

Belize- Human Rights Scorecard ¹

Belize is home to the smallest population in Central America. Despite its small stature, the country is multicultural, with English and Spanish colonial influences present in addition to Indigenous culture. While its resources are limited, they are used effectively. The country enjoys relative development and established civil freedoms. Nonetheless, there are problems with police brutality, human trafficking, and corruption. Troublingly, the freedoms of speech and press have backslid significantly within the past 5 years. Still, Belize retains its place as one of Central America’s most safe and stable states.

Official language: English

Major Spoken Languages: Spanish, Creole, Maya

Ethnic groups: 52.9% Mestizo; 25.9% Creole; 11.3% Maya; 6.1% Garifuna; 3.9% East Indian; 3.6% Mennonite; 1.2% White; 1% Asian; 1.2% Other; 0.3% Unknown. Note: Percentages add up to more than 100% due to some respondents’ identification with multiple groups.

Government: Parliamentary Democracy, Member of the Commonwealth

- Monarch: Queen Elizabeth
- Prime Minister: Dean Barrow

Death penalty: Abolitionist de facto. Last execution took place in 1985.

Population: 385,854

Life expectancy: 70.6 years

Under-5 mortality: 12 per 1000

Adult literacy: 82.8 percent



Section 1: Overall Development

The overall development of a country – considering education, health, income, and other factors – is a strong indicator of whether average citizens have a reasonable chance to enjoy social and economic well-being and mobility.

Human Development (UNDP Human Development Index (HDI)) ²



0.708 – High Human Development ³

According to the UNDP, Belizeans have a relatively small gross national income (GNI) per capita at \$7,166. However, Belize’s HDI score is excellent relative to its GNI, and development indicators are high residents can expect an average of 10.5 years of schooling

Section 2: Respect for the Integrity of the Person

Respect for the integrity of the individual is the most fundamental of human rights groupings. It guarantees protection of the person to ensure the right to life, and freedom from torture. It also prevents arbitrary detention, and disappearances, and ensures the right to a free and fair trial when accused.

Freedom from arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life



Partially Respected ⁴

There are several isolated reports of police killing civilians. The government investigates, but there are no reports of the police officers in question being suspended during the investigations.

Freedom from disappearance



Respected ⁵

There are no reports of disappearances in Belize.

Freedom from torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment



Partially Respected ⁶

There are reports of police using excessive force in anti-gang operations and reports of police staying on duty while being investigated for abuses committed during arrests and detentions.

Freedom from arbitrary arrest or detention



Partially respected ⁷

The constitution and law prevent arbitrary arrest and detention. However, a massive backlog of cases in the judicial system prolong pre-trial detentions to a degree that is not justified by the constitution.

Freedom from denial of fair public trial



Respected⁸

The constitution promises a fair public trial, and this is largely respected.

Freedom from arbitrary interference with privacy, family, home or correspondence



Respected⁹

The constitution prohibits unnecessary incursion into private life, and this is largely respected.

Section 3: Respect for Civil Liberties

Civil liberties are a basic category of internationally recognized human rights. They include the freedoms of expression, assembly, association, education, and religion. These are inalienable rights which should not be breached by government, and should ensure the rights of all, including women and minority groups.

Freedom of speech and press (*Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index*)¹⁰



Score: 23.43, Rank: 47 / 179 – Free¹¹

The press is relatively free, although extreme political polarization has made reporting on political and criminal matters difficult. Reporters without borders left Belize in the “free” category for 2018, but it is worth noting that Belize has fallen in the rankings from 29 to 47 since 2014.

Freedom from academic censorship



Respected¹²

There are no government restrictions on academic freedom.

Freedom of peaceful assembly and association



Respected¹³

Peaceful assembly and association are allowed in Belize.

Freedom of religion



Respected¹⁴

The constitution protects freedom of religion, which the state upholds. Non-denominational “spirituality” classes are taught in schools, and parents may remove their children from these classes if they desire.

Freedom of movement



Respected¹⁵

Belizean law protects freedom of movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation. These rights are respected.

Protection of refugees and stateless persons



Partially Respected¹⁶

Belize has signed international treaties on the protection of refugees and complies with the UNHCR, but has not approved any applications since the 1990s. NGOs continue to support a small population of refugees living within Belize’s borders.

