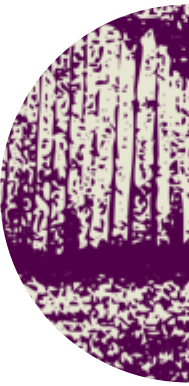




6

**Demographic
transformations
and mobility
in rural areas**



Key messages

The share of the rural population in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has declined steadily since 1950, and projections indicate that this trend will continue over the next three decades.



Fertility rates have historically been higher in rural areas than in urban areas, although the gap has narrowed significantly since the 2000s.



Population aging is occurring with similar intensity in rural and urban areas. At present, people aged 65 and over account for about 10% of the total rural population, a share that will continue to increase.



Indigenous populations are clearly overrepresented in rural areas of LAC, and their presence increases as the degree of rurality of the territory rises.



Rural households in LAC have undergone profound changes over recent decades: they are smaller in size, have fewer children, include a higher share of older adults, and show a higher prevalence of female-headed households.

Rural emigration has slowed, although over the past decade it has still implied the annual departure of 1%–2% of the rural population. Half of those who migrate move to urban municipalities, while the remainder relocate to semiurban or rural municipalities.



Emigration is most intense among young people aged 14 to 29, contributing to the process of demographic aging in rural territories.



Inmigration to rural areas does not offset emigration, but it reaches meaningful levels and plays a growing role in the demographic reconfiguration of these territories.



Health and education indicators point to gains in rural human capital, yet these gains are not sufficient to close the structural gaps that continue to limit well-being and development opportunities.

Demographic transformations and mobility in rural areas¹

Introduction

Economic development and structural change are typically associated with shifts in the territorial distribution of the population.. As economies diversify, employment shifts from primary activities toward services and industry—sectors that are predominantly urban-based. In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), this dynamic has unfolded over the past century and is reflected in the sustained decline in the relative weight of the rural population. However, the magnitude and pace of this decline vary across countries, in part because they are at different stages of development and urbanization.

Despite this diversity, the demographic evolution of the rural population follows similar patterns across the region. The share of the rural population has declined gradually in all countries, albeit at different rates. On the one hand, population growth has led some areas that were previously

rural to lose that status. On the other hand, the demographic transition—marked by declining fertility and population aging—has also advanced in rural areas. At the same time, migration flows, traditionally outward, have lost intensity and now show a greater balance between inflows and outflows, reflecting lower migratory pressure and the emergence of new territorial dynamics. Finally, although improvements are observed in human development indicators such as education and health, these gains have been insufficient to close the gaps relative to urban areas.

This chapter documents these processes and provides a panoramic, long-term perspective on the demographic and social transformations of the rural world. Where the information allows, the analysis is complemented by an approach that considers the rural–urban continuum, moving beyond the traditional dichotomy between these two spaces.

¹ This chapter was written by Dolores de la Mata and Tatiana Rosá with research assistance from Juan Barnes, Belén Cañuelo, Leandro Martínez Villa, and Emilse Vargas.

In doing so, the chapter updates and expands the available evidence on rural populations² and lays the groundwork for understanding the structural changes shaping the present and future demographic outlook of rural areas. Anticipating how these dynamics will evolve will be key to understanding the pressures that productive

systems, service provision, social protection, and territories across the region will face in the coming decades. This serves as an essential point of departure for the subsequent discussion of rural household income sources and economic opportunities (Chapter 7), as well as access to basic services (Chapter 8).

The rural population in LAC

The rural population under national definitions

According to data from the Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE–Population Division of ECLAC & UNDP, 2024), which relies on national definitions of rurality, the rural population in LAC stood at approximately 120 million people in 2025. This figure represents about 18% of

the region's total population. As shown in Chapter 1, the share of the rural population has been declining gradually since 1950, and projections indicate that this trend will continue over the next three decades (UNDESA, 2019).

The rural population under standardized measures of rurality

There is substantial heterogeneity in how countries define rural areas (see Roberts et al., 2017, and Chapter 1). This lack of comparability has generated growing interest in adopting more standardized criteria that allow for international comparisons of populations sharing similar environmental and settlement characteristics. One alternative promoted in recent years is the Degree

of Urbanisation (DEGURBA) classification, which applies homogeneous parameters across countries (see Box 6.1).³ According to this classification, the rural population of the region in 2025 amounted to around 100 million people—equivalent to 15% of the total population—a figure slightly lower than that derived from official national statistics.

2 In particular, traditional sources—such as population projections from CELADE and the United Nations population divisions (CELADE–Population Division of ECLAC & UNDP, 2024)—are complemented with original census processing (1970–2020), the Internal Migration in Latin America and the Caribbean (MIALC) database, and harmonized household survey indicators from CEDLAS (2025) for socioeconomic monitoring (2003–2023), covering 22 countries.

3 There are other methodologies that capture the rural–urban continuum in greater detail. One of them is the Relative Index of Rurality (RIR) (Waldorf, 2006). Albina et al. apply the RIR in Argentina, and their results show that the index is highly correlated with other indicators of rurality, such as nighttime light intensity, satellite data, and DEGURBA measures. This consistency validates its usefulness for territorial analysis and suggests strong potential for comparative studies, although it has not yet been applied in a standardized way across all countries in the region.

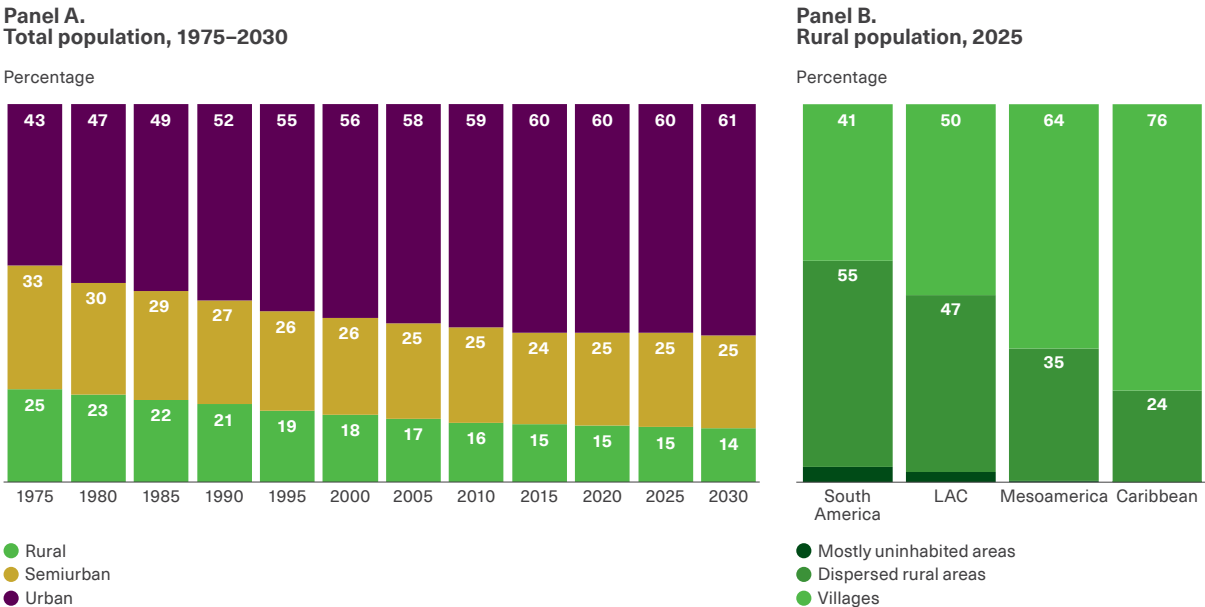
One advantage of DEGURBA is that it allows the population to be characterized along a continuous rural–urban spectrum, identifying areas of intermediate urbanization—referred to as semiurban—where nearly one quarter of the population of LAC currently resides, as well as urban areas, which concentrate close to 60% of the population, as shown in Panel A of Graph 6.1. DEGURBA also distinguishes different categories within the rural population, shown in Panel B of Graph 6.1: approximately half of the rural population lives in rural villages, while the other half resides in dispersed rural areas or largely uninhabited zones.

The composition of the rural population varies across subregions: South America has a higher share of dispersed rural population than Central America and the Caribbean countries.

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Half of the rural population of LAC lives in rural villages, while the other half resides in dispersed or largely uninhabited rural areas

Graph 6.1
Distribution of the population by degree of urbanization in Latin America and the Caribbean



Note: The categories used in Panel A correspond to Level 1 of the DEGURBA classification, while those in Panel B correspond to the rural categories of Level 2 of the same classification (see Box 6.1). Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Authors based on Schiavina et al. (2023).

Box 6.1

Rural population according to DEGURBA

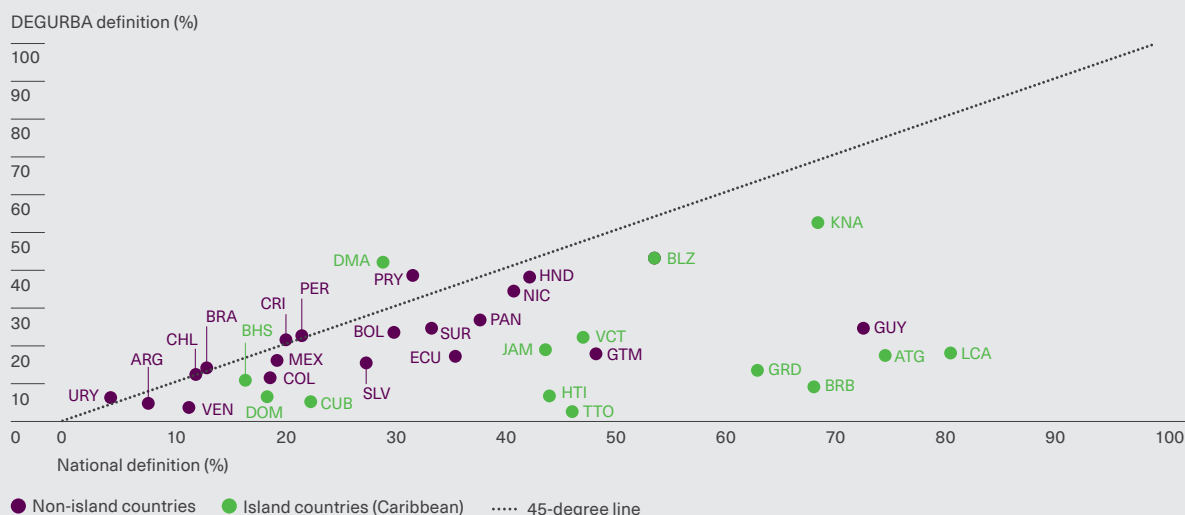
The DEGURBA approach (from Degree of Urbanisation) is a methodology developed by Eurostat and adopted by international organizations to classify territories according to their degree of urbanization using comparable and objective criteria (European Commission et al., 2024). Unlike traditional definitions based on administrative boundaries, DEGURBA uses a uniform grid of 1km² cells to classify territories by identifying population density patterns and settlement size.

