

How many Christians are under threat of persecution?

An initial assessment of approaches

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Abstract

This article examines published data from three organizations, each of which contributes in some way to a global quantification of the number of persecuted Christians. Their results depend on the delimitation of the phenomena measured and the thresholds applied. In addition, varying estimates on the number of Christians in individual countries strongly influence the outcome. The different approaches and results are compared and interpreted, and their usefulness is queried. In closing, some recommendations are made regarding the use of the data.

Keywords religious persecution, Christians, demography, statistics, Pew Research Center, Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Open Doors International.

“As in all human rights reporting, the accuracy, precision, and meaning of the numbers of those persecuted can be equally uncertain [as the definition of terms such as persecution].” (Marshall, Gilbert and Shea 2013:6)

1. Introduction

Why would we want to have an up-to-date global estimate of the number of Christians under threat of persecution? For us to understand and tackle the issue of religious persecution, does it not suffice to have detailed descriptions of the situation in each country?

Country-based research has great value in enabling in-depth understanding of national situations. However, for anyone operating on a global level – politicians, advocacy agencies or researchers – global statistics are important. If we know how many people are affected, we can say something about the magnitude of the global

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phenomenon. We can also observe changes from one year to the next and determine trends over time. Comparing numbers in different locations can help us prioritize advocacy efforts. In addition, precise numbers help us counter the claims of those who deny Christians are actually being persecuted due to their faith on any significant scale (Schirmacher and Müller 2016:26).

Obviously, journalists, politicians, and some advocacy agencies and researchers do think such numbers are important. As Birdsall and Beaman (2020) highlight, numbers put a handle on things; they are often regarded as “objective”; and unexpected numbers have the potential to raise awareness. Various such numbers have circulated in recent decades. Any number someone puts out is likely to be frequently quoted. Unfortunately, few users are checking the factual basis or plausibility of these figures.

Others are highly critical of such numbers. Some openly discredit those who produce the estimates or, at least, those who uncritically use them. Some even deny the possibility of arriving at a reliable global total due to the numerous challenges inherent in such an endeavour.

In this article, I examine how close current approaches come to providing a meaningful answer to the question of how many Christians are persecuted. What follows represents the initial results of a more extensive research project that I hope to publish later.

1.1 Key terms

The answer to this question obviously depends on the definition of key terms. First, who is counted as a *Christian*? For the purpose of this study, I follow the broad terminology of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, counting as Christians any “followers of Jesus Christ as Lord, of all kinds, all traditions and confessions, and all degrees of commitment” (Johnson and Zurlo 2020:968).

What is considered *persecution of Christians*? I generally follow a broad use of the term along with Tieszen (2018:47): “Any unjust action of varying levels of hostility perpetrated primarily on the basis of religion and directed against Christians, resulting in varying levels of harm as it is considered from the victim’s perspective.” However, I am aware that such a comprehensive philosophical definition makes enumeration difficult, and that more pragmatic and narrow approaches would make the process easier.

Moreover, I do not wish to include only those who are acutely suffering persecution, but also who are *under threat of* persecution.²

² Alternatively, one could conduct surveys asking how many Christians claim a fear of persecution, but to the best of my knowledge, no such study has been conducted yet.

In such studies, one further has to decide whether to focus on restrictions or violations of freedom of religion or belief, or on the actual phenomenon of persecution. Although these two concepts overlap, they are not identical and each one encompasses unique aspects not covered by the other.

1.2 Research question of this study

The research question of this article asks, “How many Christians are currently under actual threat of persecution globally?” This leads to a number of sub-questions: (1) What published, independent and interpreted research is available that could help us get closer to an answer? (2) How do the approaches and outcomes compare? (3) How meaningful and useful are the outcomes of the research currently available?

Of course, the research question posed here might not always match the primary intention of the sources used, which might not focus on exactly the same concerns.

1.3 Sources

The three main published, independent and interpreted sources discussed here come from the Pew Research Center (2019), the Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC; Johnson 2013/2016) and Open Doors World Watch Research (2020). For each source, I identify the research question guiding the study, present the numerical outcomes, analyse the basis and methodology, and provide an assessment of usefulness and limitations. Laying such a descriptive foundation is essential because each of these sources asks different questions, prohibiting a straightforward and simple comparison.³ Thereafter, I compare the approaches and outcomes, embed their interpretation into a wider framework, and finally make some recommendations on the use of the resulting data.

