

THE UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND  
CENTER FOR NONVIOLENCE  
AND PEACE STUDIES



# Global Rights Project

2023 Annual Report

Trends in human rights practices worldwide



In partnership with CIRIGHTS, the world's  
largest quantitative human rights dataset.

# Acknowledgments

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# Introduction:

## CIRIGHTS and the Global Rights Project

CIRIGHTS is the world's largest quantitative human rights dataset. Led by social scientists and researchers at the University of Rhode Island, Binghamton University, and the University of Connecticut, the CIRIGHTS data project assigns numerical measures for every internationally recognized human right for all countries of the world. Updated on a continual basis, CIRIGHTS currently comprises global human rights data spanning the past 40 years.

We believe that human rights data can play an important role in educating the public about what obligations states have to their citizens. Unless people demand human rights, governments are unlikely to provide them. As such, it is imperative that people understand what human rights are (and what they are not), what different rights entail, and whether governments are meeting international human rights standards. If we understand what rights look like around the world, we can craft policy to improve rights where interventions will be most effective. In addition, citizens can understand what rights look like in their country and make demands of their governments to improve rights.

Numerical measures for individual rights in the CIRIGHTS database are generated using a peer-reviewed, replicable, and transparent approach. Researchers trained in content analysis, a methodology in social science to convert text into numerical data, assign scores based on data from sources including U.S.

Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, the Amnesty International Annual Report, the Human Rights Watch Annual Report, and the Indigenous World Report, among others.

More information about the CIRIGHTS methodology, rights definitions, and the complete CIRIGHTS data file can be found on our website, [CIRIGHTS.com](https://CIRIGHTS.com).

"Human rights are rights we have simply because we exist as human beings—they are not granted by any state. These universal rights are inherent to us all, regardless of nationality, sex, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, language, or any other status. They range from the most fundamental—the right to life—to those that make life worth living, such as the rights to food, education, work, health, and liberty."

—United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

## Global Rights Project

The Global Rights Project (GRIP) is an initiative of the University of Rhode Island that analyzes CIRIGHTS data with the aims of spotting trends in human rights practices and identifying the drivers of those trends. The result of that analysis is this annual report, the ultimate aim of which is to explore ways of improving human rights worldwide.

The annual report also introduces GRIP grades, which evaluate all countries of the world on their overall human rights practices based on a set of 25 individual rights. By assigning countries yearly scores on multiple rights, we can predict where rights are likely to decline and intervene before further human rights violations occur. We can also identify policies that do not work and switch to policies that may be more effective. We can see which countries have improved or declined the most and focus case-study research on these countries to identify the causes of these shifts.

Incorporated in GRIP scores are physical integrity rights (e.g., torture, extrajudicial killings), empowerment rights (e.g., free speech and press, religious freedom), worker rights (e.g., unionization, child labor), and justice rights (e.g., independent judiciary, fair trial).

We believe that including a broad set of rights in our GRIP grades is important. Our research to date suggests that the international human rights regime and human rights scholars have focused far too narrowly on state-sponsored violence, while ignoring a large set of other human rights. Leaders are aware of which rights are commonly measured and monitored, and some are willing to pay high costs to protect those rights (or at least appear to protect them). But there's far less incentive to protect rights that are not commonly measured and reported. Leaders often opt to reduce violations of rights for which they are "named and shamed," while continuing or even increasing violations of underreported rights. Progress in overall respect for human rights can only be made if we measure a large number of rights and treat them as universal, indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated.

We hope that teachers, journalists, policymakers, NGOs, activists, and scholars will use CIRIGHTS data and the GRIP annual report to help improve human rights around the globe.

## Executive Summary

This report introduces Global Rights Project (GRIP) grades, which assess each country in the world on its overall human rights practices. GRIP grades are based on the extent to which governments respect a suite of 25 physical integrity, empowerment, worker, and justice rights rights (see page 8 for a full list of rights that comprise GRIP grades). Numerical measures for each right are based on the CIRIGHTS dataset.

For 2023, we find that Finland has the best human rights in the world, receiving an overall grade of 98 (A). Iran has the worst rights with a grade of 0 (F). A full list of GRIP grades for every country in the world can be found in the section of this report titled “Regional Human Rights Rankings.” Below, we show the eight best and eight worst countries in the world for human rights.

<b>Best Human Rights in 2023 (out of 100)</b>	<b>Worst Human Rights in 2023 (out of 100)</b>
Finland – 98 (A)	Iran – 0 (F)
Australia – 92 (A-)	Syria – 6 (F)
Estonia – 92 (A-)	Yemen – 8 (F)
Sweden – 92 (A-)	Venezuela – 12 (F)
Austria – 90 (A-)	Egypt – 14 (F)
Iceland – 90 (A-)	Iraq – 14 (F)
Monaco – 90 (A-)	South Sudan – 14 (F)
San Marino – 90 (A-)	Burundi – 16 (F), Myanmar – 16 (F), Saudi Arabia – 16 (F)

### Spotlight on the United States

We give the United States a GRIP grade of 64 (D), ranking 59th in the world. When comparing the U.S. to its regional neighbors in the Americas, it ranks 14th of 31 countries. It is the sixth worst scoring country among OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries which are sometimes taken to represent “developed” countries.

We note a downward trend in human rights respect over the last few years in the U.S., as well as the need for more data on U.S. human rights practices.

## Spotlight on COVID-19 and human rights

In this report, we provide a spotlight on human rights practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, showing a decline in a large number of rights since the pandemic's onset. Specifically, comparing the two years before and after the onset of the pandemic, we find marked declines in rights related to human trafficking, domestic movement, unionization, and electoral self-determination among others.

## Women's rights and NGO freedom

We also explore two new rights we have recently introduced to the CIRIGHTS data project: nongovernmental organization (NGO) freedom and women's social rights. We explain what these rights are, and what common violations look like, in the pages that follow.

## More trends and facts

- » Global human rights, on average, have declined in the 21st century.
- » Less than 20% of countries score in the A or B range (80–100).
- » The global median human rights score is an F (50).
- » Uzbekistan is the most-improved human rights country in the 21st century.
- » Nicaragua has experienced the worst decline in human rights in the 21st century.

Democracy is one of the strongest predictors of human rights around the globe. Our data suggest that the more democratic a country is, the better its human rights practices are (on average). Despite the overall trend, some democracies have poor human rights records (such as India in 2023 with a score of F). Some autocracies have good human rights records (such as Monaco in 2023 with an A-).

Population is also a strong predictor of human rights respect. The larger a country's population, the worse its human rights record tends to be (on average). Except for Japan and the U.S. (which both score a D in our 2023 rankings), the most populous countries score an F in overall respect for human rights.

Comparing which rights are the most and least protected around the world reveals interesting patterns:

- » The six most-protected human rights are all civil and political rights. (Please see the section entitled “Which Rights Are Most Protected” for an in-depth description of the rights we measure and the categories they fit into.)
- » Freedom from enforced disappearances is the most-protected human right—65% of countries fully respect this right.
- » The six least-protected human rights around the world are all labor rights.
- » Freedom from torture is one of the least-protected rights, with torture occurring in 75% of countries around the world.
- » Only 17 countries fully respect the right to collective labor bargaining in our most recent year of data.
- » Child labor occurs in about 87% of countries, with widespread violations in a third of the world.



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## Section 1: The Global Rights Project (GRIP)

In this section we grade human rights practices for all countries of the world, spot trends in human rights protection around the world, and identify the factors that predict better or worse human rights protection.

### Background

Charles Humana’s World Human Rights Guide aimed to measure respect for all human rights.<sup>1</sup> Humana created the first human rights “report card” for most of the world’s countries in the 1980s. Many of his scores were measured subjectively, and subsequent scholars could not replicate his findings. Humana stopped producing scores in the 1990s, and, until today, we have not had reliable data to rank countries on their overall human rights practices. Since then, we have learned a great deal about how to measure human rights, and human rights data today are far more transparent and scientifically collected than they were in the past.

In the years after Humana produced his original report cards, human rights data collection became more narrowly focused on physical integrity rights than empowerment, worker, and justice rights (Note: physical integrity rights refer to extrajudicial killings, torture, political imprisonment, and disappearances). While focusing on physical integrity rights has allowed us to learn a great deal about the causes and consequences of state-sponsored violence, it has also created a paucity of information about respect for the large number of other human rights. In order to gather more information about diverse types of human rights CIRIGHTS aims to measure all internationally recognized human rights.

### The 2023 Global Rights Project Report

This report introduces the CIRIGHTS Global Rights Project (GRIP), which ranks government respect of 25 human rights for all countries of the world.<sup>2</sup> Our GRIP project assigns each country a score of 0 to 100 on its human rights performance.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Humana, C. (1986). “World Human Rights Guide.” New York: Facts on File.

2 For all of the data in this report we use the most up to date information available in the dataset. See note at the end of the report for more details.

3 Humana assigned scores to countries ranging from 0 to 100. His approach inspired our researchers to follow the 0–100 scale.

This 2023 Global Rights Project annual report includes the 25 different human rights listed in the table directly below.

TABLE 1

<b>Physical Integrity</b>	<b>Empowerment</b>	<b>Worker Rights</b>	<b>Justice Rights</b>
Disappearances	Assembly & Association	Unionization	Independent Judiciary
Extrajudicial Killings	Foreign Movement	Collective Bargaining	Fair Trial
Political Imprisonment	Domestic Movement	Working Hours	NGO Freedom
Torture	Free Speech and Press	Forced Labor	
Atrocities	Self-Determination	Child labor	
	Religious Freedom	Minimum Wage	
	Women's Economic Rights	Safe Working Conditions	
	Women's Political Rights	Human Trafficking	
	Women's Social Rights		

Each right is scored on a scale from ZERO (0) to TWO (2). A country receives a ZERO if widespread violations of a right occur in that country during a calendar year. A score of ONE indicates the occurrence of some violations of a right in that country in a calendar year. A score of TWO means there was no evidence of violations of a right in the country in a calendar year.<sup>4</sup>

To create the index, we total the scores for all 25 rights by adding them together. Then, we multiply each score by two, to produce a score that ranges from 0 to 100. A score of 100 indicates full respect for all human rights, while a score of 0 indicates that all rights in a country are violated.<sup>5</sup> Since human rights are interdependent, interrelated, and indivisible, we opt to treat all rights equally (in other words, no right “weighs more” or more heavily factors into our analyses). These numerical scores as numerical grades can be converted to letter grades, as follows: A (94–100 points); A– (90–93); B+ (87–89); B (83–86); B– (80–82); C+ (77–79); C (73–76); C– (70–72); D (60–69); and F (0–59). As you will see below, most countries of the world receive failing grades during most years.

<sup>4</sup> We interpret scores of TWO as cases where international human rights reports have not identified violations.

<sup>5</sup> All data is biased (has errors) and so we would caution readers not to place too much emphasis on small differences among countries. More advanced statistical techniques would add confidence intervals around these predictions and give a possible range of values.

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We created a simple additive index, because it is easy to understand while generating rankings that correspond with journalistic and scholarly reports of human rights practices. Our hope is that this index will help contribute to a discussion among journalists and scholars of human rights that amplifies what we consider to be human rights, by moving beyond physical integrity rights. All of the data we use to create this index are publicly available, so anyone can create their own index (e.g., add and subtract rights, weight some rights as most important based on their own judgment, etc.).

Beyond that, we hope that the existence of these scores will stimulate discussion about human rights in high school and college classrooms; facilitate more research into why governments respect or violate human rights (generally and specifically); and lead to an amplified evaluation of the effects of policy interventions on the human rights practices of governments. To cite one policy-relevant example, the United Nations recently decided to send peacekeepers to Haiti, to assist the Haitian government in mitigating violence and social unrest. Our scores can be used to evaluate such policies' effectiveness, based on human rights records within and across countries over time. In doing so, analyzing this information can help us to formulate more effective policy in the future.

