

# The uneven geographies of Covid-19 in Latin America

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*By Sam Halvorsen, Matthew Richmond & Sonja Marzi, Latin American Geographies Working Group, UK*

Like everywhere else, the spread of Covid-19 across Latin America has been felt unevenly. However, the nature of the region's social, economic and spatial inequalities is producing impacts that depart in important ways from those seen in the global North and also, in some ways, other global South regions. To take just a couple of examples, we could point to the perilous position of indigenous communities (<https://www.latinamerica.undp.org/content/rblac/en/home/blog/2020/impacto-y-situacion-de-la-poblacion-indigena-latinoamericana-ant.html>), and of the densely populated and weakly serviced informal settlements (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2020/04/14/brazils-urban-inequalities-will-exacerbate-the-impacts-of-covid-19/>) prevalent in cities across the region. More broadly, the visibly racialised, classed and gendered nature of the crisis in Latin America, and the relationship of these dimensions to spatial inequalities, point to the need for geographically sensitive analysis. Here, we, as committee members of the newly formed Latin American Geographies Working Group (<https://lagukinfo.wixsite.com/lag-uk>) (LAGWG), take stock of the growing body of work being done by our members and colleagues on Latin America's Covid-19 geographies, and highlight some key emerging themes.

As in other macro-regions, Covid-19 has intersected with multiple inequalities that are also spatially constituted. At the international level, there are inequalities between countries which significantly shape migration flows (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/mobility-immobility-latin->

[american-migrants-trapped-amid-covid-19/](#)) – whether from Latin America to the global North or between countries within the region. By leading to a tightening of border controls across the region, in some cases building upon pre-existing geopolitical tensions and on-the-ground volatility in border regions, Covid-19 has intensified the vulnerabilities faced by many migrants. For example, Covid-19 has provided enhanced [executive power and justification](#) (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/757056/pdf>) for the Trump government to increase the use of arbitrary detention and deportation of asylum seekers at the US-Mexican border. Elsewhere, the closure of the [Colombian-Venezuelan border](#) (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/757055/pdf>) – a region already destabilised by a political-economic crisis on one side and a fragile peace process on the other – has caused further volatility and risk of violence by interrupting everyday cross-border flows that local communities depend on. Such challenges in the region are exacerbated by the fact that [multilateral regional institutions](#) (<https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/GEOP/article/view/69324>) were severely weakened in the years prior to the outbreak of the pandemic.

At the national scale, differences can be also identified in the Covid-19 responses taken by states with different political structures and governments with contrasting ideological orientations. The region's two most populous countries for example, Brazil and Mexico, have been singled out for their relatively [weak responses](#) (<https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/how-political-science-explains-countries-reactions-to-covid-19/>), with some claiming that this is due to the presence of “populist” governments (<https://www.thedialogue.org/blogs/2020/04/covid-19-pandemic-puts-populism-front-and-center-in-latin-america/>) that have prioritised economic over public health concerns. While the conflation of two very different scenarios – and governments of the far-right (Brazil) and radical left (Mexico) – under the label of “populism” seems unhelpful, it is clear that other countries which have taken more measured and consistent responses have fared better. Argentina, for example, where [President Fernández](#) (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/10/argentina-covid19-brazil-response-bolsonaro-fernandez>) took rapid and drastic action to impose social isolation measures, has had [far lower levels](#) (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1101643/latin-america-caribbean-coronavirus-cases/>) of infections and deaths.

Yet to take solely a nation-centric analysis would not reveal the complete picture. Most Latin American countries have strongly decentralised political systems, sometimes leading to disputes between central and local governments. This was the case with regards to the response of the City of Buenos Aires, governed by the right-wing mayor, Larreta, who sought to relax Covid-19 safety measures ahead of the national government, just as cases in shanty towns were beginning to escalate. To further complicate matters, there has been an uneven [coordination with the governor of the surrounding Province of Buenos Aires](#) (<https://www.infobae.com/politica/2020/05/15/coronavirus-en-la-argentina-los-intendentes-del-conurbano-cuestionaron-la-cuarentena-light-de-la-ciudad-de-buenos-aires-por-el-temor-a-una-suba-de-contagios/>), exposing long-standing challenges of municipal governance when key infrastructure and services straddle two political areas. In Brazil, President Bolsonaro's fierce opposition to social distancing has led to clashes with the governors of key states, intensifying a broader institutional crisis and further undermining the country's Covid-19 response.

