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# The Routledge Handbook of Urban Studies in Latin America and the Caribbean

Cities, Urban Processes, and Policies

Edited by Jesús M. González-Pérez, Clara Irazábal and  
Rubén C. Lois-González

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# URBAN POVERTY AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

## Social Vulnerability in the Era of Sustainable Development

*Adrián Guillermo Aguilar and Flor M. López Guerrero<sup>1</sup>*

### 1. Introduction

The presence of poverty and social inequality in most Latin American and Caribbean countries continues to be one of the main obstacles to achieving sustainable development. Although trends in the past few decades have shown that the incidence of poverty, particularly extreme poverty, is higher in rural areas, recent years have seen a significant increase in poverty in urban areas, known as the *urbanization of poverty*.

This chapter examines the scope and evolution of urban poverty, extreme poverty, and social inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean, emphasizing their territorial and economic implications, and the trajectory of several related factors such as labor income and the gaps that determine the main social inequalities. It also provides an overview of the way social vulnerability has become predominant and the reasons why its reduction must be a central objective of the political agenda.

### 2. Social welfare and the neoliberal model

The last two decades of the 20th century in Latin America and the Caribbean saw the adoption of a neoliberal economic model based on the opening of markets, the privatization of companies, and the reduction of state influence on the economy. Neoliberal expectations regarding the effects of the free market were predicated on the emergence of gradual sustained growth that would result in better employment, higher incomes, and a firmer basis for social development following an initial adjustment period. Unfortunately, expectations of economic growth failed to materialize, which had negative consequences for standards of living (Tokman, 1997; Méndez, 1997, pp. 100–102; Klein & Tokman, 2000, pp. 8–9; Held & MacGrew, 2000, pp. 18–29; George & Paul, 2002, pp. 18–24; Portes & Roberts, 2008, pp. 20–21).

The urbanization process continued to increase territorially to such an extent that in 2018, the United Nations estimated that the urban population represented 80 percent of the population, and

there were ten megacities with over 10 million inhabitants (UN, 2019). But large cities lost their appeal as sources of employment, and new development hubs emerged with new investments in medium and small cities, associated with export agriculture, export industries, and tourism, directly influencing the direction of internal migration flows. The new urban dynamics led to the rapid growth of medium cities with between half a million and 1 million inhabitants, associated with the new investments distributed throughout the various regions of each country (Portes & Roberts, 2008, p. 18).

In the labor market, liberalization policies favored deregulation and the shrinking of the state, with the consequent reduction of the public sector that had previously been a crucial source of employment for the middle class. Governments supported *labor flexibility* policies that reduced the benefits and job security enjoyed by the former working class (Portes & Hoffman, 2003, pp. 49–50; Portes & Roberts, 2008, pp. 20–21). The evolution of metropolitan labor markets in the region is a good example of social inequality and the extremely low incomes of some sectors. On the one hand, certain sectors linked to the global economic system expanded, such as knowledge-intensive, financial and insurance, and high technology sectors with high incomes yet at the other extreme, and, perhaps representing the majority, extremely unskilled consumer services coexisted such as retail trade, repair and maintenance, and cleaning and security, many in the informal sector (Méndez, 2008, p. 47–48).

Since investment was limited and failed to create a dynamic process of job creation, poverty and inequality rose, meaning that income differences are greater than they used to be in Latin America and the Caribbean. Income concentration significantly increased because of the adoption of neoliberal policies, reaching a Gini coefficient similar (0.52) to the one that existed before trade liberalization. Rising unemployment, the shift towards less productive and more unstable jobs, and wage differences exacerbated income inequality because they significantly affect the poorest groups (Klein & Tokman, 2000, pp. 20–21). In fact, inflation soared to levels of over 1000 percent in several countries in the region (Bolivia, Nicaragua, Argentina, Brazil, and Peru) during the 1980s and early 1990s, as a result of which those years became known as the “lost decade” (Jackiewicz & Quiquívix, 2008, p. 25).

It is essential to determine the impact of the neoliberal model on individual and social welfare and the extent to which the process has improved or worsened our social condition in absolute and relative terms. In the following sections, we will refer to three central concepts, urban poverty, inequality, and social vulnerability, to shed light on the recent evolution of social welfare in Latin America and the Caribbean. Although there has been significant progress in reducing poverty and destitution in the countries in the region, cities are still the scene of vast inequalities regarding access to quality public services, the presence of informal activities, and socio-residential segregation. These challenges have been incorporated into international agendas such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that seek multidimensional responses to the imbalances caused by the dominant economic model and to ensure the successful implementation of more sustainable development. This Agenda has been assumed by Latin American and the Caribbean countries as a transformative opportunity for sustainable development that incorporates their economic, social, and environmental dimensions (CEPAL, 2016).

In other words, the urban issue is being framed using a more cross-cutting approach for development themes. Cities are acknowledged as spaces where a variety of interrelated elements of sustainability are now being addressed. They express many of the tensions of the current development style, including poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and climate change, which go beyond issues more directly linked to physical factors such as housing and public services. The current high level of urbanization in the region is attracting more attention in the global discussion on development in the region. The challenge is therefore to define sustainable urban policies that can provide answers for global sustainability challenges (CEPAL, 2017b, pp. 22–24).

### **3. Urban poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean**

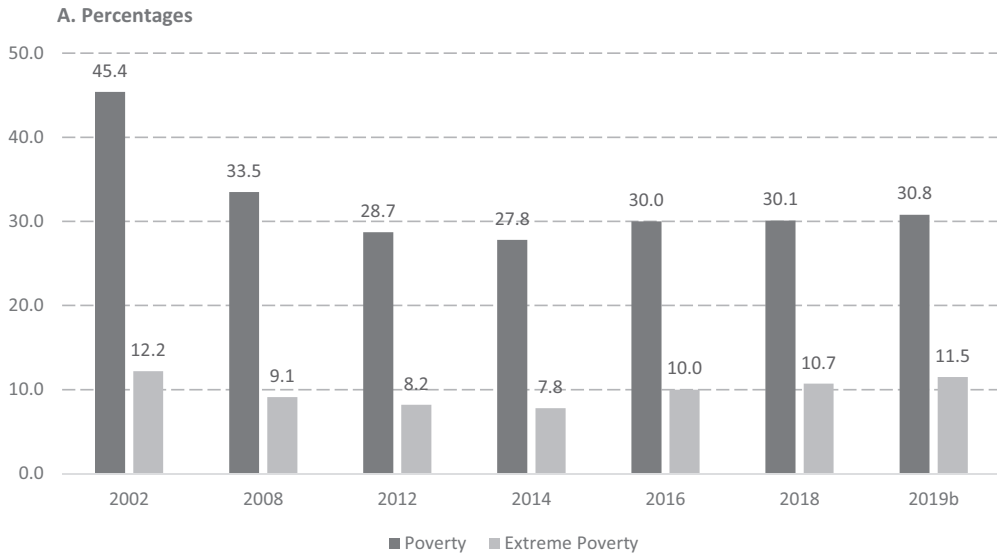
Historically, the monetarist approach has predominated in the definition of poverty, which has usually been framed as the lack of income and therefore insufficient consumption by individuals and families. To this end, a poverty line is defined, represented by a basic food basket. This indicator has been convenient because it uses information that is readily available (Ruggeri Laderchi, Saith, & Stewart, 2003, pp. 247–248). But over the years, other approaches have emerged that adopt a broader approach, such as Sen's (1993) capabilities approach, which rejects monetary income as a measure of welfare and proposes focusing on basic capability indicators that satisfy the realization of human potential. The Basic Needs approach (see Boltvinik, 2014) includes other essential satisfiers, while the Social Exclusion approach is defined as a process in which individuals or groups are totally or partially excluded from full participation in the society where they live (Ruggeri Laderchi et al., 2003, pp. 253–258).

All these latter approaches emphasize the multidimensional nature of poverty. In other words, the causes of poverty do not lie solely in economic factors but also in the lack of opportunities to enjoy a decent life. Accordingly, other dimensions should be measured, such as educational backwardness, health access, social security access, housing quality, basic service provision, and good nutrition (Sanghee, 2017, p. 31).

The conceptualization and measurement of poverty have major implications for policy orientation. If the monetarist approach is adopted, the focus will be on increasing income and therefore on economic growth and redistribution. But if a more multidimensional approach is adopted, this will lead to a greater emphasis on public goods or on eliminating exclusionary factors. There must therefore be a greater concern with characterizing poverty more comprehensively. Unfortunately, the databases that measure poverty for the entire Latin American and the Caribbean region and each of the countries use extremely restricted measures, which means that the scope of poverty is distorted, while the conditions of shortages and deprivation of the population are under-represented.

Another essential aspect is that, unlike rural poverty, urban poverty has certain characteristic features, representative of its nature, three of which warrant mentioning. First, an important aspect is that the urban poor are much more integrated into the market economy, which implies greater vulnerability to fluctuations in the economy. For the urban poor, the transmission of macroeconomic shocks is felt through the labor market, while loss of employment is one of the most devastating effects they face. Indeed, as Fay (2005, p. 2) points out, unemployment in Latin America and the Caribbean is a typical urban phenomenon. A second characteristic feature is that, from a socio-economic point of view, urban areas are far more heterogeneous regarding the economic activities undertaken there and the processes that give rise to them. Accordingly, the types of occupations are extremely varied, and it is difficult to know how each of them could be affected by a macroeconomic shock. And a third feature is that the urban poor tend to live in highly segregated socio-territorial areas, because of which they experience various degrees of social exclusion. Not only are their employment and education opportunities limited because of the “neighborhood effect”, but they are also hampered by severe deficiencies or gaps in service provision, such as water and drainage, coupled with the stigmatization of living in poor settlements (Fay, 2005, pp. 2–3).