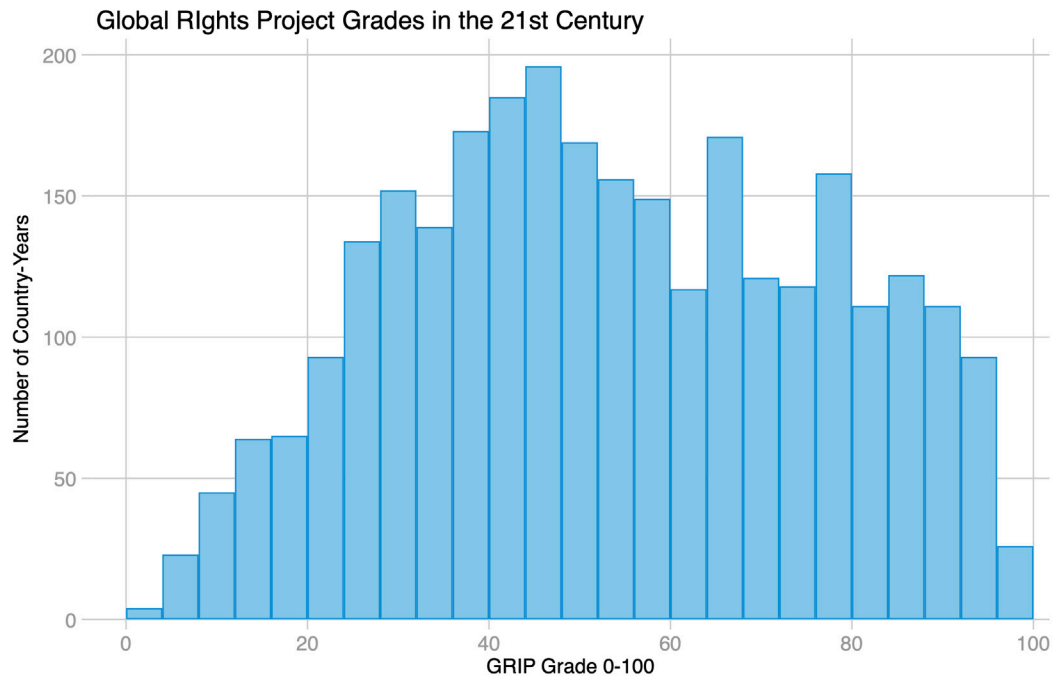
## Human rights around the world

The histogram on page 10 shows the distribution of human rights scores for 189 countries' scores in the 21st century. We might treat this index as a numerical grade if an "assignment" for governments were to protect the rights of their citizens. The grade is based on our 25 rights.

In terms of trends across the 21st century, our data reflects Iran as having the lowest respect for human rights, scoring a 0 in 2021. In contrast, Denmark in 2013 and Norway in 2009 demonstrated the highest level of respect for human rights, as they scored a perfect 100 on our index in those years.

The median score in this scoring scheme is 50. A country would earn a 50 if it had some violations of all rights in the index. This means that most countries receive a failing grade on our index. The bottom 10% of countries score a 22 or lower. The top 10% of countries score an 88 or higher.

FIGURE 1



A country's score on our index is generally representative of what human rights look like in a country for its most vulnerable citizens. That said, it is important to note that it is not a perfect measure of government progress: We are missing some rights, and we hold all governments to the same standards. Thus, using our data alongside other pertinent indicators from individual countries would be necessary before making policy changes.

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## Comparing 2023 to the rest of the 21st century: What does the world's respect for human rights look like through this lens?

### Summary of human rights grades for the 21st century<sup>6</sup>

- » F–60% of countries
- » D–12% of countries
- » C–12% of countries
- » B–10% of countries
- » A–6% of countries

### Summary of human rights grades for 2023

- » F–63% of countries
- » D–11% of countries
- » C–9% of countries
- » B–14% of countries
- » A–5% of countries

These scores tell us that governments are failing to protect human rights. In fact, a large portion of the world is failing at protecting rights, historically and today. Less than one-fifth—or 20%—of countries score in the A or B range (90–100 or 80 to 89, respectively) in the 21st century.

Notably, human rights scores have remained largely stable over the past 17 years, suggesting that human rights have not significantly improved or declined in recent times. From a pro-human rights perspective, this is not encouraging for two main reasons. First, in recent years, the number of human rights treaties has increased; and second, our abilities to identify and document violations have improved.

Our 2023 rankings compare 195 countries. In 2023, our data show that Finland has the best human rights in the world, with a score of 98 out of 100. Sweden and Australia are tied for second-best, both with scores of 92 out of 100. On the opposite end of the spectrum, in 2023, Yemen has the third-worst score at 8 out of 100. Syria has the second-worst score in 2023, with a total of 6 out of 100. Iran has the worst score with a 0 out of 100.

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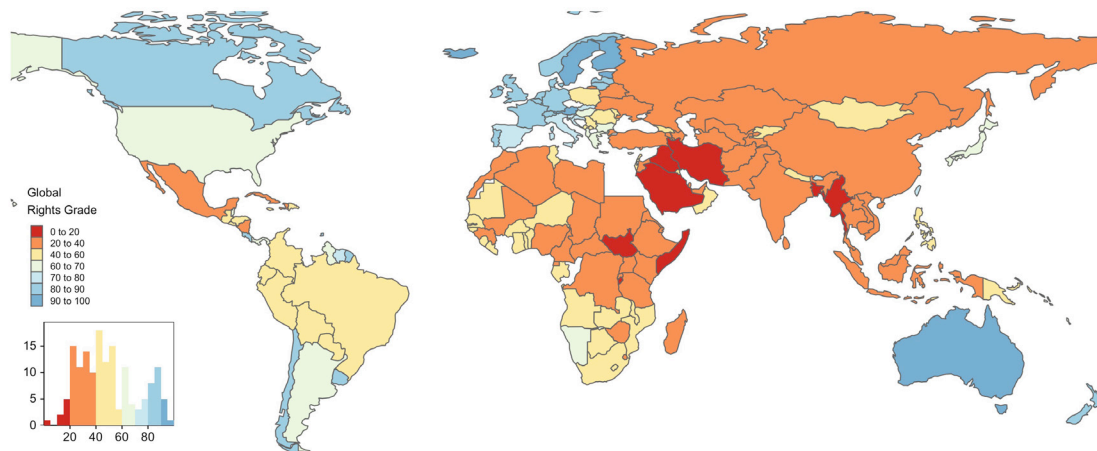
<sup>6</sup> Rounding causes the percentages to total 99%.

TABLE 2

Best Human Rights in 2023 (out of 100)	Worst Human Rights in 2023 (out of 100)
Finland – 98 (A)	Iran – 0 (F)
Australia – 92 (A-)	Syria – 6 (F)
Estonia – 92 (A-)	Yemen – 8 (F)
Sweden – 92 (A-)	Venezuela – 12 (F)
Austria – 90 (A-)	Egypt – 14 (F)
Iceland – 90 (A-)	Iraq – 14 (F)
Monaco – 90 (A-)	South Sudan – 14 (F)
San Marino – 90 (A-)	Burundi – 16 (F), Myanmar – 16 (F), Saudi Arabia – 16 (F)

Our data suggest that regime type matters for the occurrence of human rights abuses globally: Most of the countries with the best respect for human rights are democracies, while all of the countries with the lowest respect for human rights are autocracies. This reflects one of the strongest findings in the human rights literature: Democratic countries tend to have better respect for human rights (all else equal), compared to non-democratic countries (e.g., Poe, Tate, and Keith 1999). Please see page 10 of this report for a detailed discussion of regime type and respect for human rights.

FIGURE 2



The map of our Global Rights Grades for 2023 shows what scores look like around the world. One thing we can pull out of maps like this is that respect for human rights tends to cluster geographically. If a country has neighbors that respect human rights they are more likely to respect human rights themselves. Conversely, when located near other countries which violate human rights a country is more likely to violate rights also. The differences between regions are much larger than the differences within regions. This suggests that when evaluating the human rights practices of a country we may want to look at how their neighbors are doing as a point of comparison. At the end of this report we highlight regional rankings of scores which further highlight this point. However, more research is needed into how big a role geography plays in human rights protection and what kinds of improvements we should or can expect from a country surrounded by countries which do not respect human rights.

## Improvements and reversals

On page 12, we looked at the countries with the best and worst rankings for 2023. It is also worth examining how human rights have changed over time. We can examine countries where human rights have significantly improved for policy lessons that might be applied to other countries. Alternatively, we can look at countries where human rights have declined and try to understand why.

### Most improved:

- » Uzbekistan +24 (on a 0–100 scale)
- » Bhutan +22
- » Latvia +18
- » Ethiopia +16
- » Lithuania +16
- » United Kingdom +16

In terms of the most-improved countries, Uzbekistan improved the most over the 21st century, and it started in the bottom 5%. Even countries with very poor human rights can significantly improve over a relatively short period of time. Bhutan had the second highest positive change and moved from a middling score to scoring in the top 25% of countries in the world. Improving human rights respect is therefore possible, even if a country starts with middling human rights grades. Latvia displayed the third-largest change, and it improved from having a barely passing grade to scoring in the top 10% of countries in the world. All of this is extremely encouraging, because it shows that regardless of where a country starts, it is possible to significantly improve their human rights by improving state practices in a short period of time.

## Greatest rights reversals:

- » Nicaragua -36 (out of 100)
- » Burundi, Egypt, Yemen -26
- » Venezuela -22
- » Papua New Guinea -20

Nicaragua declined the most in the 21st century. Nicaragua started in the 60th percentile and now is in the bottom 20% of countries in the world. In recent years, Nicaragua has experienced democratic backsliding, significant violations of free speech and respect for nongovernmental organization (NGO) freedom, and attacks on academic freedom, labor unions, and anyone critical of the government, as well as increasing state violence that amounts to atrocities. From a pro-democracy perspective, it is safe to call the current situation in Nicaragua a serious cause for concern.

Burundi, Egypt, and Yemen tie for second, in terms of greatest rights reversals in the 21st century. While the Arab Spring in Egypt led to the overthrow of the dictator Hosni Mubarak, human rights conditions today are significantly worse than when he was in power. The Arab Spring in Yemen led to a protracted civil war that has caused a humanitarian crisis that continues today. Burundi has faced economic and political crises in recent years and declined from a democracy towards an authoritarian country in the last two decades. The government has increasingly violated several human rights, particularly against those who are critical of the government and its policies. Economic and political crises as well as conflict tend to significantly undermine human rights respect. In all of the cases above, the countries experienced democratic decline.

## Democracy and human rights respect

Democracy is one of the strongest predictors of governments' respect for human rights.<sup>7</sup>

“Democracy” is shorthand for the presence of a democratic political system, commonly referred to as electoral democracy. Under democracy, people have the legal right and the ability in practice to change the laws and officials that govern them through participating in periodic, free, and fair elections held on the basis of universal adult suffrage.

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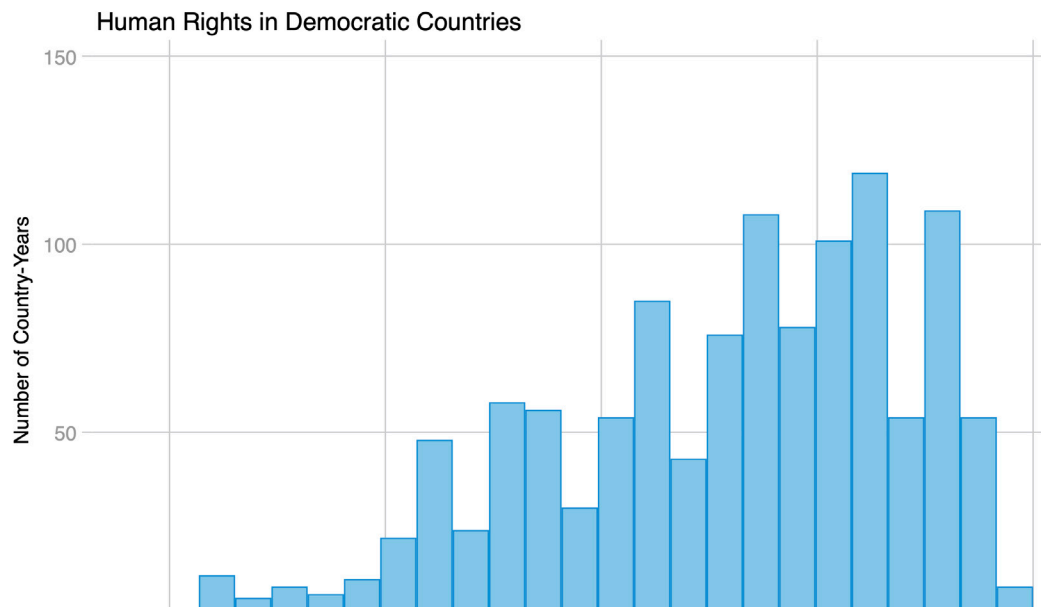
7 Poe, S. C., Tate, C. N., & Keith, L. C. (1999). Repression of the human right to personal integrity revisited: A global cross-national study covering the years 1976–1993. *International studies quarterly*, 43(2), 291-313.



