during the COVID-19 lockdown measures.
- **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 Christian converts.
- **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 the Christian faith. This cooperation aims to defend ethnic group leaders' interests and to force - most often by violent means - 'non-accepted Christians' to stop practicing their faith in the community.
- **Organized crime cartels or networks (Medium):** Organized crime cartels have sometimes acted in complicity with indigenous leaders to intimidate 'non-accepted Christians' in the communities. Such cooperation aims to defend ethnic group leaders' interests and to put 'non-accepted Christians' under strict control, thus preventing them from spreading their faith inside the community.

Drivers of Secular intolerance:

- **Ideological pressure groups (Strong):** LGBTI and radical feminist groups demand a radical Church-State separation. Instead of allowing plurality, Christian opinions are either not accepted in the public sphere or are kept to an absolute minimum through their influence. These groups harass, ridicule and censor Christians when they speak publicly and manifest faith-based points of view that disagree with their interests, especially if they are public officers who defend their Christian beliefs or refuse to perform acts related to gender or

abortion issues under the protection of the right to conscience objection. Also, they have carried out violent demonstrations outside churches as a way of showing their rejection of Christian values which defend unborn life. These groups are pushing hard for more public policies that diminish the role of the Church in the public sphere and that include school curricula with mandatory content which overrides Christian parents' rights concerning the education of their own children.

- **Government officials (Medium):** In general, the State authorities, including some ministries and some judges of local and national Courts, support the interests of ideological pressure groups such as LGBTI, radical feminist and secularist groups. They are known to push for the adherence to the views of these groups and actively react against the points of view of Christian leaders, Christian parents and those who disagree with them. Christians are at a disadvantage when they manifest their faith-based points of view since the judicial authorities tend not to give Christians the same protection and equal opportunities as to other groups when it comes to protecting the right to freedom of expression.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Political parties (such as the Alternative Democratic Pole or the Colombian Liberal Party, Green Party and Progressive Party) deliberately hinder political initiatives coming from Christian politicians or politicians supported by Christian groups. They severely criticize other politicians' personal expressions of faith and demand radical Church-State separation with no participation of Christians in the political arena. They also promote non-discrimination and hate-speech initiatives that could undermine the free expression of Christian citizens.
- **Citizens (Medium):** The intolerance of Christian values and views among the general public appears to be growing. Many citizens watch constantly to make sure there are no connections between the State and the Church and oppose any participation of Christians in the public sphere. Many often ridicule, insult and discredit Christians, especially at the workplace.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Main areas 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, Caquetá, Casanare, Cauca, Chocó, Córdoba, Guaviare, Meta, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, Valle del Cauca.

Main areas 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, Magdalena, Norte de Santander.

Main areas for Secular intolerance:

This Persecution engine depends: i) on the public policies implemented by the national government, and ii) on social attitudes within society mainly encouraged by intolerant groups with radical ideologies against religion or Christianity. It 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.

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 rejection of public manifestations of faith, not to mention the obstacles and risks of church work within indigenous communities (particularly as experienced by Protestant Christians). In sporadic cases, some Protestants experience rejection from other traditional churches (such as the Catholic Church).

Converts:

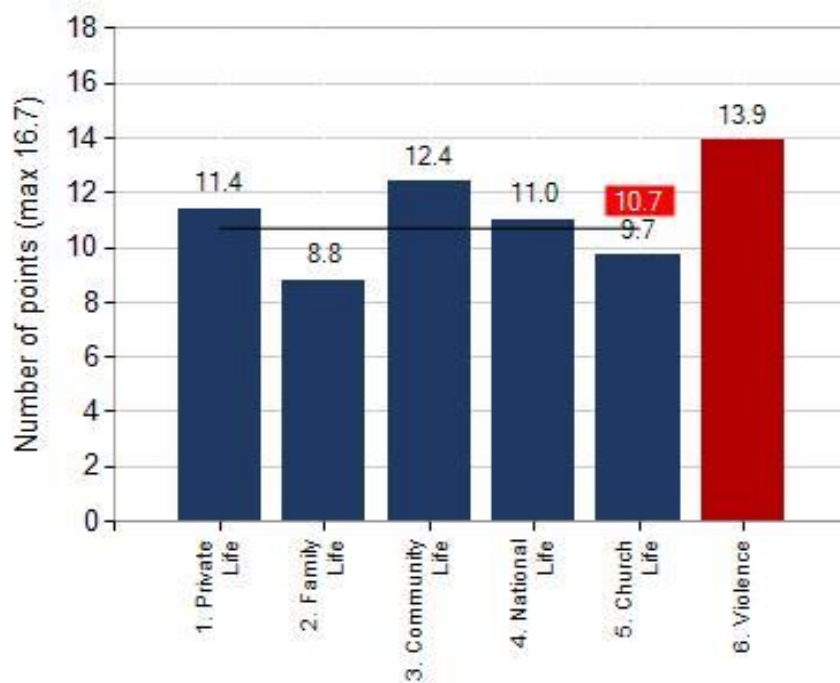
This category includes cross-denominational converts, converts within indigenous communities, and converts to Christianity from guerrilla groups and criminal organizations. Especially in the indigenous context, converts are victims of harassment, expulsion, death-threats, and other physical and psychological 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 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 be of influence in the political sphere, they face severe opposition from radical feminist and secularist groups.