The classification is organized into two hierarchical levels. At Level 1, each grid cell is classified as part of a city or urban area, a semiurban area, or a rural area, based on population density criteria and connectivity to population centers of different sizes. Level 2 of DEGURBA provides a more detailed disaggregation for the semiurban and rural categories, while the city category remains undivided. Within semiurban areas, three subcategories are identified: the small-town center, corresponding to the main core of medium-sized localities; the dense suburb, which groups compact residential areas contiguous to that center; and the suburb or periurban area, which includes lower-density areas located on the periphery. Rural areas, in turn, are divided into villages, corresponding to small population nuclei; dispersed rural areas, characterized by low density and the absence of defined settlements; and largely uninhabited areas, with extremely low or zero population density.

Graph 1 shows the percentage of the population classified as rural under national definitions (horizontal axis) and under the DEGURBA methodology (vertical axis). With a few exceptions (Dominica, Paraguay, and Uruguay), the DEGURBA classification estimates a slightly smaller rural population than national classifications. The differences are particularly pronounced in Caribbean island countries. Several factors may explain this discrepancy. Few LAC countries rely exclusively on population size or population density to define rurality (see Chapter 1). In addition, the DEGURBA method reclassifies some areas as semiurban or urban that national definitions may consider rural (for example, densely populated clusters within otherwise rural municipalities). Finally, the DEGURBA methodology is updated every five years, whereas national definitions are revised less frequently.

Graph 1

Percentage of the rural population in Latin America and the Caribbean according to national definitions and the DEGURBA methodology, 2025



Source: Authors based on UNDESA (2019) and Schiavina et al. (2023).

Degree of rurality of subnational territories

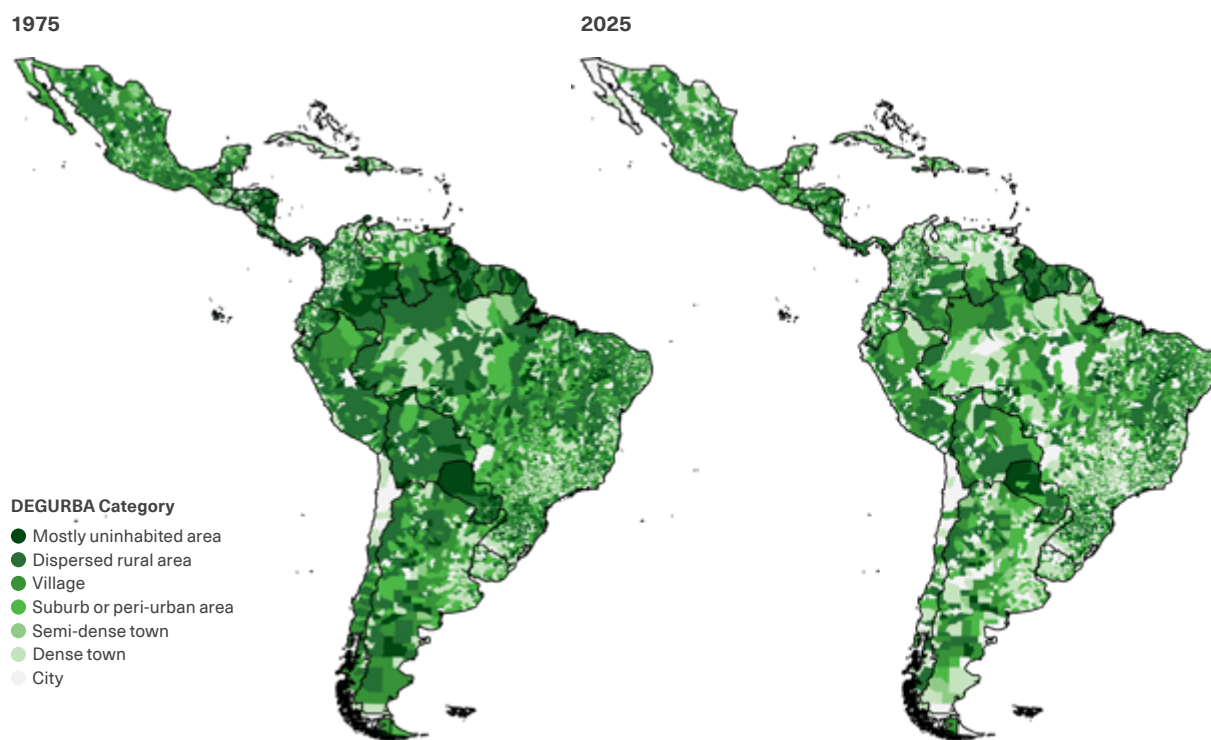
The maps in Figure 6.1 illustrate the magnitude of territorial changes in terms of the degree of rurality that have taken place in LAC over the past 50 years. Of a total of 12,713 municipalities⁴ across 23 countries in the region, approximately 65.68% were classified as rural in 1975 (villages, dispersed rural areas, and largely uninhabited areas), according to the DEGURBA classification (see Box 6.2). By 2025, this share had declined to 51.62%, reflecting a profound transformation in the territorial structure. Box 6.2

describes in detail the transitions of rural municipalities to other categories over the period 1975–2025.

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Approximately two out of every three municipalities in LAC were classified as rural in 1975, while by 2025 the share had fallen to one out of two

Figure 6.1

Degree of urbanization of municipalities in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1975 and 2025



Note: Subnational administrative units are classified according to their degree of urbanization using the DEGURBA criterion (Level 2). Under this classification, units identified as villages, dispersed rural areas, or largely uninhabited areas are considered rural. Those categorized as suburbs or periurban areas, semi-dense settlements, or dense settlements are classified as semiurban municipalities, while units identified as cities correspond to urban municipalities. See Boxes 6.1 and 6.2 for a detailed description of the DEGURBA methodology.

Source: Authors based on Schiavina et al. (2023).

4 Throughout the chapter, these subnational units are referred to interchangeably as municipalities or localities.

Box 6.2

DEGURBA approach applied at the level of subnational administrative units

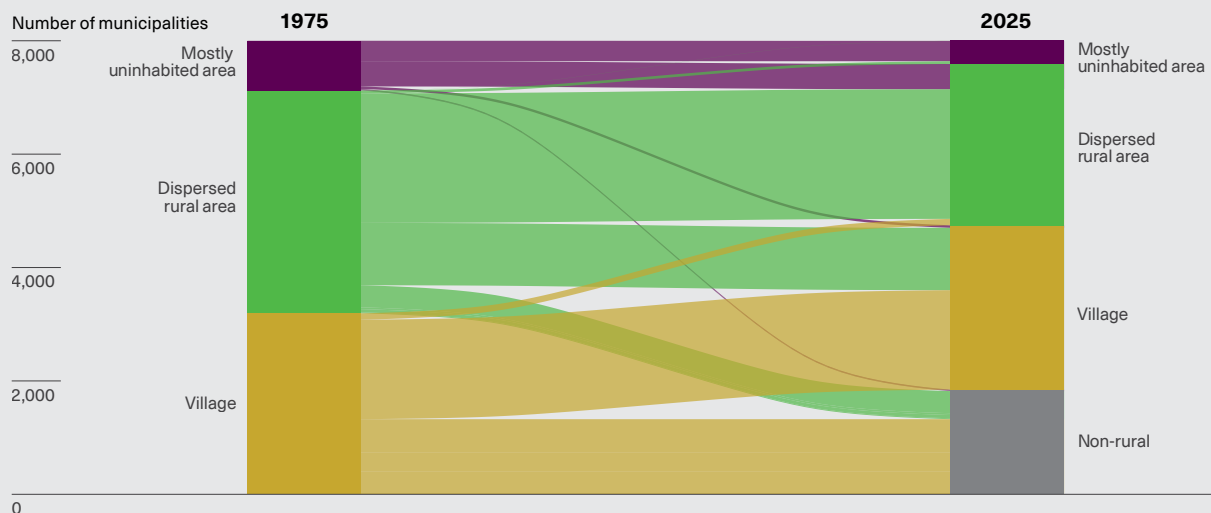
Based on the DEGURBA classification of 1 km² grid cells described in Box 6.1, it is possible to determine the degree of urbanization of larger subnational administrative units (such as municipalities or districts) according to the share of the population residing in each type of grid cell. For example, a subnational unit is classified as rural if more than 50% of its population lives in rural grid cells (that is, low-density cells), according to the Level 1 DEGURBA typology. Similarly, a unit is classified as predominantly urban if more than 50% of its population resides in urban grid cells (dense clusters forming urban centers), and as semiurban in the remaining cases. The Level 2 DEGURBA typology is applied following similar criteria.

Graph 1 shows the distribution of rural municipalities in 1975 according to Level 2 of the DEGURBA classification, as well as the transitions they underwent between 1975 and 2025. Approximately 8,000 municipalities were classified as rural in 1975. Of these, 23% were classified as villages, 32% as dispersed rural areas, and 7% as largely uninhabited rural areas. Some of these areas transitioned to categories with a higher degree of urbanization. Notably, approximately one quarter were no longer classified as rural by 2025.

For this report, the DEGURBA classification applied to subnational administrative units is combined with census data (obtained from Redatam, IPUMS, and MIALC^a) and with CAF's Local and Regional Governments database (2025a), among other sources. This allows for the construction of demographic, migration, access-to-public-services, and subnational public finance profiles by degree of rurality of the territories.

Graph 1

Distribution and transition of rural subnational administrative units in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1975–2025



Note: The countries included are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, French Guiana, Honduras, Haiti, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Paraguay, Suriname, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

Source: Authors based on Schiavina et al. (2023).

a. Redatam is a software program developed by ECLAC and used by LAC countries to process census data; MIALC is the Internal Migration in Latin America and the Caribbean database; and IPUMS (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series) is a U.S.-based system that integrates census and survey microdata from around the world.