We could choose a more expansive definition of democracy such as liberal democracy, which also includes many of the rights in the CIRIGHTS dataset, such as an independent judiciary, the right to a fair trial, free speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religion. However, using all of these rights in our definition would be problematic, because they also appear in the index. We would be using variables to predict themselves, which would make it hard to sort out how much of what we can explain is caused by democracy.<sup>8</sup>

Here, we opt to separate countries into three categories based on their political systems: democratic, anocratic, and autocratic. Democratic countries are those with free and fair elections with universal suffrage. Democracies score a TWO on our electoral self-determination variable. Anocratic countries are sometimes called semi-democratic, as they tend to have some aspects of democracy and some aspects of autocracy. They may have partially free and fair elections, or exclude an ethnic group from participating. Finally, autocratic countries have political systems where elections are not free and fair.

FIGURE 3



<sup>8</sup> We keep electoral self-determination in the index for simplicity sake. However, removing it from the index and rescaling it based on 24 rights (each worth 4.16 repeating) provides the same insights here and in the empirical model below.

FIGURE 4

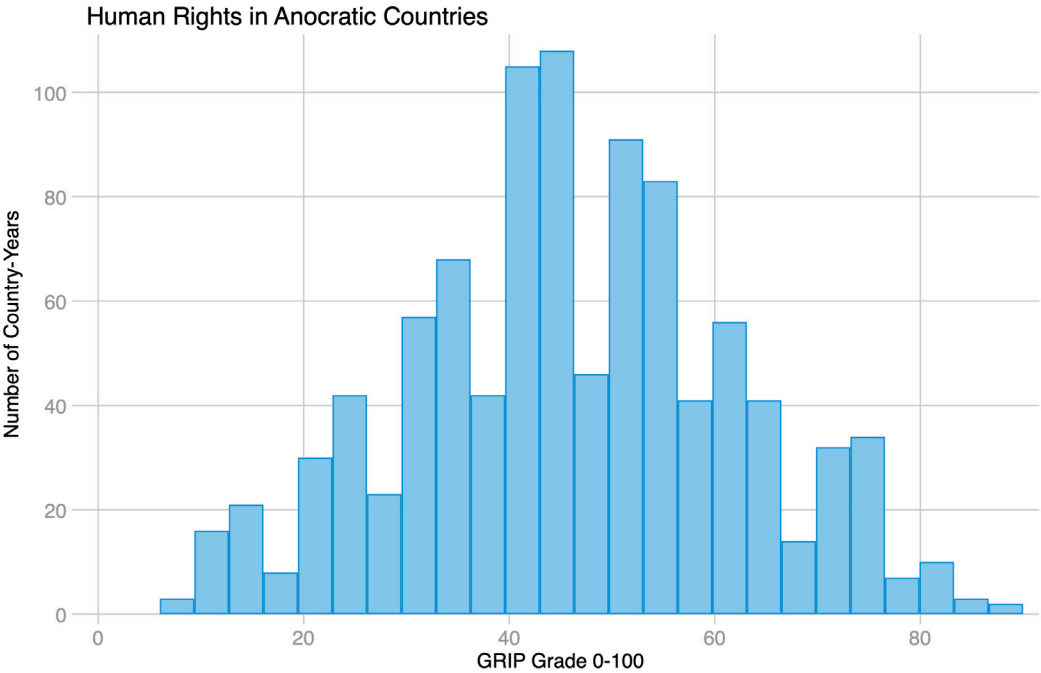
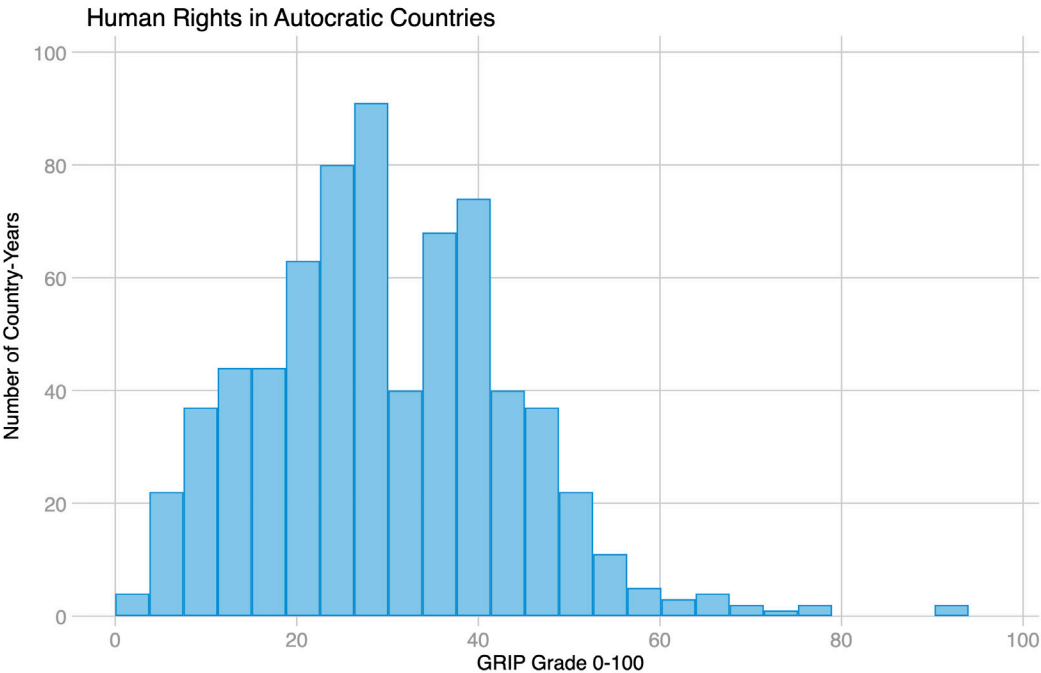


FIGURE 5



As the graphs on the previous pages demonstrate, democracies, anocracies, and autocracies display very different levels of human rights respect. We examine this relationship in two ways. First, we consider the mean (average) global rights score for each group. Second, we add a confidence interval created using the standard deviation, a measure of how dispersed (i.e., how tightly clustered) the data is around the mean (the average). If we add one standard deviation to the mean and subtract it from the mean, we get a range that incorporates 68% of cases for that group. Democracies have an average score of 71 and a standard deviation of 17. This means democracies tend to have a human rights score between 54 and 88. Anocracies have an average score of 46 and a standard deviation of 16. This means that anocracies tend to have a human rights score between 30 and 62. Autocracies have an average score of 30 and a standard deviation of 14. This means autocracies tend to have a human rights score between 16 and 44.

Within each regime type (democracy, anocracy, autocracy), there is quite a lot of variation in governments' respect for human rights. This variation tends to be caused by other factors, such as wealth, economic growth, population size, population demographics, geographic region, and how a country handled the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to consider trends in addition to regime type; figuring out how to improve human rights in a country is complicated and requires policymakers to do more than improve elections, though this is often a good start.

Some democracies have very poor human rights. India, for example, scores a 32 in our 2023 rankings, even though it is a democracy. This is well below the expected range of 54–88. On the other hand, some autocracies display very high levels of respect for human rights. Monaco is a constitutional monarchy and, yet, scores a 90 in our 2023 rankings, putting it in the top eight countries in the world. This is well outside the expected range for an autocracy. Regime type is a good predictor of human rights. Nevertheless, even with democratic institutions, countries can fail to protect the rights of their citizens. Similarly, even without democratic institutions, autocracies can protect the rights of their citizens.

## Large population countries and respect for human rights

Population size is a strong predictor of human rights respect. There is a consensus in empirical human rights research that countries with large populations have lower respect for human rights than less populous countries.<sup>9</sup> In addition, research suggests that as a country's population grows, its human rights tend to decline. There are two links that connect large populations and less respect for human rights: first, having a large population creates more opportunities for governments to violate human rights than in countries with smaller populations. Second, large populations have greater demand for resources than smaller populations. This relationship amplifies when a country experiences growth: Population growth consumes the benefits of economic growth by augmenting citizens' demand for any resources countries develop or discover.

As the global population continues to grow, we may see a subsequent decline in human rights that states have little ability to alter. The world population has exceeded 8 billion people and any efforts to reduce fertility today would not yield meaningful results for several decades. If population has a large impact on human rights, then governments and those interested in protecting human rights should intervene to mitigate the negative consequences of population growth on human rights.

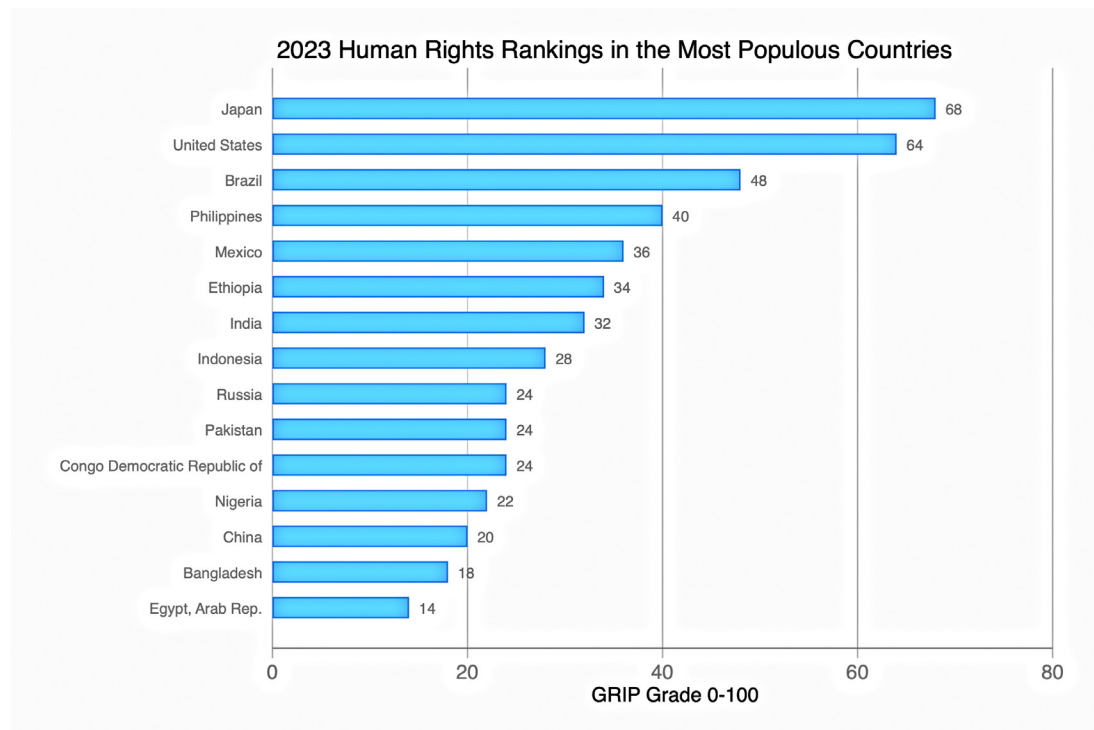
An improvement in human rights respect among a few of the most populous countries could increase global respect for most people on the planet. If we look at just the 14 most populous countries in the world (excluding the U.S.), we can evaluate what human rights respect looks like for around 60% of the people on the planet. Policies that improve human rights in these countries would have the greatest impact on global human rights respect.