2. Pew Research Center: Number of countries where Christians are intimidated

The annual reports on religious restrictions around the globe published since 2009 by the Pew Research Center (Washington, D.C., USA) include a section on the number of countries in which “harassment of religious groups” was recorded. A country is included if at least one incident was reported for at least one religious group, regardless of the size of the group and the number of people affected. At the time of writing, the latest version was *A Closer Look at How Religious Restrictions Have Risen around the World* (Pew 2019), published on 15 July 2019.⁴

³ The space restraints given for this article did not permit to include a more extensive systematic comparison which is reserved for a follow-up article.

⁴ The latest data appeared on 10 November 2020 (Pew 2020).

2.1 Research question

The overall research question of the Pew research project is as follows: How do countries and independent territories score and compare on the “Government Restrictions Index” and the “Social Hostilities Index,” and how do these scores change annually?

Regarding our specific issue, the sub-question explicitly answered and analysed is in how many countries harassment or intimidation against Christians was reported in 2017. The actors include both “any level of government” and individuals or groups in society who are motivated by religious hatred or bias (Pew 2019:79).

2.2 Numerical outcomes

At least one case of intimidation or harassment against Christians was reported during 2017 in 143 countries (Pew 2019:51). Among these, government was considered an offender in 123 countries and private individuals or groups in 101 countries. Harassment of at least one religious group (not limited to Christians) was reported in 187 of the 198 countries and territories assessed. There was no attempt to quantify the number of Christians affected, either by individual country or as a global total.

2.3 Basis and methodology

For each of the sources perused, I will identify definition(s), data source, time-frame, and other relevant parameters.

Among the crucial terms used, “intimidation” remains undefined. “Harassment” “entails an offense against a religious group or person due to their religious identity, and can include being physically coerced or singled out with the intent of making life or religious practice more difficult” (Pew 2019:51). A definition of *Christian* could not be found.

The data for this report come primarily from a coding of “factual information on specific policies and actions” contained in the U.S. State Department’s *International Religious Freedom Report*, supplemented by cross-checking information from 19 other reports (Pew 2019:67-70). The time frame under examination is the 2017 calendar year.

The Pew Research Center’s project on religious restrictions is characterized by the numerical interpretation of global religious freedom data by Americans from a US perspective.

2.4 Usefulness and limitations

This approach has the limited value of indicating a maximum number of countries that need to be taken into consideration when the lowest threshold of intimidation and harassment is applied. However, the number of countries in itself carries little

meaning for answering our research question, due to the vastly divergent population sizes of countries. To add more meaning, the names of countries must be disclosed, and the total number of Christians residing in each one must be estimated.

One strength of the Pew study is its global coverage. On the other hand, it has several limitations: it “does not assess either the severity or the frequency of the harassment in each country” (Pew 2019:79), the data used are rather thin (Schirrmacher 2016:7), and the main data source may have some degree of bias (Johnson & Zurlo 2020:911).

3. CSGC: Number of Christians facing persecution around the world, 1970-2020

The lengthy essay “Persecution in the Context of Religious and Christian Demography, 1970-2020” (Johnson 2016) represents commissioned research by “the world’s most eminent scholar on religious demography” (Hertzke 2016:3), Todd Johnson of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, for a cooperative research project and book, *Christianity and Freedom: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Hertzke and Shah 2016). The research was originally presented in 2013.

3.1 Research question

The declared purpose of Johnson’s analysis is “to provide a religious demographic context for discussions about Christianity and religious freedom in the twenty-first century” (Johnson 2016:13). The implied research question is “In 1970, 2000, 2010, and 2020, how many Christians were living in the 46 countries with the most significant threat of religious persecution or with the more egregious cases as identified by Paul Marshall in 2012?”

3.2 Numerical outcomes

Johnson estimates that in 2020 “about 600 million Christians . . . are living in” the 46 countries identified by Paul Marshall “where they are subject to persecution” (Johnson 2016:46).

3.3 Basis and methodology

For a definition of *Christians*, Johnson can point to the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (WCE), which he edits. The enumeration of Christians in the WCE aims at quantifying their order of magnitude in an approximate way (WCE 1982:45), looking at their geographical spread and location (WCE 2001:II,3).

As for defining *persecution*, Johnson was asked to base his findings on the taxonomy of Paul Marshall, which was published in the book *Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians* (Marshall, Gilbert and Shea 2013). This book applies select-

ed descriptors from the U.S. International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. The 46 persecuting countries selected include five “Self-professed Communist States,” 13 “National Security States” (including post-Communist countries), four “South Asian Religious Nationalist States,” and 24 “Muslim Majority States” (Johnson 2016:44).

