

# Population Geography of Mainland Hispanic America: Inventory of the 1980s

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## **ABSTRACT**

Rapid population growth in Latin America continued during the 1980s, although the rate has continued to decline since the 1960s. During all this time when the rate was declining the absolute annual increase of population continued to expand and it did so during the 1980s. This will cease probably within the next few years although impressive population growth will continue well into the next century. The agricultural population is now only about a quarter of the total and its absolute growth should stop shortly. The urban population is now about 70 percent and few countries remain primarily rural. Latin America remains the most highly urbanized and least agricultural region of the underdeveloped world. Although the traditional areas of settlement are expanding more slowly in population, the "empty areas" are generally increasing rapidly.

The publications on population included in this study pertain to Latin America overall and to the countries of mainland Hispanic America. Urbanization studies of mainland Middle America are excluded because they are covered elsewhere in this conference. The bibliography is divided into 10 topics or themes. Each topic/theme is subdivided into general studies and to those pertaining to individual countries (or a small group of countries). There are a total of 56 general studies (scattered among nine of the topic/theme categories) and 141 country studies. The latter are almost evenly divided between mainland Middle America and Hispanic South America. The most extensive studies pertain to urbanization and also to migration. General/Overview studies are also rather large followed by agricultural colonization, historical and development/resources/food studies. Somewhat less numerous are population characteristics studies with the smallest number of entries pertain to ethnic, distribution/settlement and, especially, political studies. Mexico accounts for more than a quarter of all the individual country studies while the next most numerous studies deal with Bolivia, Peru and Argentina. Considering present-day circumstances an area of some neglect would appear the study of the relationship of population to ecological changes and problems and the general neglect by geographers of distribution studies, other than those of migration.

## **LATIN AMERICAN POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS IN THE 1980s**

During the 1980s the population of Latin America increased from approximately 360 to 447 million.<sup>(1)</sup> The rate of population growth at the beginning of the decade was about 2.6 percent annually but decreased to about 2.1 percent by 1990. The pattern of a declining population rate of growth goes back at least to the early 1960s. The Orient is the only other underdeveloped region that began to decline at about the same time or slightly later. Latin America had the world's fastest rate of population growth until probably the late 1960s when the Middle East attained and then surpassed Latin America. At approximately the same time, or soon thereafter,

Sub-Saharan Africa also surpassed Latin America's population growth rate.

Virtually all the countries of Latin America reduced their rate of population growth during the 1980s, except that Trinidad-Tobago, Bolivia and especially, Chile showed some marginal increases. In addition, no significant changes in the growth rate occurred in Guatemala, Panama and Cuba.

The absolute annual increase for Latin America has continued to grow from approximately 5.4 million in the 1950s to about eight million in 1980 and now is slightly less than nine million. The annual absolute population increment is probably about to cease growing perhaps within the next few years. The Orient's annual absolute growth began to decrease probably in the late 1970s and is the only underdeveloped region to have done so. Latin America's population growth is projected to continue well into the next century with an expected population of 535 million at the end of the century (only a decade from now) and 705 million by 2020.

Among the Latin American countries Argentina alone shows a decreasing addition to its population growth every year. Nine other countries, all small, appear to have annual additions that are no longer expanding significantly.

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The reason for the decline of Latin America's population growth rate is the continuing reduction of fertility. Although mortality overall has declined only marginally during the 1980s (despite a significant decline in infant mortality), fertility has dropped significantly. The most marked declines in the crude birth rate during the 1980s occurred in Brasil, Ecuador, Venezuela, Peru and Honduras. No change or a slight increase occurred in Cuba, Trinidad-Tobago and Chile. During the decade the total fertility rate (average number of children born to each woman during her lifetime) was reduced by one child to a total of 3.5 children at present. At the same time life expectancy has been increased by about three years.

The rapid process of urbanization continues as the urban population increased from 61 to 69 percent of the total regional population during the 1980s. In 1990 the only countries that remain less than 50 percent urban are those of Central America (except Nicaragua, Panama and Belize), Haiti, Paraguay and Guyana.

The agricultural population now accounts for only slightly more than a quarter of the total population and it should cease growing altogether in the next few years. Haiti, Honduras and Guatemala are the only countries that remain more than 50 percent agricultural while Mexico and Peru are the only major Latin American countries where the agricultural population continues to expand. Latin America remains the only highly urbanized underdeveloped region and, by far, the least agricultural. The traditional areas of settlement (the Antilles, Middle Chile, the La Plata-Parana Basin, the Cordilleran and Brazilian Highlands) have been increasing at relatively slow rates, or very slowly in the case of the Antilles. These regions still account for more than four-fifths of Latin America's total population and occupy approximately one-half of the total area. The relatively "empty areas" have been growing rather rapidly in population,

except for South Chile and the Guiana Highlands. Amazonia and the region of Northwest Argentina and Patagonia have had an especially pronounced rapid population growth during the 1980s.