The transformations in the degree of rurality of the subnational units described above underscore the need to reassess the nature of the territories and settlements that remain rural. Over time, these areas are likely to have developed distinctive characteristics that set them apart from those that have urbanized. These characteristics may include greater isolation, lower population density, or more pronounced gaps in infrastructure and economic opportunities. If this

is the case, the population currently living in rural areas is not fully comparable to the rural population of previous decades—especially if the territories that urbanized started from more favorable initial development conditions than those that remain rural today. Accounting for this potential selective persistence of rurality is important when interpreting the well-being indicators analyzed in this chapter of the RED and in the two chapters that follow.

The demographic transition in rural areas

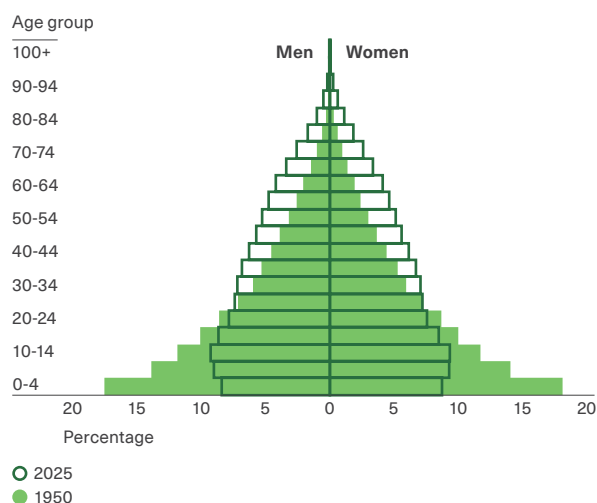
LAC is undergoing a sustained process of demographic change, driven by the combined effects of declining fertility rates and rising life expectancy. This demographic transformation has unfolded much more rapidly in the region

than in many developed countries, generating profound changes in population age structures and intergenerational dependency relationships over the course of just a few decades (Álvarez et al., 2020).

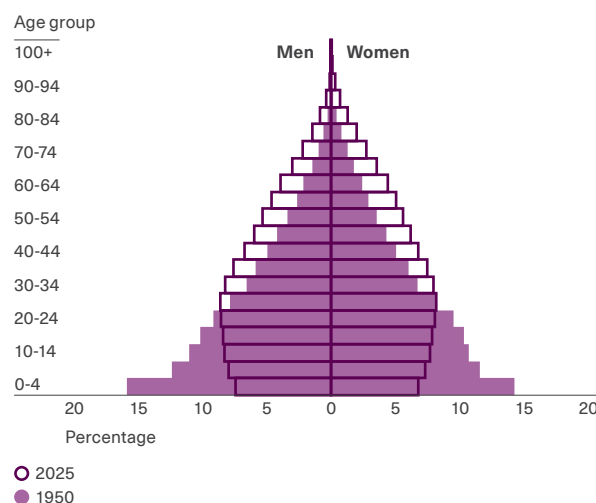
Graph 6.2

Distribution of the population by age and sex. Latin America and the Caribbean average, 1950 and 2025

Panel A. Rural zones



Panel B. Urban zones



Note: Simple average calculated using data from 20 countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay, and Venezuela).

Source: Authors based on CELADE–Population Division of ECLAC and UNDP (2024).

These changes are evident in both urban and rural areas. Graph 6.2 compares the population structure by age and sex in 1950 with projections for 2025 (CELADE–Population Division of ECLAC & UNDP, 2024), based on national definitions of rural and urban areas.⁵ In 1950, both population

pyramids displayed a wide base, reflecting high birth rates, and a progressive narrowing at older ages, associated with lower levels of longevity. By contrast, current population pyramids exhibit a narrower base and a higher share of the population in adult age groups.

Fertility

The decline in births is the main factor behind the slow or zero demographic growth observed in more developed societies and one of the primary drivers of population aging (Cabella & Nathan, 2018). In LAC, total fertility rates have declined steadily over recent decades. On average, the region stands at 1.8 children per woman, below the replacement level, estimated at 2.1 children (ECLAC, 2024).

Historically, fertility rates have been higher in rural areas than in urban areas.⁶ Graph 6.3 shows the evolution in the number of live-born children among women aged 45 to 49 in rural and urban areas, according to national criteria, calculated using census data from the 1970s through the 2020s.

In countries with census data available for the 1970s or 1980s, the average number of children among rural women ranged between 6 and 8, except in Argentina and Uruguay, where it stood at approximately 4 and 3, respectively. In countries with censuses in the 2010s and 2020s, this same indicator ranged between 3 and 5, with the exception of Uruguay (2 children). Overall, the average number of children per woman declined across all countries over the period, both in rural areas (Panel A of Graph 6.3) and in urban areas (Panel B of the same graph). Toward the end of the last century, several countries experienced a more rapid reduction in the number of children

in urban areas, widening the gap with rural areas (for example, in Bolivia, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Paraguay). Since the 2000s, fertility declines in rural areas have been more pronounced, steadily narrowing this gap.⁷



Historically, fertility rates have been higher in rural areas than in urban areas, although this gap has narrowed over recent decades

The economic and demographic literature identifies key factors behind the decline in fertility. These include the expansion of female education, the rising opportunity cost of women's time, changes in gender norms, and increased female labor force participation (Doepke et al., 2023), as well as greater access to contraception and declines in infant mortality. These determinants operate in both urban and rural areas, but with important differences: in rural areas, the transition has been slower due to delayed progress in these changes (Lerch, 2019).

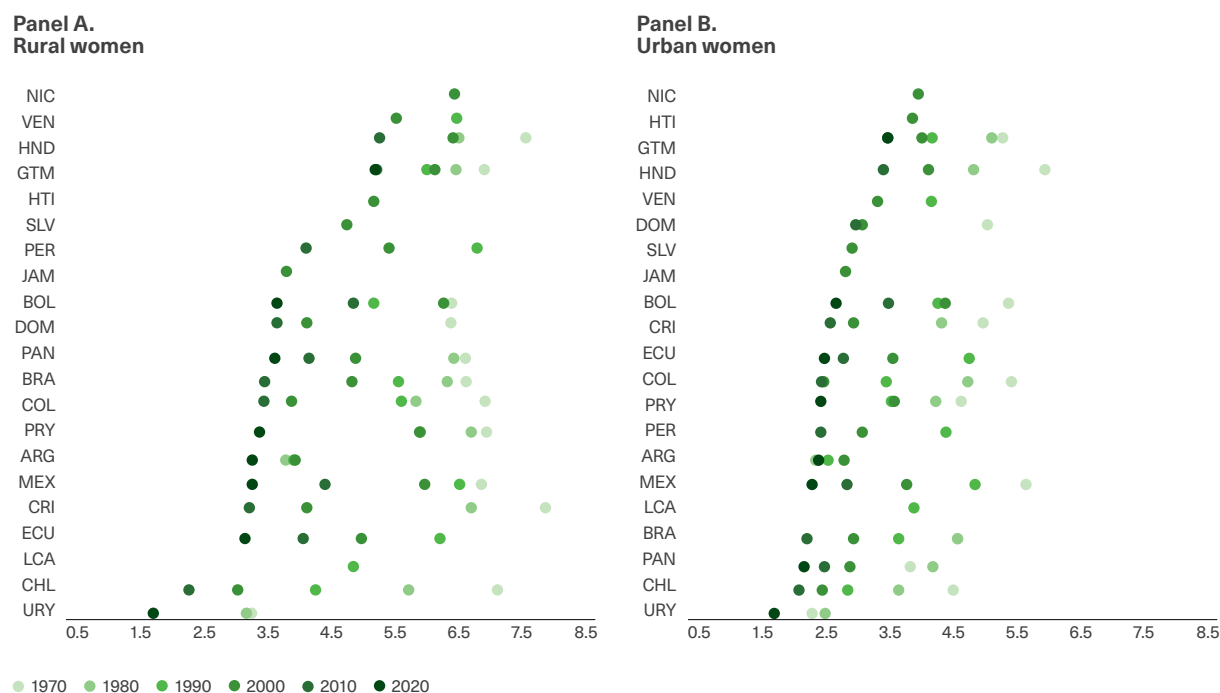
5 Throughout the chapter, the indicators presented for LAC correspond to simple averages across countries. The decision to use simple averages, rather than population-weighted averages, is intended to prevent the results from disproportionately reflecting the situation of the most populous countries.

6 Fertility rates in countries across the region, calculated using Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), confirm this pattern (CEDLAS, 2025).

7 Graph A.6.1 in the appendix to this chapter, available in the online edition of the RED, shows the evolution of these gaps.

Graph 6.3

Number of live-born children among women aged 45–49 in Latin American and Caribbean countries, 1970s–2020s



Note: The sample covers 21 countries whose censuses provide information on the number of live-born children per woman.

Source: Authors based on Barnes and de la Mata (2025), using census data.

A demographic phenomenon of particular relevance in the region is early motherhood. Adolescent pregnancy remains one of the most persistent challenges in LAC, which records some of the highest rates worldwide. Bancalari et al. (2025) document the pronounced socioeconomic and territorial inequalities associated with this phenomenon, highlighting stark differences between rural and urban areas, with significantly higher rates in the former.

Graph 6.4 shows the evolution of the share of women aged 15 to 19 with children in rural areas

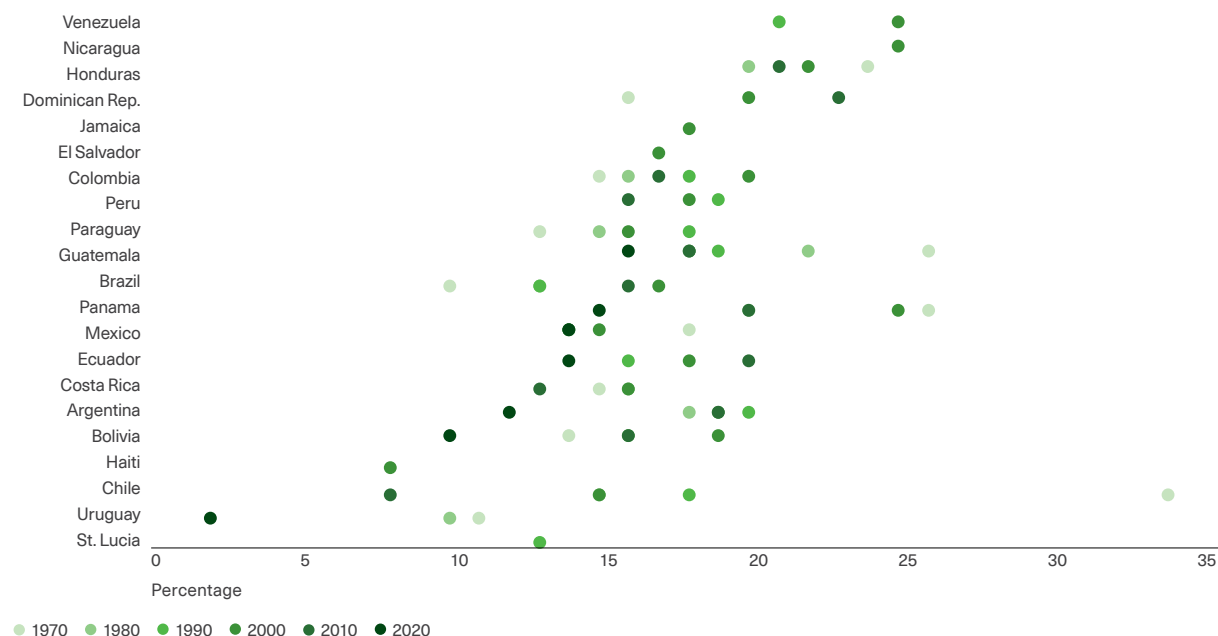
across LAC countries⁸ between 1970 and 2020. Substantial declines are observed: in the 1970s and 1980s, between 10% and 34% of rural women aged 15 to 19 were already mothers; by the 2010s and 2020s, these figures had fallen to between 8% and 23%, with the exception of Uruguay (2%). Although these advances are encouraging and partly associated with overall fertility declines, adolescent pregnancy remains more prevalent in rural areas than in urban areas, and the reductions observed—particularly over the past decade—have been less pronounced in rural than in urban settings.⁹

