



OBSERVATORY OF  
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM  
IN LATIN AMERICA

# Violent incidents of persecution of Christians in Latin America in 2017

Data from the Violent Incidents Database

*Dennis P. Petri*

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## Abstract

The persecution of Christians in Latin America on religious grounds is a problem of growing concern. The problem is multifaceted and goes unreported in many cases or it is not understood as religious persecution. The objective of this essay is to give a brief but insightful description of violent incidents of the persecution of Christians which occurred in Latin America in 2017. In exposing the incidents, this essay uses, as a primary source, empirical material from 2017 collected by the Violent Incidents Database (VID), a project of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. The essay concludes by highlighting the need for further research in the field and a call for the VID's improvement of access to information sources.

## 1. Introduction

Monitoring religious freedom and documenting incidents of persecution on religious grounds is a challenging task. The difficulty is mainly rooted in three fundamental causes. First, many incidents of religious persecution are never made public or they go reported in Latin America and, therefore are never included in databases; second, reported incidents in the media are not always accurate and are problematic to verify and third, incidents might not be understood as

religious persecution. In the light of these three constraints the number of incidents reported but not recorded by the VID are possibly higher.

In this essay it is asserted that at the core of the multidimensional problem lays the prevailing persecution engine. In other words, the persecution phenomenon involves ethnic antagonism, organized corruption and crime, killings of innocent victims, abductions, communist and post-communist oppression (in Cuba) involving short detentions and long arrests, attacks against church buildings and Christian shops as well as physical and mental abuse. Persecution could also involve non-physical violence such as discrimination. Nonetheless, the common denominator is the hindrance of religious freedom.

Religious freedom is a broad and multidimensional concept that can be observed and measured in many different ways. One method to do this is to distinguish between two types of religious freedom violations: physical violence, such as torture or rape as a result of one's identification with a particular religion, and non-physical violence, which could take the form of discriminatory legislation, social pressure or more generally any other form of symbolic violence (Pierre Bourdieu)<sup>1</sup> or structural violence (Johan Galtung)<sup>2</sup> to use common sociological concepts.

In this essay, I describe religious freedom violations in terms of physical violence for Christians in Latin America. The discussion is mainly based on empirical material from 2017 collected by the VID. In other essays, I will address religious freedom violations that can be categorized as non-physical violence.

In order to aid clarity this essay is divided into three brief sections. The first section describes the main objective of the VID that is, monitoring religious freedoms of Christians in Latin America. The second section discusses specifically the violent incidents of the persecution of Christians in the subcontinent during 2017. In context, it considers persecution as a multifaceted phenomenon and explains the dominant persecution engines against Christians. Third, the essay concludes with two observations: the need for ongoing research about the persecution of Christians and the need for improved access to information and documentation by the VID.

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<sup>1</sup> Symbolic violence is central to understanding how social inequalities are reproduced. Essentially, symbolic violence is the imposition of habits of thought and perception upon dominated groups within society who then take the social order imposed to be just. The dominated then take their subservient position to be "right" within the social order. In other words the dominated people collude in their own subordination. Symbolic violence is in some sense more powerful than physical violence in that it is indirect and embedded in different types of thought patterns, perceptions and actions of individuals, which in turn, imposes a sense of legitimacy of the social order. See Bourdieu Pierre. (1984). *Distinction*. London: Routledge, pp. 5 - 41; Bourdieu Pierre & Wacquant, Loic. (1992). *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 167 -168.

<sup>2</sup> Galtung defines violence as "avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs or, to put it in more general terms, the impairment of human life, which lowers the actual degree to which someone is able to meet their needs below that which would otherwise be possible." In other words, structural violence is a form of violence where social structures or institutions, such as elitism, racism, sexism, etc. may harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Galtung Johan. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6 (3), pp. 167-191. Retrieved from [http://www2.kobe-u.ac.jp/~alexroni/IPD%202015%20readings/IPD%202015\\_7/Galtung\\_Violence,%20Peace,%20and%20Peace%20Research.pdf](http://www2.kobe-u.ac.jp/~alexroni/IPD%202015%20readings/IPD%202015_7/Galtung_Violence,%20Peace,%20and%20Peace%20Research.pdf)

## 2. The Violent Incidents Database

The Violent Incidents Database (VID) is a data collection project of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. Its main objective is to monitor religious freedom violations of Christians in Latin American countries, which can be used as input for research and advocacy initiatives. The VID is publicly accessible at [www.violentincidents.com](http://www.violentincidents.com).

The main input for the VID are public sources, most of which are digital media available on the internet. The VID also takes information into consideration that is provided by partner organizations of the Observatory.

The VID follows essential elements of [the methodology of the World Watch List \(WWL\)](#) of Open Doors International.<sup>3</sup> Each new incident that is added to the VID contains several fields of information (title, country, state/province, city, date and summary), a categorization by type of incident (see Figure 1), the identification of the driver of persecution, the identification of the persecution engine<sup>4</sup> and the sources of the information.

The VID aims to give an indication of the numbers of Christians experiencing violence on grounds of faith in Latin America but cannot claim to be an exhaustive listing. The data included in the VID is based purely on reports published in digital media available on the internet. Many incidents are never made public and are therefore not included. There are times when incidents reported in the media are incorrect. We do not have the capacity to verify all incidents listed. However, where reports are flagged up as being false or incorrect, the corresponding entries are altered or deleted.

## 3. Violent incidents of persecution of Christians in Latin America in 2017

Persecution is a complex multifaceted phenomenon that involves many aspects such as various forms of cultural marginalization, government discrimination, hindrances on conversion, and hindrances on participation in public affairs and restrictions on church life. It involves both physical violence and non-physical violence.

