

Populations and Cities

Latin America, as of mid-1986, had more than 400 million inhabitants, with over half concentrated in South America. Brazil, the largest Latin American country in terms of landmass, also has the largest population. The majority of the population is concentrated near the coasts, although Mexico, Honduras, and Argentina have both large interior and coastal concentrations of population. Only about one fourth of Latin America's population lives in rural areas, which emphasizes the importance of urban centers. Some of the most populated metropolitan areas in the world are located in Latin America, such as Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, and Mexico City. Mexico City is the most populous city in the world.

The major Latin American cities share certain characteristics. The principal and most populated city of each country tends to be the federal capital. These cities are usually a country's economic, political, and cultural focal point. Basic social services, such as medical care, public transportation, water, electricity, and education are usually much better there than in rural areas. Federal capitals are usually international and cosmopolitan, and frequently they are the center of the country's most advanced industries.

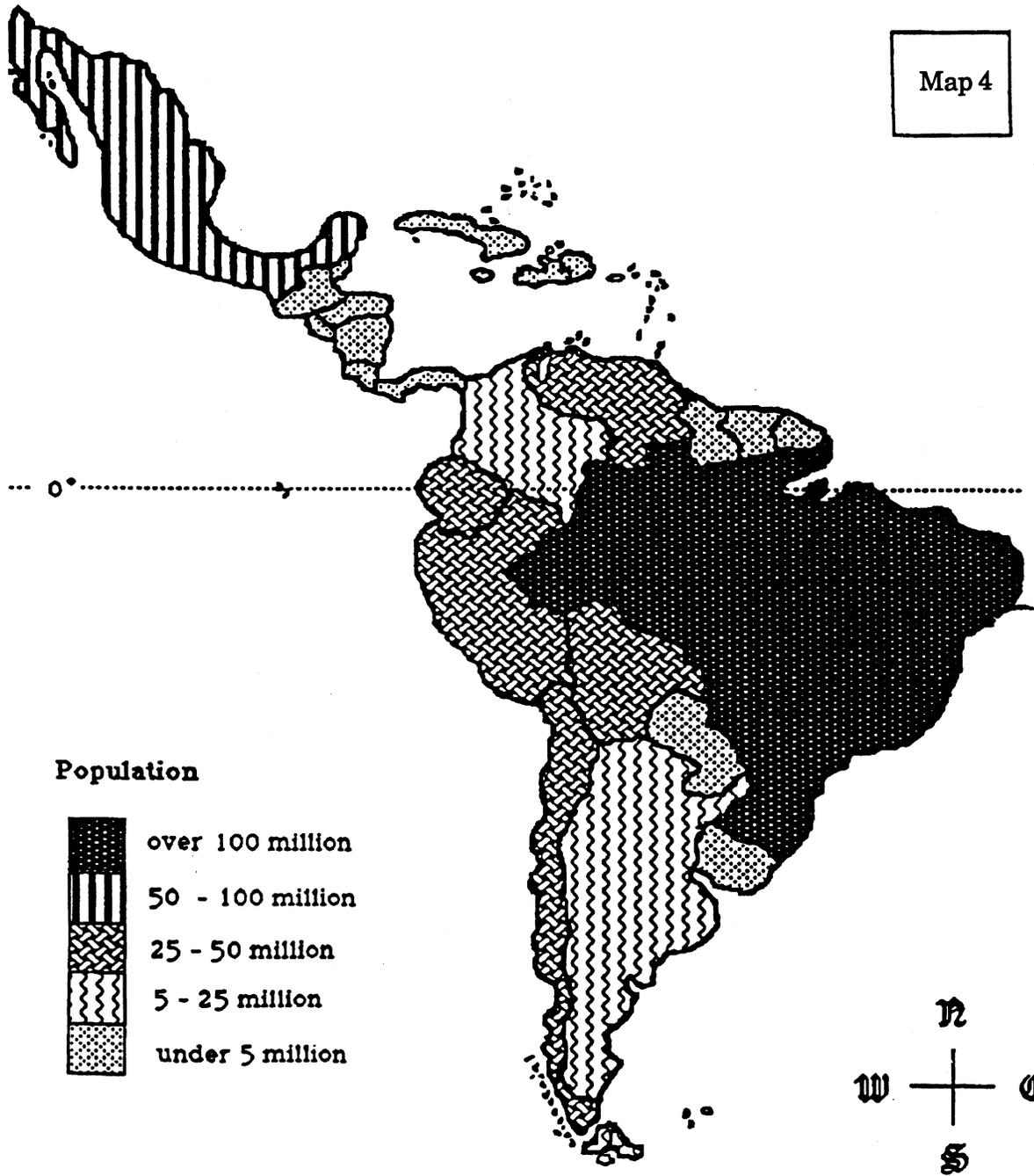
Another shared characteristic of large Latin American cities is that they often are surrounded by large slums, called by many names including *favelas* in Brazil and *ciudades nuevas* or *ciudades perdidas* in Mexico. These slums are quite different from the United States concept of

a slum, however. When most North Americans think of a slum, they think of an area that was once a viable part of the city but that has deteriorated as a result of poverty or neglect of landowners and public agencies. In the case of Latin American cities, on the other hand, the slums are usually a new section of the city. In fact, the term *ciudades nuevas* literally means "new cities." These areas are usually occupied by individuals who have migrated to the city from poverty-stricken rural regions in an effort to improve their economic situation. New arrivals often settle in areas such as hillsides, which richer people consider too marginal for building.

The new settlers initially build their houses from inexpensive, readily-available materials including cardboard, plastic, or corrugated tin. Later they improve them as they earn money to buy concrete blocks, wood, and other more permanent materials. Because the new settlements spring up so quickly, and in some cases are built illegally, it often takes years for city services such as electricity, running water, or telephones to reach the areas. Sometimes community members take matters into their own hands by tapping into existing power or water lines. Over the years, the slums may slowly improve and city services may finally arrive. What started as a precarious, temporary settlement can evolve into a viable working-class neighborhood. However, the process is extremely slow, and during the early years, the living conditions are very poor. The new slums stand in sharp contrast to the established city.

LATIN AMERICAN POPULATIONS

Map 4



Courtesy of:
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