The data source used by Johnson is the *World Christian Database*, of which he is an editor.

The starting point of Johnson’s approach is to apply his unique expertise, gathered over decades of research on general global Christian demographics, to a pre-determined taxonomy with a largely fixed list of countries so as to establish the number of Christians living there.

3.4 Usefulness and limitations

Johnson’s demographic approach offers a much better quantitative approximation than the mere counting of countries. It provides data on a country level and transparency regarding the countries included, both of which factors allow for better analysis and verification.

Limitations include the sole focus on the number of Christians residing in a country instead of those actually persecuted, and the restriction to a static set of countries with the most egregious cases.

If a way could be found to better determine (1) a transparent threshold of persecution for the inclusion of countries and (2) the respective number of Christians affected in each country or territory examined, an even better approximation to an answer to our research question could be provided.

4. Open Doors: Christians affected by persecution in 2018-2019

The annual World Watch List (WWL), prepared by Open Doors International/World Watch Research, the Netherlands, reports on the countries where it is most difficult to live as Christians. This is the most detailed, systematic and regular of such measurements currently available. Its published documentation includes a section on “the total number of persecuted Christians,” the most recent version at the time of writing appeared on 15 January 2020 (WWL 2020a).

4.1 Research question

The WWL is guided by several questions: What are the 50 countries in the world where it is most difficult to live as Christians? Which countries fulfil the threshold of high levels of persecution beyond this top 50? How does this change annually?

Regarding our specific issue, the implied research question could be stated as follows: “How many Christians are affected by ‘extreme,’ ‘very high’ or ‘high’ levels of persecution in the 50 countries on the World Watch List 2020, when we calculate

the Christian populations living in provinces within these countries that meet the persecution threshold?”

4.2 Numerical outcomes

The WWL concludes that at least 260 million Christians are affected by persecution in the top 50 persecuting countries. This number increases to an estimated 312 million Christians when all 73 countries meeting the threshold of at least “high” levels of persecution are taken into account.

4.3 Basis and methodology

Persecution is broadly and comprehensively understood as “any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians.” In practice, it also includes hostilities between different Christian groups (WWL 2020a:2).

The definition of *Christians* is of limited relevance, as an external data source, the Brill *World Christian Database* (accessed in April 2019), has been used for the Christian demographics of most countries. Open Doors made independent estimates of the Christian population for only 11 countries.

The timeframe examined ranges from 1 November 2018 to 31 October 2019. The total number of countries thoroughly analysed is 110, with the remaining countries and territories monitored by less time-intensive methods. The threshold for including a country is a score of 41 points on a scale of 100, representing the bottom value of the “high” level of persecution among four possible categories: “extreme,” “very high,” “high,” and “variable.” This is an overall country score. Thus, countries are not included if the minimum threshold of 41 points is reached in certain regions but the country as a whole does not reach that score.

The number of Christians affected is determined by individual country: “If the estimate of the level of persecution in a specific region within the country came within the range of ‘high’ and above, the Christian population for that region was counted as persecuted Christians. The total of such regions made up the number of persecuted Christians in that country” (WWL 2020a:7). However, only the numbers of national Christian populations are published. Regarding Christians considered as persecuted, only a global total is published. Open Doors claims a risk of security concerns if such figures were released on a country level (WWL 2020a:8).

4.4 Usefulness and limitations

Of the three approaches examined, that of Open Doors is the most nuanced and differentiated, as it seeks to assess not only the number of countries engaging in persecution or the number of Christians residing there, but the number of Chris-

tians actually living in provinces of countries where persecution meets a defined threshold.

Open Doors' work benefits from well-developed professional expertise and vast data on the persecution of Christians, based on field research and primarily first-hand information. The inclusion of countries is based on a carefully calculated score, which attempts to incorporate many relevant variables (WWL 2020b).

The limitations include the fact that some information is treated as confidential, lack of finer documentation with respect to our research question, potential overscoring of more populous countries, a margin of uncertainty due to the methodology, and lack of substantiation of diverging estimates of Christian demographics, such as for Egypt and China. Nevertheless, the WWL gives a rather good indication of the order of magnitude of Christians affected by persecution globally, provided that one accepts the definition of persecution and the threshold applied.

5. Comparisons

5.1 Overlaps and differences in approaches

Although each of the approaches examined has a different research design, there is also significant overlap between them. All three share an overarching approach in which the base units are countries/territories and Christians. As a result, the key questions are as follows: Which countries need to be considered in a calculation? What is the threshold to determine their inclusion? How many Christians are there, and how many of these are adversely affected? What is the threshold for including adversely affected Christians in a global count?