⁸ The percentage of women aged 15–19 who are mothers at the time of the census is an alternative and complementary indicator to SDG 3.7.2, which measures the adolescent fertility rate. Although both indicators refer to the same phenomenon (early motherhood), the census-based indicator has the advantage of being structural—that is, it measures the cumulative prevalence within a cohort—and of being comparable over time and across territories, even in contexts where vital registration systems are incomplete or inconsistent.

⁹ Graph A.6.2 in the appendix to this chapter, available in the online edition of the RED, shows these rates for women in urban areas as well as the rural–urban gaps.

Graph 6.4

Percentage of rural women aged 15–19 with children in Latin American and Caribbean countries, 1970s–2020s



Note: The sample includes 21 countries with census data on the number of live-born children per woman.

Source: Authors based on Barnes and de la Mata (2025), using census data.

Aging and dependency in the rural population

The narrowing of the base of the population pyramid and the expansion of older age groups reflect the advance of population aging, a phenomenon that is also strongly evident in rural areas. Panel A of Graph 6.5 shows the evolution of the age composition of the rural population across four broad age groups between 1970 and 2020. Aging, measured by the share of people aged 65 or older, is advancing in rural areas and, as in urban areas, currently accounts for around 10% of the population.¹⁰

The growing relative weight of older adults, together with the decline in the number of children and adolescents, is reshaping dependency ratios and the balance between the working-age and dependent populations. Panel B of Graph 6.5 shows the sustained increase in the old-age dependency ratio, particularly in rural areas: in the 2020s, for every 100 people of working age (15–64), there were 15 people aged 65 or older in rural areas, a share slightly higher than in urban areas. Similar patterns are observed along the rural–urban continuum, as illustrated in Box 6.3: the population

¹⁰ The changes in the distribution of the urban population can be seen in Graph A.6.3 of the appendix to this chapter, available in the online edition of the RED.

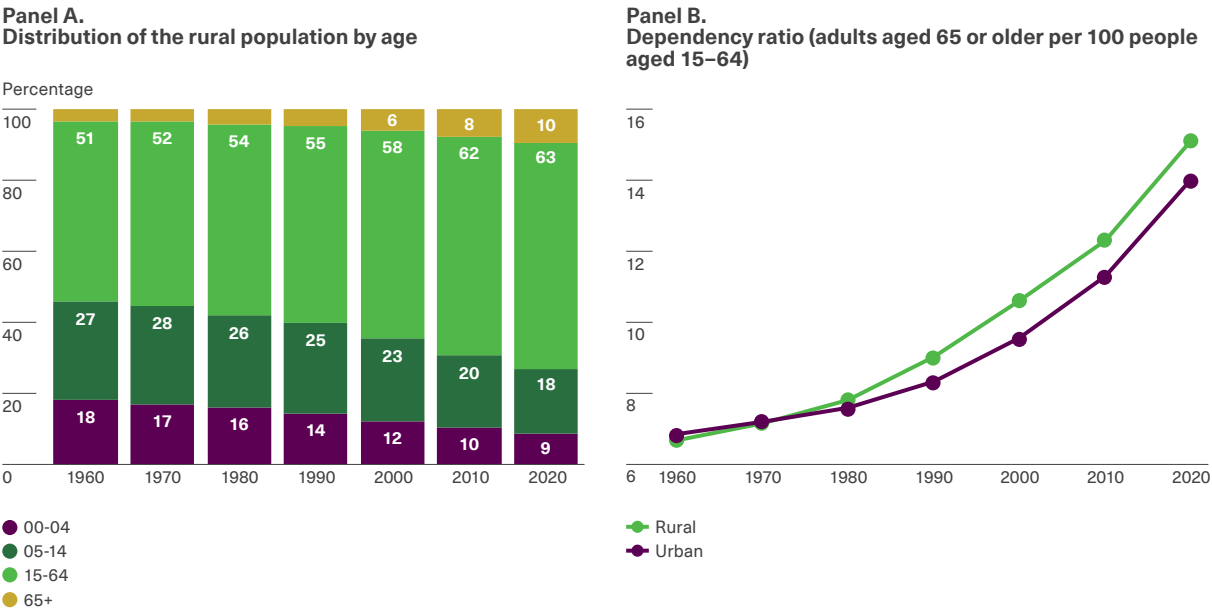
of rural municipalities is not only slightly older, but is also aging at a faster pace and exhibits higher dependency ratios than semiurban and urban municipalities.

Although population aging and rising old-age dependency ratios are widespread across the region, their impact may be more pronounced in rural settings. This is because aging poses specific challenges for the provision of health services, due to increased care needs and related strategies,

as well as for the economic sustainability of households—issues that are examined in greater detail in Chapters 7 and 8.

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Population aging is pronounced in rural areas, just as it is in urban areas

Graph 6.5
Distribution of the rural population by age group and old-age dependency ratios in rural and urban areas. Latin America and the Caribbean average, 1960s–2020s



Note: Simple average calculated using data from 20 countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay, and Venezuela). Projection values correspond to the midpoint of each decade. Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Authors based on CELADE–Population Division of ECLAC and UNDP (2024).

Box 6.3

Demographic transition along the rural–urban continuum

Barnes and de la Mata (2025) characterize the demographic transition along the rural–urban continuum by integrating census data with the Level 1 DEGURBA classification applied to subnational administrative units.

The analysis covers indicators of aging, fertility, and dependency for municipalities with different degrees of urbanization between 1970 and 2020, based on 67 censuses from 18 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Panel A of Graph 1 shows that population aging, measured by the share of people aged 65 or older, manifests with similar intensity across rural, semiurban, and urban municipalities, and is even higher in rural municipalities. Consistently, Panel B shows a clear hierarchy across geographic settings, with rural areas systematically exhibiting the highest dependency burdens, followed by semiurban areas and, lastly, urban areas.

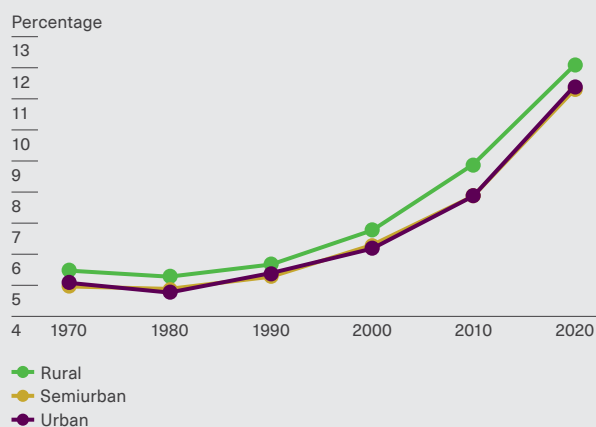
The cross-country comparison reveals several patterns: (1) population aging is a generalized phenomenon across all segments of the rural–urban continuum, with the share of older adults (65 or older) doubling on average between the 1970s–1980s and the 2010s; (2) as early as the 1970s and 1980s, rural and semiurban municipalities already exhibited older population structures than urban municipalities, with the exception of Costa Rica; (3) for the country average, the increase in aging has been greater in rural municipalities, although with notable heterogeneity across countries; and (4) the share of the population aged 85 or older has grown more rapidly in urban municipalities.

The fertility analysis shows that, although rural municipalities continue to exhibit higher fertility levels, the disparity relative to semiurban and urban municipalities has narrowed substantially, pointing to clear convergence across areas.

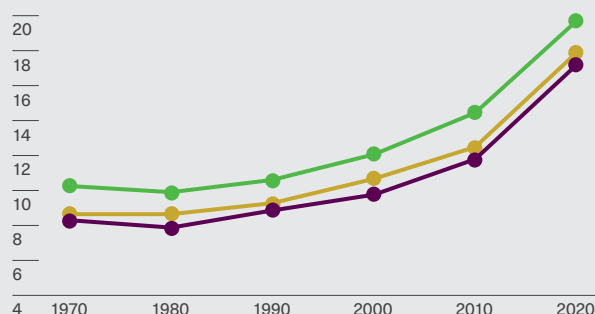
Graph 1

Aging and dependency by degree of municipal urbanization. Latin America and the Caribbean average, 1970–2020

Panel A.
Share of the population aged 65 or older



Panel B.
Old-age dependency ratio (people aged 65 or older per 100 people aged 15–64)



Note: Simple averages calculated using available censuses, by decade, for the 18 countries included (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela). Where possible, values for missing decades were estimated by applying trends specific to each degree of urbanization.

Source: Authors based on Barnes and de la Mata (2025), using census data.