The persistence of poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean remains a huge challenge to achieving more inclusive, sustainable development. ECLAC data show that from the beginning of the century to 2014, the region saw a decrease in poverty in relative numbers, falling from 47.4 to 27.8 percent, considering poor persons those with the per capita income of their household below the poverty line.<sup>2</sup> However, as of this last year, this trend was reversed, and poverty levels began to increase until they reached 30.1 percent in 2018, with an upward trend. The extreme poverty trend has been similar, rising from 7.8 percent in 2014 to 10.7 percent in 2018 (see Figure 11.1). In other words, over the past five years, the percentage of poverty and extreme poverty has remained virtually constant, with the two types of poverty together accounting for 40.8 percent of the total population in 2018.



*Figure 11.1* Latin America (18 countries): population in situation of poverty and extreme poverty, 2002–2019a (percentages and millions of persons).

*A* Weighted average from the following countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brasil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panamá, Paraguay, Perú, Dominican Republic, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

*B* Values correspond to projections.

*Source:* Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), from the Data Bank, Household Surveys (BADEHOG).

But in absolute figures, the reality is even more dramatic, because the number of poor people has steadily risen. Whereas in 2014, there were 164 million poor people in the region, it was estimated that this number would increase to 191 million by 2019, with 72 million living in extreme poverty (see Figure 11.1). This means 263 million people in conditions of poverty, a vast number.

The 2019 figures for the increase in poverty and extreme poverty in the region are based on a 0.9 percent drop in the per capita economic growth rate forecast for the region and low expectations of economic performance for certain countries in the region such as Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela (CEPAL, 2019, p. 96). A glance at the incidence of poverty and extreme poverty in the region by country shows that there is enormous heterogeneity. It is immediately apparent, for example, that poverty levels in recent years have been much lower in South America (23 percent on average), with Uruguay and Chile having the lowest percentages, than in Central America (37 percent on average), where Costa Rica and Panama have the lowest incidence and Honduras the highest. The case of Brazil is a representative example of a country with a high level of development and urbanization with a stable level of poverty in recent years (20 percent). By contrast, Mexico, with similar characteristics to Brazil, has higher levels of poverty (41 percent) (see Figure 11.2).

It is recognized by international organizations that in the Caribbean countries, there is a limited capacity to collect data through National Household Surveys in time and of good quality. In consequence, data on inequality and poverty indicators used to be scarce and outdated, which makes comparisons between countries and over time difficult (see PNUD, 2021, p. 30). For these countries, data show that there is heterogeneity in the poverty levels. Whereas some countries are at an

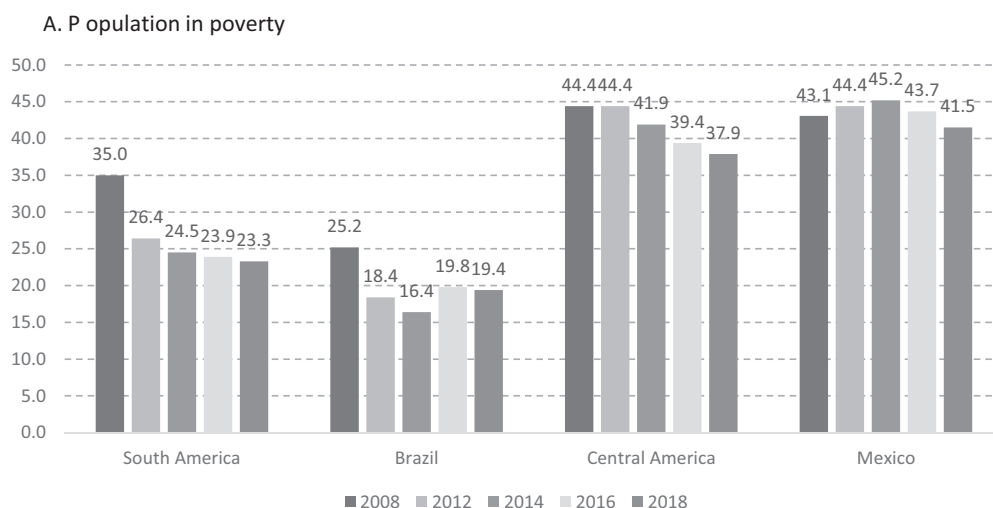


Figure 11.2 Latin America (17 countries): population in situation of poverty and extreme poverty by country and subregions, 2008–2018 (percentages).

A Weighted Average for: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay. Venezuela is not included because data were not available after 2014.

B Values between 2016 and 2018 correspond to the National Survey of Households (PNAD Continua). Values between 2008 and 2015 correspond to the National Survey of Households (PNAD), adjusted according to the difference observed in both surveys in 2014.

Source: Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), from Data Bank, Households Surveys Hogares (BADEHOG).

Table 11.1 Caribbean countries: poverty levels in different years

Country	Percentage (%)	Estimation year
Barbados	18.0	2017
Dominica	30.0	2018
Dominican Republic	21.0	2019
Guyana	43.0	2018
Haiti	53.0	2012
Jamaica	19.3	2017
Saint Lucia	20.0	2019
St. Vincent and The Grenadines	30.0	2008
Suriname	29.0	2017

Source: The World Bank (2020)

average of 20 percent of poverty level, like Barbados, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, or Saint Lucia, others register levels higher than 30 percent, like Haiti, Guyana, Dominica, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines (see Table 11.1).

Indeed, in 9 out of 15 countries in the region, the evolution of total poverty was more favorable between 2008 and 2014 than between 2014 and 2018 and even more so in the case of extreme poverty, where ten countries performed better. Conditions in Brazil and Argentina clearly deteriorated from 2014 to 2018. In Brazil, total poverty increased to 4.3 percent during this period, whereas



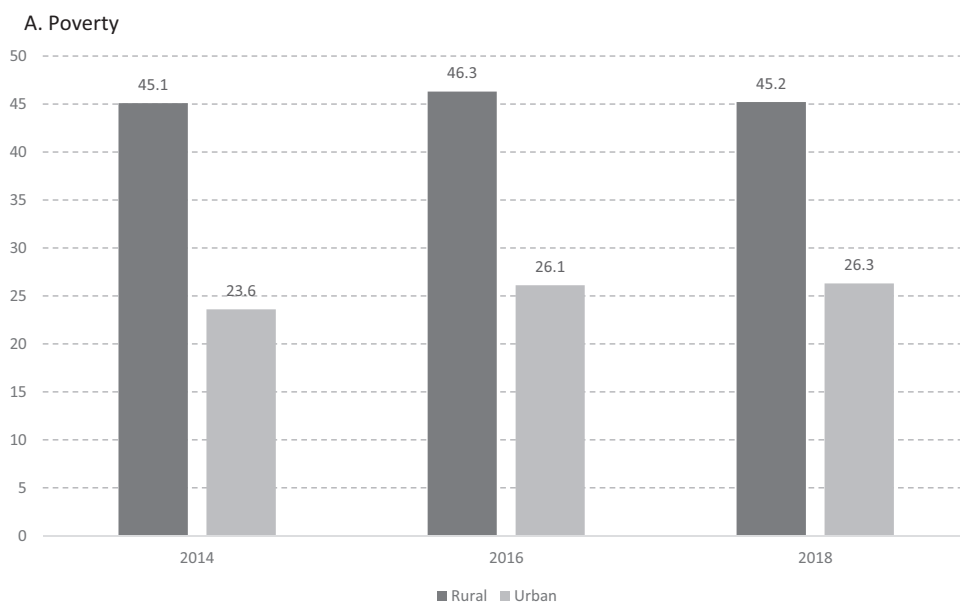


Figure 11.3 Latin America (18 countries): Incidence of poverty and extreme poverty by residence zone, 2014 to 2018a (percentages).

A Weighted average for the following countries: Argentina (urban), Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Dominican Republic, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

Source: Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), from Data Bank, Households Surveys Hogares (BADEHOG).

extreme poverty increased at an annual rate of 11.8 percent. Conversely, in Argentina, poverty only decreased at a rate of 0.5 percent per year during that same period (CEPAL, 2019, p. 104).

With an urbanization level of 80 percent in the region, a first assumption would be that an extremely high proportion of these poor are concentrated in urban centers. However, regional aggregate data show that poverty and extreme poverty levels are higher in rural than urban areas. The incidence of urban poverty increased from 23.6 percent in 2014 to 26.3 percent in 2018, whereas extreme poverty rose from 5.2 to 8.4 percent during the same period. In other words, 34.7 percent of the poor population in the region were in urban areas in the past year (see Figure 11.3). But interestingly, although the proportion of poverty and extreme poverty is higher in rural areas, figures show that between 2014 and 2018, there was a marked tendency towards concentration in urban areas. During this period, poverty and extreme poverty grew by 2.7 and 3.2 percentage points in urban areas, whereas in rural areas, they rose by 0.1 and 1.3 percentage points, respectively (CEPAL, 2019, p. 105).

*Incidence of Poverty in Cities:* The information used in this section was obtained from the ECLAC<sup>3</sup> statistical database, based on household surveys in most of the countries. The data refer to capital cities, which are usually the largest and constitute metropolitan areas, and other urban areas. These figures highlight certain key aspects regarding the scale of poverty. First, in most countries, the proportion of people below the poverty line, and below the extreme poverty line in cities, has decreased since the beginning of the century in variable percentages, although there are exceptions, such as Costa Rica and Venezuela, where the number of extreme urban poor has remained or increased, and Guatemala and Honduras, where the percentages of both types of urban poor have not changed. Mexico stands out with a high proportion of poor population.

Second, the number of people below the poverty line in urban areas tends to be lower than in the country as a whole, usually 5 to 10 percentage points, with some exceptions such as Chile, Uruguay, and the Dominican Republic, where these figures are the same, or, on the contrary, countries where the difference between the proportion of the urban and national population living in poverty is 15 percentage points, such as Guatemala and Honduras. Third, if one only refers to urban areas, the number of people below the poverty line in large cities or metropolitan areas is usually lower than in other urban areas, although in some cases it is the same as the urban total. Fourth, the proportion of the population below the extreme poverty line tends to be larger in other urban areas than in large cities, except for Argentina, where the opposite holds true (see Figure 11.4).