During the period 1980-87 (the period of the 1980s for which comparable data are available) the growth of population, among other factors, has resulted in a continued rapid expansion of land under cultivation. Latin America continues to expand its cropland faster than any other underdeveloped (or advanced) region but the rate (both relative and absolute) of expansion during the 1980s is considerably below that of the 1970s. This may be due to the slowing down of overall population growth and especially that of the agricultural population or to increasing agricultural yields, but it may also indicate that desirable and accessible arable land may be in short supply. All the large countries of the region, except Bolivia and Chile, had large increases in cultivated area during the 1980s, with Brasil accounting for three-fourths of the total regional increase, but some small countries, viz., Cuba, Guatemala and especially, Paraguay, had very substantial expansions of cropland. During the 1980s, in contrast to the 1970s, the expansion of pasture land was greater than that of cropland and greater than the increase during the previous decade. The most impressive expansion of pastures during the 1980s occurred in Brasil, Paraguay and Colombia. The penalty for these increases has been paid for by the very rapid and increasing deforestation. Although Latin America has the largest forest area, both relatively and absolutely, and the largest forested area per capita of any world region, the rate of deforestation, both relatively and absolutely, is also the greatest. During the 1970s an area the size of Costa Rica was deforested annually in Latin America and during the 1980s that area was increased by one-fifth. Brasil accounts for more than a third of the loss of forested area. Large losses also occur in most of the other tropical South American countries and Mexico. In contrast, Cuba and Uruguay actually increased their forested areas during the 1980s.

## **POPULATION LITERATURE IN THE 1980s.<sup>(2)</sup>**

The literature pertaining to population in Latin America that was published during the 1980s is quite extensive. The appended bibliography is certainly not complete nor attempts to be definitive.<sup>(3)</sup> It can, however, be considered representative of the nature of the publications that have been issued over the past decade. The population studies have been divided into 10 topics or themes and within each topic/theme are listed the general studies followed by studies of individual countries (or sometimes small groups of countries). There are a total of 56 general entries listed and 141 entries for individual countries. The latter are divided almost evenly between the countries of mainland Middle America and Hispanic South America.

1. **General/Overview.** These studies deal with the demographic situation, population changes and trends, population growth and pressures and demographic policies and politics (including immigration policies). This comprises one of the largest group in the study with five general studies and 20 entries dealing with individual **[end p. 100]** countries or a small group of countries. Mexico has, by far, the largest number of entries, as is the case in most other topic/theme headings.

2. **Historical.** Population studies dealing with past population conditions is also one of the larger

groups. There are five general studies and 15 country entries. Again, Mexico has the greatest number of country publications but there are more entries from South America than in the previous topic/theme.

**3. Population Characteristics.** These studies deal with fertility, mortality (including infant mortality), family planning and contraception, and the age structure. There are two general studies, dealing with contraception and mortality, and 14 country entries. Half of the latter deal with Mexico and only three focus on South American countries.

**4. Development/Resources/Food.** A rather broad category that is also one of the larger in terms of entries. The studies deal with population or population change and the economy or economic development, the problem of resource depletion, deforestation or ecological effects, agriculture, land tenure and development, the food supply/production/nutrition problems and poverty. There are 11 general studies (the second largest among the 10 topics/themes) and eight country studies, with all of them pertaining to Mexico and four of the countries of Central America.

**5. Distribution and Settlement.** These studies focus on the distribution of population, the settlement patterns and settlement and distribution policies. Although one would expect geographers to concentrate or at least devote considerable attention to this theme, this group is one of the smaller of the categories. There are five general studies and only five entries pertaining to three individual countries (Mexico with three and Costa Rica and Argentina).

**6. Agricultural Colonization.** This comprises one of the larger categories of entries and pertains to the processes, problems and policies of agricultural colonization projects as well as to spontaneous settlements. Although there is only one general study, pertaining to health problems in agricultural colonization, there are 20 individual country studies. In this topic there isn't a single entry listed for Mexico and only one for any Central American country (Costa Rica). The great focus is on South America, especially the expansion toward the interior of the continent.

**7. Political.** By far the smallest category of entries focuses on the demographic aspects of unrest and conflict and on United States security considerations. There are two general studies dealing with those subjects and three country studies and they all deal with Central America.

**8. Ethnicity.** A relatively small group of entries (only 11) with a focus on minorities, including Amerindians, and also on refugees. There are no general studies on this theme and the country studies are broadly scattered.

**9. Migration.** This is the second largest group of entries and the studies pertain to internal migration and the rural exodus, immigration and undocumented or illegal migration. There are four general studies and 28 individual country studies. Mexico has a dozen entries, and the remainder are broadly scattered with no other country having more than three.

**10. Urbanization.** This category excludes studies devoted to mainland Middle America as previously noted. Despite this, more entries are listed under urbanization than any other

topic/theme. There are 21 general studies (as many or more than the total for nearly all the other categories) and 17 individual country studies. Chile has, by far, the largest number of country entries.

The scope of population studies by geographers and/or of interest to geographers on Latin America is extremely broad and the volume is impressive. Many facets of the relationship of population to other factors or themes is explored. Urbanization and migration appear to receive the greatest attention but important topics such as the relationship of population to development, resources and food supply are receiving some attention. The effect of population growth on ecological change appears to be somewhat neglected, at least in the professional literature. Population growth and pressure on deforestation would appear to warrant more attention than it has been receiving. It would also appear that geographers would have a distinct advantage in furthering the study, more than they do in migration studies, of the distributional aspects of population. Mexico accounts for more than a quarter of all the individual country studies while the next most numerous studies deal with Bolivia, Peru and Argentina. Some countries also appear to be somewhat neglected; viz., Panama and Honduras in Central America and Colombia and Uruguay in South America.

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## **Notes**

1. Population figures are based on data from various editions of the *World Population Data Sheet* (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, Inc.), *Demographic Yearbook* (New York: United Nations), and the *FAO Production Yearbook* (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations).
2. The literature included in this study pertains to Latin America overall and for the countries of mainland Hispanic America. Since urbanization in Mexico and Central America is included elsewhere, it is not included in this study.
3. More than three pages of entries have been deleted in order to provide a slightly more concise bibliography. Virtually all of the entries deleted were general in nature; i.e., pertained to Latin America overall or included Latin America as part of the 3rd World.

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