The median human rights score for high population countries is 28, which is almost half of the rest of the world (where the median score is 50). None of the highest-population countries score higher than a D for our 2023 rankings. Of the 14 countries below, only Japan and the United States score a "passing" grade if assessed on an A–F scale. The world's two most populous countries, China and India, score a 20 and a 32, respectively—well below the global average. India has the second-lowest human rights score among democracies. China has the twelfth-lowest human rights score among autocracies (out of 66 countries). Improving rights in these two countries alone would improve human rights conditions for about a third of the world's population.

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9 Poë, S. C., Tate, C. N., & Keith, L. C. (1999). Repression of the human right to personal integrity revisited: A global cross-national study covering the years 1976–1993. *International studies quarterly*, 43(2), 291-313.

FIGURE 6



## What explains respect for human rights?

Now that we have data on the overall human rights conditions around the world, we can begin to examine what causes human rights respect to increase or decrease. If we take all of the scores we have for the 21st century, we can build a statistical model that seeks to explain GRIP grades. Using regression analysis, a powerful statistical technique that allows us to determine if a change in one variable (e.g., regime type, population, etc.) leads to a significant change in another variable (e.g., human rights respect). This technique also allows us to look at the effect of a variable (like regime type) while controlling for (holding constant) the effect of the other variables in the model. This allows us to produce more statistically reliable estimates, since we can attempt to control for other explanations by treating the other variables as-if equal (as if at their baselines, to test the effect of our independent variable of interest on our dependent variable). If we still see a significant effect of a change in one variable on a change in another, we can be more confident that the explanatory variable has a causal effect on our response variable; in this case, human rights respect.

First, we need to identify the factors that are likely to affect human rights. Human rights research is a valuable resource here as many scholars have spent decades

trying to answer this exact question. As noted, regime type (democracy, anocracy, autocracy) and population size are two of the strongest predictors of human rights. So we will examine regime type: autocracies, anocracies, and democracies. We also include an indicator of population size.<sup>10</sup>

Another strong indicator of human rights respect is the “youth bulge,” which occurs as the proportion of a country’s population between ages 15–24 increases.<sup>11</sup> Countries with large youth bulges tend to have higher levels of unemployment, political violence, and more human rights violations. Level of development is also important. Wealthier countries have more resources to protect the rights of their citizens. GDP growth also produces additional resources, which could be put towards improving human rights. We include a measure of GDP per capita and GDP growth which are often used to capture the economic situation of a country.

There is also evidence that a country’s neighbors can affect their human rights. If a country is surrounded by repressive countries, they tend to have worse human rights, than if their neighbors have high levels of respect for human rights. We call these “neighborhood effects,” and since a country cannot change their neighbors, we can think of this as a factor beyond a country’s control that nonetheless may affect their human rights. We include variables for the region of the world that a country appears in. Finally, we include an indicator of time. This will tell us whether human rights are improving or declining over time.

The results from this model are shown on page 22. The vertical axis (y-axis) shows the variable and its effect on human rights. The horizontal axis (x-axis) shows the size of the effect. All of the variables have been standardized so that we can see the effect of moving from the lowest value to the highest value.

For regime type, the graph only includes anocracies and democracies. This is because we need something to compare them to. So the effect size tells us what happens to a country’s human rights score if it went from an autocracy to another

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10 We log the population, and GDP variables to ensure they are normally distributed. This helps reduce the error in our predictions since some gdp and population scores are vastly different from others. India and China have populations in the billions while the next largest population is much smaller than that.

11 Nordås, R., & Davenport, C. (2013). Fight the youth: Youth bulges and state repression. *American Journal of Political Science*, 57(4), 926-940.

regime type. For the same reason the Americas are not included in the graph. So the graph helps to identify the gap between human rights in the Americas and human rights in Europe, Africa, Oceania, Asia and the Middle East.

If any of the points cross the dotted line we interpret this as telling us that the variable does not have a significant effect on human rights. GDP growth for example crosses the dotted line. This tells us that our best estimate of GDP growth's effect on human rights could be positive or negative. So we cannot say with any confidence how GDP growth would affect human rights.

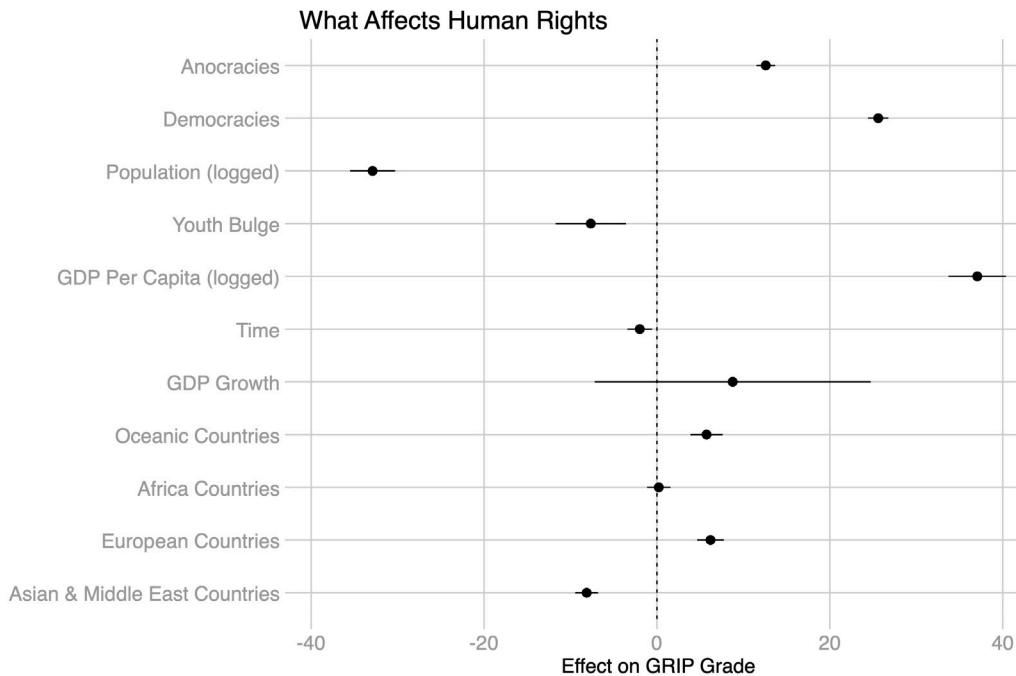
## Findings

Our first finding is that regime type has a large and positive effect on human rights. We find that if a country were to move from autocracy to an anocracy (or semi-democracy), its human rights score would increase by about 12–14 points on a 0–100 scale. If an autocracy were to become a democracy its human rights score would increase between 24 and 27 points on a 0–100 scale. This is a large effect and helps explain why democracy is such an important part of human rights protection.

If a country's population went from the smallest country to the largest country, its human rights score would decline by 30–35 points on a 0–100 scale. This is larger than the effect of regime type. However, shifting from a lesser-populated country to a most-populated country is also less likely to occur in the real world (though it is not impossible: major shifts in population may occur due to economic growth or as a result of war, health crises, or natural disasters). One implication of this finding is that all else equal, smaller countries will have better human rights respect than their larger peers. It also suggests that as a country's population grows, its human rights may decline. This is particularly true if the country develops a larger youth bulge. A large youth bulge can reduce human rights respect between 4 and 12 points on a 0–100 scale. Thus, beyond population growth, the share of youths in a country is an important factor in explaining human rights conditions.

Wealth plays a large factor in human rights protection, but economic growth does not. Moving from the poorest country to the richest country would increase human rights by 34–40 points on a 0–100 scale.

FIGURE 7



Neighborhood effects also play an important role. For example, Oceanic and European countries have significantly higher human rights respect than countries in the Americas. If a country were located in Oceania we could expect its human rights to increase by between 4 and 8 points compared to if it was located in the Americas. For Europe this number is between 5 and 8 points. On the other hand, countries located in Asia and the Middle East tend to have scores between 7 and 9 points lower than countries in the Americas. Human rights in the Americas and human rights in Africa are roughly comparable as the estimates cross the dotted line.

Finally, we find that human rights have declined by 1–3 points over the course of the 21st century. A decline in human rights is always a cause for concern for citizens' quality of life. If human rights are in decline, democracy is declining (our scores indicate a decline in electoral self-determination in the 21st century), and inequality is increasing we can expect a rise of conflict within and between countries. So our 2023 findings indicate that global human rights protection is on the decline.



## Major takeaways:

- » Democracy significantly improves human rights. Democracies have a human rights score that is 24–27 points higher than autocracies.
- » Small-population countries tend to have better human rights. The smallest countries score 30–35 points higher than the largest countries.
- » Countries with a large youth bulge (a percentage of the population that is age 15–24) score 4–12 points lower than countries with a small youth bulge.
- » Wealthy countries have better human rights. The poorest countries have a human rights score that is 34–40 points lower than the richest countries.
- » In recent years, Europe and Oceania have significantly better human rights respect than countries in the Americas.
- » In recent years, Asian and Middle Eastern countries have significantly worse human rights respect than countries in the Americas.
- » In recent years, countries in the Americas and Africa display similar levels of human rights respect.
- » Human rights are declining in the 21st century.

## Two groups of rights

In order to answer the question about which rights are most and least respected, it is helpful to sort rights into two groups:

- » Civil and political rights
- » Economic, social, and cultural rights

See chart on page 25, the CIRIGHTS project finds that the rights that are most protected around the world include a large number of civil and political rights. The rights that are least protected include a large number of economic, social, and cultural rights. The human rights regime appears to be doing a better job at protecting first-generation rights compared to second-generation rights.

One of the most common debates regarding economic and social rights is whether they are justiciable (can be dealt with within the judicial system). Critics argue that because it is not clear who the duty bearer is responsible for providing these rights, they cannot be human rights. Furthermore, because states have such different resources it is unrealistic to imagine poor states can provide many of these rights. However, many economic and social rights, in fact, are justiciable. States have labor laws that protect economic, social, and cultural rights such as guarantees for safe working conditions, limits on hours worked, women's economic and social rights, restrictions on forced and child labor, the right to unionize, and the right to bargain collectively. Individuals can go to court in order to have violations of these rights remedied. States are tasked with the progressive realization of these rights, meaning that regardless of a country's wealth they should strive to continually improve these rights to the best of their ability.

## Which rights are most protected?

We start this section by trying to answer the question: Which human rights are most/least protected around the world? By examining data on a large number of human rights, for every country in the world, this section highlights some trends in global human rights respect. By identifying the rights that are most protected, we can gain insight into what are the most effective means for promoting human rights globally. By identifying the rights that are least protected, we can highlight areas where the human rights regime seems to be falling short. These rights point to areas where the human rights regime could have the greatest return on investment for policies aimed at improving human rights for the most people.

Civil and political rights are sometimes referred to as **first generation rights** or **negative rights**. These include rights that protect the physical integrity and security of the person and those associated with participation in political life. Many of these rights are outlined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Economic, social, and cultural rights are sometimes referred to as **second-generation rights** or **positive rights**. These include rights that fulfill our basic needs as human beings, rights that promote equality between different groups and cultures, and rights that provide social welfare and equal participation in economic and social life. Many of these rights are outlined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

TABLE 3

<b>Table 1. Global Average Rights Protection</b>	<b>Rights Rank</b>	<b>Global Mean 2023 (0-2)</b>
Disappearances	1	1.56
Foreign Movement	2	1.50*
Political Imprisonment	3	1.37
Domestic Movement	4	1.35
Extrajudicial Killings	5	1.34
Women's Political Rights	6	1.23*
NGO Freedom	7	1.21
Freedom of Association & Assembly	8	1.11
Freedom of Speech	9	1.09
Women's Social Rights	10	1.08
Religious Freedom	11	1.03*
Electoral Self-determination	12	1.04
Women's Economic Rights	13	0.94*
Forced Labor	14	0.89
Independent Judiciary	15	0.87
Torture	16	0.85
Minimum Wage	17	0.83
Right to a Fair Trial	18	0.80
Child Labor	19	0.79
Union Rights	20	0.72
Reasonable Limitations of Work Hours	21	0.70
Safe Working Conditions	22	0.58
Collective Bargaining	23	0.57
Human Trafficking	24	0.43

One way to examine the question of which human rights are the most protected globally, is to look at the average level of respect for 24 rights globally. Meaningful comparisons would be much more difficult if we pulled data about different rights from different sources. In order to avoid all of the problems that come from comparing rights measured in fundamentally different ways, we would need to employ a set of highly technical and complex statistical techniques. However, because we measure our rights using the same methodology and can examine

each right on the same measurement scale (a lot of violations, some violations, no violations), we can compare respect for rights in an accessible way. The table above examines the average respect for each right in our 2023 ranking.