The Persecution pattern

WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern for Colombia



The WWL 2021 Persecution pattern for Colombia shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Colombia remains at a high level, rising from 9.4 points in WWL 2020 to 10.7 points in WWL 2021. This rise was mainly due to the pressure criminal and ethnic groups exert on Christians in a large parts of the country's rural territory.
- All *spheres of life* scored above 8.8 points or above (out of a maximum of 16.7 points) and thus pressure is at a high level throughout. Pressure is highest in the *Community sphere* (12.4 points).
- The score for violence is extremely high, although it dropped from 15.0 points in WWL 2020 to 13.9 points. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, there was no reports of Christians being forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons, as happened in high numbers in WWL 2020.

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 2021 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: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

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 varied levels of risk. In the organized crime context, it is highly risky for anyone to make a 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 has worsened during the WWL 2021 reporting period because more people have used social media during the COVID-19 lockdown, making their opinions about violence in the country and their rejection of criminal groups more visible.

During the 2021 reporting period, using the Internet was the most effective way of relating to the outside world. It was not uncommon for those expressing their Christian faith through written media, especially Facebook or similar social media, to be severely and offensively criticized, especially in relation to matters of marriage, family, unborn life and religious liberty. Thus, although these are not high-risk situations, attempts at censorship have been made. This was also the case with the president himself, who was denounced for publicly acknowledging his respect for the Virgin Mary through his Twitter account in July 2020. The president was ordered by court to erase the Tweet, but in the appeal process, the Supreme Court of Justice (SCJ) ruled that the Tweet was part of freedom of expression and that it need not be deleted on this occasion. However, the SCJ also pointed out that the president was very close to [overstepping the limit](#) of how freely a public servant may legally express himself (Supreme Court of Justice, 19 August 2020).

Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.00 points)

For Christians to meet up with fellow believers is particularly risky in indigenous communities or in territories controlled by organized crime. If they do, they are quickly accused of not following community norms (i.e. regarding the abandonment of syncretistic practices or of not complying with curfews or other rules imposed by gangs) and of conspiring against the ethnic or criminal leaders. This includes meetings which are not for worship purposes.

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, control and monitoring increased in rural areas (especially in the departments of Antioquia, Chocó, Córdoba, Santander, Nariño, Cauca, Arauca, Valle del Cauca, Sucre, Meta, Putumayo, Boyacá, Bolívar, Atlántico, Casanare, Caquetá and Guaviare), making it even more difficult for Christians to be in contact with each other.

Block 1.6: It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian material on the Internet. (2.75 points)

In indigenous communities (e.g. in the Catatumbo area), access to Christian media is difficult. When it is possible and a 'non-accepted Christian' 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 areas co-opted by criminal groups, accessing or using Christian material with contents that could affect the interests of these groups (e.g. denunciations of illegal activities or encouragement for conversion to Christianity, will be punished. Christian content is often considered harmful for criminal groups exerting their authority in an area, especially books which present Jesus as a solution for the problem of violence.

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 fidelity to ethnicity prevails over family ties. Thus, a member of a family who converts to Christianity or belongs to a 'non-accepted Christian' denomination will be rejected by the extended family. The same goes for areas dominated by criminal groups, especially when a family member's faith clearly opposes the criminal activities of local groups.

Also, there were some situations of intolerance, for instance, when the new Protestant faith of a family member was not accepted by the wider Roman Catholic family. Rejection by members of the extended family has even occurred even when some of the members of the extended family have been invited to participate in a virtual religious service. In some cases, the situation became so polarized that threats of violence ensued.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.25 points)

In order to prevent any 'destabilization of indigenous identity', the ethnic leader's threaten and prevent 'non-accepted Christian' parents from transmitting their faith to their children and sometimes arrange that the children of such Christians be raised by other relatives or other members of the indigenous community that do follow the indigenous customs (which often include the use of witchcraft, charms, shamanism etc.) in order to ensure that ancestral traditions are maintained. Within the areas controlled by criminal networks, Christian parents can hardly prevent their children from being indoctrinated or recruited by ELN and dissident FARC guerrillas 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 COVID-19 crisis.