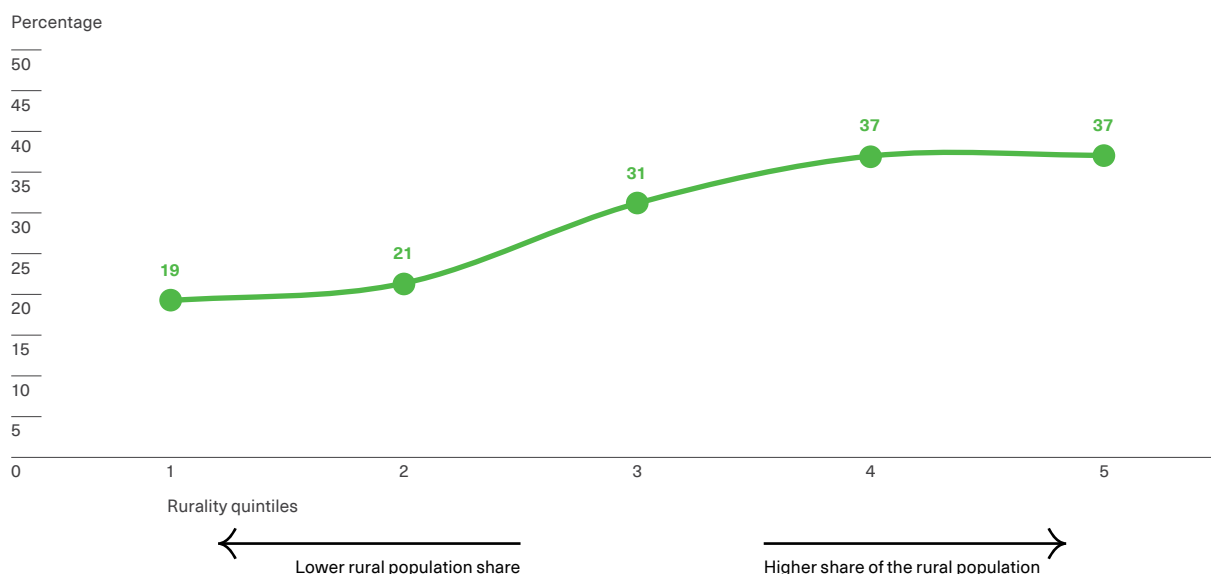
Indigenous population and rurality

Indigenous populations are clearly overrepresented in rural areas of LAC, according to national definitions of rurality—a pattern that is not systematically observed among Afro-descendant populations (Albina et al., 2024). Using census data, Albina et al. (2024) show that the Indigenous share of the rural population more than doubles the national average in several countries: in Colombia, it reaches 10% compared to 3% nationally; in Costa Rica, 5% compared to 2%; in Ecuador, 15% compared to 7%; and in Panama, 27% compared to 12%. In countries with a large Indigenous presence in the total population, this rural overrepresentation also persists. Thus, Indigenous populations account for 80% of the rural population in Bolivia (compared to 47% nationally), 20% in Chile (23% nationally), 52% in Guatemala (41% nationally), and 38% in Mexico (22% nationally).

An analysis at the municipal level shows that as rurality increases, so does the share of the Indigenous population. Graph 6.6 shows the proportion of Indigenous population across municipalities in 14 LAC countries that collect ethnic-racial information in their censuses. Municipalities are ranked into quintiles, from lowest to highest, based on the share of the rural population relative to the total population of the subnational unit. In the first quintile (the 20% of subnational units with the lowest rural population share), Indigenous populations account for 20% of the population. In the final quintile (the 20% of subnational units with the highest rural population share), this proportion rises to 40%.

Graph 6.6

Indigenous population as a share of the total municipal population. Latin America and the Caribbean average by degree of municipal rurality



Note: Quintiles are constructed by ranking municipalities from lowest to highest according to the percentage of rural population. The rural population of each municipality corresponds to that defined under the Level 1 typology of the DEGURBA classification (see Boxes 6.1 and 6.2). The vertical axis shows, for each quintile, the simple average share of the Indigenous population across the municipalities included. In total, 7,580 subnational administrative units from 14 countries are included (Belize, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela). Data corresponds to the latest available census for each country.

Source: Authors based on CAF (2025a) and Schiavina et al. (2023).



Family in a rural home in Samaipata, Bolivia.

Household structure

Household composition in LAC has undergone profound changes over recent decades. These changes reflect demographic shifts as well as transformations in economic patterns—associated with changes in productive structures—and in cultural patterns, such as norms governing gender roles (Becca et al., 2025; Esteve et al., 2025; Trias-Prats & Esteve, 2025).

These transformations have affected rural and urban settings differently, with some converging trends and others where marked differences persist. Understanding the structure of rural households—including household size, the presence of children and older adults, female headship, and family structure—is important for analyzing living conditions in rural areas. These characteristics directly shape care arrangements, educational and labor decisions by household members, income sources, and demand for social services, among other factors.

Graph 6.7 summarizes the evolution of these indicators between 2003 and 2023 for rural and urban households in 14 countries in the region included in the CEDLAS (2025).¹¹ First, average household size declined steadily (Panel A), falling from four to three members in both rural and urban areas, reflecting declining fertility.

One of the most notable changes in the region has been the rise in female-headed households (Panel B)—that is, households in which a woman is identified as the main person responsible for the household.¹² This trend reflects transformations in family models and greater female autonomy, but also the persistence of gender inequalities in care responsibilities (Liu et al., 2017). This pattern is observed in both rural and urban areas. In 2023, 16% of rural households were headed by women,

compared to 22% in urban areas, representing a sustained increase over recent decades.

By contrast, economic headship—defined as the main income earner—remains substantially lower among women (Panel C). Although there has been growth relative to the near-zero levels observed in the early 2000s, currently only 6% of rural households and 8% of urban households have a woman as the primary economic provider. This gap highlights the barriers women face in accessing quality employment and the persistent unequal distribution of domestic and care work, which continue to constrain their full economic autonomy, as documented for rural areas in Chapter 7.

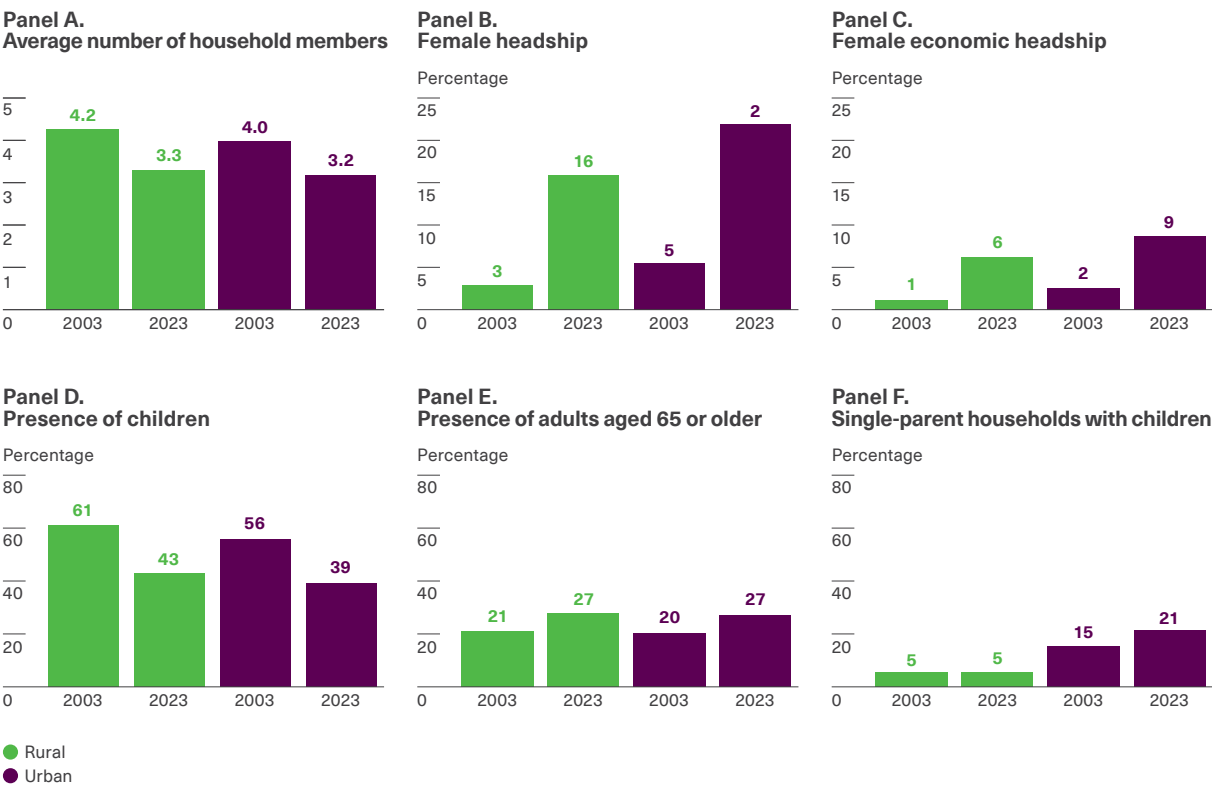
Households with children declined significantly (Panel D), in line with falling fertility—from 61% to 43% in rural areas and from 56% to 39% in urban areas. At the same time, the presence of older adults in households increased (Panel E), rising from 21% to 27% in rural areas and from 20% to 27% in urban areas. This demographic shift reflects the population aging discussed earlier, but also the continued role of households as intergenerational support networks, especially in contexts where formal care systems are limited (Becca et al., 2025).

Another relevant change in LAC is the rise in single-parent households, most of them headed by women (Gailán et al., 2023; Ullmann et al., 2014). However, this is a distinctly urban phenomenon, as in rural areas the share of single-parent households has remained stable at around 5% (Panel F). This suggests that, while family arrangements are evolving across the region, traditional household structures remain more prevalent in rural settings.

11 The database includes information for Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay.

12 Household headship is self-reported. The increase in female-headed households may reflect a range of factors, including changes in household composition—such as a rise in households headed by women due to the absence of a partner—or changes in reporting practices in households where a couple co-resides.

Graph 6.7
Household characteristics in rural and urban areas. Latin America and the Caribbean average, 2003–2023



Note: Simple average calculated using 14 countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay). Panels A, B, C, D, and E are calculated for all households in which the household head is older than 15 years. Panel F excludes single-person households.

Source: Authors based on CEDLAS (2025).