Overall protection of civil liberties (*FreedomHouse Civil Liberties Index*)^{17 18}



15/16– Free¹⁹

The media and the legal system are independent from the government. Journalists and unions have faced increasing obstacles in recent years, but civil liberties are still robust.

Section 4: Respect for Political Rights

Political rights ensure all members of society are able to influence the political process. The assessment of political rights includes an examination of the electoral process and the selection of representatives, the political empowerment of the general public, the tolerance of dissent, the accountability of government, etc.

Overall protection of political rights (*FreedomHouse Political Rights Index*)²⁰



1.5 / 7 –Free²¹

Belize's democracy experiences regular rotations of power through democracy. There are incidences of rights abuses by police, but redress processes and democratic institutions remain strong.

Section 5: Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The civil, political, economic and social rights exercised within a country are often modulated by the degree of transparency and freedom from corruption. Various international metrics assess transparency and corruption, including the OECD anti-bribery convention, the Bribe Payers Index, and the Open Budget Index.

Transparency and freedom from corruption (*Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index*)²²



Score: 2.9/10, Rank: 109 / 180 as of 2008– Current Corruption Levels unknown²³

The last time the Belizean government released data on corruption levels was in 2008, and there is an insufficient number of independent monitors due to the country's small size. While current corruption levels are unknown, the lack of transparency and data cannot bode well.

Section 6: Governmental Response to Criticism

This section deals specifically with the response heads of state have to civil society or international human rights reports.

Governmental attitudes vis-à-vis independent investigations of alleged human rights violations



Respected²⁴

International observers are allowed in Belize's prison, and can observe elections and perform independent investigations.

Section 7: Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Legal and social discriminatory practices related to sex, race, creed or sexual orientation, are violations of human rights. Countries with strong civil liberty traditions should have a fair legal system that ensures the rule of law, allows free economic activity, and ensures equality of opportunity for all.

Endangered Minorities (*Peoples Under Threat – Minority Rights Group International*)²⁵



No threat listed – Limited dangers to minorities²⁶

According to Minorities Rights Group International, Belize does not have any minorities which face an immediate threat of violence.

Rights of women (*World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index*)²⁷



Score: .662/1, Rank: 111/ 149 – Highly unequal participation²⁸

While women in Belize rank first in the world for health and survival, they rank 144th in political empowerment. Similarly, women almost reach parity in education but experience mediocre economic participation.

Rights of Children (*KidsRights Index Overall Score*)²⁹



Score: .743/1, Rank: 84 / 165 – Somewhat protected³⁰

Children in Belize enjoy good health and educational outcomes. Nevertheless, laws to explicitly protect children could be strengthened.

Rights of persons with disabilities



Partially respected³¹

Although the constitution places a blanket ban on discrimination of any kind, there are no specific laws protecting the disabled, mandating accommodations, or encouraging businesses to hire disabled people.

Rights of national/racial/ethnic minorities (e.g. discrimination, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism etc.)



Respected³²

Citizenship is conferred upon birth in Belizean territory. Minorities are small, and there are no reports of discrimination against particular nationalities, Islamophobia or anti-Semitism.

Freedom from abuse and discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity



Partially Respected^{33 34}

Belize's anti-sodomy law was ruled unconstitutional in 2016. Nevertheless, there are no legal protections against discrimination and there have been reports of hate crimes against LGBTQ individuals. The first pride parade was held in 2017 amid protest from some sectors of society.

Section 7: Workers' Rights

Workers' rights are a group of legal rights relating to labour relations between workers and their employers. At their core are things like the ability to negotiate pay, benefits, terms of employment, and safe working conditions. These rights often devolve from the right to unionize and access to collective bargaining.

Rights to freedom of association and to collective bargaining



Partially respected³⁵

The law allows for the formation of unions, collective bargaining, and legal strikes. Anti-union discrimination is prohibited, and citizens can file complaints with the Ministry of Labour. However, the Ministry frequently cannot follow its mandate due to lack of resources.

