



Reports monitoring covid-19 pandemic in countries and regions of the Global South Nº 14

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The problem of informal settlements in Latin America

The *World Health Organization* (WHO, 2020) issued a series of basic protection recommendations with the aim of preventing the spread of the virus among different populations. These include maintaining social distance, which is keeping at least one meter away from other people, especially those who cough, sneeze and have a fever.

According to data from the *Inter-American Development Bank* (IDB, 2020), many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean took early action to encourage social distancing. In early March, most countries closed their schools and cancelled events with large crowds. In the third week of the same month, many countries such as Argentina and El Salvador issued orders to stay home, and others, such as Uruguay and Colombia, imposed quarantines on older adults. By the end of March, most countries in the region had declared quarantine mandatory for most of their inhabitants. These recommendations are difficult to implement given the way informal settlements are organized in Latin America.



Figure 1. Measures of social distancing in Latin America and the Caribbean. Source: IDB, 2020.

Mild: Instructions were given not to leave the house and large events were cancelled. **Moderate:** Curfews at certain times of the day, closure of some non-essential businesses, mandatory quarantine for the elderly, and recommendations to stay home as much as possible for the rest of the population. **Mandatory:** Stay-at-home orders, with penalties.

On the report of the *Latin American Council of Social Sciences* (LACSS, 2020), about 20% of the total Latin American urban population lives in informal settlements, which highlights the great

inequality that exists in this part of the world. This population is already vulnerable because it has serious economic, social and health problems. In addition, it is impossible for them to maintain social distance due to the combination of high population density and limited infrastructure. There are also many large families living together in one room. This is in addition to the need to provide for their daily sustenance, since most of the people living in these settlements are engaged in informal work. All of the above helps to ensure that once the virus arrives within these populations, its spread will occur rapidly and almost inevitably.

According to data from 2014, the most recent ones to be published, in most Latin American countries at least 10% of the population lives in this type of settlement (ECLAC, 2019). Haiti is the country with the largest population living in these conditions, more than 70%. It is followed by Bolivia with more than 40%, and Ecuador, Guatemala, Peru and Venezuela with more than 30%. It is estimated that all these percentages have increased in recent years.

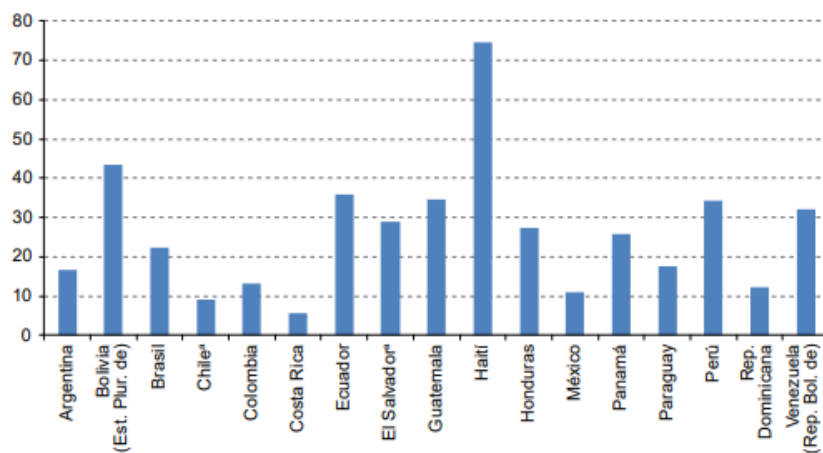


Figure 1. Percentage of urban population living in informal settlements for some Latin American countries, in 2014. Source: ECLAC, 2019.

The consequences of informal settlements in Latin America on the spread of covid-19 have already been seen. Argentina has around 1,700 informal settlements called villas, according to the newspaper *La Nación*. More than 50% of the confirmed cases in the country's capital are found in these settlements. One specific case is that of Villa Azul, settled at south of the capital. According to the same newspaper, more than 3,000 people live there and there are already hundreds of suspected cases and more than 80 confirmed positive cases.

In Peru, there has been a great increase in the number of infections in the different human settlements in the country. According to the newspaper *Gestión*, more than 960 positive cases have been registered in the San Juan de Lurigancho district and more than 750 in the San Martín de Porres district.

In Ecuador, more than 2.8 million people live in informal settlements. According to the newspaper *Primicias*, particularly in the city of Guayaquil, more than 31% of the population lives in this type of settlement. This city has been the epicenter of coronavirus in Ecuador, where almost 15,000 cases were registered and more than 1,500 deaths occurred.

According to *The Guardian*, the city of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil is home to some 6.7 million people, 20% of whom live in informal settlements called favelas. Regarding the newspaper *O*

Globo, the virus has already reached more than 90% of the 92 municipalities of Rio de Janeiro. The Rocinha favela, the largest in the country with more than 100,000 inhabitants, was one of the first and most affected in the city. Many tourists include the informal settlements of Rio de Janeiro in their itineraries, either through a sight-seeing in the distance or as part of various tours. The Rocinha favela in particular is one of the most visited. In this regard, the *Rio On Watch* Organization reports that until the beginning of March, a large number of international tourists continued to enter the favela. It is believed that this may have been one of the reasons why the virus spread so quickly in this community.

On the other hand, the Brazilian city of São Paulo is home to the Brasilândia district, which has the second largest number of favelas in the country. This district has been notoriously affected by the virus, having the highest number of deaths in the whole city. Overall, Brazil has more than 1.7 million confirmed cases of coronavirus and more than 134,000 deaths. It is the country most affected by the virus in Latin America, and the second in the world after the United States.

In conclusion, informal settlements in Latin America are an ideal situation for the spread of covid-19. A large population lives there with limited infrastructure and cannot follow the recommendations issued by the WHO and the governments, specifically that of maintaining social distance. Overcrowding is just one of the many social, economic and health challenges facing these vulnerable populations. Clearly, the sum of all these problems contributes directly to the rapid spread of the virus in these settlements.

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The research group BIOCOM-SC from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia is in contact with different research groups and governmental offices in order to jointly predict the evolution of the pandemic covid-19. Moreover, we follow up local media in 35 African countries and 9 Latino American countries and complemented it with interviews to field experts.

<https://biocomsc.upc.edu/en/covid-19>