All of the rights above are measured on an ordinal ZERO to TWO scale. A score of ZERO indicates widespread violations in a country in a calendar year. A score of ONE indicates some violations in a country in a calendar year. A TWO score indicates no evidence of violations in the reports we examined in a country in a calendar year. A global average above ONE suggests that global respect is closer to full respect than to no respect. A score below ONE indicates that global respect is closer to no respect than full respect. We rank each of the 24 rights in terms of their global level of respect in table 1 below.

Clear patterns emerge from this ranking. The top 6 (most-respected) rights are all civil and political rights. The bottom 6 least respected rights are rights associated with labor conditions or labor violations. The top six most respected rights are 1) freedom from enforced disappearances, 2) freedom of foreign movement, 3) freedom from political imprisonment, 4) freedom of domestic movement, 5) freedom from extrajudicial killings, and 6) women's political rights. The bottom six (least respected rights) are 1) child labor, 2) the right to unionize, 3) reasonable limitations on work hours, 4) safe working conditions, 5) collective bargaining rights, and 6) human trafficking. This suggests the human rights regime would have the greatest impact if policymakers were to focus on improving the enforcement of economic rights.

Freedom from enforced disappearances. We find that freedom from enforced disappearances is the human right that is the most protected globally in 2023. The average global protection is 1.56, with 65% of countries scoring TWO (no evidence of violations in the reports we score). There are only 17 countries that score a ZERO (widespread violations): Bangladesh, Burundi, Cameroon, China, El Salvador, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Mexico, Nigeria, North Korea, Russia, South Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, and Uganda. All of these are non-democratic countries according to our electoral self-determination variable.

Right to collective bargaining. Global respect for collective bargaining is poor in 2023. The average global protection is 0.57, with 51% of countries scoring a ZERO (widespread violations). There are only 16 countries that score a TWO (no evidence of violations in the reports we score): Austria, Bhutan, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Kiribati, South Korea, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovak Republic, Sweden, and Switzerland. Fourteen of these countries are democratic according to our electoral self-determination variable (with the

exception of Cyprus and Slovak Republic). Similarly, child labor is one of the most violated rights around the world with about 87% of countries violating this right in recent years, and a third of countries experiencing widespread violations.

We can also examine patterns within groups of rights. When examining physical integrity rights (disappearances, killings, political imprisonment, and torture), torture emerges as an outlier. While the other three all fall in the top five in terms of global respect, torture is quite commonly employed around the world. About 75% of countries engaged in torture during 2023.

When examining women's rights, we see a similar trend for global respect as we do for the full set of human rights. Women's political rights (global average of 1.23) are the sixth most respected right. Women's social rights (global average of 1.08) are the tenth most respected right, and women's economic rights respect (global average of 0.94) is the 13th most respected right. Respect for women's rights mirrors respect for many other human rights whereby civil and political rights are more protected than economic and social rights.

Why is global respect so much better for civil and political rights? One explanation for this might be that early scholarly and activist work focused far more on civil and political rights. We have more data for a global sample of countries measuring civil and political rights than we do for economic, social, and cultural rights. This means human rights violations are more likely to be identified, documented, and publicized for violations of civil and political rights. Leaders face greater costs for violating these rights and so they are more likely to protect them.

Much of what we know about the causes and consequences of human rights violations comes from research about civil and political rights. It is an open question how much of what we know translates into lessons about economic, social, and cultural rights. By measuring all rights, we can figure out which policies work to improve all rights, and which policies need to be tailored to specific rights or groups of rights. These findings suggest that current policies that may be effective for improving civil and political rights, are ineffective, or may even undermine respect, for economic, social, and cultural rights.

The Convention Against Torture was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1984, and today 173 countries have ratified the treaty. On the other hand, the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1992, and currently, only 70 countries have ratified the treaty. So while fewer countries have ratified the Convention on disappearances than the Convention on torture, more countries engage in torture than enforced disappearances.

CIRIGHTS is one of only a handful of projects that measure economic, social, and cultural rights for a large number of countries over multiple years. This allows scholars to identify the causes and consequences of economic, social, and cultural rights violations using case studies and statistical analyses. Many of the economic, social, and cultural rights included in CIRIGHTS are those where states can put in place laws to protect those rights. We are working to expand the rights we code to include the right to water, housing, healthcare, and education.

## Section 2: Human Rights Data Spotlights

In this section, we zero in on specific areas of human rights concerns. Our 2023 human rights spotlight areas are:

- » COVID-19 and Human Rights
- » Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) Freedom
- » Women's Social Rights
- » Human Rights Protection in the United States

### Spotlight: COVID-19 and human rights

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a decline in human rights globally. Several governments used the pandemic to justify imposing harsher public security practices, leading to human rights violations. Recent academic research has found that repressive governments during the COVID-19 pandemic put curfews and lockdowns in place earlier and kept them longer than non-repressive countries.<sup>12</sup> In addition, surveys of human rights experts around the world find evidence that government respect for economic and social rights, as well as civil and political rights, declined as a result of COVID.<sup>13</sup>

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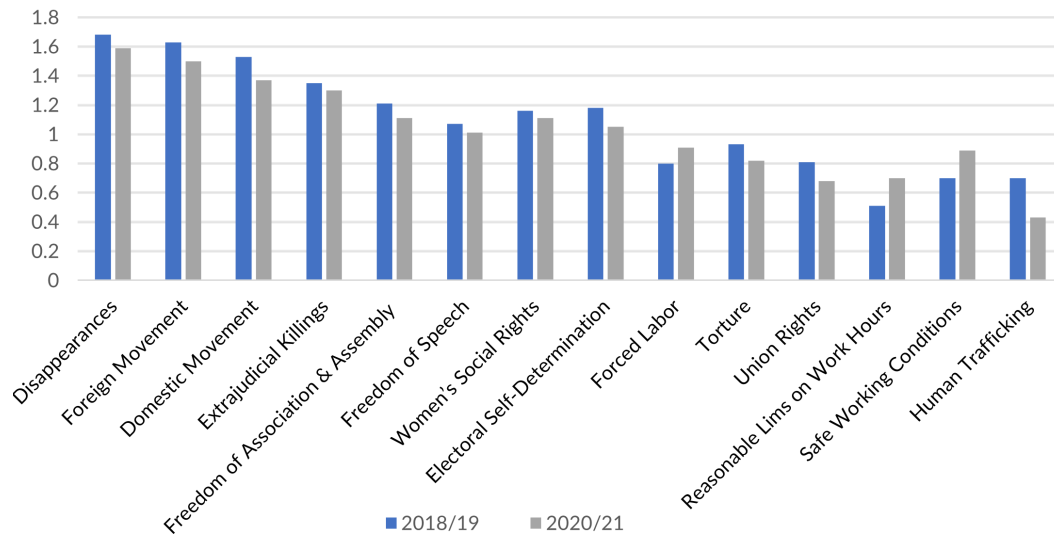
12 Barceló, J., Kubinec, R., Cheng, C., Rahn, T. H., & Messerschmidt, L. (2022). Windows of repression: Using COVID-19 policies against political dissidents? *Journal of Peace Research*, 59(1), 73-89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433211062389>

13 Clay, K. C., Abdelwahab, M., Bagwell, S., Barney, M., Burkle, E., Hawley, T., ... & Rains, M. (2022). The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on human rights practices: Findings from the Human Rights Measurement Initiative's 2021 Practitioner Survey. *Journal of Human Rights*, 21(3), 317-333.

During global crises, leaders are often able to violate human rights while facing lower risks to their power and reputation than in normal times. Recent examples include the global recession of 2007 and the War on Terror. During these crises, human rights took a back seat to issues of economic crisis, national security, and public health. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, several leaders restricted movement in and out of their countries. The global response to the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the inherent tension between rights: Can a government stop people from going to worship and practicing their religion in the name of public health? Can countries restrict the right to protest in order to prevent the spread of the pandemic? Should leaders restrict free speech to stop the spread of misinformation or disinformation during times of crisis? While leaders restricted some rights (free movement) in order to protect others (the right to health), there are plenty of examples of leaders using these restrictions to target critics, political opponents, and vulnerable groups in society.

FIGURE 8

### Human Rights Respect and the COVID-19 Pandemic



Which rights declined during the pandemic? According to the CIRIGHTS' average scores in the two years before the pandemic and the two years after the pandemic, we find:

TABLE 4

<b>Human Rights</b>	<b>Global Change</b>	<b>Percent Change</b>
Human Trafficking	-0.27	-62%
Domestic Movement	-0.16	-12%
Right to Unionize	-0.13	-19%
Electoral Self-determination	-0.13	-12%
Foreign Movement	-0.13	-9%
Torture	-0.11	-13%
Freedom of Association & Assembly	-0.10	-9%
Disappearances	-0.09	-6%
Free Speech	-0.06	-6%
Extrajudicial Killings	-0.05	-4%

To put these numbers into perspective, a global decline of 0.10 is equivalent to a ONE point drop (on a 0–100 scale) in respect for a right in 20 countries. A decline of 0.05 is equivalent to a ONE point drop in respect for a right in 10 countries. Given that human rights tend to change very little from year to year within a country, these changes are quite large.

Civil and political rights declined across the globe during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings are consistent with other research conducted during the pandemic showing that governments violated domestic and foreign movement, restricted free speech, restricted freedom of assembly including the right to protest, and engaged in higher levels of extrajudicial killings and disappearances.

During the pandemic, workers who tried to organize unions saw more violations of their right to unionize. Human trafficking also worsened during COVID as the unemployed, children, and those suffering from the economic consequences of COVID were particularly susceptible to human trafficking.<sup>14</sup>

14 United Nations, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1083542>



On the other hand, a small group of rights improved during the pandemic, including limitations on work hours (0.19 or +27%), safe working conditions (0.19 or +21%), and forced labor (0.11 or +12%). All three of these rights were widely violated globally before the pandemic, leaving less room for them to decline. The economic fallout and high levels of unemployment meant employers were able to find workers without needing to violate their rights. Given that union rights declined while these rights improved, it is possible that employers reduced labor rights violations in an attempt to prevent union drives calling for better pay, healthcare, and overtime. It is also possible states enforced labor laws protecting these rights in an attempt to address the pandemic and protect frontline workers.

More research is needed to unpack why each of these rights declined or improved, and importantly, how improvements or declines in one right affected respect for other rights. That some rights improved during the pandemic should not be terribly surprising. Human rights are interrelated, interdependent, and indivisible, so a change in one right will affect the violation or respect of other rights.

### Spotlight: Nongovernmental organization freedom

One of the most important sources of information about human rights violations around the world comes from human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). NGOs investigate, document, report on, and “name and shame” countries for their human rights violations. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are two international NGOs that produce annual reports that CIRIGHTS and other human rights measurement projects use to create our scores. Within countries, many domestic NGOs with knowledge of local conditions and an ability to interact with victims of violations also investigate and report on violations, and their findings make their way to international NGOs, the press, and activists. Human rights NGO reporting is the main source of human rights information for the general public.

We define NGO freedom as the extent to which human rights NGOs are affected by government censorship, violence, coercion, intimidation, and institutional barriers to operation. Human rights NGOs should be able to operate within a country, to investigate human rights violations and publicize those violations, and to operate without being targeted by the state or its affiliates for retaliation. Where human rights NGOs and defenders are targeted, there should be government remediation.

