

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

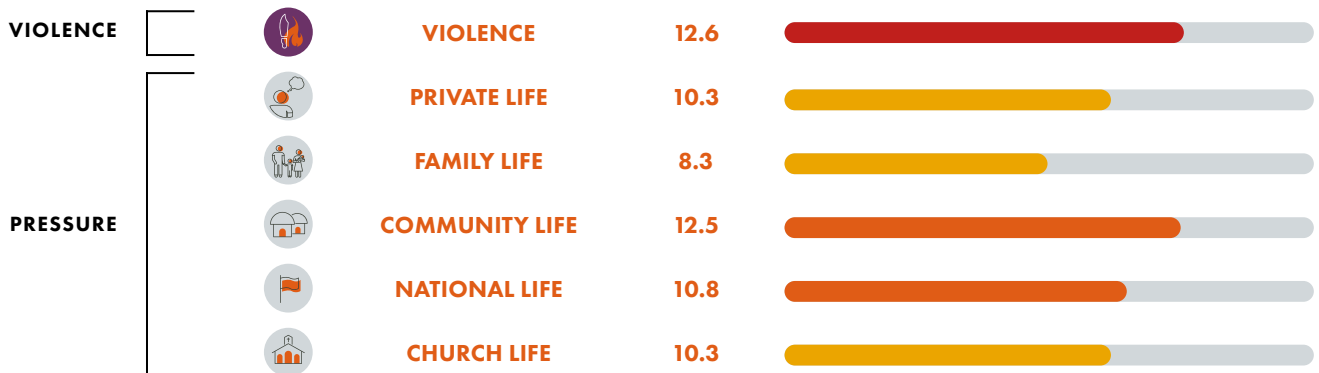
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**43**

## Mexico



### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).<sup>1</sup> Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

## Key findings

Christians and church leaders living in certain areas face a constant risk of being targeted. The increasing presence of criminal groups and the struggle for territorial control means Christians are at risk wherever they are perceived as a threat to criminal operations and are not obedient to group demands. In indigenous communities, those who decide to abandon community religious beliefs also face rejection and punishments such as fines, incarceration and forced displacement. General societal intolerance of Christianity and its beliefs continue to grow, especially when Christians express socially conservative views based on their faith.

<sup>1</sup>World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador

### POPULATION

135,384,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

129,627,000 (95.7%)<sup>2</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

### GOVERNMENT

Federal Presidential Republic



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	129,627,000	95.7
Ethno-religionists	1,407,000	1.0
Atheists	154,000	0.1
Agnostics	3,898,000	2.9

Source<sup>3</sup>

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) took office in 2018. He was criticized for prioritizing the economy over health during the COVID-19 pandemic and for his increasingly authoritarian government, including [suppression](#) of media. Human Rights Watch has [denounced](#) violations by military personnel, such as the use of torture to obtain confessions, enforced disappearances, extra-judicial killings, and attacks on journalists and human rights defenders.

Mexico has no official religion and no religious classes are taught in state schools. According to the law regulating religious organizations, [church officials](#) are not allowed to publicly express political opinions or hold public office, and the state authorities cannot intervene in the internal life of religious associations (USCIRF 2020).

In a context of rising violence and insecurity, it has become frequent for Christian leaders to be targeted by criminal groups throughout the country. Killings,

extortion, death threats and property vandalism have become commonplace. Since 2015, there has been an [increase in homicidal violence](#) every year in Mexico. The June 2021 elections became the second most violent in [Mexican history \(Jornada, 16 May 2021\)](#). Intolerance against Christians defending their faith-based opinions has increased, often influenced by a misinterpretation of the separation of Church and State.

The Intercensal Survey 2015 reported that 12 million people live in indigenous households. In such communities, Christians face opposition when they reject the religious practices and customs of the ethnic group to which they belong. Since ethnic leaders are those who administer justice in their territories, the religious freedom of indigenous people is not guaranteed by local (state) authorities.

## How the situation varies by region

Criminal networks have spread throughout Mexican territory and are no longer confined to the so-called 'narco-states' (France 24, 02 December 2019). Though denied by the government, it is estimated by some that criminal networks have [complete control](#) of 30-35% of Mexican territory. The violation of rights of Christians inside indigenous communities occurs particularly in the southern zone, such as Chiapas, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Jalisco and Oaxaca. General societal intolerance for

<sup>2</sup>Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

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Christianity, which increases the likelihood of property vandalization, occurs primarily in Colima, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Mexico City, Mexico State and Veracruz.