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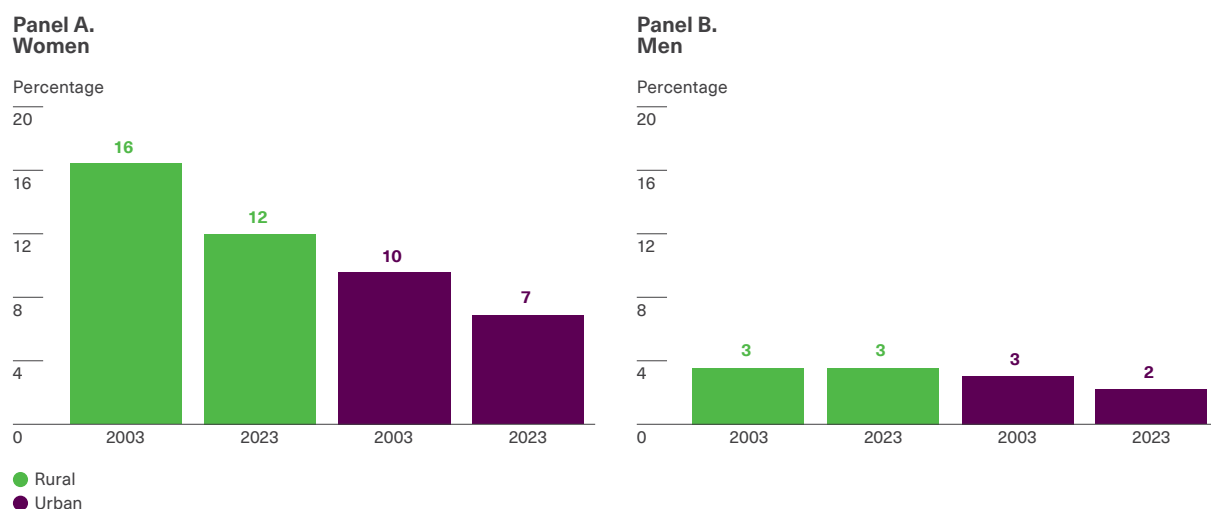
Early marriage remains considerably more common in rural than in urban areas, with significant implications for the educational and labor trajectories of young rural women

remains considerably more common in rural than in urban areas, with significant implications for the educational and labor trajectories of young rural women (Bellés-Obrero & Lombardi, 2023; ECLAC, 2022). Moreover, when it occurs before age 18, early marriage constitutes a violation of human rights (UNICEF, 2019).

A persistent difference between rural and urban areas is the prevalence of early marriage. In both settings, women continue to be more likely than men to marry or enter a union between ages 15 and 19 (Graph 6.8). Despite progress, early marriage

Graph 6.8

Percentage of young people aged 15–19 who are married or in a union in rural and urban areas. Latin America and the Caribbean average, 2003–2023



Note: Simple average calculated using 14 countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay).

Source: Authors based on CEDLAS (2025).

Migration

Migration is a key component of demographic change, as it alters the size, structure, and spatial distribution of the rural population. Like the natural components of population growth (births and deaths), migration responds to socioeconomic and territorial determinants, and its analysis is essential for understanding processes of depopulation, productive transformation, and territorial reconfiguration in rural areas.

Out-migration from rural areas reflects the interaction between push and pull factors. Among the former are technological change in agriculture; productivity and wage gaps between rural and urban areas; and high levels of labor informality (Gollin et al., 2014; Harris & Todaro, 1970; Jedwab et al., 2017; Lewis, 1954). These factors are compounded by adverse shocks affecting agriculture, liquidity constraints,

distortions in agricultural markets, and limited access to insurance (Britos et al., 2025; Bryan et al., 2014; Minale, 2018; Munshi & Rosenzweig, 2016), violence and insecurity (Clemens, 2021), natural disasters, and climate change (see Box 6.4). Together with deficits in infrastructure and social protection networks (issues addressed in Chapters 7 and 8 of this report), these conditions constrain opportunities in areas of origin, while access to employment, education, public services, and family networks in destination areas acts as the main pull factor.

Box 6.4

Climate change and migration

Extreme heat waves and other severe climate events are becoming increasingly frequent and intense and are expected to accelerate further in the coming decades (IPCC, 2021). These shocks erode agricultural yields and reduce rural incomes, particularly in rainfed areas with limited risk-management tools (Deschênes & Greenstone, 2007; Jessoe et al., 2018). In contexts of incomplete insurance and credit markets, households adjust inputs, sell assets, reallocate family labor, or migrate (Carter & Lybbert, 2012; Jayachandran, 2006; Rosenzweig & Wolpin, 1993). Climate-induced migration may take the form of “distress migration” (departures to stabilize consumption after losses) or “investment migration” (mobility financed after good harvests as a strategic bet) (Ibáñez et al., n.d.; Kleemans, 2015) and it is often short-distance unless well-established international networks already exist (Findlay, 2011). In LAC, the World Bank projects nearly 17 million internal climate migrants by 2050, equivalent to almost 3% of the population (Rigaud et al., 2018).

A growing body of evidence documents clear causal effects in rural areas and shows that climate shocks increase both international migration and internal migration. Hurricanes have raised migration to the United States from Central America and the Caribbean (Spencer & Urquhart, 2018). In El Salvador, extreme heat reduced maize yields, forced adjustments in labor and inputs, and, without access to irrigation or insurance, pushed international migration as a consumption-smoothing mechanism (Ibáñez et al., n.d.). In Mexico, unusually warm episodes and severe droughts increased migration to the United States (Nawrotzki et al., 2016). On the domestic front, heat waves in Central America and the Caribbean have increased mobility, with relatively larger effects among young women (Baez et al., 2017), while in South America, temperature anomalies have been associated with higher within-country migration (Thiede et al., 2016). In Brazil, intensifying droughts have increased rural-to-urban migration (Busso & Chauvin, 2023). Taken together, evidence based on census or survey data and panel or difference-based designs shows that hurricanes, extreme heat, and droughts act as triggers of rural mobility.

However, the effects are not uniform. In Ecuador, adverse environmental conditions do not always increase departures and may even reduce them depending on context (Gray & Bilsborrow, 2013). Moreover, when networks or liquidity are lacking, severe shocks can inhibit migration (“trapped migration”), reflecting high exit costs and financing constraints (Busso & Chauvin, 2023).

In summary, climate-related migration reveals failures in insurance and credit markets. Public policy must act on two fronts: first, reducing vulnerability at origin (for example, through agricultural and income insurance, countercyclical credit, water and irrigation infrastructure, technical assistance, and early-warning systems) so that households are not forced to migrate; and second, facilitating mobility when agricultural activity at origin becomes unviable (Ibáñez et al., n.d.)—by improving access to credit to finance relocation, reducing remittance costs, ensuring safe transfer channels, and supporting labor-market and housing integration—so that migration can function as an effective and safe adaptation mechanism.

Migration is commonly classified into three categories according to length of stay: short-term (between three and twelve months), medium-term (from one to five years), and long-term (more than five years). The analysis in this chapter focuses on medium-term internal migration, which can

be measured using census questions on place of residence five years prior to the survey. An individual is considered a migrant if they report living in a different locality than five years earlier. The degree of rurality of municipalities of origin and destination is classified using the current

DEGURBA typology or the closest available version (Martinez Villa & Rosá, 2025). This approach makes it possible to identify recent movements from rural municipalities, but it does not capture seasonal or very short-term migration, nor international movements. These limitations are discussed in Boxes 6.4 and 6.5.

It is important to note that migration related to rural areas can be analyzed from two perspectives: outflows from rural localities to other settings (rural emigration) and inflows into rural localities from other areas (rural immigration). This report focuses on rural emigration, as it currently represents the most quantitatively significant migratory phenomenon for understanding demographic change in rural areas.

Box 6.5

Limitations in measuring migration

Measuring migration faces methodological and data constraints that shape the type of analysis that can be conducted and, consequently, the policy recommendations that can be formulated to address this phenomenon in rural areas.

In the region, the main source for identifying recent migration is population censuses, through the question on place of residence five years prior. This approach provides a medium-term snapshot but lacks individual follow-up, making it impossible to reconstruct migration trajectories, returns, length of stay, or to precisely link changes in residence to economic, climatic, or policy shocks. The results reflect discrete cross-sectional observations rather than dynamic processes.

The predominant use of census data also entails limitations in the coverage and quality of key economic variables—such as income and employment—which are often captured only partially or are not fully comparable across countries. In rural areas, high levels of informality and subsistence production further exacerbate these limitations. In addition, this approach cannot capture seasonal, circular, or very short-term mobility, nor can it document multi-residence arrangements that are common in rural settings.

Given these constraints, it is essential to advance the development of longitudinal data collection systems where they do not yet exist and to revive those that have been discontinued. In particular, panel household surveys—which follow the same individuals or families over time—are crucial for analyzing migration trajectories, returns, impacts on well-being, and responses to shocks. Latin America has had valuable experiences in this area, including Nicaragua's National Household Survey on Living Standards Measurement and Mexico's Family Life Survey, whose most recent rounds were conducted more than a decade ago, as well as the Young Lives study in Peru, which remains the only active experience, with a seventh round currently under way (2023–2024). This sustained disinvestment in panel surveys severely limits the ability to understand dynamic phenomena such as migration.

Complementarily, the use of administrative sources and sectoral registries—such as school enrollment records, social programs, or health registries—can help detect changes in residence more promptly. However, these records lack the individual longitudinal component needed to understand migration dynamics and do not substitute for representative longitudinal data.

Box 6.6

Seasonal and temporary rural migration in Latin America and the Caribbean

Seasonal rural migration consists of temporary movements, generally aligned with productive cycles (planting and harvesting, construction projects, extractive activities, or tourism seasons). This form of mobility—prevalent among young rural workers from low-income households—combines subsistence agricultural strategies with temporary paid employment (Soto Baquero & Klein, 2012).

Internal seasonal migration. In agriculture, temporary labor crews are common in coffee-, banana-, and sugarcane-growing areas of the Southern Cone and the Andes, as well as in intraregional flows in Bolivia, Honduras, and Peru (Reardon et al., 2004). Beyond agriculture, large infrastructure projects—such as dams or highways—attract workers for months or years. In Andean mining, rotational arrangements predominate, with workers commuting from rural areas or intermediate cities (Clemenceau, 2023). Sectors such as aquaculture and fish processing—for example, salmon farming in southern Chile—generate sharp peaks in seasonal employment (Tapia Catalán & Marchant Santiago, 2025). In tourist destinations, temporary hiring in hospitality, food services, and related activities intensifies during peak seasons (ILO, 2022). Taken together, these activities show that seasonal rural mobility is not limited to agriculture but extends across multiple sectors with episodic labor demand.

In terms of well-being, these movements allow households to supplement income and improve food security by diversifying labor sources. However, they also entail family separations, increase care burdens in households of origin, and can generate temporary local labor shortages during peak production periods.

Internacional seasonal migration. Short-term movements across borders also occur, structured through social networks, informal arrangements, or temporary mobility programs. Mexico stands out for the participation of agricultural workers in harvesting campaigns in the United States and Canada, while El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras register seasonal flows toward southern Mexico. In the Caribbean, movements include migration to the United States during tourism and construction seasons, as well as intraregional flows: the Dominican Republic and the Eastern Caribbean islands receive seasonal workers—mainly from Jamaica and Haiti—to meet peak labor demand (Busso et al., 2023).