Each of the approaches, however, stops at a different point in the course of these inquiries. The Pew Research Center basically stops at the point of identifying the number of countries to be considered. The CSGC stops at the point of identifying the global total of Christians living in affected countries. Open Doors proceeds to a closer approximation of how many Christians are actually affected in each country under consideration, by examining information at the provincial level.

None of the methods provide an exact number in response to our research question. The total amount of Christians facing persecution globally remains, and likely will always remain, an approximation. Nevertheless, that approximation could still be improved.

5.2 Countries included

Each approach included a different number of countries in its formula. For Pew, a single incident reported in any of the sources used suffices; therefore, the resulting number of countries (143) is the largest amongst the three analyses.⁵ The

⁵ As Pew does not assess North Korea for methodological reasons, the total of countries engaging in some level of persecution of Christians is actually 144.

Comparison of numerically top countries for the persecution of Christians			
JOHNSON		OPEN DOORS	
Country	Christian population	Country	Persecuted Christians
Russian Fed.	118.027.000	China	65.000.000
China	109.594.000	India	46.336.000
Nigeria	93.791.000	Nigeria	32.827.000
India	66.194.000	Ethiopia	23.022.000
Ethiopia	65.776.000	Indonesia	19.674.000
Indonesia	32.790.000	Egypt	16.250.000
Egypt	9.322.000	Mexico	15.220.000
Totals	495.494.000		218.329.000

Table 1

CSGC works with the smallest set, 46 countries predetermined by an expert assessment. The application of Open Doors' threshold results in a total of 73 countries. Comparing the countries identified by the CSGC and Open Doors finds agreement consensus on a core of 42 countries.

5.3 Most impacted countries

There is a consensus between the CSGC and Open Doors on six countries with the greatest numerical impact on Christians when considering persecution: China, Nigeria, India, Ethiopia, Indonesia and Egypt. Together they make up 70 percent of the global total of persecuted Christians as estimated by Open Doors. However, due to their different methods, CSGC and Open Doors do not agree whether Russia or Mexico is the seventh country to include in this category of numerically most impacted countries.

5.4 Impressions created by the results

What impressions are created by the respective results? The absolute numbers published need to be considered in relation to global totals and to the balance that is not named.

Focusing on the results for the years around 2020, the approach used by the CSGC arrives at nearly twice the absolute number of Christians facing persecution (600 million Christians out of 2.5 billion living in said countries) as compared to Open Doors' method (312 million Christians out of 2.5 billion facing persecution). Both approaches agree, however, that only a minority (OD 12.5%; CSGC 23,5%) of the global Christian population actually lives in areas with strong persecution. By contrast, Pew's numbers create a different impression because a minimal threshold for inclusion is used and countries (72% affected) are counted instead of Christians.

5.5 Definitions and determination of thresholds

The variations in the definitions of "Christians" used here apparently do not make much difference in the determination of the order of magnitude of the number of Christians facing persecution.

There is some variation in the definition and delimitation of the adverse phenomena affecting Christians. Pew focuses on two questions as a very broad and inclusive measure with a very low material threshold. In addition, the numerical threshold for coding is at the bare minimum, as a single recorded case suffices to place a country on Pew's list.

Regarding the CSGC's predetermined set of countries with the most significant threat to Christians, no clearly defined threshold is applied. For Open Doors, on the other hand, the threshold is systematically and empirically determined by the answers to a battery of 84 questions.

5.6 Data-related aspects

A closer examination of data-related aspects reveals the degree or originality of the source data, the different timeframes examined, the varying currency of the data, and the respective degree of coverage of the studies.

Regarding the originality of the source data, Open Doors is the only entity that conducts independent field research on persecution data. Pew and the CSGC both rely on external data in that regard. Conversely, only the CSGC can claim full originality with regard to demographic data on Christians. The most current data come from Open Doors, but with reliance primarily on external demographic data. Although the CSGC's projection in 2013 for 2020 might appear to address the present time most accurately, it might also be significantly off due to differences between projected and actual population/Christian growth rates.

