

Introducing the Region: Human Geography

Latin America is home to 33 countries and more than 500 million people. Brazil is the largest country in both area and population. About 180 million people lived in Brazil in 2000. This means that one Latin American out of three was a Brazilian. Brazil is the largest country in the world where Portuguese is the first language.

This region is called *Latin America* because most of its people speak Spanish or Portuguese. Both are modern languages based on Latin. This was a language spoken in the Roman Empire about 2,000 years ago. Languages based on Latin are called Romance languages because of their Roman roots.

Political Boundaries of Latin America



History

Over time, many peoples have come to Latin America. Each group has left its mark on the history of this region.

Early Times

The first Americans were probably hunter-gatherers from Asia. They may have followed animals they hunted across a land bridge that once connected Asia to Alaska. From Alaska, their descendents spread to the tip of South America.

Over time, some native peoples learned how to farm. Their most important crops were maize (corn) and the potato. Farming allowed native peoples to settle down in one place. It also led to the growth of civilizations.

The Maya created civilizations in Mexico and Central America. Four hundred years later, the Aztecs built their **empire** in Mexico. The Incas built a large empire that spread down the western coast of South America.

The Colonial Period

In 1492, a European explorer named Christopher Columbus landed on an island in the Caribbean. As news of his discovery spread, more Europeans came to the Americas. In the early 1500s, Spain conquered the Aztec and Inca empires.

These conquests began a long period of European colonization. Many native peoples died in wars against the colonists. But diseases brought by the Europeans proved even more deadly than war. As the native

peoples died out, the Europeans brought Africans over to work as slaves.

Eventually, Spain and Portugal controlled most of Latin America. During the colonial period, Spanish and Portuguese replaced many Native American languages. At the same time, many native peoples became Christians.

In time, Latin Americans began to rebel against their European rulers. The wars for independence began with an uprising of slaves in Haiti in 1791. By 1825, most of Latin America had thrown off colonial rule. One of the first acts of the newly independent countries was to outlaw slavery. The exception was Brazil, which did not free its slaves until 1888.

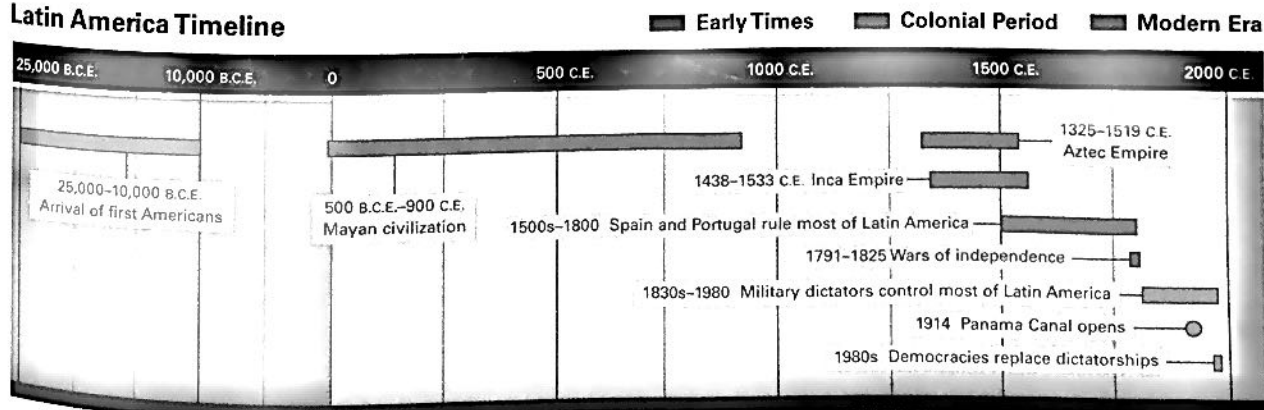
The Modern Era

Independence did not bring democracy to Latin America as it had to the United States. From Mexico to Argentina, military leaders seized power and ruled as **dictators**. Most dictators were only interested in holding onto power. They cared little about the rights or welfare of their people.

By the 1980s, Latin Americans were weary of dictators. In one country after another, the people demanded the right to choose their leaders. Today, elected governments run most Latin American countries.

Democracy has not solved all of Latin America's problems. Poverty is widespread. Schools are poor. Governments are not stable. Living standards remain low. But for many Latin Americans, the right to vote has brought with it hope for a better future.

Latin America Timeline



Population

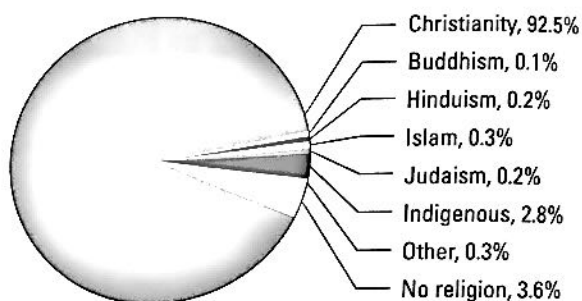
Latin America includes more than 15 percent of the world's land area. But it is home to less than 9 percent of the world's people. Still, its population is growing fast. From 1950 to 2000, the number of Latin Americans more than tripled. Only Africa has a higher growth rate.

As the population grows, it is becoming more **urban**. In 1950, more than half of Latin Americans lived on farms. Today, three fourths live in urban areas. Most large cities are located on the coasts.

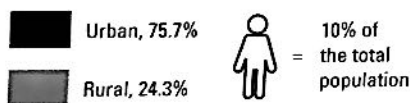
Most Latin Americans are Christian. This region is home to nearly half of the world's one billion Roman Catholics. However, other Christian churches are gaining members.