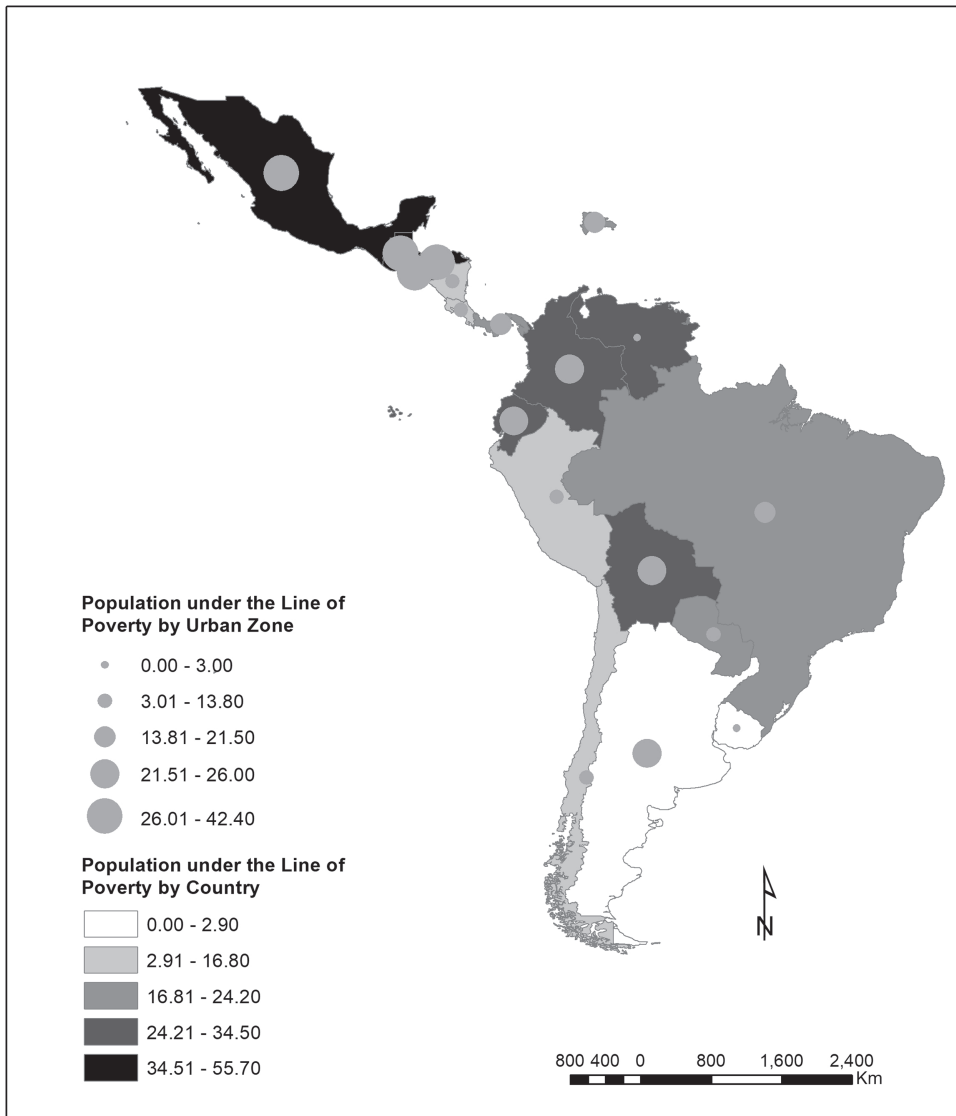


Figure 11.4 Population under the poverty line by country and urban zones, 2018 (percentages).

Source: Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), from Data Bank, Households Surveys (BADE-HOG). <https://cepalstatprod.cepal.org/cepalstat/tabulador/ConsultaIntegrada.asp?idIndicador=3328&idioma=e>

Several factors have contributed to the decline in urban poverty levels. On the one hand, since the end of the last century, there have been spurts of economic growth, despite periods of crisis, especially in the largest countries such as Chile, Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia, which brought a measure of economic prosperity. Consequently, there has been an improvement in the provision of utilities, such as electricity, water, drainage, and paving. Life expectancy has increased, and there is a greater presence of durable goods in homes, even among the poor population. However, although average family size has shrunk due to declining fertility rates (Gilbert, 2017, p. 17–18), serious shortcomings continue to plague the poorest neighborhoods.

Nevertheless, we consider that all these figures on poverty levels fail to fully reflect the scope of the shortages and the massive social deterioration that has occurred in the region. Instead, they are figures that underestimate poverty levels and attempt to convey an image of greater social welfare than actually exists in each country. An in-depth analysis of Latin American metropolises reveals extensive areas of poverty and precarious habitat coexisting with modern areas and large infrastructure works. On the one hand, areas with leading technology have emerged, and public services and transportation systems have expanded. There are also, however, urban areas that lack sufficient investment in basic infrastructure, while informal settlements, crime, the street sleeper population, and vendors in the informal sector have increased (Aguilar & López, 2019, pp. 126, 128). The study of Hardoy and Almansi (2011) reflects very well this situation in the case of poor neighborhoods in the small municipality of San Fernando towards the northeast of the Buenos Aires metropolitan region,

Most live in neighbourhoods that are still negotiating formal tenure. They have built their houses over the years, mostly with second-hand materials, and many are far from finished. They have struggled for years to get services such as water, sanitation, and gas; they have low education levels and have difficulties keeping their children at school.

These social inequities and poverty conditions form part of the main contradiction of urban development in the region. Although large cities and metropolitan areas constitute the spaces with the greatest economic development and concentration of investments in each country, they also suffer from marked socioeconomic deficiencies and inequalities. For example, almost 13 percent of households in the Sao Paulo metropolitan region, the richest in the country, are not connected to the sewerage system, and 56 percent of the sewage collected is discharged into the rivers that run through the metropolis (Maricato, 2017, p. 48). Moreover, the strong economic pull of urban centers makes the increase in the number of poor people inevitable, and poverty has become an urban phenomenon (Gilbert, 2017, p. 16), which is why we increasingly see a process of *urbanization of poverty* (López, Aguilar, Hernández, & Flores, 2016), which translates into a greater concentration of poor people in cities.

A survey on the perception of poverty in La Habana, Cuba, at the beginning of this century, reported that 23 percent of the population qualified themselves as “poor” and another 23 percent as “quasi poor”, giving a total of 46 percent; the surveyed population identified five main problems: low salaries (76 percent), food insufficiency, the deterioration of housing, clothes and shoes (70 percent), and lack or difficulty of transport (70 percent) (Mesa-Lago, 2012, p. 16). In Haiti, around 20 percent of urban households are considered chronically poor, highlighting

the particularly narrow opportunities to emerge from poverty in urban Haiti (The World Bank, 2014, p. 3).

It is important to note that there is an underestimation of urban poverty due to the limited ways in which urban poverty is conceptualized, defined, and measured, since measures are usually based on the construction of poverty lines at the national level according to local costs. Urban poverty can therefore be said to be minimized, or at least some of its dimensions tend to be overlooked.

And although there is apparently a wealth of statistics on urban poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean, in fact very little information is available on the extent to which the depth of poverty has increased during the neoliberal phase. For example, there are very few data for all cities on irregular settlements and their living conditions or aspects not included as part of the basic food basket such as the cost of rented accommodation, taking children to school, transportation, medicine, school fees, health care, degenerative diseases, and water supply. These dimensions of poverty are not well documented and prove extremely costly and difficult to cover (Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2013, pp. 30–31). The mere fact of failing to include the population in irregular settlements in official statistics means that urban poverty estimates are below their actual level.

In this respect, it is important to refer to data that point to the importance of informal settlements in the various countries in the region. These settlements are physical and territorial manifestations of poverty and social inequality in cities. They reflect severe deficiencies in public services and represent poor-quality housing and insecurity regarding land ownership. There are no accurate updated data on the number of these settlements in the region, although 2010 figures indicate that 23.5 percent of urban inhabitants in Latin America and the Caribbean lived in these types of settlements, which represented 111 million people (UN-HABITAT, 2014, p. 105). Figure 11.5 displays the percentage of these settlements in various countries in the period from 2005 to 2010. It also shows how the proportion varies between 70 percent in Haiti and 4 percent in Suriname. It is low in Chile, moderate in Colombia and Mexico, and within the average in Brazil. And although the proportion of urban population in these settlements has declined since the 1990s, the absolute population has not only increased due to demographic growth but also because of the importance of this type of urbanization that occurs in a context of poverty. According to UN-HABITAT (2014:106), the number of inhabitants in these informal poor settlements increased from 105 million in 1990 to 111 million in 2010.

One good example of the illegal nature of land occupation is the study of Maricato (2017, p. 46) on Brazil, which indicates that, in some state capitals in the north and northeast (Belém, Sao Luiz, Fortaleza, Terezina, Recife, Maceió, and Natal), the proportion of illegally built dwellings is higher than that of legally built housing; in the south, southeast, and east, the proportion of illegally built dwellings in the core cities is almost 15 percent in Sao Paulo and Curitiba; 25 percent in Belo Horizonte, Rio de Janeiro, and Porto Alegre; and more than 30 percent in Salvador.

Informal settlements to a great extent contribute to periurbanization through the occupation of sites not recommended for urban settlements and prone to flooding or landslides with a clear deficit of public services. The calculation of the urban marginality index for all urban areas in Mexico reveals these aspects (see Box 11.1).