The impacts of federal and state policies, but also extreme subnational inequalities in Latin American countries, have meant different impacts in different regions. For example, many [remote rural areas](#) (<https://redaccion.lamula.pe/2020/05/22/urge-garantizar-el-acceso-a-oxigeno-y-medicamentos-para-combatir-al-covid-19-ucayali-nos-necesita/redaccionmulera/>) as well as being economically vulnerable are weakly served by healthcare and other essential services, and receive little media coverage. Such challenges are further aggravated in the case of historically marginalised groups, most notably the region's indigenous population. As is well known, pandemics have historically had [devastating impacts](#) (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/756952/pdf>) on the original inhabitants of the Americas. Even if, at least partial, access to modern medicine should help to avoid a catastrophic scenario, there are fears that Covid-19 will [fit into this history](#) (<https://theconversation.com/covid-19-isolated-indigenous-peoples-and-the-history-of-the-amazon-136090>). Furthermore, there are signs, for example in the Peruvian Amazon, that the context of the pandemic is providing cover to bolster new rounds of extractivist [incursions into indigenous territories](#) (<https://lagukinfo.wixsite.com/lag-uk/post/reactivaci%C3%B3n-econ%C3%B3mica-y-una-pandemia-en-comunidades-ind%C3%ADgenas-amaz%C3%B3nicas-peruanas>).

Covid-19's unequal social and spatial impacts can also be clearly seen in urban contexts. In Brazil's largest cities, although the virus first spread in wealthy neighbourhoods, it is already having far more devastating effects in low-income favelas and urban peripheries (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2020/04/14/brazils-urban-inequalities-will-exacerbate-the-impacts-of-covid-19/>). These settlements are often densely occupied and, in some cases, lack basic sanitation, hastening the spread of the virus, while also typically being located further from the essential services needed during the pandemic, from hospitals to supermarkets and pharmacies. This also has important economic dimensions. Large numbers of residents of these cities are informally employed (<http://www.a-id.org/2020/05/17/the-impacts-of-covid-19-on-brazils-precarious-labour-market-informality-citizenship-and-the-universal-basic-income/>) or self-employed, meaning they are less able to sustain long periods of isolation and thus more likely to expose themselves to risk of infection in the absence of quick and substantial state support. These, and other issues already mentioned, have clear gender dimensions. In Cúcuta, Colombia (<https://lasillavacia.com/silla-llena/red-de-las-mujeres/la-carga-total-de-enfermedad-de-covid-19-va-mas-alla-de-los-se>), a spike in domestic violence linked to the economic and personal strains caused by the pandemic has been observed, exacerbated by reduced access to services and refuges for women. In Medellin (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/internationaldevelopment/2020/05/22/conducting-transnational-participatory-research-with-women-during-covid-19-remotely-an-impossibility/>), mobility restrictions put in place through curfews, have had especially serious impacts on women, who are heads of household with caring responsibilities, living on steep slopes on the outskirts of the city. Many of them working in the informal economy and struggling with spatial mobility already before the pandemic, they are now anxious about not being able to feed their children.

The LAGWG was set up to foster a politically engaged and ethically sensitive dialogue between Latin America and Anglophone geographical knowledges. The uneven way the Covid-19 crisis has unfolded across the region exposes and brings to the fore the protagonism that geography has in understanding and addressing key social issues today. As a longer-term project, the working group hopes to facilitate two-ways conversations in which UK-based scholars take seriously the knowledges produced in Latin America and consider their broader implications for how they understand and engage in the world. For this reason, we aim to promote a diversity of fora, including blogs (<https://lagukinfo.wixsite.com/lag-uk/blog>), seminars, and solidarity actions ([https://4eaaf642-a71b-41bc-8fd9-3dcaa731bf5c.filesusr.com/ugd/f14f35\\_986789326f4c46738be48d054fba08db.pdf](https://4eaaf642-a71b-41bc-8fd9-3dcaa731bf5c.filesusr.com/ugd/f14f35_986789326f4c46738be48d054fba08db.pdf)), while seeking to support and promote the activities of Latin American activists and scholars within the UK geographical community.

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You can join or find out more about the Latin American Geographies Working Group by visiting their website (<https://lagukinfo.wixsite.com/lag-uk/about-us>), or following them on twitter (@lag\_uk).

## Suggested further reading:

Patchin, P.M. (2020). For the sake of the child: The economization of reproduction in the Zika public health emergency. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. doi:[10.1111/tran.12384](https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12384) (<https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12384>).

Halvorsen, S. (2020). The geography of political parties: Territory and organisational strategies in Buenos Aires. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12343> (<https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12343>).

JLAG Perspectives forum: COVID-19 in Latin America (<https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/42348>).

Geopolítica(s) special issue: Geopolítica de la pandemia de COVID-19 (Geopolitics of the COVID-19 pandemic) (<https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/GEOP/issue/view/3602>)

Espaço e Economia dossiê: Coronavírus (<https://journals.openedition.org/espacoeconomia/10071>). (português)

LSE Latin America and Caribbean Centre COVID-19 Portal (<http://www.lse.ac.uk/lacc/covid-19>)

[#coronavirus](#), [#Covid-19](#), [#Latin America](#), [#politics](#), [#regions](#)

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