Freedom from forced or compulsory labour



Partially Respected³⁶

Belize has strong laws against forced labor. However, trafficking still occurs and women are sometimes forced to work in bars or homes. Forced labour is also a concern in the agricultural or fishing industries. No cases of forced labour were prosecuted in 2017.

Freedom from forced labour for children, and a minimum age of employment



Partially respected³⁷

The law sets minimum ages for different kinds of work and distinguishes between work that is beneficial to development and work that is hazardous. However, the Ministry of Labour does not always have the resources to enforce its own rules.

Right to acceptable conditions of work



Respected³⁸

The Belizean government sets minimum wage and safety requirements for all industries. While inspectors are stretched thin, the Ministry of Labour has them stationed throughout the country. The minimum wage is mostly respected. Fines are levied when violations are found.

Right to employment



9.8% - Reasonable unemployment³⁹

While youth unemployment is high in Belize, the overall unemployment rate is enjoying a period of improvement. However, unemployment is forecasted to rise as Belize's young population base continues to move into the work force.

¹ A hybrid human rights and freedoms model, leveraging both legal principles and intuitive classifications, has been used for this human rights assessment. The CJPME Foundation seeks to integrate as many independent sources and metrics into its summary analysis as possible. In many cases, for qualitative material pertaining to the respect for a particular right in a country, the CJPME Foundation has drawn on material from Human Rights Watch and the US State Department country reports. Human Rights Watch (HRW) publishes a World Report which assesses the respect for human rights in each country. HRW uses a methodology of local reporting and interviewing, combined with research and analysis to assess the level of respect of human rights. The U.S State Department keeps an updated publication on the state of human rights internationally. Their system of research and accountability draws from the research of official US State Department officials, as well as local civil-society and international human rights organizations.

² The UN Development Program HDI was created to emphasize that people and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing the development of a country, not economic growth alone. The HDI can also be used to question national policy choices, asking how two countries with the same level of GNI per capita can end up with different human development outcomes. These contrasts can stimulate debate about government policy priorities. The Human Development Index (HDI) is a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and have a decent standard of living. Accessed Jan. 14, 2019 <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/HDI>

³ "Table 1: Human Development Index and its components, Belize" UNDP, based on 2017 or the most recent year available. Accessed Jan. 14, 2018. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/HDI>.

⁴ "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2017 Belize." U.S Department of State. January 2018. Accessed January 14, 2019. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>.

⁵ Ibid. U.S Department of State. For purposes of the present analysis, a “disappearance” is different than simple arbitrary detention because a “disappearance” is considered permanent.

⁶ Ibid. U.S Department of State.

⁷ Ibid. U.S Department of State.

⁸ Ibid. U.S Department of State.

⁹ Ibid. U.S Department of State.

¹⁰ The Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders ranks the level of freedom of information in 180 countries. This is determined through the polling of local NGOs and freedom of expression civil society organizations across the globe. This index is also determined by local correspondents and follow-up work done on reports of infringement to press freedom where ever it takes place. Their methodology looks at six different indicators: 1) Media pluralism, 2) Media independence, 3) Media atmosphere and self-censorship, 4) the Law around media, 5) Media transparency, and 6) Media infrastructure. The score from these six indicators is combined with a rating for the violence against journalists in the country to create an overall score. The CJPME Foundation classifies the Press Freedom Index as follows: 0 – 14.99 (16 countries), Largely free, diverse and independent; 15 – 24.99 (37 countries), Mostly free, diverse and independent; 25 – 29.99 (31 countries), Partially free, diverse and independent; 30 – 39.99 (39 countries), Partially controlled, limited or intimidated; 40 & higher (57 countries), Highly controlled, limited or intimidated.

¹¹ "World Press Freedom Index." Reporters Without Borders: For Freedom of Information. Accessed January 14, 2019. <https://rsf.org/en/belize>.

¹² "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2017 Belize." U.S Department of State. January 1, 2013. Accessed November 19, 2019.

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>.

¹³ Ibid. U.S Department of State.

¹⁴ Ibid. U.S Department of State..

¹⁵ Ibid. U.S Department of State.

¹⁶ Ibid. U.S Department of State..