Some Latin Americans still follow indigenous religions. These are traditional beliefs held by native peoples. The *Other* category in the circle graph below includes several religious traditions. Some of these traditions were brought to the Americas long ago by Africans. Others were brought by more recent immigrants from Asia.

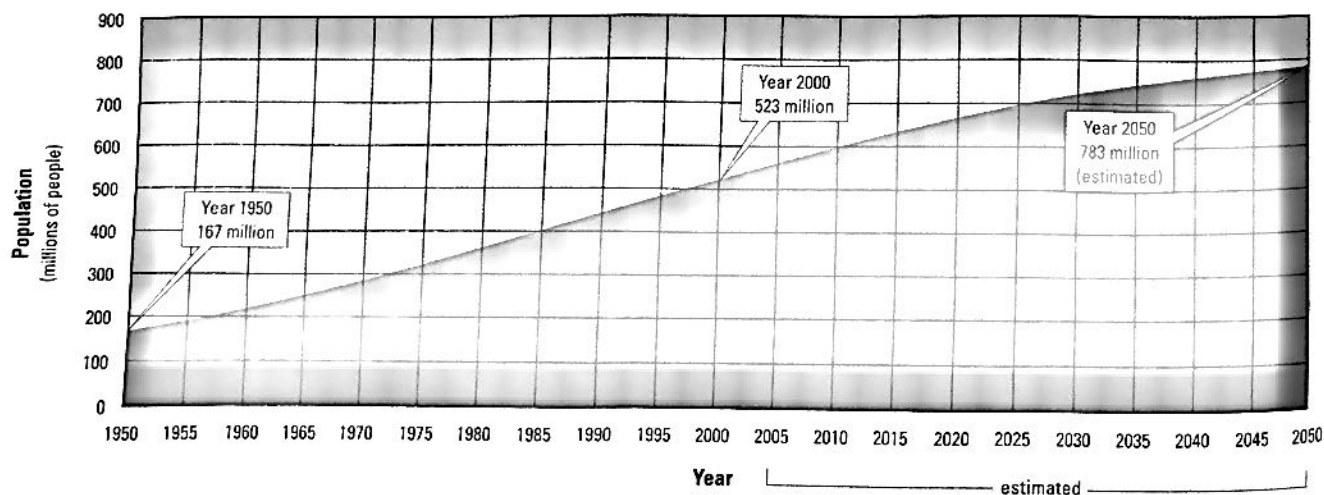
Latin America: Major Religions



Latin America: Urban and Rural Population, 2000



Latin America: Population Growth, 1950–2050



Sources: Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, "World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision" and "World Urbanization Prospects: The 2003 Revision," esa.un.org/unpp. "Religion," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2005, Encyclopædia Britannica Premium Service, www.britannica.com.

Economic Activity

Latin America has a wealth of **natural resources**. Those resources support a broad range of **economic activities**. The most widespread economic activities are **livestock raising** and **subsistence farming**.

Subsistence farmers usually grow only enough food to feed their families. Good weather may sometimes allow them to produce a crop surplus. They can then sell or **barter** their extra food for other things they need. But surpluses are rare. As a result, subsistence farmers are generally poor. The most important crops grown by subsistence farmers are corn, potatoes, and beans.

Resources

The Europeans who first came to Latin America wanted its mineral wealth. They were interested mainly in mining silver and gold. Later, people mined copper, uranium, and other minerals as well. Most of these metals are found in the Andes Mountains.

Today Latin America is better known for its energy resources. This region has about 12 percent of the world's petroleum, or oil supply. Large oil deposits have been found in Mexico and Venezuela.

Latin American rivers are another source of energy. Dams on rivers in Brazil and Paraguay produce large amounts of **hydro-electric power**.



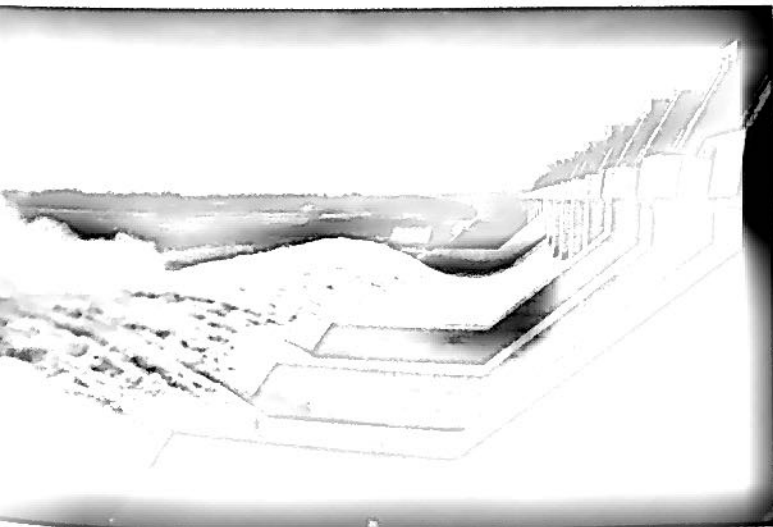
A subsistence farmer in Mexico harvests corn. Subsistence farming is widespread in Latin America.

Land Use

Farming and ranching are important across Latin America. One of the most important **commercial farming** crops is coffee. Coffee beans are grown on large **plantations** in Brazil, Colombia, and Central America. Ranchers raise mostly cattle and sheep. The largest cattle ranches are found on the Pampas of Argentina.

Forestry is another major industry. Many types of trees are harvested from Latin American forests. This wood is used for building materials and fuel. It is also used to make products such as furniture and musical instruments.

Some areas in Latin America specialize in a particular activity. The most important industry in the Caribbean islands, for example, is **tourism**. Mexico, in contrast, is strong in manufacturing. Many of the cars you see on American roads were made in Mexico.



This dam supplies electricity to industries in northern Brazil.