Elsewhere in Colombia, parents face difficulties raising their children according to Christian convictions because of the promotion of ideological content regarding sexuality which contradicts Christian teaching. The Constitutional Court has already established that school regulations cannot be "arbitrary" and that, among other things, they must be respectful of the gender identity and sexual orientation of their students, which can put at risk the ethos of Christian denominational schools and the right of parents to raise their children according their convictions. Even when parents choose an educational institution that matches their Christian

values, neither the institution nor the parents can prevent the promotion of content that contradicts their religious beliefs regarding sexual orientation and gender identity.

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 the indigenous context, schools have become an area of pressure for 'non-accepted Christians'. Since the educational legislation of 1994, the Associations of Traditional Indigenous Authorities (AATIs) were granted full authority to administer their educational institutions with an emphasis on ethnic-education, which openly and legally promotes their animist worldview. Indigenous education aims to maintain the cultural identity of the ethnic group. In this context, community beliefs are taught, even those which are clearly anti-Christian and contradict the religious convictions of 'non-accepted Christian' children and their parents. 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 space. The pressure is exerted on Christian children to learn through the "Coexistence Manual" about concepts such as "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"; which contradicts their Christian faith and values. Thus, 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, non-Catholic schoolchildren are obliged to join in Catholic activities organized by the school and are required to learn Catholic doctrine.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.25 points)

Children of Christian indigenous parents often face pressure to make them not follow their parent's faith. Sometimes these children are excluded from community activities, are mocked and mistreated to prevent them from spreading any 'non-accept Christian' influence. This both discourages possible new conversions and puts pressure on parents to renounce their Christian faith. In areas co-opted by organized crime, it is common that guerrilla members recruit children from an early age, especially children from Christian families. This is done to put pressure on families and make them stop Christian activities and stop resisting the local criminal "authorities".

Elsewhere in Colombia (especially in urban areas), due to the growth of intolerance towards Christianity in society, some Christian children are criticized or mocked (because Christian faith is seen as being unnecessarily radical) when they refuse to be part of secular celebrations or to participate in activities supporting ideological pressure groups. In some cases, Christian children

of certain Christian denominations suffer bullying because of the clothes they wear. In rural areas (such as Nariño), there are cases where non-Catholic children are discriminated against by being given lower marks than they deserve because they follow a Christian denomination different from the Catholic one.

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. (3.00 points)

'Non-accepted Christians' who have been expelled from indigenous communities are forced to separate 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. During the WWL 2021 reporting period, there were cases in which ethnic leaders refused to allow indigenous Christians to re-enter the community - despite the ending of COVID-19 lockdown measures - arguing that they could spread disease and thus forced the separation of Christian families.

Also, the number of internal displacements continues to increase due to violence in areas controlled by criminal groups and guerrillas. In the areas dominated by criminal groups, they have the authority to decide who can live in their zone; as a consequence, many Christians have been forced to leave their homes and families. In addition, sometimes Christians are forced to leave their homes in order to protect their children from being recruited by criminal groups. This was especially difficult during the travel restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, the pressure to comply with anti-Christian activities and rituals has led some parents to separate themselves from their children and send them to relatives where there is more freedom for Christians.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

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

Indigenous authorities use a system of fines (either in the form of money or harvest products) for Christians who refuse to collaborate or participate in community practices and festivities that contradict their faith (such as ancestral traditions or even certain Catholic festivities). Sometimes, when ethnic groups collude with criminals, the fines or quotas are substantially higher for such 'non-accepted Christians'. In a broader context, criminal groups demand protection money (quotas) from pastors, priests, and other Christians in exchange for not exercising violence against them and for allowing them to carry on some of their religious activities. The problem is greater when the territory is disputed by different groups and, on occasions, the fees demanded by criminal groups include the recruitment of their children. Regions like Cauca, Choco, Antioquia, Meta, Putumayo, Huila, Caqueta, Magdalena, Tolima, Norte de Santander, Guaviare, Nariño, Valle del Cauca and Bolivar are greatly affected.

In the WWL 2021 reporting period, this situation intensified due to the COVID-19 restrictions imposed in the country and the violence exerted by criminal groups. Christians had to pay high fees to be allowed to distribute aid packets in the community and to resume holding services

and other activities in the churches. The situation is more difficult when the territory is in dispute between various criminal groups and all of them ask for fees to finance their illicit activities (or all of them agree not to allow any kind of aid distribution at all).

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 'non-accepted Christians' have faced constant interrogation when they refuse to participate in community activities related to payments or rituals. Such intimidation increased during the COVID-19 lockdown period.

In areas where there is hardly any State presence, criminal groups are the “de facto” local authorities. In this capacity, they 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.

Block 3.4: Christians been hindered in sharing community resources because of their faith (e.g. clean drinking water). (3.00 points)

In some indigenous communities, 'non-accepted Christians' are excluded from basic resources (often including access to clean water and health facilities) or from financial benefits, as a way to pressurize them into stopping their activities. The lack of access to drinking water continues to affect several indigenous Christian communities of the Nasa ethnic group in Cauca and Huila. The four communities of El Tablón, Eden, Sanaan, and La Guinea share the same struggle. In the context of the COVID-19 lockdown, difficulties increased because they could no longer go and request this basic resource from other neighboring communities.