¹⁷ Freedom House is an internationally recognized NGO based in the U.S which documents and rates the quality of democratic practice in a given country. Freedom House splits its grading system between the two areas of civil and political rights in a country. On each scale, the Freedom House rating is 1-2.5 (free), 3-5.5 (partly free) and 6-7 (not free).

¹⁸ Freedom House's Civil Liberties index measures things such as a) freedom of expression and belief, b) associational and organizational rights, c) the rule of law, and d) personal autonomy and individual rights. Freedom House rates countries as 1-2.5 (free), 3-5.5 (partly free) and 6-7 (not free). Accessed Jan. 16th, 2019

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>

¹⁹ "Belize." Freedom in the World 2018: Belize. Accessed January 16th, 2019. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/belize>

²⁰ See footnote about the Freedom House organization above. The Freedom House Political Rights assessment looks at a) the electoral process, b) political pluralism and participation, and c) the functioning of government. Accessed Jan. 16, 2019

²¹ "Belize." Freedom in the World 2018: Belize. January 1, 2014. Accessed November 25, 2014. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/belize>

²² Transparency International (TI) publishes a “Corruption Perceptions Index” annually, which is based on independent research and polling. The main categories of corruption are broken down within the index to provide particulars on issues including things such as perceptions of corruption, control of corruption, and financial secrecy.

²³ "Belize." Corruption by Country. January 16, 2019. Accessed November 25, 2014. https://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/cpi_2008/0.

²⁴ "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2017 Belize" U.S Department of State. Accessed 16 January, 2019.

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>.

²⁵ The Peoples under Threat assessment by Minority Rights Group International highlights countries most at risk of genocide and mass killing. The ranking is created by compiling data on the known antecedents to genocide or mass political killing. Accessed Jan. 16, 2019 <http://peoplesunderthreat.org/>.

²⁶ "Belize." Peoples under Threat, Minority Rights Group International. 2018, or most recent data. Accessed Jan. 16, 2019. <http://peoplesunderthreat.org/>.

²⁷ This metric is based on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index. 0.00 denotes inequality between the sexes, and 1.00 denotes fully equality between the sexes. This index looks at four subdomains: economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival; and political empowerment. Each country is given a percentage score; the higher the percentage, the better the protections. The CJPME Foundation classed the percentages as follows: 80-100% (5 countries): Almost equal rights; 70-79% (60 countries): Somewhat unequal rights; 0-69% (77 countries): Very unequal rights

²⁸ "Belize." World Economic Forum. Accessed January 16, 2019. http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf

²⁹ This metric is based on the KidsRights Index Overall Score. This index has five subdomains: life expectancy and maternal mortality; health; education; protection; and child rights environment. Each country is given a percentage score; the higher the percentage, the better the protections. KidsRights classes the countries according to these percentages, and the CJPME Foundation has given each class a term as follows: 70-100% (77 countries): Protected; 60-70% (29 countries): Somewhat protected; 45-50% (33 countries): Slightly vulnerable; 30-45% (12 countries): Highly vulnerable; Lower than 30% (11 countries): Extremely vulnerable

³⁰ "The KidsRights Index: Overall Ranking." The KidsRights Index. Accessed January 16, 2019. <http://www.kidsrightsindex.org/>

³¹ "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2017 Belize." U.S Department of State. January 1, 2013. Accessed November 19, 2019.

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>.

³² Ibid. U.S Department of State.

³³ "ILGA World Map." International Lesbian Gay and Intersex Association. Accessed January 16, 2019. <http://ilga.org/>. See also Ibid. U.S Department of State.

³⁴ ILGA, the International, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, was founded in 1978 on the principle of highlighting state sponsored homophobia where it exists around the world. ILGA annually publishes a map with an accompanying report on sexual and gender based harassment, which focuses on both the legal and non-legal acts of state sponsored discrimination.

³⁵ "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2017 Belize." U.S Department of State. January 1, 2013. Accessed November 19, 2019.

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>.

³⁶ Ibid. U.S Department of State.

³⁷ Ibid. U.S Department of State.

³⁸ Ibid. U.S Department of State.

³⁹ "Belize Forecast: Unemployment Rate." CEIC Data. Accessed January 16, 2019. <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/belize/forecast-unemployment-rate>