What happens when NGOs are not free to investigate or report on human rights violations? NGO freedom can be undermined through the use of violence (or the threat of violence), as well as by implementing laws and institutions that make it hard for NGOs to do their job. In 2019, Guatemala saw over 300 attacks against

human rights defenders and 12 human rights defenders were killed with no government effort to redress the violence or prevent further attacks. As of 2021, the United Arab Emirates bans domestic and international human rights NGOs and exerts near total control over all NGOs. In Bangladesh, the human rights organization Odhikar reported harassment, intimidation, and surveillance by the state in 2021. They and several other human rights NGOs practice self-censorship around topics of security force violence, religion, human rights, indigenous rights, LGBTQI+ rights, Rohingya refugees, and worker rights for fear of being targeted by the state.

Human rights NGOs may be free to investigate some human rights issues that align with government policy agendas while restricting investigations of other areas that they deem more of a threat. Saudi Arabia, Zimbabwe, and Uganda all fall into this camp and offer support to NGOs whose work they support and target or suppress NGOs that they deem a threat. Some governments like Azerbaijan, China, and Russia view NGOs with suspicion, especially when these organizations engage in activities related to human rights, democracy, or advocacy for political change. They may impose strict regulations, hinder their operations, or label them as foreign agents or threats to national security. This can lead to harassment, surveillance, or legal actions against NGOs and their members.

On the other hand, countries that generally have poor human rights can still allow NGO freedom. Haiti and the Ivory Coast, for example, do not interfere with human rights NGO investigations and as such the information we have about human rights violations in these countries is likely to be more accurate than the information we have about Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, China, Guatemala, the Russia, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Uganda, or Zimbabwe. This can sometimes make it appear as if human rights conditions are worse in places where NGOs can more freely investigate abuses than in places where they cannot. However, if we had equal information about human rights, we might find that governments are less likely to violate rights in places where NGOs are permitted to function more transparently and effectively and more likely to violate rights in places that silence the voices of nongovernmental organizations.

## Spotlight: Women's social rights

Women's social rights are those that empower women to participate in society on equal terms with men. When scoring women's social rights, we examine whether women have the following rights in a country (in each calendar year):

1. The right to equal inheritance.
2. The right to enter into a marriage based on equality with men.
3. The right to travel abroad.
4. The right to obtain a passport.
5. The right to confer citizenship to children or a husband.
6. The right to initiate a divorce.
7. The right to own, acquire, manage, and retain property brought into marriage.
8. The right to participate in social, cultural, and community activities.
9. The right to an education.
10. The right to choose a residence/domicile.
11. Freedom from female genital mutilation/ or cutting (FGM/C) of children and adults without their consent.
12. Freedom from forced sterilization.
13. Freedom from child marriage (where the laws differ between boys and girls).
14. Right to raise and make decisions regarding children with equal authority to men or husbands.

The most frequently violated social rights for women were rights related to equal marriage (#2) and freedom from child marriage (#13). While the right to equal marriage and child marriage practices are not directly linked, they share connections in the broader context of women's rights, gender equality, and the fight against harmful traditional practices that disproportionately affect women and girls.

Most scorers identified the following pattern: when a country report contained cases of child marriage, where the laws differ between boys and girls, more often than not, that same country had violations in the right to enter into marriage on a basis of equality with men. The latter takes the form of equal marriage ages and the ability to choose the person they want to marry, without force or coercion. Many countries violate the marriage right by setting the minimum legal age of marriage for women to be less than men. It was common that marriage ages would be different for men

and women, the women's age usually being lower. In Papua New Guinea (2022), the legal age for marriage is 18 for boys and 16 for girls. There are younger legal marriage ages (16 for boys and 14 for girls) with parental and court consent. In 2018 (the most recent data available), UNICEF reported that 27 percent of girls in the country were married before the age of 15. The country's customary and traditional practices allow marriage of children as young as age 12, and early marriage was common in many traditional, isolated rural communities. Child brides frequently were taken as additional wives or given as brides to pay family debts and often were used as domestic servants. Child brides were particularly vulnerable to domestic abuse, and there were no government prevention or mitigation efforts.

Women being forced into marriage by family members due to financial struggles or cultural practices that required them to marry certain people, with almost no ability to choose the person – is another common occurrence. Women get married off to repay a debt to the family or just because the family could not support them. Instances of kidnapping and societal discrimination from rejected proposals were also common. In Spain (2022), as of May, the Catalan regional police prevented five forced marriages in Catalonia, three of them involving underage girls. All persons involved were originally from countries in North Africa or South Asia. The Catalan regional police reported 194 women and girls have been the victims of forced marriages in the region since 2009.

Laws regarding a plural number of spouses (polygamy/ polyandry) did not apply to men and women equally. Most frequently the law gave men the ability to marry multiple wives as long as the wives gave permission. However, women did not receive the option to have multiple husbands leaving them in a subordinate position once again. Polyandry is illegal in virtually every country. Polygamy, however, is often protected by religion or customs. Thus, in Algeria (2022) “The law affirms the religiously based practice of allowing a man to marry as many as four wives.”

Women are often restricted from marrying outside of their religion under customary law. For example, in Egypt (2022), “A female Muslim citizen cannot legally marry a non-Muslim man. If she were to do so, authorities charge her with adultery and, under the government's interpretation of Islamic law, place any children from such a marriage in the custody of a male Muslim guardian.”

The right to equal inheritance (#1) and the right to own, acquire, manage, and retain property brought into marriage (#7) together presented another prevalent breach in women's social rights. In many cases, these rights are upheld by the law, but in customary practice, a man is traditionally seen as the head of the household, and most, if not all, inherited property would go to the husbands' families, not their

spouses. For example, in Zimbabwe (2022) “The law recognizes a woman’s right to own property, but very few women owned property, due to the customary practice of patriarchal inheritance.” In Liberia (2022): “By law, women may inherit land and property and may own and manage businesses. In rural areas, traditional practice or traditional leaders often did not recognize a woman’s right to inherit the land.” In both cases, the scorers would not lower the “Law” score but would mark down the score for “Practice.”

The right to an education (#9) for women was violated in 2022 in regards to hygiene products during menstruation and the stigma surrounding pregnancy (South Africa, Togo, Tuvalu, Uganda, Vanuatu, Zimbabwe). The education profile of men and women at a postsecondary level has substantial differences (Vietnam, 2022). Women often show significantly lower literacy rates than men as a result of fewer educational opportunities (Malawi, 2022). In Turkey (2022), human rights NGOs expressed concern that despite the law on compulsory education and the progress made by the nationwide literacy campaign launched in 2018, some families were able to keep girls home from school, particularly in religiously conservative rural areas, where girls often dropped out of school after completing their mandatory primary education. In Azerbaijan (2022), “while education is compulsory, free, and universal until age 17, large families in impoverished rural areas sometimes placed a higher priority on the education of boys and kept girls at home to work. Some poor families forced their children to work or beg rather than attend school.”

Another area of concern is women’s right to confer citizenship to children or a spouse (#5). In Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen (2022), only a father can transmit citizenship to his child. In Saudi Arabia (2022) the situation is similar: citizenship generally derives from the father. The law permits women to transmit citizenship to their children under certain circumstances.

In many cases, the citizenship of a child is acquired at birth when born into a country, but when this is not the case, many women are unable to pass their citizenship to their children. In situations such as these, if a mother is a citizen and a father is a non-citizen, that could leave the child stateless. Sometimes a noncitizen woman will automatically lose custody of her child if she gets into a divorce with the father.

Female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C) is one of the most violent impediments of women’s rights globally. FGM/C refers to any practice that removes or alters part, or all, of the female genitalia. The freedom from female genital mutilation/ or cutting (FGM/C) of children and adults without their consent (#11) is often protected by law, however, most often FGM/C occurred in practice and

despite legal restrictions. Countries that did not have legislation prohibiting FGM/C included Chad, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, Mali, and others. Throughout the scoring process, there were many cases when the practice was outlawed, but was still a common practice in the country.

The measures that governments impose to eradicate this harmful practice differ from country to country. In Germany (2022), FGM/C of women and girls is a criminal offense punishable if convicted by 1 to 15 years in prison, even if performed abroad. Authorities may revoke the passports of individuals suspected of traveling abroad to subject a girl or woman to FGM/C but have not taken this step since the law took effect in 2017. The harsh penalties and strict enforcement have resulted in little to no occurrence of FGM/C in Germany. Pakistan does not have any laws concerning FGM/C and there is a high prevalence of it throughout the country, in many different forms. FGM/C was a very common violation that resulted in a country getting low scores, usually for practice, but violations occurred in both categories. In Spain (2022), the law prohibits FGM/C and authorizes courts to prosecute residents of the country who committed this crime in the country or anywhere in the world. Doctors must ask parents residing in the country who originate from countries that practice FGM/C to sign a declaration promising their daughter(s) will not undergo FGM/C when they visit countries where the practice is common. Once a family returns to the country, a doctor must examine the girl(s) again and may start legal action against the parents if examination finds that the minors underwent FGM/C during their trip.

### Spotlight: Human rights protection in the United States

Overall, we give the United States a Global Rights Project grade of 64 (D). This places the U.S. as the 59th best scoring country in the world. When comparing the U.S. to its regional neighbors in the Americas, it ranks 14th of 31 countries. It is the sixth worst scoring country among OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries which are sometimes taken to represent “developed” countries.

Currently, the CIRIGHTS project includes U.S. scores for our overall index for a single year to complete our 2023 rankings. This is because we use U.S. State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices to construct our measures, and those reports do not examine human rights conditions in the U.S. To measure rights in the U.S. we therefore use Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reporting to help score the U.S. for all of the rights in the dataset. This means the methodology used to generate scores for the U.S. is slightly different, and researchers and policymakers who take issue with this are encouraged to drop the

U.S. from their analysis. Still we believe the benefit of scoring the U.S. outweighs the costs and that our scores for the U.S. are reliable and valid.

For our 2023 rankings the United States has a score of FIVE out of EIGHT on our physical integrity rights scale which is often used to measure repression. This scale is made up of a country's score on disappearances, political imprisonment, extrajudicial killing, and torture. Taken together this scale is often a measure of government repression or the extent to which a government uses violence against its citizens.

The U.S. receives a TWO (no evidence of violations) for enforced disappearances and a TWO for political imprisonment (no evidence of violations), a ONE (some violations) for torture, and a ZERO (widespread violations) for extrajudicial killings.

As mentioned above, enforced disappearances is the most protected right globally and political imprisonment is the 3rd most protected right. The U.S. has not engaged in enforced disappearances in recent years. Despite the U.S. having a large incarcerated population, we did not find evidence that arrests in the U.S. were politically motivated.

The U.S. gets a ONE (some violations) for unlawful deprivation of life and extrajudicial killings prior to 2015 and then the score drops to ZERO afterwards. In 2015, *The Washington Post* started the police shooting database to track police killings across the country.<sup>15</sup> They found that police kill more than 1,000 people every year, and disproportionately kill Black Americans.

The U.S. government does not track the number of people killed by police at the national level, so prior to 2015, it was difficult to say how often police killed people, whether one race was more likely to be killed, or how often police faced consequences for extrajudicial killings. While police violence was well known in the Black community, human rights defenders, civil rights lawyers, and activists, the lack of data measuring this allowed these violations to go under the radar of international attention.

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15 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>

After *The Washington Post* database became public, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch annual reports started to include numbers of police killings and citing the lack of government data tracking this violence as a serious human rights issue. The Amnesty 2014 report mentioned 35-60 deaths from the use of police tasers, as well as the deaths of Michael Brown, Kajieme Powell, Ezra Ford, and Eric Garner. A year later, they included estimates of police killings between 458-1000 or more and cited the lack of specific data as problematic. In the 2022 report, Amnesty identify 1,093 people, who were disproportionately black, killed by police. They note that no state laws in the U.S. related to police use of force conform to international law and note a federal program to track these deaths remains unimplemented.

Starting in 2015, the CIRIGHTS dataset scored the United States as ZERO every year for extrajudicial killings (widespread violations) using information in the Amnesty International annual country report on the United States.