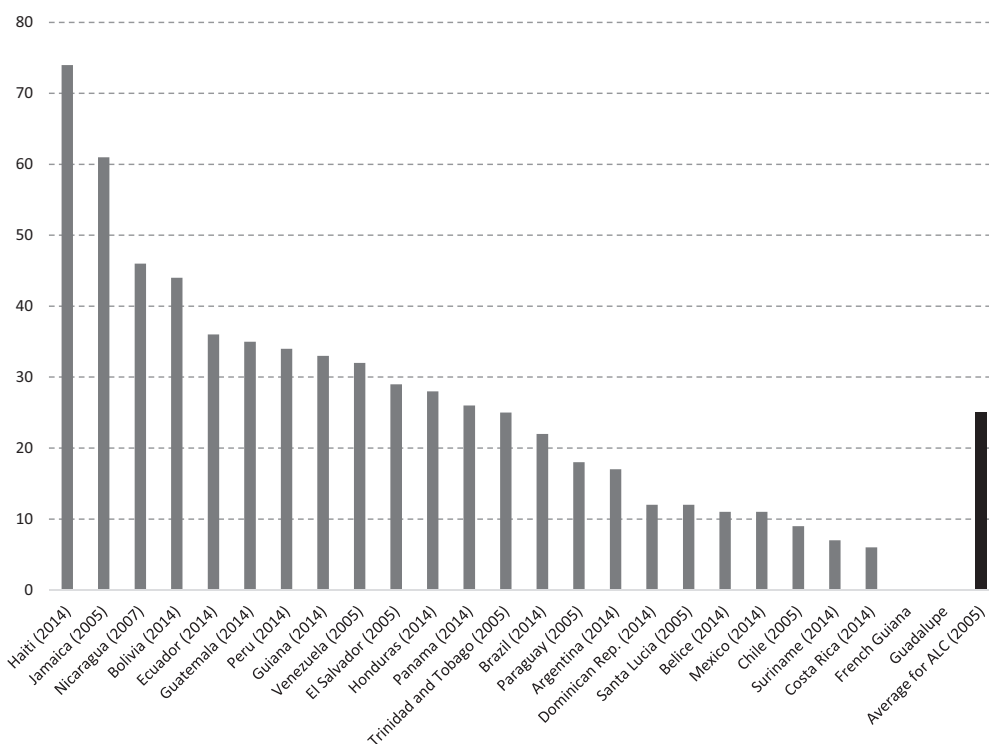


Figure 11.5 Proportion of urban population living in slums 2005–2010, by selected countries in Latin America.

Source: ONU-HABITAT Urban World Observatory. <https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/EN.POP.SLUM.UR.ZS?end=2014&start=1990&view=chart>

### Box 11.1 The urban marginality index in México

In México, most informal settlements tend to locate at the periphery of cities in precarious conditions. The index of marginality calculated for all urban areas in Mexico is a good indicator of the residential segregation and peripheral location of poor neighborhoods; this index was calculated from four dimensions (education, health, housing, and goods in the household) and ten variables, with the aim to apply social policies that to some extent could revert situations of exclusion. The evaluation of this index at ten years (2000–2010) revealed that despite progress in some indicators, others still present an important lagging condition in that period such as: population of less than 15 years old without complete basic education (primary and secondary), lack of access to health services, lack of piped water inside dwellings, overcrowding inside dwellings, and dwellings without drainage connected to public drain or septic tank. These five indicators represent the main deficiencies in poor neighborhoods in cities. Figure 11.6 shows maps of the two largest metropolitan areas of Mexico, Mexico City and Guadalajara, with 27 percent and 17 percent of their population with a very high and high index of marginality, respectively. Two important aspects can be appreciated in these maps: first, the gap between the worst and the best conditions within each city shows strong urban inequalities, and second, the worst conditions tend to be present in peripheral areas associated with informal settlements.

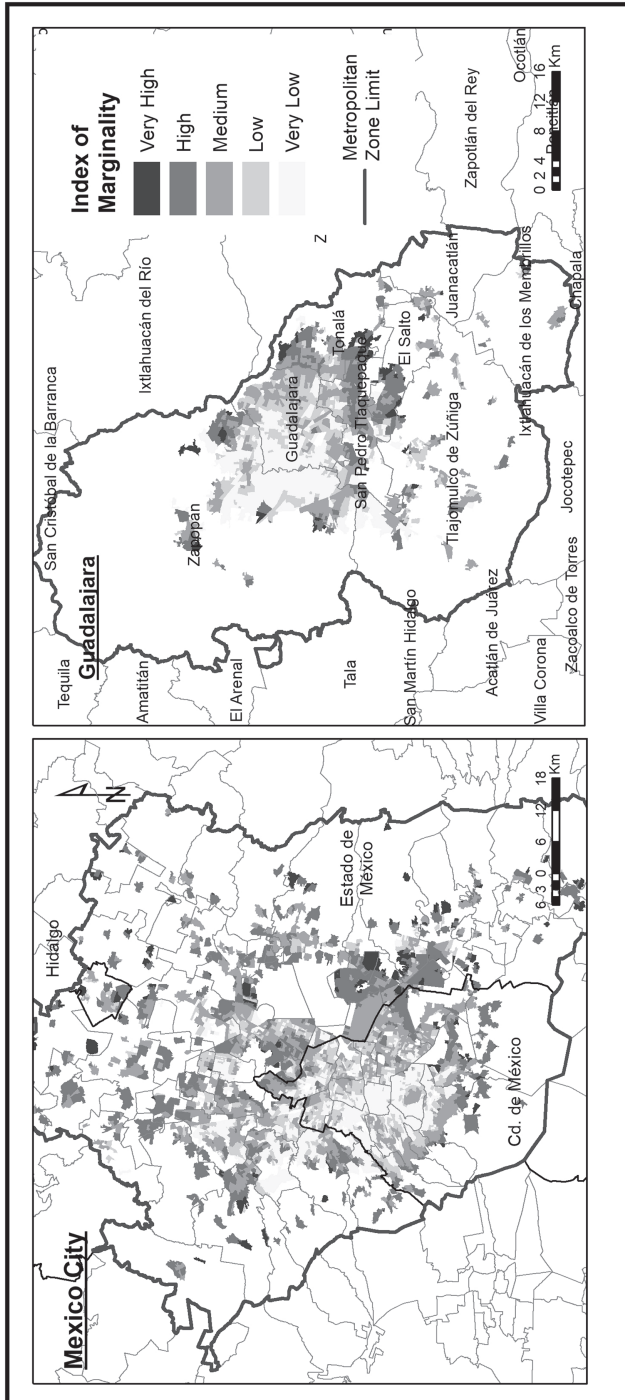


Figure 11.6 Mexico: Index of urban marginality for the metropolitan zones of Mexico City and Guadalajara, 2010.

Source: CONAPO (2012, pp. 57, 58).

#### **4. Social inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean**

Various studies have indicated that since the colonial era, Latin America and the Caribbean have experienced profound social stratification with undemocratic, sometimes even dictatorial, regimes and exclusive economic models (Furtado, 1999; Cardoso, 1977; Bértola & Williamson, 2016).<sup>4</sup> The colonial era was characterized by 25 percent slavery rates, a largely Indigenous population deprived of civil rights and land ownership, and extremely low educational attainment, all indicative of a profoundly unequal society (Bértola, 2018, p. 79). In Mexico, Central America, and part of the Andean countries, where there were many Indigenous people, a land distribution system was created where members of the Spanish elite received large properties and control over many workers. Brazil and the Caribbean were characterized by plantations of tropical products with large numbers of slaves (Engerman & Sokoloff, 1997).

It has subsequently been pointed out that in the middle of the last century, social inequality in the region increased during the period of import substitution industrialization (ISI), making it one of the regions with the greatest social inequality in the world (Puchet Anyul and Puyana Mutis, 2018, p. 27). This conception of stark social contrasts would persist until the end of the last century because of the collapse of ISI in the 1970s and after the debt crisis at the beginning of the 1980s, and the so-called “lost decade” at that same time. The latter was due to structural reforms and the liberalization of the economy, whereby it was hoped the economy would resume the path to growth.

However, in the first decade of this century, progress was unexpectedly observed in the reduction of social inequality in the region, contrasting with previous trends. And although the trajectory has differed by area, it is possible to confirm a reduction in income gaps, more so in some countries than others.

This reduction in income concentration in several countries in the region can be attributed to three main factors. First, a marked increase in labor income for workers on the lowest rung of income distribution and, above all, an increase in the number of hours worked. This is related to the rise in the number of household members incorporated into the labor market and to the length of each of their working days. Second, the differential reduction in wages between skilled and unskilled workers. Due to the greater supply of skilled labor, the relative wages of the latter deteriorated. This was driven by higher educational attainment compared to previous decades and minimum wage increases. And third, the role played by redistributive social policies and targeted programs to support the poor, particularly in governments with a social democratic political orientation. (López-Calva & Lustig, 2010; Lustig, López-Calva, & Ortiz-Juarez, 2013, pp. 5–8; Sánchez Ancochea, 2018, pp. 106–107).

Despite the advances in reducing social inequality registered in the first decade of this century, there are several reasons to doubt that this trend can be maintained in the immediate future. Although redistributive social policies have positively affected the welfare of poor groups, this has not been at the expense of the most powerful groups, who have maintained their privileges. Among other aspects, there are still marked differences in the quality of public services, such as education and health. Yet, as Sánchez Ancochea (2018, pp. 109–110) points out, there has been less progress in the productive sector, where structural change has not been promoted to increase the productivity of the most backward sectors and wages are lower. Economic policy prioritized capital-intensive and high-tech sectors, which has failed to prevent the decline of the manufacturing sector. At the same time, the primary sector has been reactivated through the commercialization and export of raw materials such as mining, oil, gas, and agricultural products, which are more vulnerable to international price variations. The industrial sector lost momentum, and the service sector became the largest job creator, yet the productivity gap persists between the most modern sectors and those with extremely low productivity.