In other areas, criminal groups prevent Christians from receiving government aid or humanitarian aid from other civil society actors and have accused Christians of being informants. In the vast area of the Darién (departments of Chocó and Antioquia), criminal groups have directly blamed Christians for bringing information to other groups when obtaining food (such as fish or crops). Criminal groups are keen to ensure that Christian leaders (or the Christian community itself) remain loyal to their authority and threatened them with attack, abduction or death should they not be compliant.

Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (3.00 points)

Giving the importance of community life within the ethnic group, Christians are expected to participate in community events and to take part in the religious festivities in indigenous communities, otherwise, they are identified as traitors and receive punishment (such as imprisonment, forced labor, isolation, displacement, etc.). They are also blamed for any unfortunate events that occur in the community by their not attending the rituals. There is evidence that in some indigenous territories, the traditional authorities have alliances with illegal armed groups to ensure full participation in ceremonies and activities. Furthermore,

indigenous people, who for some reason were outside the community at the time when the lockdown measures were implemented and the internal borders were closed, were prevented from entering again if they did not participate in an animist ritual of purification, regardless of whether that was contrary to their (Christian) faith or not.

Similarly, although criminal groups do not hold religious ceremonies or organize community events, leaders of such groups can call on the community to make announcements or impose "new rules", which happened frequently as a way to maintain isolation during the lockdown period. The announcements promoted violence, corruption and drug trafficking, which clearly go against Christian values. Elsewhere in Colombia, despite the confinement measures, Christian workers were forced to participate in (virtual or face to face) activities organized by their companies relating to issues of gender and discrimination even when they stated that such activities were contrary to their faith.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

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

In indigenous communities, the discrimination and mistreatment of 'non-accepted Christians' goes unpunished because the ethnic and religious leaders are both the instigators and those who impart justice in that jurisdiction. The affected Christians cannot seek court justice before other government entities due to the special indigenous jurisdiction.

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 because their religious convictions are considered a threat by criminal groups. 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. The authorities have refused to guarantee to the integrity of church leaders or activist Christians arguing that, because they are public figures, a critic's right to freedom of expression (against them) must prevail. So, the situation in which the Christian is mistreated or discriminated against has been normalized and it is considered that there is no action to punish.

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.25 points)

According to indigenous customs, anyone whose faith differs from the community faith has no right to express themselves before the community. The reason is that such people might encourage other indigenous people to follow their religious convictions. Their voice is vetoed since their opinion will always have a religious motivation, even when the matter of debate is not necessarily linked to the church or their faith. 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 Peace Agreement, human rights or environmental issues. After the regional elections carried out in October 2019, Christians who

supported winning candidates of a different political party than the one supported by the local criminal group, were viewed as a danger to their interests and received reprisals. In this context, Christians working on behalf of their local community who publicly denounce the atrocities done by armed groups outside the law, have received death threats via printed flyers.

At the national level, Christians have experienced pressure in the media and on social networks, when expressing their views on issues related with Christian participation in politics, the defense of unborn life, marriage, parental rights etc.. They are swiftly labeled fanatics, accused of breaching the separation of Church and State and of halting progress in society. In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, Christian politicians have been accused of lobbying (a derogatory term in Colombia) to get churches reopened for the economic benefit of pastors and priests. Critics scathingly referred to the practice of giving tithes and offerings as 'retrograde' and theft. Even the president had to appear in court after sharing a tweet on his personal Twitter account expressing his respect for the Virgin Mary in July 2020 (See Block 1.4 above).

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)

Criminal groups have de facto authority in several rural areas of the country, replacing or acting in collusion with the state authorities. These groups hinder the activities of Christian civil society organizations related to youth work and drug misuse since they are considered a threat to their recruitment of young people. In addition to this, if Christian political parties try to gain adherents in the areas controlled by criminal groups, they risk total obstruction. The risk has increased in the WWL 2021 reporting period following the electoral results of some departments. Violence has escalated where parties or candidates not supported by criminal groups have been declared a 'military target'.

Christian social and political representatives face greater levels of pressure after the October 2019 elections, where the political left gained ground. Hostility towards them has increased, preventing them from freely expressing their views and values in the public realm.

Block 4.11: Christians have been subjected to smear campaigns or hate speech. (3.25 points)

Given that the State has given autonomy and self-determination to indigenous communities, indigenous populations themselves establish and regulate their norms of coexistence. Hence, ethnic leaders attempt to impose a lifestyle regulated by their ancestral customs, acting as the only authority in the area. Bearing this in mind, they promote rejection of anyone encouraging the abandonment of ethnic practices and conversion to Christianity. 'Non-accepted Christians' are held responsible for whatever negative things happen in the community (including the spread of the COVID-19 virus) and they are blamed by illegal groups for being informants working for rival groups or the police.