For rural households, these forms of mobility generate remittances that smooth consumption and facilitate investment in education, health, or small productive assets. It is estimated that around 40% of remittances in the region are directed to rural areas (Vasconcelos et al., 2017). However, the temporary nature of these arrangements can exacerbate labor precarity in destination areas and increase the vulnerability of households of origin during the absence of adult members.

Overall, seasonal migration—both internal and international—constitutes a key labor strategy for rural households, organized around productive cycles and temporary opportunities, but it is also associated with family costs and labor risks that call for targeted protection policies.

Rural emigration today

Rural–urban migration in LAC is a long-standing process, historically associated with industrialization and the expansion of services, with heterogeneous timing and intensity across

countries. In countries that urbanized early (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay), the peak of the rural exodus was observed mainly in the 1980s and moderated during the 1990s. In countries

with later urbanization (Bolivia, Guatemala, Panama, and the Dominican Republic), the peak occurred in the 1990s (Rodríguez Vignoli, 2004).

Graph 6.9 presents recent evidence on migration originating in rural areas along two dimensions.¹³ Panel A shows the rural emigration rate, defined as the annual average number of people who left rural municipalities over the previous five-year period, divided by the rural population at the beginning of that period.¹⁴ By contrast, Panel B presents the rural net migration rate, which captures the net migratory balance of rural municipalities—that is, the annual average difference between the number of people entering and leaving rural municipalities, divided by the rural population five years earlier/ divided by the same rural population base. A negative net migration rate indicates that more people left rural areas than entered them. This distinction is essential for understanding not only the magnitude of migration flows but also their net demographic impact.

Within Panel A, countries such as Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Peru record the highest levels of rural emigration, with rates that in some cases reach or exceed 2% of the total rural population per year. At the other extreme, countries such as Cuba, El Salvador, and Mexico exhibit more moderate outflows, at around 1% per year, likely reflecting the fact that their migration peaks occurred earlier and the importance of international migration, the magnitude of which cannot be adequately measured using available census data.

● ●
Since the 2010s, rural emigration has implied the annual departure of between 1% and 2% of the rural population

● ●
On average, 50% of people leaving rural municipalities move to urban areas; the rest split in similar shares between semiurban and rural municipalities

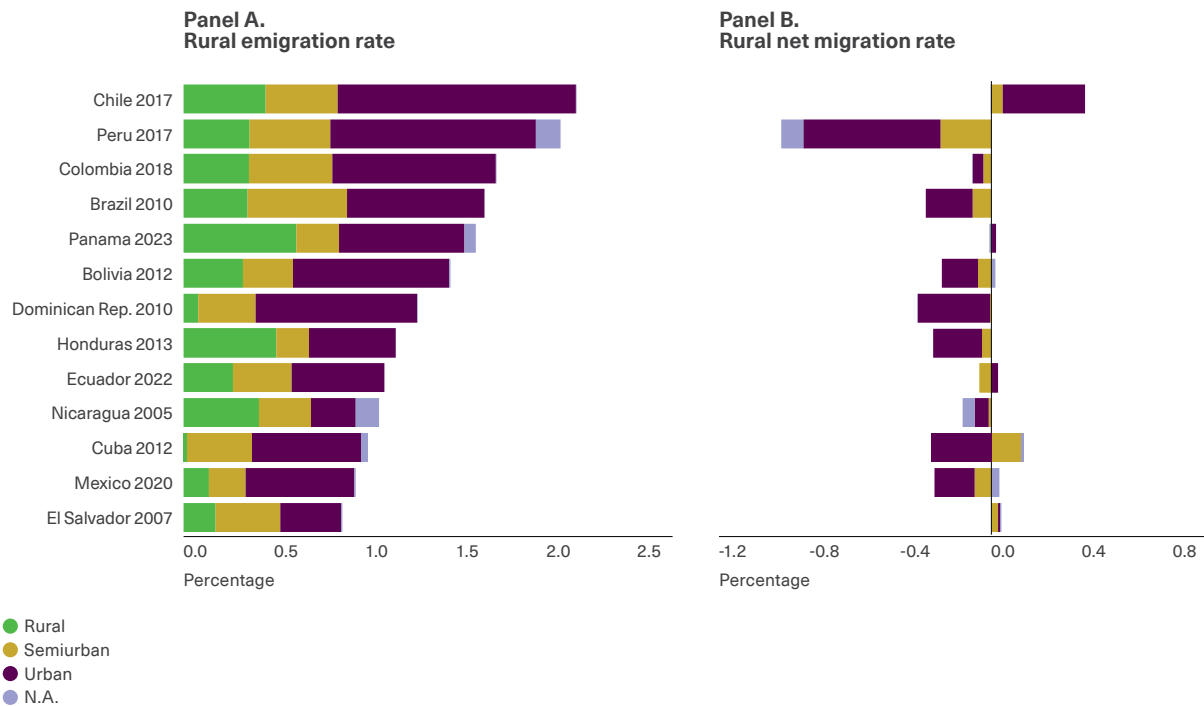
By contrast, net migration patterns differ from those observed for emigration (Panel B). Although countries such as Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Panama register relatively high levels of outflows from rural areas, their net migration balances are low or even positive, suggesting that these outflows are partially offset by inflows from other areas. In the case of Chile, for example, high rural emigration is offset by particularly strong urban-to-rural migration, resulting in a positive net balance. By contrast, Peru exhibits both one of the highest rural emigration rates and the most negative net migration balance in the region, with an annual loss close to 1% of its rural population, making it the country with the largest net loss of rural population in LAC.

With respect to destinations, on average, 50% of people migrating from rural municipalities move to urban municipalities, while the remainder is distributed in similar shares between semiurban and rural municipalities (see Graph A.6.4 in the appendix, available in the online edition of the RED). This average structure masks important heterogeneity: for example, in Chile, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico, more than 60% of rural emigrants move to urban municipalities, whereas in Ecuador, Honduras, and Panama, movements to other rural municipalities account for between one quarter and nearly half of emigration from rural areas, reflecting short-distance trajectories and labor strategies linked to the rural economy itself.

13 The data reported in this section are based on the authors' calculations using census sources. For Bolivia, Chile, and Mexico, census microdata available through IPUMS International (Ruggles et al., 2025) were processed. For Ecuador, the analysis relies directly on the results of the 2022 National Population and Housing Census (INEC, 2024). For Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Honduras, Panama, Peru, and the Dominican Republic, the information comes from the MIALC database (CELADE–Population Division of ECLAC, n.d.). The classification of the degree of urbanization of municipalities of origin and destination is based on the DEGURBA typology (see Boxes 6.1 and 6.2): for the place of origin, the classification in effect five years prior to the census is applied, while for the destination, the classification corresponding to the census year is used.

14 The migration rate is expressed as an annual average. It is calculated by dividing by five the total number of people who migrated during the previous five-year period (based on the census question on place of residence five years earlier), assuming that migration is evenly distributed over that period. This annual average is then divided by the total population of the reference group (for example, the rural population five years earlier), so that the resulting figure reflects the relative annual migration flow.

Graph 6.9
 Rural emigration and net migration rates from rural municipalities in Latin America and the Caribbean



Note: The classification of the degree of urbanization of municipalities of origin and destination is based on the DEGURBA typology. For the calculation of rates, the population residing in rural municipalities five years prior to the census is used, except in the case of Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, and Mexico, where the population residing in rural municipalities at the time of the census is used.

Source: Authors based on IPUMS (Ruggles et al., 2025), INEC (2024), census data processed from MIALC (CELADE–Population Division of ECLAC, n.d.) and Schiavina et al (2023).

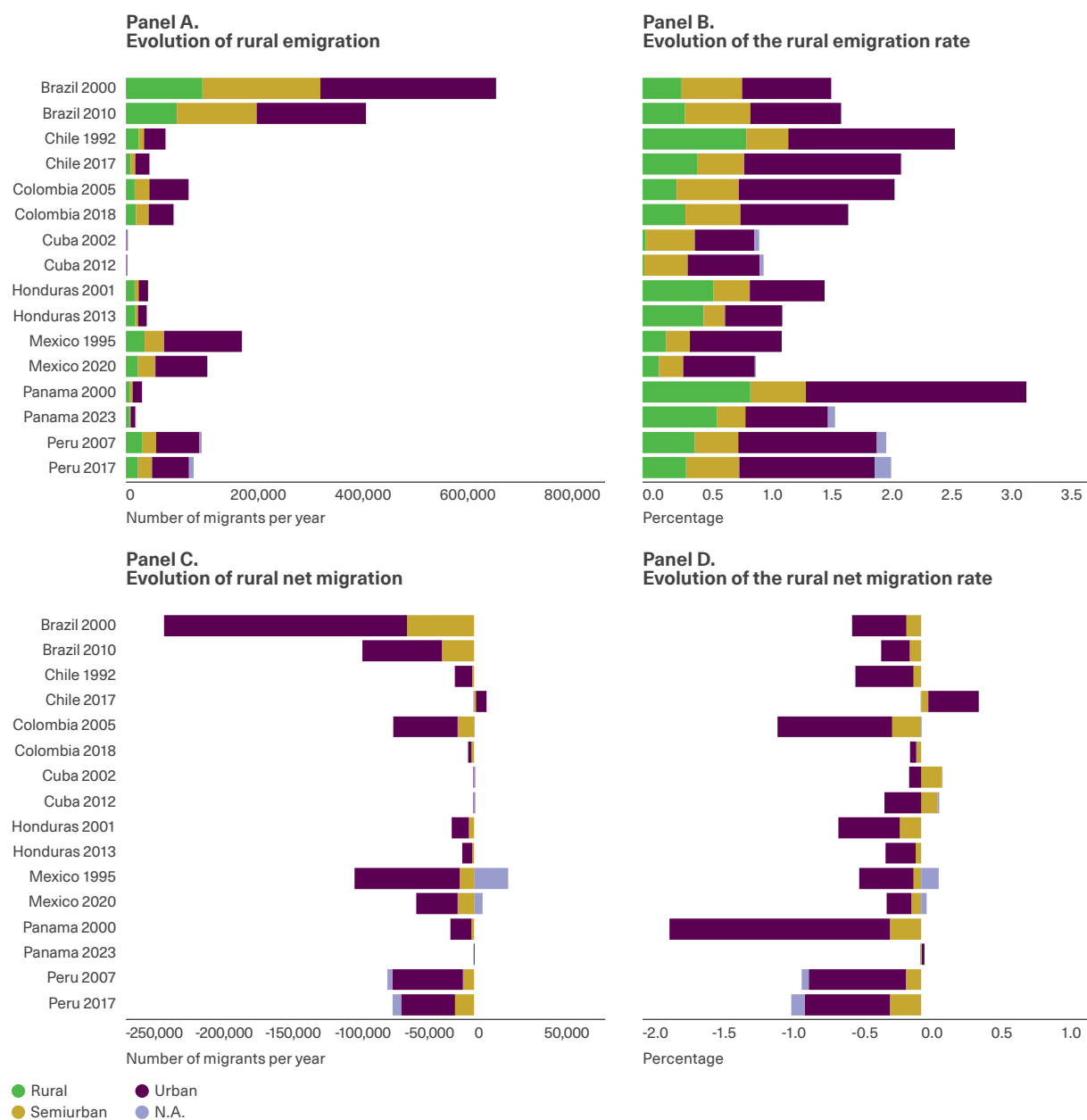
Evolution of rural emigration in recent decades