Trends in social inequality in recent decades can be grouped into three periods: the 1990s, when inequality registered a high level, followed by a period of reduction of inequality in the first decade of this century (2000–2012), and subsequently a setback in this inequality between 2012 and 2020 (BID, 2020, p. 19). The reduction in inequality was due to economic growth that reduced wage inequality and increased public transfers. The most conventional way of measuring social inequality is through income distribution among social groups. Despite the progress made, glaring disparities persist between different population segments and between regions in each country. Inequality associated with socioeconomic status is usually measured through the Gini index. According to household surveys, at the beginning of the century in Latin America, the Gini index reached a value of 0.538 in 2002. More recently, in 2014, it registered a value of 0.465. In other words, most countries showed a reduction in inequality, although in recent years, the rate of reduction has slowed. But we cannot overlook the fact, as Saravi (2019, p. 74) points out, that household surveys usually under-report or under-declare the income of the richest sectors or even fail to directly capture the elites in which income is concentrated, which suggests that inequality may be more substantial than the data indicate.

Figure 11.7 shows how social inequality diminished in all of the region but at different pace in different places. Changes in the Gini coefficient are represented for each country in three periods; the higher reductions happened in the first decade of this century; the reduction of inequality was higher in the Andean region, about ten points; reduction also fell in the South Cone (7 points) and in Central America around six points. In the Caribbean countries, reductions were lower, about 5 points, including Haiti, the country with the highest inequality in the whole region. Apparently, the main promoter of these changes was the reduction in wage inequality, which was closely linked to wider access to education, the rise in the price of raw materials that increased demand for non-qualified workers, a rise in minimum salaries, and the application of focalized social programs (BID, 2020, p. 27).

The previous figures show that in urban areas, the social gap between groups with the highest and lowest socioeconomic level is extremely significant. One way to examine this distributive inequality

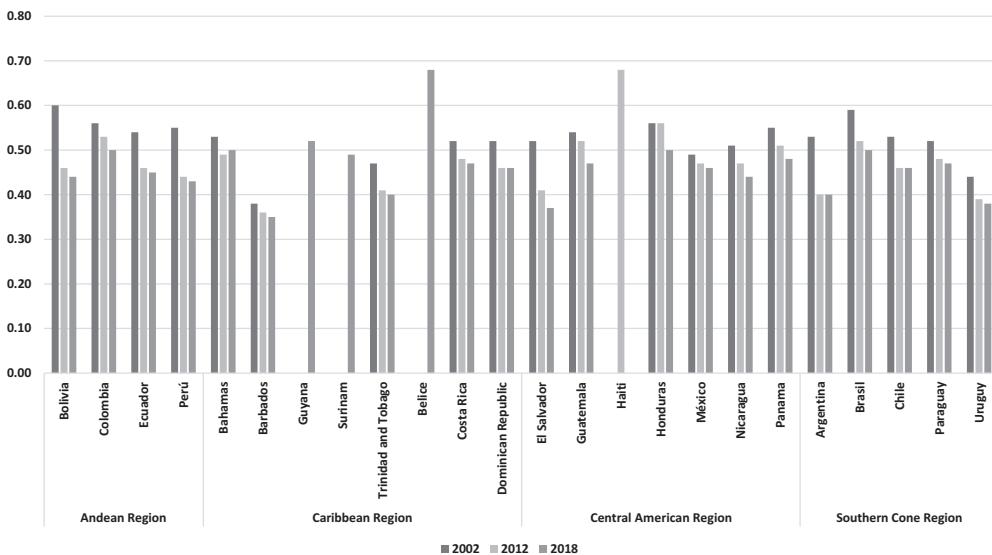


Figure 11.7 Latin America and the Caribbean: Evolution of the Gini coefficient by region and country.

Sources: SEDLAC and The World Bank, and data based on household harmonized surveys of Latin America and the Caribbean by the Interamerican Development Bank (BID, 2020, p. 27).



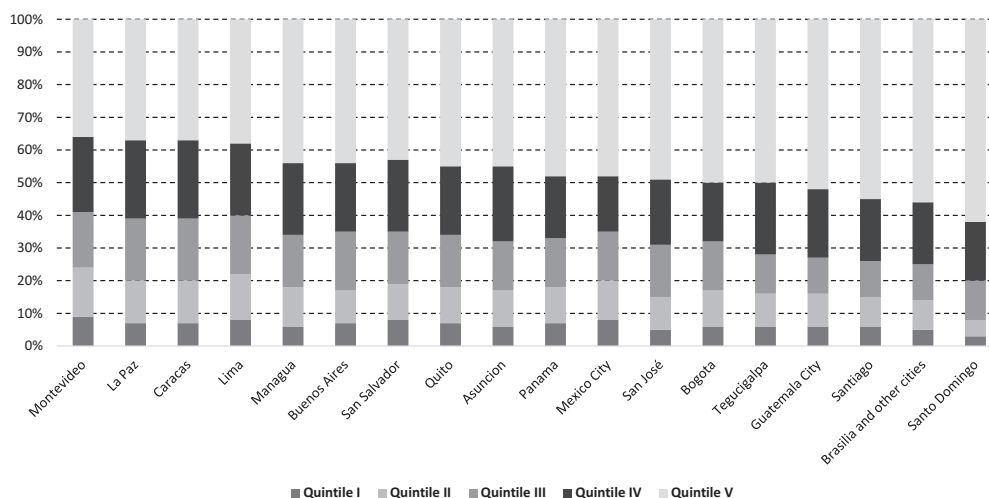


Figure 11.8 Latin America (18 capital or main cities). Participation in the total income of households by quintile of per capita income, 2013 (percentages).

Source: CEPAL (2017b, p. 170).

is through the share of different households of the total income by income level. Figure 11.8 shows the income distribution by quintile for the main cities in Latin America and the Caribbean using data from CEPAL (2017b, p. 170). Inequality is evident from the large share of the richest households (quintile V), compared to the small share of the lowest-income households (quintile I).

Figures in this table show that the cities where the share of the wealthiest quintile, V, reaches values below 40 percent are Montevideo, La Paz, Caracas, and Lima, where, at the same time, the first two quintiles (the poorest) achieve values of less than or equal to 20 percent. At the other extreme, the cities where the highest values of quintile V are reached (over 50 percent) are Tegucigalpa, Guatemala, Santiago, Brasilia, and Santo Domingo, where the share of the first two quintiles is between 10 and 16 percent. Based on these data, and according to the analysis by CEPAL (2017b, p. 172), when the proportion of inequality in the capital city, the remaining urban areas, and rural areas was estimated, it was concluded that the major cities that contributed the most to national inequality were San José (66%), Santiago (54%), and Montevideo (54%).

Inequality in the region is truly extreme compared to other countries, particularly those that are members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). One way of measuring this inequality is to calculate the difference between the proportion of the total income earned by the richest quintile and the poorest quintile: the greater the difference, the greater the inequality.

Income distribution by quintile for the urban population in several Latin American countries, with the regional average, is shown in Table 11.2. The figures indicate that on average in the region, in 2018, the richest 20 percent of the population urban earned 49.8 percent of national income, while the poorest 20 percent obtained just 4.8 percent. In other words, the richest 20 percent earned ten times more than the poorest 20 percent. There is obviously heterogeneity between the countries. Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama, and the Dominican Republic are among the most unequal, while countries such as Uruguay, Argentina, and El Salvador are among the most egalitarian. According to BID (2020, p. 21) estimates, countries in the Latin American region with the lowest income inequality display more inequality than the most unequal countries in developed economies.

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Table 11.2 Income distribution by quintile for the urban population, 2018

<i>(Percentages)</i>						
<i>URBAN</i>	<i>[A]</i>	<i>Sex/Quintile</i>				
		<i>Both genders</i>				
<i>Country/Years</i>		<i>Quintile 1</i>	<i>Quintile 2</i>	<i>Quintile 3</i>	<i>Quintile 4</i>	<i>Quintile 5</i>
<b>Argentina</b>						
2000	/b	2.5	7.4	12.7	20.4	57.0
2018	/c	4.6	10.2	13.9	23.7	47.6
<b>Bolivia</b>						
2000		3.8	7.8	11.8	19.0	57.5
2018		6.5	11.9	16.3	23.5	41.7
<b>Brazil</b>						
2000		...	...	...	...	...
2018	/d	3.2	7.7	11.5	19.8	57.9
<b>Chile</b>						
2000		3.6	7.6	11.5	18.1	59.1
2018		...	...	...	...	...
<b>Colombia</b>						
2000		...	...	...	...	...
2018	/e	4.2	8.9	13.7	20.6	52.6
<b>Costa Rica</b>						
2000	/f	4.2	9.0	14.4	22.0	50.5
2018	/g	3.5	8.1	13.4	22.1	52.9
<b>Ecuador</b>						
2000		...	...	...	...	...
2018		5.2	9.8	14.7	22.0	48.3
<b>El Salvador</b>						
2000		4.4	8.7	13.3	21.2	52.3
2018		6.3	11.1	16.4	22.9	43.3
<b>Guatemala</b>						
2000		3.2	6.4	10.9	18.3	61.2
2018		...	...	...	...	...
<b>Honduras</b>						
2000		...	...	...	...	...
2018	/h	4.4	9.4	14.2	22.3	49.6
<b>Mexico</b>						
2000		4.9	8.8	13.3	20.0	53.0
2018		5.5	10.0	14.5	21.2	48.9
<b>Nicaragua</b>						
2000		...	...	...	...	...
2018		...	...	...	...	...
<b>Panama</b>						
2000		3.1	7.6	12.3	20.3	56.7
2018		3.8	8.6	14.0	21.8	51.9
<b>Paraguay</b>						
2000		...	...	...	...	...
2018		5.0	9.8	14.8	21.7	48.7
<b>Peru</b>						

*(Continued)*

Table 11.2 (Continued)

Country/Years		Quintile 1	Quintile 2	Quintile 3	Quintile 4	Quintile 5
<b>2000</b>	/i	5.9	11.0	15.4	21.4	46.3
<b>2018</b>	/j	5.6	10.8	15.4	22.4	45.8
<b>Dominican Republic</b>						
<b>2000</b>	/k	3.4	7.9	12.7	20.5	55.5
<b>2018</b>	/l	4.6	9.0	13.5	20.3	52.6
<b>Uruguay</b>						
<b>2000</b>		5.0	9.9	14.5	21.6	49.0
<b>2018</b>		5.5	10.8	15.4	23.0	45.3
<b>Venezuela</b>						
<b>2000</b>		...	...	...	...	...
<b>2018</b>		...	...	...	...	...
<b>Latin America (simple average)</b>						
<b>2000</b>		...	...	...	...	...
<b>2018</b>	/a	4.8	9.6	14.2	21.5	49.8

Revised Information on 10-Dec-2019

Source:

[A] CEPAL: Comision Economica para America Latina y el Caribe. From the Data Bank, Household Surveys (BADEHOG).