Elsewhere in Colombia, sometimes the media and civil society defame Christians and stigmatize them, especially when church leaders speak out on issues related to life, family, electoral processes or peace agreements. The goal would seem to be to create divisions within the Church so that it loses credibility in the eyes of society. In the recent electoral context, citizens criticized the relationship between some Christian groups and political candidates harshly. This situation

has encouraged an increase in religious intolerance and disrespect for religious pluralism in the country. It has also meant that media reporting on attacks against the church and religious leaders by criminal groups has been minimal. In addition, Christians in rural areas, especially those with a Pentecostal background, suffer from widespread defamation by ordinary citizens and the church leaders of other denominations.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

Christian leaders and their families are particularly targeted for harassment in indigenous communities. They are often shunned by their community and made to live in very poor conditions. In urban areas, verbal attacks are common where church leaders defend topics related to marriage, family, the sanctity of life, and the presence of the Church in the public sphere. After the re-opening of the churches and during the COVID-19 lockdown measures, many church leaders were decried as being irresponsible and promoters of COVID-19 infection.

In territories co-opted by criminal groups, Christian leaders and their families are the most frequent victims of fines and mobility restrictions, especially if their activities are related to the defense of human rights, the environment, work with young people, the implementation of the Peace Agreement, 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 notable public figures, attacks on them are an efficient way of intimidating the whole population living in a particular zone. Pastors' children are a special target for human trafficking, forced recruitment, or rape to discourage pastors from continuing their church ministry.

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. (3.50 points)

The activities of Christian organizations are not allowed in indigenous communities. Christian indigenous schools or health centers are forbidden both by indigenous authorities and by the Colombian government. Church-affiliated organizations helping rehabilitate young drug-addicts are frequently targeted by criminal groups (since they see such youth-work as an 'attack' on their economic interests). Also, due to the high level of insecurity in the border areas, some Christian organizations could not carry on their activities of assistance to migrants (especially 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 related to sexual education. Also, organizations defending unborn life or the sanctity of marriage have also been harassed by radical feminist and LGBTI groups to the point of legally denouncing them as discriminators and calling for violence against them. It has produced a chilling effect: Nowadays the organizations that intend to work in the educational field prefer not to be linked to churches.

Block 5.4: Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities inside their place of worship. (3.25 points)

Because of the direct opposition to Christianity in most indigenous territories, the church activities of 'non-accepted Christians' must be done in complete secrecy, in small, clandestine houses of prayer, and at a very low volume. In places dominated by criminal groups, church activities are subject to the authorization, control, and supervision of criminal groups; even within the place of worship the content of the conversations between parishioners or the purpose of the activity must not openly criticize these groups. Criminals will impose their will regarding the hours of church activities.

In the cities, impediments to church activities are becoming more frequent. Complaints about noise and the invasion of public space are clearly discriminatory since there are no complaints against other entertainment establishments such as bars and discos located in the same sector as the churches. Thus, although there has been no official obstruction, there has been a kind of 'warning' that limits the development of activities within some churches.

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

In the rural areas, the groups outside the law impose strong surveillance on the preaching, activities, and Christian materials used. The infiltration of observers in churches is common and their purpose is to report anything opposing their criminal activity. Pastors must also be very careful with the information contained in their cell phones since it is common for groups to request their cell phones at check-points when traveling. 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 is dangerous.

Regarding ethnic groups, sharing Christian faith is risky; any kind of Christian preaching will be reported and punished according to the ancestral customs.

In cities like Bogota, Cali and Cartagena, what is taught in the churches about sexuality and related matters is monitored by ideological pressure groups associated with radical feminist and LGTB groups. They deliberately seek possible accusations of discrimination. Considering that during WWL 2021 reporting period, church services had to be held online for many months due to the COVID-19 restrictions, it was easier to monitor what was being preached and attack it.

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. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (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 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure. The symbol "x" denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security considerations.

Colombia: Violence Block question	WWL 2021	WWL 2020
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	16	16
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	20	40
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	2	0
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?	6	6
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	3	10
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	9	11
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)?	62	50
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?	1	3
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	3
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	247	235
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	0	60

Violent incidents against Christians for faith-related reasons remain at an extremely high level. Criminal groups are the main perpetrators of violence. The COVID-19 lockdown measures increased the vulnerability of Christians living in the areas dominated by such groups.