Extrajudicial killings are difficult to score. First, we do not know how many of these killings are unlawful or illegal under international law given the human rights reports we are consulting. We can say for certain that the U.S. does not score a TWO. However, there is a case to be made that the U.S. might better be scored a ONE without better evidence within human rights reports on the exact nature of these killings. Given the international attention that police killings in the U.S. have received, we are confident that they constitute a human rights violation. The consistent police shooting of over 1,000 civilians a year as reported in Amnesty and Human Rights Watch Reports, the lack of effort to pass policing reform at the federal level, failure to develop national tracking of police killings, and failure to update use of force laws to comply with international standards (or in some states, U.S. standards), we have concluded that there is enough evidence these events constitute unlawful killings to justify a score of ZERO. The above highlights the ways that reporting within countries by the press can be picked up by NGOs and become human rights data. It also highlights the need for better data on human rights violations which makes it easier to generate reliable and replicable scores.

We can also be reasonably confident that the U.S. was killing similar numbers of people before 2015. However, if we were to adjust our scores based on our knowledge of the U.S., we would have to do the same for all other countries. Otherwise, the countries that are best able to keep their violations local (like the U.S. before 2015) would have higher scores than they deserve. This case illustrates an important point for understanding human rights data. Human rights data does not capture all violations, nor all violations that citizens are aware of. Instead



CIRIGHTS data and other human rights measures give us a glimpse into the rights violations that the international community is paying attention to and can document reliable evidence of. In cases where there are violations of free speech and NGO freedom, our scores may be less accurate because the press and NGOs are less able to investigate and publicize their results.

As mentioned above, the U.S. scores a ZERO for extrajudicial killings from 2015 forward. In 2018 and 2019, and 2020, the United States also scored a ZERO for torture (widespread violations) for its treatment of prisoners and widespread police repression. [A joint letters from Amnesty International, American Civil Liberties Union, Center for Victims of Torture, the Haitian Brige Alliance, Human Rights First, Human Rights Watch, Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, and Refugees International](#) called out numerous violations in the United States which constitute torture under the Convention Against Torture (CAT). This letter was in response to a U.S. [report on its compliance with CAT](#), which was widely criticized for its lack of policies related to accountability, reporting on policies and instances of violations, and areas where the reports assertions are directly contradicted by evidence. Most countries that submit reports on their own human rights practices engage in similar subterfuge, trying to downplay violations while highlighting their commitment to human rights. The letter does acknowledge the shift in U.S. rhetoric around human rights, with the Biden Administration publicly committing to improving human rights in the country and similar reporting from Amnesty confirms that the U.S. was improving in 2021 compared to previous years.

The U.S. receives a score of ONE for NGO freedom (some violations) for its use of the judicial system to target human rights defenders and government critics in 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021. The U.S. also scores a ONE for free speech in 2018, 2019, and 2021 and a ZERO for free speech in 2020 as a result of [police violence and arrests of the press covering the Black Lives Matter \(BLM\) protests](#).

Beyond these violations, the U.S. scores poorly on most labor rights. [Human Rights Watch](#) noted for example that obstacles to unionization collective bargaining, as well as failures to guarantee safe working conditions, decent wages and benefits, and other labor rights violations became more apparent after the COVID-19 pandemic. [Human Rights Watch](#) has also long reported on numerous violations of child labor in the United States, particularly in the agriculture sector where child labor laws do not apply and children as young as 12 can work up to 60 hours a week. The U.S. has only ratified 14 out of 189 International Labour Organization conventions and only 10 of these 14 are in force (meaning the convention is binding and the U.S. is responsible for protecting these rights). The U.S. is also the only country that has

not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which helps explain why child labor remains a problem in a rich democratic country.

In 2020 the United States saw [widespread violence used in its response to the largely peaceful Black Lives Matter \(BLM\) protests](#) that took place across the country. In light of these violations and others, the CIRIGHTS project codes the U.S. as having committed atrocities in 2020. Not only did the U.S. engage in high levels of repression, uncommon in most developed democracies, it also specifically [targeted journalists, medics, and legal observers](#). The United Nations among others criticized the U.S. for its treatment of protesters and journalists, and for police violence during protests. The U.S. also criticized the U.S. for limits NGO freedom to investigate human rights abuses and for restrictions on freedom of assembly, (for example in [Florida and Oklahoma](#) where state laws restricted the right to protest). Free speech and NGO freedom are two pillars of democracy, and this decline coincides with our [downgrading of the U.S. from a full democracy to an anocracy](#) in 2020 as a result of election violence, attempts to overturn a democratic election, and attempts to harass and coerce election officials. Encouragingly, human rights in the U.S. seem to have improved in 2021 and continue to improve as the U.S. re-engages with human rights institutions, the United Nations, and has made public commitments to addressing human rights problems at home.

Is the U.S. doing better or worse than we would expect based on what we know are the drivers of human rights generally? Our simple model explaining human rights above (in the “What Explains Human Rights” and “Findings” Sections) allows us to generate a prediction or best guess of what human rights in the United States should be as a large -population, wealthy, democracy in the Americas with a small youth bulge.<sup>16</sup>

If we treat the U.S. as an anocracy or semi-democracy, then we would expect the U.S. to score a 53. However, if we treat the U.S. as a democracy, we would expect it to score a 66. One way to interpret these findings is that the U.S. score is about where we should expect it to be given its characteristics. A less positive view might be that if the U.S. is experiencing democratic backsliding, we should expect human rights to deteriorate in the near future. The decline of U.S. human rights respect over the last few years, and subsequent rebounding of rights respect since 2021 seems to be representative of claims that U.S. democracy is under threat. If democratic institutions continue to erode, we will see human rights violations increase. Conversely, if democratic institutions are strengthened or reinforced this may help improve human rights in the U.S.

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16 We use the regression results to predict a human rights score when plugging the U.S. characteristics into the regression equation we are given. Our regression mode creates a best fit line that predicts what human rights would be given values of our independent variable. Here we present the point predictions without confidence intervals for ease of interpretation.

A note of caution here is that we used a simple regression model, and more advanced statistical techniques would be necessary to make a more accurate prediction that would provide a range of scores rather than a single score. This model is still quite useful for starting a conversation about how the U.S. scores compared to how we would expect it to score.

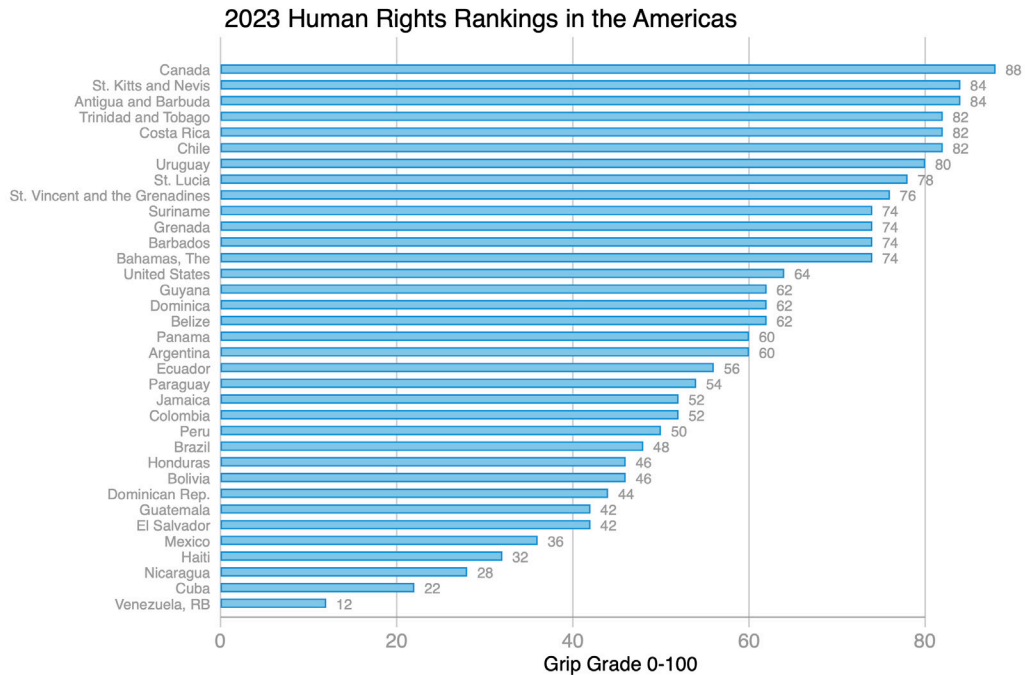
There is a dire need for better human rights data for the U.S. as there is little systematic and reliable data on what empowerment, worker, and justice rights look like in the country, compared to the rest of the world. With the release of this report, we have generated scores for the United States for our 2023 rankings which allow us to compare U.S. human rights practices to other countries.

## Section 3: Regional Human Rights Rankings

In this section we present human rights scores for each country and their rankings compared to neighboring countries.