Notes

a The average for Latin America includes households surveys carried out by countries in the corresponding year; when there is no information in that year, the previous year is taken.

B October.

C Reference period: fourth trimester.

D Annual data. Comparable series from 2016.

E Comparable series from 2008.

F Comparable series until 2009.

G Comparable series from 2010.

H Reference period: June.

I Fourth trimester: comparable series until 2002.

J Annual data. Comparable series from 2004.

K October. Comparable series until 2016.

L Annual data. Comparable series from 2017.

Some of the factors most often cited to explain the high social inequality in the region are differentiated access to land ownership, natural resources, education, and health. These differences have been exacerbated by the cumulative effects of uneven distribution in the post-war period due to import substitution industrialization, subsequent structural adjustment in the 1980s, and finally liberalization and the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s, which brought greater private investment and a growing integration into the world economy that had negative effects on income distribution (ONU-Hábitat, 2014, pp. 41, 62).

If we specifically examine social inequality in the main metropolises of the region, the largest ones and those that are national capitals, we observe that social contrasts are extremely marked and

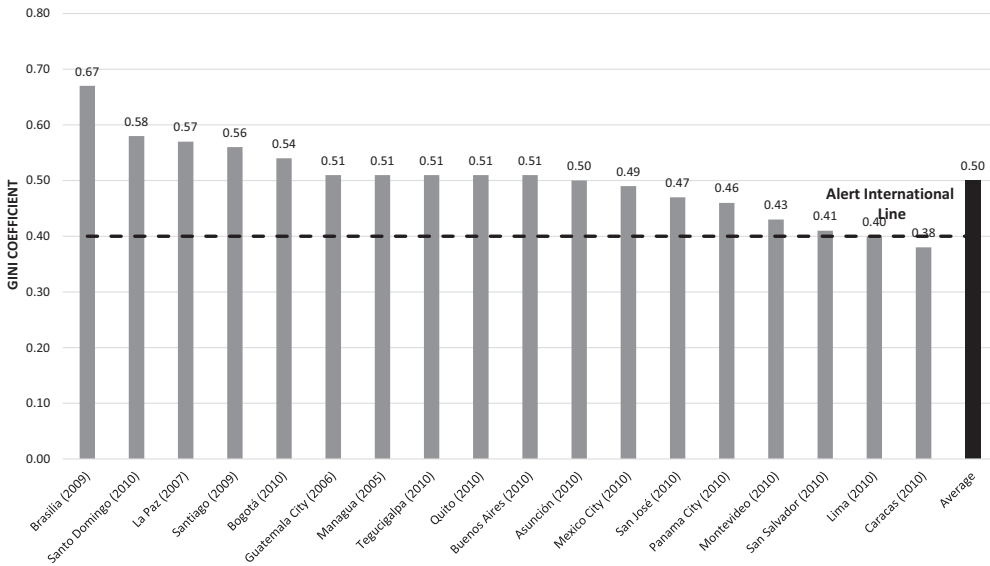


Figure 11.9 Gini index for city capitals of Latin America, 2005–2010.

Source: ONU-Habitat (2014, p. 59).

inequality substantial. Figure 11.9 shows the calculation of the Gini index for these metropolises, most of which are above average inequality (a value of 0.40), which is considered alarming for the urban context. The most worrying cases are Brasilia, Santo Domingo, La Paz, Santiago, and Bogotà, with values of nearly 0.55 and over. These data are a sample of how major cities in each country, while concentrating economic wealth and privileged socioeconomic strata, also become nuclei for the reproduction of poverty and attract populations with extremely low incomes.

And although the economic dimension of social inequality is decisive and indicative of its depth and persistence over the years, inequality also emerges and is reproduced in other areas of urban life. Profound inequalities exist in socio-residential segregation, the segmentation of the educational system, the universalization of health systems, employment benefits, and life expectancy (Saravi, 2019, p. 79).

The marked conditions of residential segregation are widely discussed by Pereira Leite (2008) in her study of Rio de Janeiro, where 25 percent of the city population live in 752 *favelas*, a situation that decisively affects their structure of opportunities. The resident population in these *favelas* is integrated by large contingents of poor workers without qualifications, illiterate or with few years of study, and mostly Afro-descendants; their vulnerability in the labor market reveals high unemployment rates and temporary and informal jobs; the social fragility of the population increases with a frequent environment of violent crime and trafficking of illicit drugs (Pereira Leite, 2008, pp. 216–217).

Social inequality has spatial expression, because in a stratified society, space also displays social differentiation, which in turn highlights the social distances of everyday life. In urban space, there are pockets of poverty and wealth in certain areas of the city, some more homogeneous than others, and this socio-spatial differentiation, or urban segregation, expresses social inequality. Specifically, the coexistence of poor neighborhoods and gated residential communities reflects the extremes of this urban inequality.

In the region, the urban rich live in elegant homes in well-serviced neighborhoods, while the poor build their own settlements with limited public services. As Gilbert (2017, p. 20) points out in the case of Brazil, the homes of the rich and the poor are usually located at different ends of the city, and while the urban rich live in almost exclusively white areas, the poor live in multicolored communities; racial segregation owes much more to differences in income than to outright discrimination.

The proliferation of poor and irregular neighborhoods is a common denominator in the metropolises in the region. These settlements are generally located in urban peripheries a long way from the urban center, with an acute shortage of public services and in most cases with irregular land ownership. Various studies report the socioeconomic conditions of these neighborhoods. For example, Soldano (2014, pp. 28, 32) analyzes the case of the “El Tanque” neighborhood on the northwest periphery of the metropolitan region of Buenos Aires, with low-income subdivisions and informal settlements, where the population arrived because of the economic crisis and rent increases in central locations. Settlers purchased land from real estate developers, while others simply illegally settled on public land with a promise of public services that never materialized and no property deeds. This is a population with a high level of socio-economic vulnerability and poor public transit links to the downtown area that make it difficult to move around and forces people to look for local opportunities that are extremely limited. Surrounded by high-tension cables, polluted streams and a lack of paving, and with a strong sense of insecurity due to the presence of crime, the population feels marginalized and abandoned, in an “unfinished periphery”.

In Mexico City, Aguilar and López (2018, p. 109) highlight the emergence of these poor areas on the periphery of the metropolis, giving rise to a process of “peripherization of poverty”, where all the disadvantages associated with poverty are concentrated and intensified in these vast spaces (see Box 11.2).

### **Box 11.2 The Atotolco settlement, a poor, irregular settlement on the southern outskirts of Mexico City**

The borough of Tláhuac is in the south of Mexico City. One of its distinguishing features is that 75 percent is ecological conservation land, because it comprises wetlands, a canal zone, and chinampa areas that represent areas with high ecological value. In recent decades, irregular settlements have often sprung up in this conservation land in the form of clandestine subdivisions in which local owners and leaders divide and sell the land even though they do not actually own the land, despite the fact that urbanization is prohibited in this area.

The irregular settlement of Atotolco, the largest in the borough of Tláhuac, has an area of 917,124.60 square meters and a total of 1,339 lots, only 726 of which are residential land. It is a poor settlement on the southern periphery of the great metropolis, where a total of 316 surveys were administered using the satisfied basic needs methods, devised by Boltvinik (1997, p. 396), to stratify and locate each household within a poverty stratum. The result of this measurement was that the main stratum was that of the moderately poor, who can cover up to 75 percent of their basic material needs, and the next most important one was that of the extremely poor, who can meet up to 50 percent of their basic needs. These strata jointly accounted for 88 percent of households.

Classifying the spaces of poverty involves highlighting socio-territorial elements, which together characterize the status, condition, and level of poverty of its residents. But there are other more important factors and conditions in the spaces of poverty. These aspects, both separately and combined, expand the explanation of poverty levels. Table 11.3 provides information on these factors and conditions of poverty that show the everyday difficulties of survival and therefore reveal the actual dimensions of poverty (see Aguilar & López, 2018, pp. 112–118).

Table 11.3 Typology of factors exacerbating poverty situations

<i>Key factors</i>	<i>Situation</i>	<i>Results</i>
Location and transport links	Poor access, low quality	Low connectivity, low mobility, more than one means of transport
Physical state of housing	Segregated community	Severe deterioration, lacking water, drainage and electricity service
Land ownership	Irregularity	Low land value, threat of eviction, legal uncertainty
State of environment	High risk and vulnerability	Risk of flooding, presence of wastewater, no paving
Economic activity	Low investment and minimal supply	Few microbusinesses, lack of employment, informality
Social policy	Exclusion from social programs	Low presence, partial support, inefficiency in reducing shortages

Source: Own elaboration

The other side of residential segregation is the existence of gated communities, a successful residential model created by real estate developers that has transformed metropolitan space. These neighborhoods have been designed for upper- and middle-class families and are considered new spaces of residential segregation because they constitute “fortified enclaves”, which are isolated by perimeter walls, surveillance and monitoring technologies, and security personnel. In other words, “outsiders” are excluded because public space in the form of streets and squares is privatized. One of the main justifications for the upper classes to live in these complexes is fear of crime, but the price-quality ratio of the housing must also be considered due to the high appreciation of these complexes, since they have access to various amenities inside (Aguilar & Mateos, 2011, p. 12). As Caldeira (2000, p. 258) notes, “Fortified enclaves confer status. The construction of status symbols is a process that accentuates social differences and creates the means for the affirmation of social distance and inequality”.