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<sup>3</sup> Open Doors International. (2017). World Watch Research, World watch list methodology, Main document, p. 3. Retrieved from <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/WWL-2018-Methodology-LONG-VERSION-November-2017.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> “*Persecution* is when Christians and their communities experience pressure and/or violence that are specifically related to the persecution dynamics prevalent in their environments and which are forcing them to comply with the drivers of these dynamics. The WWL methodology groups these persecution dynamics into three different ‘impulses’. These impulses fuel eight different persecution engines and are driven by specific actors or drivers of persecution. The eight persecution engines are *Islamic oppression, Religious nationalism, Ethnic antagonism, Denominational protectionism, Communist and post-Communist oppression, Secular intolerance, Dictatorial paranoia* and *Organized corruption and crime*,” Open Doors International. (2017). World Watch Research, World watch list methodology, Main document, *Supra note 3*, p. 3.

This essay highlights some of our findings related to violence, which, although not the only aspect of persecution, is perhaps its sharpest edge. Figure 1 shows the counts of violent incidents that have been recorded in the VID, following the categorization of Block 6 of the World Watch List questionnaire, which focuses on violence.

Figure 1. Violent incidents of persecution of Christians in Latin America in 2017, by persecution category

Countries	Killings	(Attempts to destroy Churches or Christian buildings)	Closed Churches or Christian buildings	Arrests	Sentences	Abductions	Sexual Assaults	Forced Marriages	Other forms of attack (physical or mental abuse)	Attacked Christian houses	Attacked Christian shops or businesses	Forced to leave Home	Forced to leave Country
Argentina	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	1	1
Bolivia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Brazil	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	0
Chile	0	6	0	0	1	0	0	0	7	0	1	0	0
Colombia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	3	0
Cuba	0	0	0	1322	4	0	0	0	873	7	0	2	0
Ecuador	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
El Salvador	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Guatemala	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Honduras	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mexico	13	8	0	11	0	82	0	0	347	3	0	136	0
Peru	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0
Uruguay	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Venezuela	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1333</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1253</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>1</b>

Source: Violence Incidents Database, Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America<sup>5</sup>

As can be observed, the highest ranking Latin American countries on the World Watch List of Open Doors International, Mexico, Colombia and Cuba, also have the highest number of violent incidents of persecution of Christians. In the case of Mexico and Colombia, this is consistent with the finding that the prevailing persecution engines in these countries, ethnic antagonism and organized corruption and crime, are characterized by excessive violence at this stage of their development. In the case of Cuba, the prevailing persecution engine, communist and post-communist oppression, expresses itself mainly through non-violent forms of pressure, but does nevertheless involve occasional violence against Christians, mainly in the form of short detentions and longer arrests and various forms of physical abuse.

On the subcontinent as a whole, the majority of violent incidents were recorded for Mexico and Cuba, followed by Colombia. The main reason why Colombia had slighter lower reports of violence in 2017 is because the ongoing peace process led to a (temporary) reduction in violence against Christians. Other Latin American countries where violent incidents have been reported are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela.<sup>6</sup>

As a subcontinent, killings of Christians were localized in Mexico (13) and Brazil (1). Mexico has the doubtful honor of being the most dangerous country in the world for priests. It is likely that real numbers are higher, but go unreported or are not understood as religious persecution.

<sup>5</sup> Violent Incidents Database, Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. Retrieved from <http://www.violentincidents.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> See above Figure 1. Violent incidents of persecution of Christians in Latin America in 2017, by persecution category.

Mexico is also the country in the world with the highest risk of kidnapping, and kidnappings sometimes target actively practicing Christians (82 abductions recorded in 2017). Also in Mexico, 136 Christians were forced to leave their homes, either as the result of forced displacements in indigenous territories or because of threats by organized crime.<sup>7</sup>

Church buildings have been attacked in Brazil (1), Chile (6), Honduras (1), Mexico (8), Peru (1) and Venezuela (2), the outlier being Chile where churches have been subject to arson attacks by indigenous activists in the Mapuche territory. In Chile, one house of a Christian was also attacked.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of arrests, Cuba leads the list with 1322, followed by 11 in Mexico. Most arrests in Cuba are related to Christian dissidents who have been protesting against the regime. The VID also reports 4 sentences of Christians in Cuba and 1 in Chile. No sexual assaults or forced marriages were reported, but anecdotal evidence suggests that this does happen in some indigenous communities, particularly in Colombia. For understandable reasons, such incidents rarely get reported. In total, 1253 other forms of attack were reported, of which 873 occurred in Cuba and 347 in Mexico. Some reports of other forms of attack also happened in 11 eleven other countries.<sup>9</sup>

## 4. Concluding remarks

As stated above, the VID should not be considered as an exhaustive resource, but it nevertheless justifies the need for ongoing research about persecution of Christians, and more generally religious freedom, in Latin America. In 2018, the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America will continue to improve its documentation of violent incidents by accessing more sources of information and involving other partners in the operation.

## Bibliography

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<sup>7</sup> See above *Figure 1. Violent incidents of persecution of Christians in Latin America in 2017, by persecution category*.

<sup>8</sup> See above *Figure 1. Violent incidents of persecution of Christians in Latin America in 2017, by persecution category*.

<sup>9</sup> See above *Figure 1. Violent incidents of persecution of Christians in Latin America in 2017, by persecution category*.

Open Doors International. (2017). World Watch Research, World watch list methodology, Main document. Retrieved from <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/WWL-2018-Methodology-LONG-VERSION-November-2017.pdf>.

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