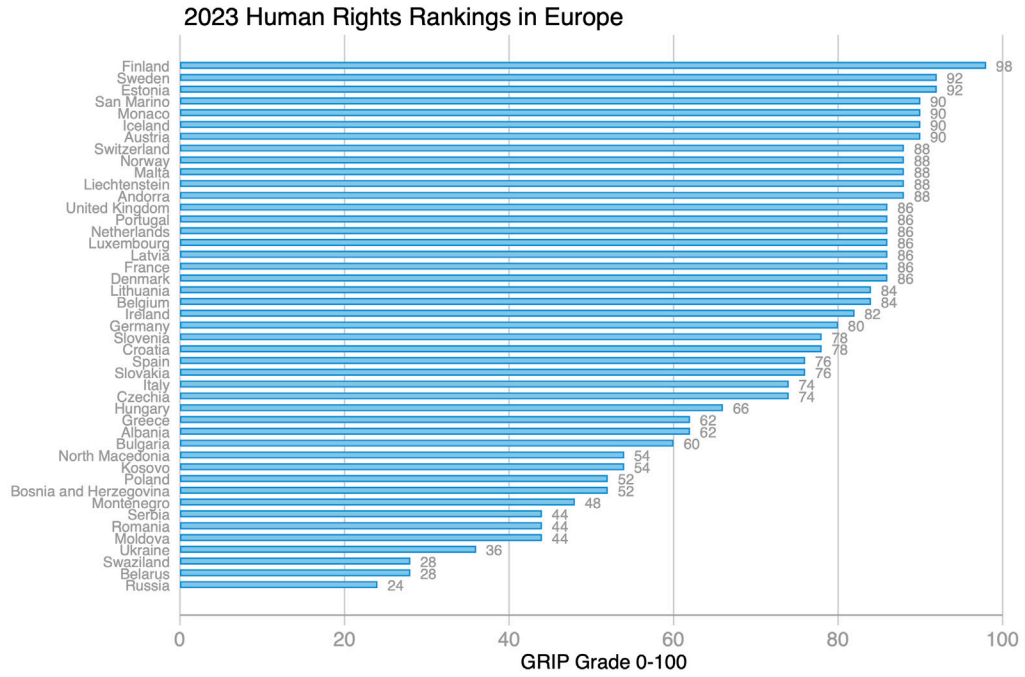
### Americas

FIGURE 9



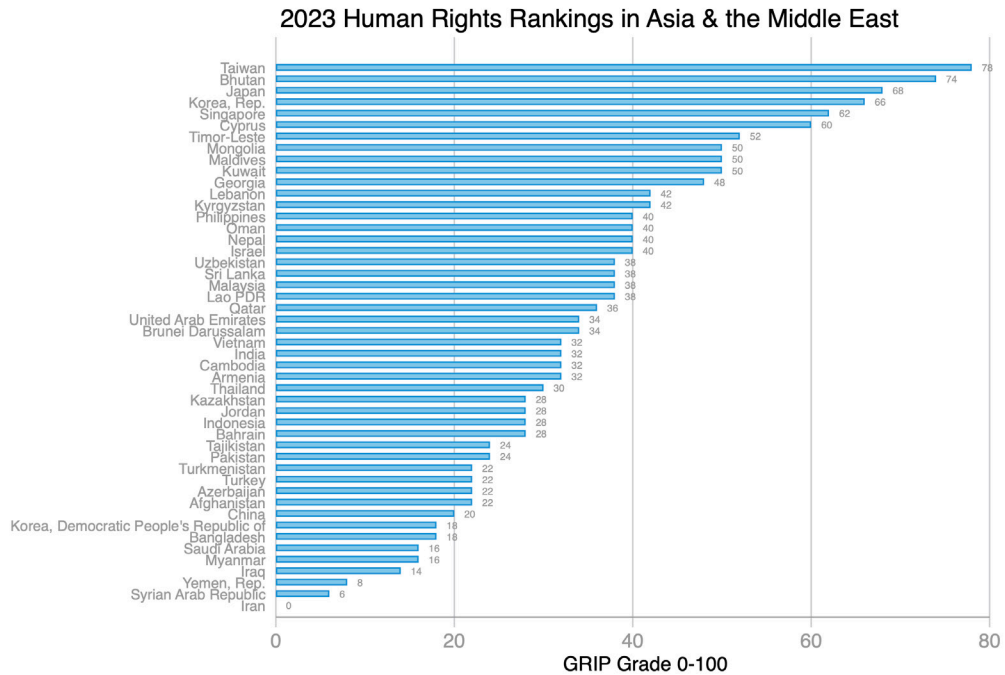
## Europe

FIGURE 10



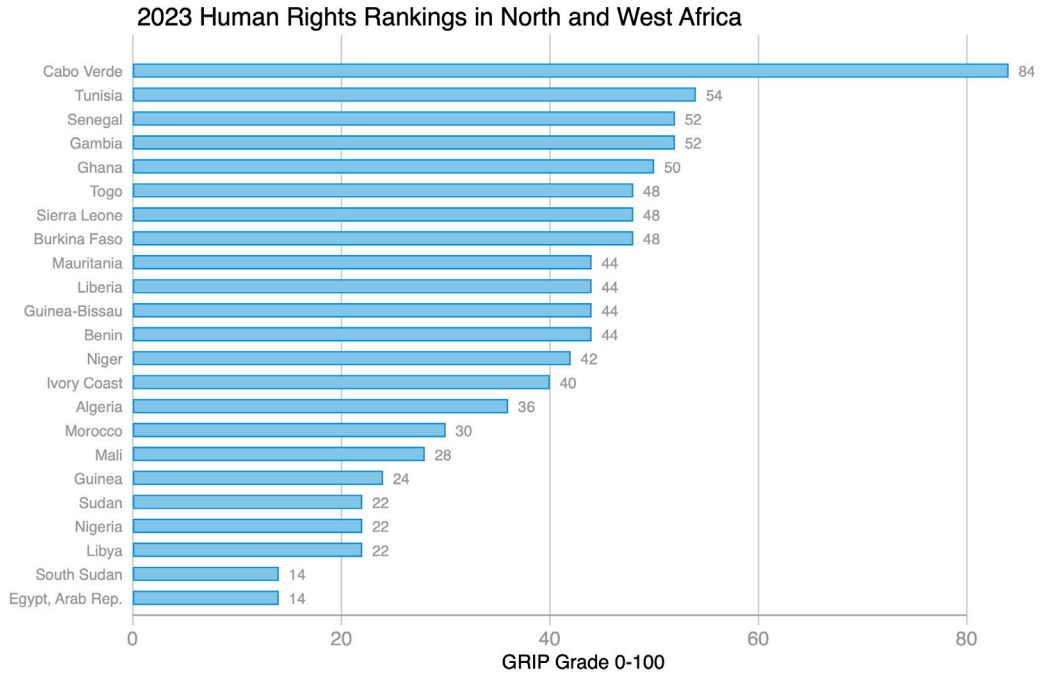
## Asia and the Middle East

FIGURE 11



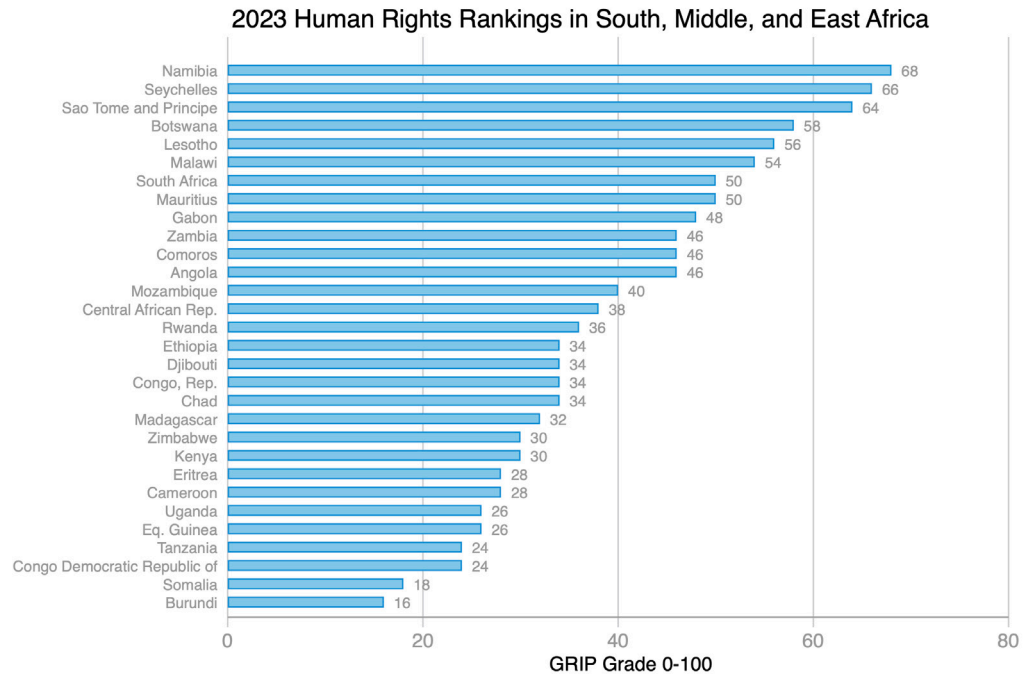
## North and West Africa

FIGURE 12



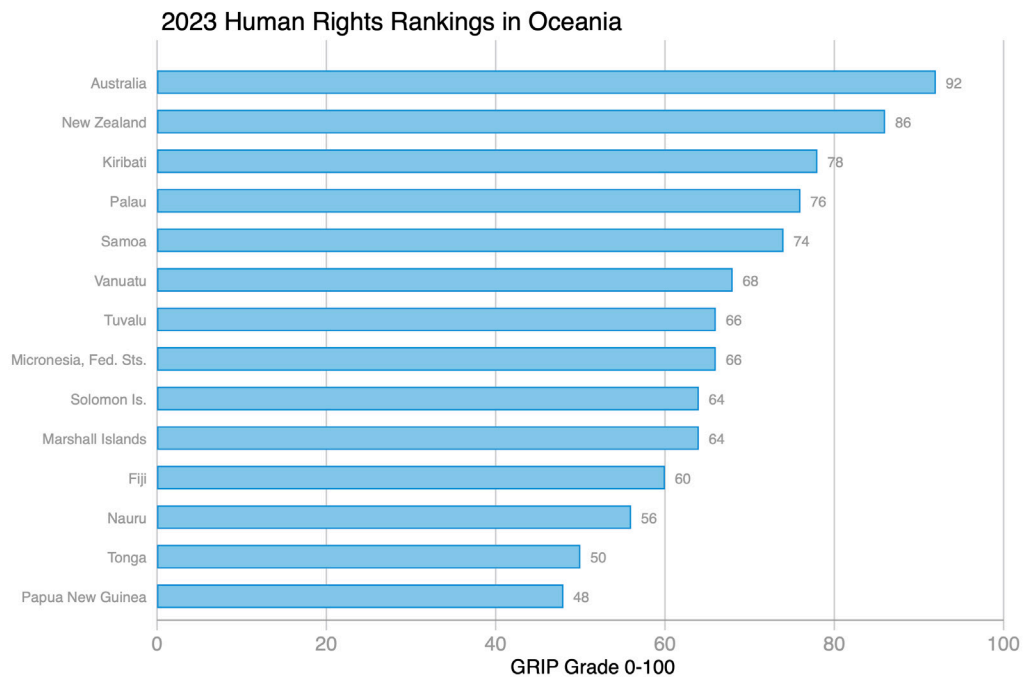
## South, Middle, and East Africa

FIGURE 13



## Oceania

FIGURE 14



## Frequently Asked Questions

### How do I read the maps?

The maps show the level of respect for various human rights in the 21st century. For all rights, higher values indicate greater respect. The exception is mass atrocities where we examine the years in which a country committed an atrocity. The legend shows what colors correspond to “No respect” and “Full respect.” The histogram below the legend shows how the values for this right are distributed around the globe; absent this, discerning distributions can be hard to see, given that some countries are smaller than others.

### What are the years covered in the report?

For all of the data in this report we use the most up to date information available in the dataset. This report uses the CIRIGHTS v2.8.29.23. This version fills in some scores from the CIRIGHTS v2.8.27.23 dataset so that we could include as many countries as possible. The most recent year we have data for is 2022, though most of our rights are scored through 2021.

### What do you do when you are missing scores for a right or country?

A well established finding in the human rights literature is that human rights change very little, when measured on an ordinal scale like ours, from year to year within a country. As such, if we are missing data for an entire right for a year we assume the right did not change from the previous year. This led us to impute scores for reasonable limitations on work hours (2020), women’s economic rights (2020, 2021), women’s political rights (2020, 2021), religious freedom (2021), foreign movement (2021), and human trafficking (2021). We do not want to lose GRIP grades for an entire year if we do not have the resources to score every right. Future updates will include these scores, and the next GRIP grades will correct any mistakes we made with this assumption.

## How are the data created?

We train undergraduate and graduate students in content analysis, a methodology in social science to convert text into numerical data. They use a scoring guideline (available online) that has rules for what counts as a violation and where to find the texts used to score a country. At least two students score each country separately, taking notes that can be reviewed later, and then compare scores. If the scores match, that score is added to the dataset alongside a set of notes explaining the decision. Where the scores differ, they discuss the case, and try to settle on a single score. Usually disagreements occur over one person missing a sentence or interpreting a word differently than the other. However, if they cannot reconcile their scores, one of the principal investigators steps in to decide on a final score by looking at the case, the notes taken by each scorer, and the source material. Having multiple people scoring each country helps reduce errors. All of the rights in the dataset have a high degree of inter-coder reliability meaning there are few disagreements that need to be resolved. We also check for odd patterns in the data and spot check scores to ensure we identify as many errors as possible.

The CIRIGHTS project is committed to human rights education. Our methodology is aimed at producing easy to understand scores that are transparent, replicable, and reliable. This means anyone should be able to download our scoring guide, and the human rights reports we use, and replicate our findings. Since all of the material is publicly available, anyone can check a score and if they disagree they can contact us and we will double check the scores and change them if we find an issue.

## What sources are used to create the data?

One of the reports the CIRIGHTS project uses to quantify nearly all rights currently in the dataset is the annual U.S. Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices. Depending on the right, researchers may also use the Amnesty International Annual Report, the Human Rights Watch Annual Report, the USSD International Religious Freedom Report, the U.S. Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report, the U.S. State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, or the Indigenous World Report. We opt to limit the sources of textual information about each variable, rather than adding additional sources with different country coverage and additional bias we may not be able to account for. By doing



this we have a good sense of where our scores may be more biased. When using multiple sources of information this becomes much harder as very few sources cover every country in the world.

### Where do the examples in the report come from?

The examples in the report are taken from the annual U.S. Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for the country and year indicated in the example. While additional sources used for coding might have added more detail, we want readers to be able to go back and find these examples so they can replicate our scores if they are interested in doing so.

### Where does the data on Population, GDP, and the youth bulge come from?

These data are taken from the World Bank's World Development indicators. We use the total population (logged), GDP per capita (logged), GDP growth (annual %), population (15-19 male), population (20-24 male), population (15-19 female), population (20-24 female), population (15-64 total). The youth bulge score is calculated as:

$$\frac{((15-19 \text{ male population} + 20-24 \text{ male population}) / (100)) * (\text{population } 15-64) + ((15-19 \text{ female population} + 20-24 \text{ female population}) / (100)) * (\text{population } 15-64)}{(\text{population } 15-64)}$$

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