5 Year trends

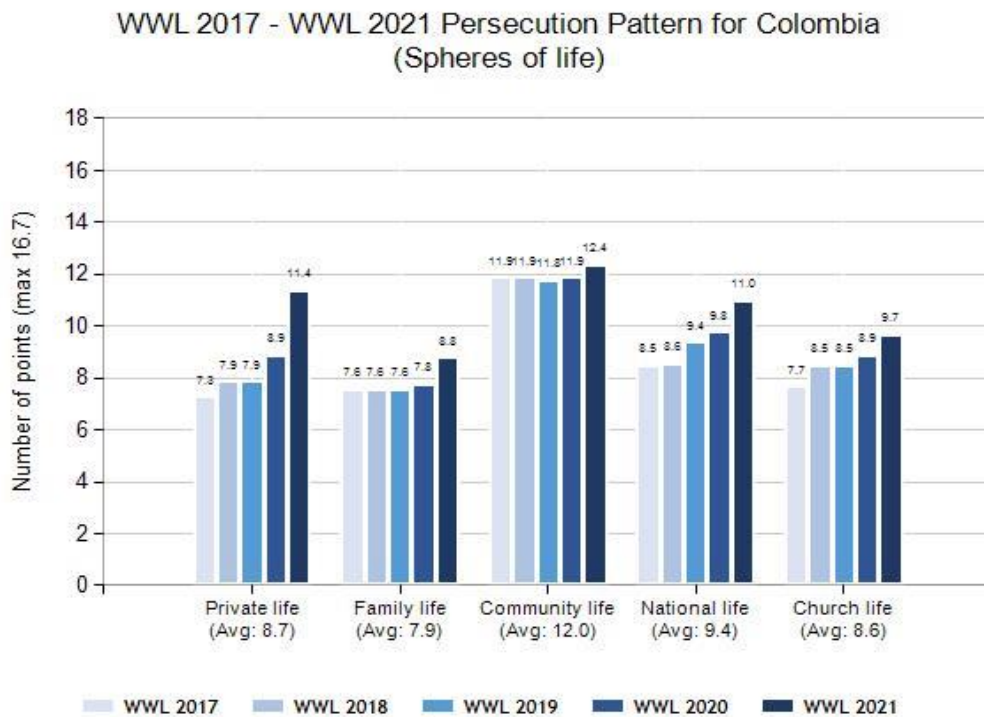
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Colombia: WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2021	10.7
2020	9.4
2019	9.0
2018	8.9
2017	8.6

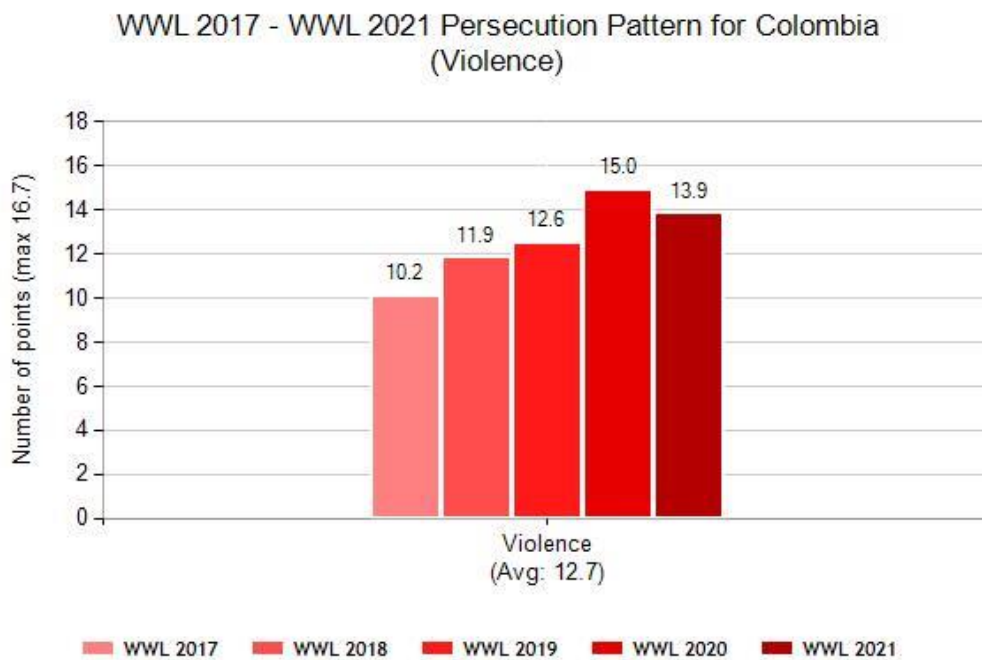
The table above shows that the average pressure on Christians has been rising consistently in each of the last five reporting periods. The increase has been due to the lack of efficiency in the implementation of the FARC Peace Agreement and to the increasing social control exerted by criminal groups against Christians considered a threat to their interests.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



In general, the most significant rises in pressure can be seen in *Private life*, *National life*, and *Church life*. This is due to the context of insecurity at various levels, involving for instance: Criminal groups in areas with no State control; FARC fighting units being re-established; and newer criminal groups emerging and fighting with others to gain territory to dominate. The rise in pressure is also influenced by increased *Clan oppression* and by the increased rejection (in society in general but also in some government authorities) of public manifestations of Christian faith. The pressure in *Family life* and *Community life* also has increased but less markedly; this reflects how Christians continue to face significant challenges in their daily lives from the local authorities and citizens in their neighborhoods.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