Comparison of data related aspects				
		Pew	CSGC/ Johnson	Open Doors
Originality of source data	persecution	dependent	dependent	original
	demography	n/a	original	mainly dependent
Time examined (time frame or point in time)		2017 calendar year	1970, 2000, 2010, 2020; extrapolations in 2013	Nov 2018 – Oct 2019 (demo- graphics, April 2019)
Time lag of results		1.5 years	3.5 years	2.5 months
Degree of coverage		99.5% of global population	approx. 25% of countries	50-100% of countries

Table 2

With regard to the time lapse between the research and the date of publication of the results, Open Doors clearly leads the field, with a time lag of only 2.5 months.

Regarding the degree of coverage or comprehensiveness, Pew appears to be the leader, covering 99.5% of the global population in equal measure by considering all countries and territories except North Korea. However, these degrees of coverage cannot be compared fairly, because each one measures something different, due to the methodological differences between the approaches. Open Doors focuses only on the Christian population, and the CSGC's limitation to 46 countries is externally predetermined and not the result of systematic, empirical research.

All approaches examined have room to dig deeper and improve the meaningfulness of their results. Amongst the three, Open Doors provides the most current and detailed data on the number of Christians under threat of persecution, and thus it probably comes closest to a reliable approximation of a global total.

6. Interpretation within a broader framework

From this review, we can see which variables methodologically influence the outcomes of any attempt to determine the global magnitude of persecution of Chris-

tians. The meaningfulness of outcomes depends heavily on the choices made concerning how to assess the relevant variables, the respective depth of competence of the researchers, and the reliability of the source data. Beyond that, it is crucial to interpret the outcomes within the broader framework of global Christian and religious demographics and not regard them in isolation.

First, the 2.5 billion Christians of all traditions taken together represent the largest number of adherents of any religion, constituting 32.3 percent of the global population in 2020 (Johnson and Zurlo 2020:6). The number of persecuted Christians must be considered in relation to those global totals.

Second, since 1981 more Christians have been living in the Global South than in the Global North (Johnson 2016:15-17). Thus, we would also expect to find more persecuted Christians in the Global South.

Third, any study of persecution of Christians, as Johnson (2016:27) rightly reminds us, must recognize that the phenomenon is dynamic and not static.

Fourth, due to the greatly unequal overall population sizes of countries and the wide variation in the number of Christians in each country, global estimates of the number of persecuted Christians are largely influenced by estimates of Christian demographics in 7 countries with large Christian populations, each of which have millions of believers under likely threat of persecution. These countries include China, India, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Egypt.⁶ Any substantial uncertainty about the size of the Christian population in these countries will significantly affect the level of certainty regarding the number of Christians under threat of persecution globally.

Fifth, it is helpful to keep in perspective how persecution or violations of freedom of religion or belief affecting Christians are statistically related to those experienced by adherents of other religious faiths globally, if at all possible.

7. Recommendations for users

Users of statistics, including those on global numbers of harassed or persecuted Christians, need to observe multiple cautions. First, they should quote and apply the statistics carefully within the framework of their intended interpretation. Any attempt at simplification usually leads to the pitfall of oversimplification. Lack of attention to the nuance and detail included in the statements made by the various information sources leads readily to misquoting and misrepresenting the results.

Second, readers need to ensure that they understand the limitations inherent in the methodological approach chosen.

⁶ In addition to those named above, according to the estimates by Open Doors, the other countries with large numbers of affected are: Mexico, Vietnam, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Colombia, Kenya and Tanzania.

Third, (professional) users of statistics should examine the derivation of those statistics critically. One needs to look beyond the conclusions communicated by the report authors and examine the data first-hand. Might there possibly be any flaws in the data, methodology or conclusions?

Fourth, critical minds should compare the outcomes of such reports with other comparable sources and use each one only where it is strongest and most meaningful. The results should also be embedded into the bigger picture.

Finally, users should be very careful when attempting to draw their own conclusions from the data, due to the considerations discussed above.

One possible conclusion could be that one or two of every ten Christians live in provinces with at least high levels of persecution. Or, stating the other side of the coin, at least three-quarters of all Christians globally do *not* live in provinces where they might be affected by at least high levels of persecution. What can the remaining 80 to 90 percent of Christians learn from those more under pressure for their faith and what is their responsibility towards their persecuted brethren?

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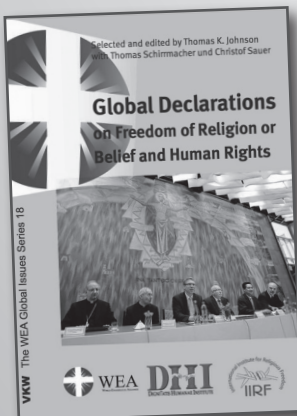
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Global Declarations on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Human Rights



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