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

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

### Historical Christian communities

The Roman Catholic Church (the largest denomination) and small Orthodox, Presbyterian and Anglican communities make up this category. Catholic churches are particularly affected by the activities of criminal gangs and the corruption of local authorities, and experience societal intolerance. These Christian communities are not free to teach or otherwise share their faith with members of the indigenous communities who follow ancestral traditions.

### Converts to Christianity

This category includes cross-denominational converts from historical Christian communities, converts from a criminal (mafia) background and Christians who have abandoned the religious (ancestral or syncretistic) practices of the indigenous community to which they previously belonged. Indigenous converts often face significant pressure to abandon their new faith and may experience threats of violence, arrests and even expulsion.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

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



## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Organized corruption and crime:

Continual warfare between the many criminal groups causes a [spiral](#) of violence. Some communities have formed [self-defense groups](#) to keep criminal groups and corrupt police officers away. However, many regard these as criminal groups as well. Christians are considered a threat to the interests of criminal groups, especially when their work aims to prevent young people from joining the ranks of drug traffickers. They can quickly become targets for surveillance, [death threats](#), kidnapping and even killings. Corrupt officials at various levels allow criminal activity to take place with impunity. The [Corruption Perception Index](#) 2019 ranks Mexico 130th out of 180.

### Clan oppression:

The state intervenes minimally since it recognizes indigenous communities' right to autonomy. In such communities, ethnic leaders attempt to impose a lifestyle regulated by ancestral or syncretistic customs. If Christian converts reject such customs, they face community pressure through [forced displacement](#), fines, the blocking of basic community services, imprisonment and beatings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some converts were unable to receive state aid since they were no longer viewed as members of the ethnic group.

### Secular intolerance:

Ideological pressure groups, supported by some government authorities, seek to promote a secularist agenda which aims to restrict the participation of Christians in the public sphere, especially when they hold positions of [public office](#). Christians experience increasing societal intolerance for expressing faith-based beliefs.



# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

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

- Abduction
- Denied/restricted healthcare
- Forced marriage
- Trafficking
- Violence - death
- Violence - physical
- Violence - sexual

## MEN

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

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via fines
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence - death
- Violence - physical
- Violence - verbal



## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	43	64.77
2021	37	64.42
2020	52	59.52
2019	39	61.47
2018	39	58.78

The incremental increase against last year's score is a result of increased retaliation against indigenous Christians when their faith is not accepted by their families and/or the ethnic groups to which they belong. Similarly, there has been an increase in societal intolerance against faith-based expressions in the public sphere. Criminal groups continue to target Christians and have taken advantage of political and health (COVID-19) crisis to increase territorial control.

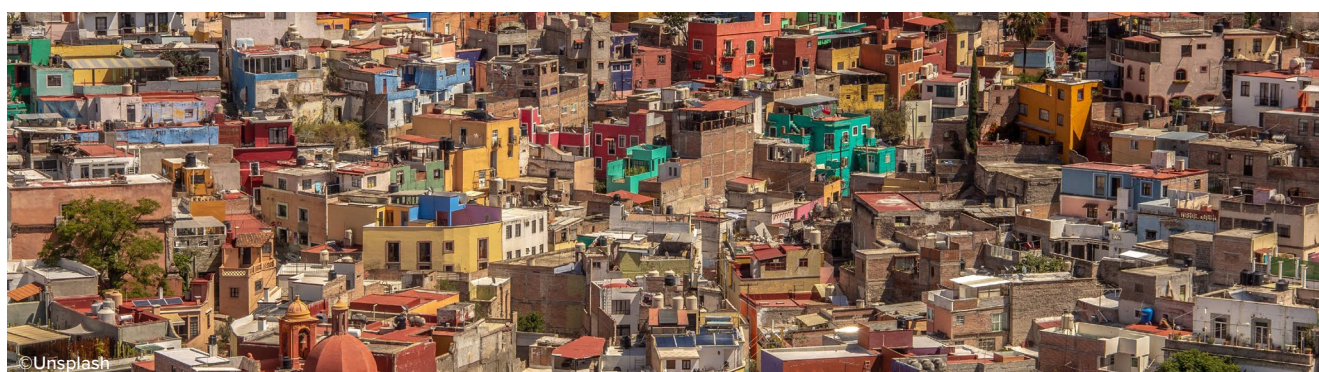
## Examples of violence in the reporting period

There is immense community pressure on Christians.