In the chart above, the scores for violence show a progressive increase during the first 4 reporting periods, as a result of the delays and failures in the complex implementation of the Peace Agreement, as well as the resurgence of criminal groups and guerrillas in those places abandoned by the FARC, in addition to violent repression against Christian converts in indigenous communities. However, for WWL 2021, even when criminal groups and ethnic leaders took advantage of the COVID-19 context to enlarge their control over some areas, there were no registered incidents regarding Christians forced to leave the country, although unreported incidents for fear of reprisal are highly probable.

Gender-specific religious persecution Female

Female Pressure Points
Abduction
Forced marriage
Forced to flee town/country
Targeted Seduction
Trafficking
Violence – death
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological
Violence – sexual
Violence – Verbal

Although there is no particular law that puts women and girls in specific danger, in practice, there are situations in which Christian women have to overcome [challenges](#) in order to live their faith without fear (Open Doors International, Nov 2018). Despite the cessation of hostilities in Colombia, cases of sexual violence against women [continue](#) in rural areas where armed groups use them as a weapon of war to generate fear (UN Association of Australia, 25 Mar 2020). Women belonging to indigenous and Afro-Colombia ethnic groups are disproportionately [affected](#) by conflict-related violence (ONU Mujeres, Colombia).

For instance, within indigenous communities the authorities oppose Christians who refuse to accept the indigenous rites and customs; Christian women may be forced into marriage with a non-Christian indigenous man or be abandoned by their husbands, separated from their children, threatened and ostracized by the community. This exposes them to forced displacement where they are vulnerable to criminal groups, trafficking and sexual exploitation. Experts report that forced prostitution has increased in some areas of Colombia, such as the Bajo Cauca region.

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 rape and sexual harassment. Some girls are 'bought' from their parents on pain of death. This phenomenon also affects Christian families who are forced to give up their daughters, targeted for their perceived purity and obedience, to

cartel leaders for sexual purposes – or even marriage. In other instances, the girl may be targeted for seduction. This serves to both satisfy the sexual desires of the criminal commanders, as well as to silence the work of churches. Children of church leaders are especially vulnerable. One pastor has been on the run with his daughter for months, fleeing the hands of criminal leaders who want to molest her. Female pastors have also been targeted and labelled ‘witches’, including by leaders of the Catholic church.

Secular intolerance is also a persecution engine that affects women in Colombia. Women have also been victims of forced abortion and the forced use of contraceptives. This pressure is carried out more aggressively in schools in rural areas, where pupils are pressured into the use of contraceptives despite their parents' disagreement. This interferes with their right to educate their children according to their principles and beliefs.

Country experts have also observed the negative impact of COVID-19 on women; in 2020, unemployment opportunities fell, particularly in the [service sector](#) (FIP, 1 Aug 2020) where women usually work, and the percentage of calls due to domestic violence rose by [162%](#) (Observatorio Colombiano de las Mujeres). Whilst this affects women of all faiths, it gives some indication of how the COVID-19 crisis has created additional vulnerabilities which can be exploited for the purposes of religious persecution. Criminal activity has worsened during the pandemic.

Gender-specific religious persecution Male

Male Pressure Points
Abduction
Denied access to social community/networks
Discrimination/harassment via education
Economic harassment via fines
Forced out of home – expulsion
Forced to flee town/country
Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
Violence – death
Violence – physical

Violence – psychological
Violence – Verbal

Christian men have always faced a higher level of threats and violence, partly because they represent the head of the family (or of the church, if they are pastors or priests). Both men and boys are in particular danger in regions of armed conflict. As the providers for the family, men face being extorted to provide finances for armed groups; non-church leaders face the risk of being killed; pastors or priests may be physically assaulted, extorted for financial gain, forced to leave their regions, or even killed.

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. This, as a country expert explains, “is seen as a need to stop the 'threat' and 'bad example' that their conversion means for the rest of the community.”

Illegal armed groups continue to pose one of the greatest threats to Christian men and boys, who are exposed to abduction, forced recruitment and violence at their hands. They are subject to indoctrination and mandatory participation in the activities of these groups which may include abductions, surveillance activities, sexual abuse, killings and trafficking. In the case of indigenous people, illegal armed groups benefit from their knowledge of the terrain and use them as “security rings” which leaves them more [exposed](#) (Infobae, 20 Jun 2020).

According to [COALICO](#), there has been a dramatic increase in the recruitment of children into armed groups in 2020, in part due to an exploitation of the COVID-19 crisis by criminals (COALICO, June 2020). In light of threats and reprisals, many see it 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.