These gated communities have multiplied in Latin American metropolises, and various studies have documented their main characteristics and, above all, their proliferation in urban space. In Mexico, there are several examples of this. In the metropolitan area of Toluca, Becerril-Sánchez, Méndez, and Garrocho (2013) document the case of the municipality of Metepec, a medium- and high-level residential area, with heavy real estate investment in this type of development. Between the 1990s and 2011, 115 gated communities emerged in this municipality, which created an urban image of a space with exclusive and exclusionary constructions, with a social practice of segregation due to the lack of interaction between the population inside and outside (Becerril-Sánchez, Méndez, & Garrocho, 2023, pp. 203–207). The city of Tijuana, on the border with the United States, has seen a remarkable emergence and increase of these subdivisions in recent years. Between 2004 and 2005, 97 gated communities less than 15 years old, offering high- and medium-level and low-cost housing, were identified. In the Playas de Tijuana sector, medium- and high-level housing is concentrated in developments comprising 60 to 300 homes. One of their distinctive features is that these neighborhoods are also inhabited by US citizens, for whom it is cheaper to buy a property in Mexico than in San Diego (US). In addition to living in luxurious residences, they have golf courses, scenic landscapes, a clubhouse, hotels for visitors, and churches inside the residential complex (Enríquez Acosta, 2007, p. 135).

Several studies mention the proliferation of gated communities in other Latin American metropolises. For example, for Buenos Aires and Tucumán, see Vidal-Koppmann (2014) and Malizia (2015); for Santiago de Chile, see Hidalgo (2004); for the metropolises of São Paulo and Campinas, see Reche Domingo and Viana Leonelli (2019); and for Lima, see Matta (2007).

The drama of social inequality in the region's metropolis is well characterized in the example of Sao Paulo,

The real Sao Paulo is a tiny city of privileged and a giant city of dirt, noise, and dangerous pollution; a modern industrial city with high levels of poverty, illness and infant mortality; a city of oppression, of illiteracy, of enormous loneliness, of violence and fear; only the scale of the misery has grown.

(Goldsmith & Acca, 2017, p. 68)

## **5. Social vulnerability in urban contexts**

In the early 1990s, the concept of social vulnerability began to acquire importance in both academic discussion and studies by international organizations. The origin of this interest lies in the concern that socioeconomic conditions for a high proportion of the population had not improved, and millions of people had become more vulnerable to political threats, physical disasters, and the high cost of coping with contingencies, such as health costs, asset loss, and the lack of stable employment, making this population less equipped to deal with future needs or crises (Chambers, 1989, pp. 1, 7).

But why is the concept of vulnerability useful? Kirby (2004, p. 13) posits three important aspects. First, the terms “poverty” and “inequality” refer to aspects of distribution, are linked to globalization, and are measured through income and more recently other indicators, yet they tell us little about people's lives, which are more related to the vulnerability implied by threats to everyday life and welfare. Second, unlike the term “risk” and its various types, vulnerability focuses more on the nature of the threats we face and concentrates on our ability to cope with these threats. And third, the concept is based on a broad understanding of welfare that is not limited to material aspects and therefore more fully reflects the concerns of the poor with their feeling of helplessness.

The market economy and the state's shrinking productive and social role have increased defenselessness and insecurity for a great majority of people and medium- and low-income families, who experience significant exposure to risks, particularly in urban areas. The sources of vulnerability are diverse, and all people and social groups are therefore vulnerable to a greater or lesser extent. One can be vulnerable because of income, assets, place of residence, ethnic origin, or political factors, reasons that represent risks and insecurities, which have territorial expression, temporal sequence, or characteristics of social reproduction (Busso, 2001, p. 8–9). Today the sources of vulnerability or risks have increased and are more diverse, and each of them represents a universe of social fragility: increased precariousness of working conditions, social spending cuts, financial crises, violence, crime, natural disasters, and exclusion from the education system (Aguilar & López, 2019, p. 131).

The case of the settlement Canaan in Haiti sheds light on the impacts that disasters can have on urbanization dynamics. It contributes to our understanding of how disasters transform territories and urban settings in Latin America and the Caribbean (see Box 11.3).

### **Box 11.3 Canaan, Haiti. A post-disaster settlement**

Canaan, is a periurban settlement in Port-au-Prince, Haiti; it is a 33-km zone that extends from east to west over approximately 12 km and is located 18 km north of Port-au-Prince. It is an entire “satellite city” which emerged, unplanned, on the metropolitan area's limits, creating opportunities but also tensions between the urban core and its periphery. After the January 2010 earthquake, NGOs and politicians opened up the first camp for disaster victims in the zone. Two years after the disaster, an estimated

60,000 people had moved to Canaan. Five years later, the area had over 250,000 inhabitants, making it one of Haiti's largest urban agglomerations. Households identify access to water as their biggest problem, with nearly all households lacking running water or access to a public water source; Sanitation and waste management are also major challenges. About 38% of households have no form of toilet, and of these, 41% are forced to defecate in the open, in plastic bags or buckets. Solid waste is often burned, buried, or thrown into rivers and ravines. About 65% of residents have no jobs, and 86% of them experience food insecurity. In response, most residents have established their own small subsistence economy. Most resort to home-based businesses such as stores, small manufacture, and retail space (Petter et al., 2020)

What has changed in the socio-economic and political context in the Latin American and Caribbean region is an entire constellation of factors that affect poverty and social inequality. These factors constitute new vulnerabilities that arise from changes in the structure of the labor market and macro-level transformations that reduce and limit the opportunity structure for the poor sectors and even for the middle classes. These factors in the socio-economic and political context can exacerbate existing deficiencies and inequities and increase social vulnerability.

Representative examples of more serious social vulnerabilities that have recently increased in urban contexts include the following: the precarious conditions of the labor market, the lack of social protection and pensions, poor water supply, and the increase in violence and crime. The two first vulnerabilities are detailed in the following.

*The Informal Labor Market.* One of the most serious social vulnerabilities is the form of insertion in the urban labor market, since this determines the ability to earn an income, and because working conditions can be highly insecure, precarious, and informal, with low wage levels. The labor market continues to be responsible for much of social inequality in the region, since approximately 50 percent of the employed population in the region forms part of the informal economy, which means they do not have access to medical services, pensions, or a safety net to protect them in the event of loss of income such as unemployment insurance (IDB, 2020, p. 195). The fringe benefits provided to workers tend to be associated with formal jobs.

There is enormous heterogeneity in the proportion of urban informal workers in countries throughout the region. In some countries, such as Chile, Panama, and Uruguay, the proportion of these workers is approximately a third, whereas in others, such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Peru, informal workers account for over two-thirds (see Table 11.4). Such is the importance of these workers that it has been said that 46 percent of households in the region do not have any members working in the formal sector, while in the poorest countries, this proportion exceeds 60 percent (IDB, 2020, p. 208). These workers earn low incomes and lack fringe benefits, all of which makes them extremely vulnerable to economic crises or pandemics such as COVID-19.

Informal workers can be classified into two groups: first, wage earners in micro-businesses, the construction industry, or domestic work, and second, self-employed or independent workers, such as street vendors. Table 11.4 shows the composition of urban informal workers by type of occupation, according to the averages for the whole region, highlighting several important aspects. First, 70 percent of workers are unskilled, making it exceedingly difficult for them to secure formal employment. Second, informal independent and self-employed workers in commerce and services constitute a majority with respect to salaried workers, accounting for 48 percent of the workforce, meaning that their social vulnerability is extremely high. And third, there is an enormous range of informal occupations, both salaried and self-employed, within cities.



Table 11.4 Urban occupied population in low-productivity sectors. Informal sector

		[A] Sex/low productivity occupied									
		Both genders									
Country/years	Low productivity occupied population	A. Microenterprise employers	B. Microenterprise: salaried employers	B1. Salaried workers: professionals and technicians	B2. Salaried workers: no professionals and technicians	C. Domestic workers	D. Non-qualified independent workers	d1. —non-qualified independent workers: industry and construction			3
<b>Argentina</b>											
2000	/b 42.9	3.3	15.5	1.5	14.0	5.6	18.5	5.5	5.5	12.8	
2018	/c 41.0	2.7	13.4	1.2	12.2	7.7	17.2	5.5	5.5	11.5	
<b>Bolivia</b>											
2000	62.2	1.7	10.5	0.7	9.8	4.2	45.8	12.1	12.1	30.3	
2018	63.1	3.3	13.0	1.6	11.4	2.6	44.2	10.6	10.6	31.1	
<b>Brazil</b>											
2000	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	
2018	/d 41.0	3.2	10.1	1.2	8.9	6.8	20.9	6.4	6.4	13.2	
<b>Chile</b>											
2000	31.8	2.4	8.3	0.8	7.4	6.4	14.7	4.3	4.3	9.6	
2018	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	
<b>Colombia</b>											
2000	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	
2018	/e 55.2	3.3	10.4	0.6	9.8	3.2	38.3	7.8	7.8	28.4	
<b>Costa Rica</b>											
2000	/f 38.6	4.1	12.8	1.2	11.6	4.5	17.3	4.5	4.5	11.6	
2018	/g 37.5	2.6	12.2	1.3	10.8	7.7	15.1	3.6	3.6	10.8	
<b>Ecuador</b>											
2000	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	
2018	59.5	2.9	15.8	0.8	15.0	3.6	37.2	6.5	6.5	27.8	
<b>El Salvador</b>											
2000	52.9	5.0	13.4	1.0	12.5	4.0	30.5	6.6	6.6	21.5	