- **In July 2021**, a Catholic catechist in Simojovel de Allende was assassinated by a shot in the head as a consequence of drug trafficking and organized crime in the area.
- **Since January 2021**, approximately 30 evangelical Christians comprising five families, including a pastor, were imprisoned for not professing the same faith as the 'Tzotil' ethnic group. They were subsequently expelled from the community. The five houses on the expelled pastor's property were demolished and burned, in [reaction](#) to him visiting his sick mother.
- **In June 2021**, the walls and doors of Xalapa city Cathedral were vandalized after the local congress voted in favor of decriminalizing abortion on demand.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated	Christians internally displaced
2022	7	12	80	405
2021	7	0	3	71

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





### Private life

During the COVID-19 crisis, online platforms played a more significant role than ever before. It became easier for criminal groups to target Christians who published material supporting non-violence and opposing illicit activities. Politicians can be targeted, criticized and sometimes removed from their political parties if they make their Christian beliefs known on social media. In indigenous communities, monitoring of converts increased greatly during the pandemic. Where Christian religious symbols were found, they were likely to be destroyed and the Christian using them punished. Motivated by their loyalty to the community, immediate family members denounce converts to the indigenous leaders.

### Family life

Indigenous Christian children have been threatened with separation from their parents, after their parents converted from traditional community beliefs to Christianity. Organized crime is also a cause of separation within families; the danger of attack can be so high, some Christian family members are forced to look for a safer place to live. The COVID-19 travel restrictions meant that those threatened by organized crime could not flee far from their homes and had to remain within a criminal group's territory. The recruitment of children by criminal groups skyrocketed; they were used to transport drugs in food and medicine and to join self-defense groups.

### Community life

Christians are closely monitored within both indigenous communities and areas dominated by organized crime. Within the indigenous communities,

Christians face harassment, fines, threats and forced displacement. Criminal gangs extort protection money from church leaders and other Christians to allow them to conduct their Christian activities undisturbed.

### National life

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

### Church life

Within indigenous communities, 'non-accepted Christians' considered religious leaders are particularly targeted for harassment along with their families. Those who speak out against their oppressors face threats, forced displacement and arrest. In areas where organized crime is dominant, when Christians denounce their aggressors, criminal groups often respond with violent reprisals. Leaders and their families are the most frequent victims of the imposition of taxes, fines or extortion. Christian preaching and teaching is closely monitored by pressure groups who label religious leaders as 'haters', 'discriminators' or disrespectful of secularism.



# International obligations & rights violated

**Mexico has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:**

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

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

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

# Situation of other religious minorities

Anti-Semitism has also been reported in Mexico. The International Religious Freedom Report, 2020 stated: "Jewish community representatives assessed online anti-Semitic messages, symbols, and language from January through September 17 [2020], finding Twitter accounted for 69% of the anti-Semitic content, news sources 18%, online forums 8%, and blogs 4.5%." Anti-Semitic tweets typically referenced the Holocaust and Hitler, used another derogatory language, and questioned Israel's right to exist.

In September 2020, Volkswagen apologized after a customer visiting one of its showrooms tweeted a photograph of a World War II Nazi rally being addressed by Adolf Hitler, replete with a large swastika, hanging on the showroom's walls. The tweet quickly went viral. The customer had photographed the image during a visit to the showroom, located in Coyoacan Municipality near Mexico City. In a letter to Steffen Reiche, the president of Volkswagen's operations in Mexico, the Simon Wiesenthal Centre urged the company to cut ties with the dealership where the Nazi imagery was displayed. "We expect you to immediately identify those responsible and publicly announce the action you will take. The most appropriate would be to drop the concession completely to pass a clear message to your customers that you have learned from your history," the letter stated.





# Open Doors in Mexico

The ministry of Open Doors in Mexico focuses on the following strategic intervention areas:

- Biblical training
- Professional litigation
- Financial support
- Research





#### About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2022 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

*All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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