There is a noticeable lack of trauma management and resocialization programs for men. Gender-based policies promoted by the government do not give men the same opportunities to educate themselves or to participate in programs for managing and overcoming vulnerability. This is because, as men, they are expected to be stronger.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Colombia is not included in the [US Commission IRF 2019 report](#).

According to the [US State Department's](#) 2019 International Religious Freedom report, “The Jewish community reported continued comments promoting anti-Semitism on some social media sites, including aggressive actions by Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Colombia, an anti-Israel protest movement that continued to use anti-Semitic slogans such as “Jews control the media” (US Department of State, 10 June 2020).

It was also [reported](#) that the monument to the State of Israel in Bogota was daubed with a painted swastika and the word "Israel" crossed out. The Ambassador of the State of Israel in

Colombia, Christian Cantor, spread a photo of the vandalism through social networks and expressed his disgust at what had happened (El Tiempo, 1 November 2019).

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Organized corruption and crime:

With the COVID-19 crisis taking priority, there has been a delay in the on-going implementation of the Peace Agreement and also increased opportunities for local criminal groups to expand their control in areas with little government presence. Due to the high levels of corruption and impunity in the country, those highlighting problematic social issues fail to generate any positive public impact. Christians who continue working in the defense of human rights, the fight against drugs or for the promotion of a culture of peace find themselves facing worsening levels of pressure and violence. This is likely to continue so long as they are not considered by the government to be a particularly vulnerable sector of society which is constantly at risk.

Clan oppression:

As it stands, the State has not yet provided any effective solution for protecting the individual dimension of the right to religious freedom for indigenous community members who decide to convert to Christianity and not follow traditional ethnic rites. The increased power of indigenous leadership and autonomy through the COVID-19 crisis has reinforced the obstacles for indigenous Christians to live their faith in freedom, in the face of the neglect of government authorities and the creation of alliances between ethnic leaders and criminal groups.

Secular intolerance:

Colombia is becoming a major center of Christian intolerance in the region; although it does not always manifest itself in a violent way, intolerance towards the political participation of committed Christians and towards public expressions of faith are clearly increasing. Despite the recognition of the religious sector as an important element of society, Christian leaders are likely to continue to be ignored by the government and ideological groups, when decisions are made on issues relating to the sanctity of life, marriage and family. This situation will not improve as long as the exercise of freedom of expression and religious freedom is restricted by public officials interpreting the principle of secularism in a radical way.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: Corruption Perception Index - <https://www.transparency.org/country/COL>
- Persecution engines description: Organized Armed Groups - GAO - <https://www.laopinion.com.co/colombia/los-grupos-armados-han-crecido-en-colombia-176710#OP>
- Persecution engines description: areas - <https://moe.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Mapas-de-Riesgo-Electoral-2019-DIGITAL.pdf>
- Persecution engines description: elected authorities - https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/local-polls-colombia-put-peace-test?utm_source=Sign+Up+to+Crisis+Group%27s+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=7509f39ff4-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_10_25_01_57&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1dab8c11ea-7509f39ff4-359953141

- Persecution engines description: alliances - <https://www.rcnradio.com/colombia/antioquia/salvoconductos-criminales-en-medellin-la-base-para-descubrir-corrupcion-en-la>
- Persecution engines description: weakened - <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20200707/482186628438/la-onu-avisa-que-criminales-usan-la-pandemia-para-ganar-terreno-en-colombia.html>
- Areas where Christians face most difficulties: census - <https://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/boletines/grupos-etnicos/presentacion-grupos-etnicos-2019.pdf>
- Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere: overstepping the limit - <https://cortesuprema.gov.co/corte/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/STL5798-2020.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: challenges - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/COLOMBIA-Compound-structural-vulnerabilities-facing-Christian-women-2018-FINAL-WITH-PREFACE.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: continue - <https://www.unaa.org.au/2020/03/25/women-peace-and-security-achievements-in-colombia/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: affected - <https://colombia.unwomen.org/es/onu-mujeres-en-colombia/las-mujeres-en-colombia>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: service sector - <http://empresaspazddhh.ideaspaz.org/ser-mujer-un-riesgo-en-medio-de-la-pandemia>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: 162% - http://www.observatoriomujeres.gov.co/archivos/publicaciones/Publicacion_6.pdf
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: exposed - <https://www.infobae.com/america/colombia/2020/06/20/la-oea-alerto-sobre-reclutamiento-forzado-de-menores-por-grupos-armados-en-colombia/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: COALICO, - <http://coalico.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Bolet%C3%ADn-ONCA-No.-23.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: US Commission IRF 2019 report. - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: US State Department's - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/COLOMBIA-2019-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: reported - <https://www.eltiempo.com/bogota/vandalizan-monumento-del-estado-de-israel-en-el-norte-de-bogota-429718>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- [LATIN AMERICA – Organized corruption and crime – 2018](#)
- [Colombia UPDATE 2020](#)
- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Colombia>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Colombia>