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2018	54.0	4.2	15.6	0.9	14.7	3.8	30.4	5.5	22.8
<b>Guatemala</b>									
2000	71.6	6.7	30.8	4.8	26.0	4.4	29.7	6.3	17.7
2018	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
<b>Honduras</b>									
2000	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
2018	58.2	3.3	14.1	0.9	13.3	4.3	36.4	8.5	24.4
<b>Mexico</b>									
2000	45.4	3.9	17.1	1.0	16.1	3.0	21.4	4.1	14.9
2018	46.2	5.8	23.3	2.6	20.7	3.7	13.3	2.3	9.5
<b>Nicaragua</b>									
2000	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
2018	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
<b>Panama</b>									
2000	34.4	2.2	6.7	1.0	5.8	6.2	19.2	4.9	13.4
2018	35.3	2.1	6.2	1.0	5.2	4.3	22.8	5.3	16.4
<b>Paraguay</b>									
2000	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
2018	51.5	4.9	14.7	1.6	13.1	8.7	23.2	4.3	16.7
<b>Perú</b>									
2000	64.1	4.9	14.0	1.5	12.5	4.5	40.8	4.8	32.6
2018	59.2	3.9	13.9	1.9	12.0	2.8	38.5	4.5	27.7
<b>Dominican Republic</b>									
2000	44.6	1.8	8.4	0.8	7.7	4.1	30.3	7.2	20.3
2018	53.2	3.0	9.9	0.8	9.0	5.2	35.2	8.5	23.2
<b>Uruguay</b>									
2000	39.6	2.4	11.7	0.7	11.0	9.0	16.5	7.2	8.3
2018	35.2	2.1	10.0	0.5	9.5	4.0	19.2	5.9	12.0
<b>Venezuela</b>									
2000	54.2	3.8	11.5	0.4	11.1	2.1	36.8	7.4	24.5
2018	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...

(Continued)

Table 11.4 (Continued)

Country/years	Low productivity occupied population	A. Microenterprise: employers	B. Microenterprise: salaried employees	B1. Salaried workers: professionals and technicians	B2. Salaried workers: no professionals and technicians	C. Domestic workers	D. Non-qualified independent workers	d1.—non-qualified independent workers: industry and construction	3
<b>Latin America (weighted average)</b>									
2000	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
2018	/a 46.0	3.7	13.7	1.4	12.3	5.0	23.7	5.5	16.2
<b>Latin America (simple average)</b>									
2000	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
2018	/a 48.5	3.2	13.0	1.1	11.8	4.5	28.1	6.0	19.7

Source

[A] CEPAL: Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe. From the Data Bank, Household Surveys (BADEHOG).

Notes

Additional indicator proposed by CEPAL. Objective 1. Calculated from income distribution per capita of population. Includes persons with income equal to zero.

A The average for Latin America includes households surveys carried out by countries in the corresponding year; when there is no information in that year the previous year is taken.

B October.

C Reference period: fourth trimester.

D Annual data. Comparable series from 2016.

E Comparable series from 2008.

F Comparable series until 2009.

G Comparable series from 2010.

H Reference period: June.

I Fourth trimester: comparable series until 2002.

J Annual data. Comparable series from 2004.

K October. Comparable series until 2016.

L Annual data. Comparable series from 2017.

In cities, informal work takes a variety of forms (see Gilbert, 2017, p. 23): driving taxis, domestic employment, cleaning shoes, street vending, prostitution, and crime; it employs both men and women, although the latter tend to dominate in domestic service and shop work.

Additionally, the economic crisis caused by COVID-19 has increased unemployment and reduced wages. A high proportion of workers have joined the informal economy, and women who used not to work have sought jobs to offset the loss of household income. These labor market adjustments will obviously exacerbate poverty and affect informal workers, who are the most vulnerable, to a greater extent, particularly in a context of low-income families that have little chance of saving individually; the study of Hardoy and Almansi (2011, p. 31) in a poor settlement in the periphery of Buenos Aires showed how households stretch their money each month to cover their daily basic needs, and any unexpected need is a jolt to the family's economy; health problems can severely affect a family's subsistence capacity. More often than not, to repair a refrigerator, a TV, or the oven can take months due to lack of funds.

*Pension Systems.* Unequal, precarious employment conditions are linked to various social protection instruments. One of these instruments is pension systems, benefits that seek to mitigate the reduction in personal or family income because of contingencies derived from advanced age, disability, and death (OIT, 2014). Above all, they serve to support pensions that are partially or totally financed through contributions made by workers themselves and, frequently, through employer and state contributions.

Unfortunately, there are very few sources of information about pensions, and when they do exist, they often focus on affiliation with state health insurance programs, a totally different issue. We must reflect on the fact that the issue of pensions should be a priority for the Latin American and Caribbean context, where there is a gradual and significant increase in the elderly population, which, due to its condition of physical and social vulnerability, unquestionably requires resources for the latter stage of its life.

Figure 11.10 includes data on the employed population affiliated with a pension system. The data indicate that, in terms of income levels, there are extremely slight levels of affiliation among those with the smallest incomes (quintiles I and II), probably due to the lower levels of labor participation and the higher dependency rates of the latter, as well as their limited educational attainment and the poorer quality of their labor insertion. The gender difference is also extremely noticeable. Women have the lowest levels of affiliation. For example, in quintile I, they account for less than

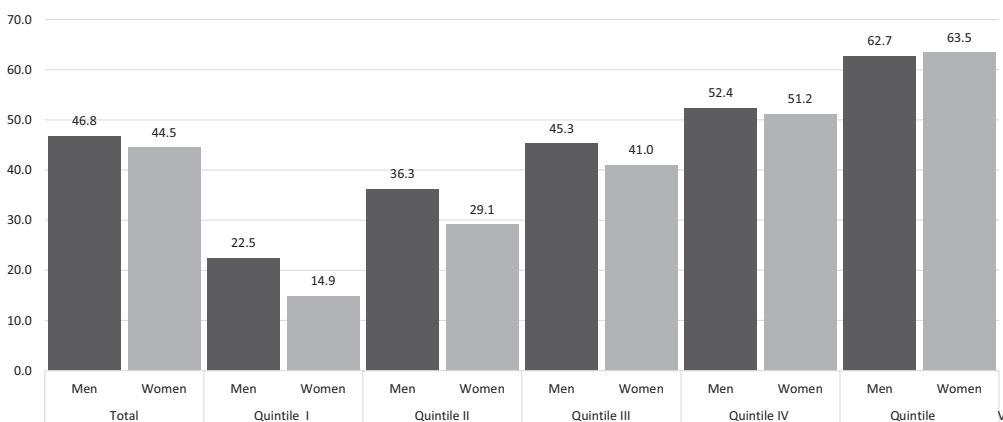


Figure 11.10 Urban employed population affiliated with a pension system, by quintiles and gender, 2018 (percentages).

Source: Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), 2020. [https://estadisticas.cepal.org/cepalstat/web\\_cepalstat/estadisticasindicadores.asp](https://estadisticas.cepal.org/cepalstat/web_cepalstat/estadisticasindicadores.asp)

15 percent, whereas in quintile V, they account for over 60 percent, as is the case in most quintiles. A look at the highest income quintiles shows that the percentages of affiliation in the middle classes (quintiles III and IV), which represent most of the employed population, are only slightly above the average for men and women for the entire region (about 45 percent), showing the acute vulnerability of the population not affiliated with the pension system, which is practically half the employed population.

We cannot fail to mention the low levels of access to pension systems among non-salaried workers, who are extremely widespread in the region. According to CEPAL (2017a, p. 55), the level of affiliation of non-salaried workers (in 14 countries of the region) in 2015 was less than 18 percent, although in some countries, the situation is slightly more favorable, since explicit efforts have been made to include this type of worker in contributory social protection systems.

## 6. Conclusions

The Latin American and Caribbean region faces major challenges in terms of social welfare. After a decade of rapid growth and significant improvements in social indicators, growth has stalled, and external conditions do not appear to be favorable, at least in the short and medium term. Given the growing urban poverty and social inequality that characterize the region, the state has an evident responsibility to promote citizen equality both in terms of civil and political and social rights.

It is necessary to acknowledge that social vulnerability has increased, especially for the lowest income groups, and represents an entire universe of social fragility. This concept helps emphasize the way poverty conditions increase the propensity of households to be affected by exposure to new risks, which increases social vulnerability. It is important to advance the understanding of the impact of changes in the social environment, which, far from being homogeneous, is extremely diverse. Negative effects vary according to the household and the characteristics of the urban and national environment and are related to aspects such as access to the labor market, the deterioration of social conditions, access to goods and services, and state programs and support.

There is an urgent need for governments in the region to prioritize the reduction of poverty and the fight against social inequality in their political agendas, as stipulated in the global sustainable development goals. On the one hand, in recent decades, although there have been policies that supposedly combat poverty, the results show that they have focused on *managing* it. And on the other, the conditions of marked social inequality point to an economic model that has encouraged wealth concentration in small social groups, a structural feature shared by many countries in the region.

The analysis in this chapter has attempted to show that despite their economic and social role, the urban and metropolitan spaces of Latin America and the Caribbean concentrate a large sector of the poor population that has maintained a stable proportion in recent years and is in fact showing an upward trend. In addition, conditions of social inequality tend to be more marked in urban contexts because they are extremely attractive places, both for the most privileged strata due to the presence of economic activities involving more advanced knowledge and technology, and for the poorest groups seeking economic opportunities for their survival. The socioeconomic context of major cities has therefore become one with extremely high social vulnerability due to the shortages and disadvantages faced by the population, without substantial improvements in their social welfare.

## Notes

1. The authors acknowledge the collaboration of Josefina Hernandez Lozano in the elaboration of figures and tables.
2. The approach used by ECLAC to estimate poverty consists of classifying a person as “poor” when the per capita income of their household is below the value of the poverty line; that is, the monetarist approach is followed for this calculation (CEPAL, 2019, p. 95).

3. ECLAC statistics for Latin America are available on its website: [interwp.cepal.org](http://interwp.cepal.org)
4. Humboldt's study (1822, p. 276) already indicated how, since colonial times, the determining factor in social inequality had been land ownership, an element that has been identified as central to the social exclusion that persists to this day.

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