Panels A and B of Graph 6.10 show the evolution of rural emigration over recent decades across selected LAC countries, allowing for the identification of relevant changes in internal mobility patterns. Overall, migratory flows from rural municipalities have experienced a slight slowdown in recent years, in line with the existing literature (Rodríguez Vignoli, 2017). In absolute terms, the decline in the number of rural emigrants in Brazil between 2000 and 2010 is

notably sharp, potentially reflecting greater territorial stabilization or a reduction in the rural population with migration potential. Similarly, Colombia and Mexico show a decline in the magnitude of rural emigration between the two periods observed, while figures in Honduras, Panama, and Peru remain relatively stable.

Graph 6.10

Temporal evolution of migration originating in rural municipalities, by degree of urbanization of the destination municipality



Note: The classification of the degree of urbanization of municipalities of origin and destination is based on the DEGURBA typology. For the calculation of rates, the population residing in rural municipalities five years prior to the census is used, except in the case of Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador and Mexico, where the population residing in rural municipalities at the time of the census is used.

Source: Authors based on IPUMS (Ruggles et al., 2025), INEC (2024), census data processed from MIALC (CELADE–Population Division of ECLAC, n.d.) and Schiavina et al (2023).



Overall, migratory flows from rural municipalities have experienced a slight slowdown in recent years

When rural emigration rates are considered, the evolution also points to a downward trend in most countries. In Panama, for example, the rate declines markedly between 2000 and 2023, as it does in Peru between 2007 and 2017 and in Honduras between 2001 and 2013. In Colombia, rural emigration as a share of the population falls sharply between 2005 and 2018, potentially reflecting the end of the Colombian armed conflict. The persistence of relatively high percentages in Brazil indicates that, despite the decline in absolute numbers, rural emigration remains a relevant phenomenon relative to the size of its rural population.

Panels C and D of Graph 6.10 show the evolution of rural net migration toward urban and semiurban municipalities, both in absolute terms and as a share of the rural population. Compared with

emigration trends, the decline in outflows from rural areas is even more pronounced when net migration is considered. In countries such as Brazil and Colombia—where emigration declined between the two observation points—net migration balances fall even more sharply, suggesting that outflows have decreased more than proportionally or that return migration has increased. For example, Brazil shifts from a negative net balance in 2000 to a substantially smaller one in 2010, despite continuing to record significant levels of rural emigration.

Similarly, in relative terms, there is a generalized decline in net migration as a percentage of the rural population, more pronounced than that observed for emigration indicators. This suggests that, although mobility persists, return movements (or movements between non-urban areas) have intensified. These patterns may reflect changes in residential strategies, more flexible linkages between rural and urban areas, or increasing constraints on permanent settlement in urban settings.

Rural immigration

Rural immigration has become increasingly relevant in several Latin American countries (Martínez Villa & Rosá, 2025). As shown in Panels B and C of Graph 6.10, although rural emigration to urban municipalities remains the dominant trend, a sustained increase in movements in the opposite direction—from urban or semiurban municipalities to rural municipalities—has been observed in a number of national contexts, with significant implications for the structure and development of these territories. In Chile, census data from 2017 show for the first time that immigration into rural areas exceeds emigration from them, reversing the pattern observed in the 1990s. The evidence suggests that these inflows originate mainly in the Metropolitan Region and are directed toward rural municipalities in the central and southern parts of the country, following a pattern associated with amenity-driven migration, tourism development, and

new real estate opportunities (INE, 2020; Marchant & Rojas, 2015; Martínez Villa & Rosá, 2025).



Rural immigration does not exceed emigration, but it reaches meaningful levels. Although it remains a minor phenomenon in aggregate terms, it plays a growing role in the demographic reconfiguration of rural territories

In other countries in the region, rural immigration does not surpass emigration but nevertheless reaches meaningful levels. According to the most recent censuses, immigrants arriving in rural

municipalities account for around 1% of the rural population per year in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Panama, and Peru (Martínez Villa & Rosá, 2025) and their numbers have grown steadily where comparable census information is available.¹⁵ Although this remains a minor phenomenon in aggregate terms, it plays an increasingly important role in the demographic reconfiguration of rural territories, particularly in contexts of overall population decline. While

a detailed analysis of this process is beyond the scope of this report, existing studies find that these inflows originate primarily in urban or semiurban municipalities and respond to a range of factors, including access to land, the availability of non-agricultural employment, and so-called “amenity migration,” linked to the search for more attractive natural or cultural environments (Marchant & Rojas, 2015; Millán-Otero & Torrejón Cardona, 2023).

Who leaves and who arrives in rural areas?

Age and demographic profile of rural migration in the region

An analysis of the age pattern of internal emigration in LAC shows that this phenomenon is particularly pronounced among young people aged 14 to 29, regardless of the degree of rurality of the municipality of origin, as shown in Table A.6.1 in the appendix (available in the online edition of the RED). Moreover, emigration is especially intense from rural municipalities. This result, combined with the progressive aging of the rural population, reinforces the evidence discussed earlier regarding rising dependency ratios in these areas. A demographic structure characterized by population aging and the departure of working-age individuals directly contributes to an increase in the dependent population in rural areas.

These age patterns are consistent with the push and pull factors described at the beginning of this section. During adolescence and early adulthood, limited educational and labor opportunities in rural areas—together with the concentration of study, employment, and services in urban and semiurban areas—make migration an especially attractive option. As individuals move through the life cycle, the consolidation of family and employment

projects, along with the higher economic and emotional costs of relocation, reduces the propensity to migrate. As a result, internal mobility is concentrated at relatively young ages.



Rural emigration is particularly significant among young people aged 14 to 29, contributing to the aging of the population in these areas

By contrast, the age profile of immigration to rural municipalities tends to be older than that of those leaving rural areas. In the countries analyzed—Brazil (2010), Peru (2017), and Colombia (2018)—most individuals arriving in rural areas are between 30 and 59 years old. The exception is Honduras (2013), where the dominant group is aged 15 to 29 (Martínez Villa & Rosá, 2025). Taken together, the combination of predominantly young rural emigration and older rural immigration means that the negative net migration observed in many rural municipalities contributes to population aging in rural areas.

15 This increase in immigration is observed in Panama (2023 relative to 2000), Honduras (2013 relative to 2001), Colombia (2018 relative to 2005), and Chile (2017 relative to 1992). The only countries in the sample where rural immigration has declined over time are Brazil (2000 relative to 2010) and Mexico (1995 relative to 2020).

Characterization using census microdata: Mexico and Chile

Using microdata from the most recent censuses available for Mexico (2020) and Chile (2017), a comparative analysis is conducted of individuals who resided in rural municipalities five years prior

to the census. The objective is to characterize those who migrated from these municipalities during that period and to compare them with individuals who remained in rural areas. Because the census migration question refers to place of residence five years earlier, it does not allow the precise timing of migration to be identified, only that it occurred at some point within that interval.

Table 6.1
Demographic characteristics of migrant and non-migrant rural population

Panel A. Chile 2017

Variable	Non-migrant	Rural emigrant	Difference: Emigrant vs. non-migrant	Rural immigrant	Difference: Immigrant vs. non-migrant
Age	41.0	31.8	-9.2***	35.6	-5.4***
Woman	50.1%	49.3%	-0.8***	48.1%	-2.0***
Primary	36.9%	21.2%	-15.7***	27.3%	-9.6***
Secondary	36.5%	61.1%	24.6***	50.1%	13.6***
University	3.6%	9.7%	6.1***	13%	9.4***

Panel B. Mexico 2020

Variable	Non-migrant	Rural emigrant	Difference: Emigrant vs. non-migrant	Rural immigrant	Difference: Immigrant vs. non-migrant
Age	34.8	28.4	-6.4***	30	-4.8***
Woman	51.3%	52.4%	1.1***	51.4%	0.1***
Primary	48.2%	45.4%	-2.8***	49.5%	-1.3***
Secondary	16%	32.9%	16.9***	24.8%	8.8***
University	4.5%	10.1%	5.6***	13.3%	8.8***

Note: The table presents averages for the Chilean population in 2017 and the Mexican population in 2020. Means for educational variables are calculated for the population aged over 18. Rural emigrants are defined as individuals who, five years prior to the census, resided in a locality classified as rural according to the closest available DEGURBA typology and who, at the time of the census, report living in a different, non-rural locality. Rural immigrants are defined as individuals residing in a rural municipality at the time of the census who did not reside in one five years earlier, following the methodology of Martínez Villa and Rosá (2025). ***p-value <0.01; **p-value <0.05; *p-value <0.1%.

Source: Authors based on the 2020 census in Mexico and the 2017 census in Chile (Ruggles et al., 2025) and Schiavina et al. (2023)

Table 6.1 shows that 53% of those emigrating from rural municipalities in Mexico are women, while in Chile the share is slightly lower (49%). With respect to age, census microdata allow for a more precise analysis than broader age brackets used in sources such as MIALC. In Mexico, the average age of those emigrating from rural areas is 28.4 years,

suggesting that many departures occur between ages 23 and 28, toward the upper end of the 14–29 range. In Chile, the average age of rural emigrants is higher, falling between 26 and 31 years, pointing to a later migration pattern, possibly associated with family or labor decisions. In both countries, individuals who leave rural areas are significantly

younger than those who remain, contributing to the relative aging of the places of origin (Martinez Villa & Rosá, 2025).



The data suggest that rural-urban migration largely involves young, working-age individuals with relatively higher levels of education, thereby deepening productivity gaps relative to urban areas

Educational attainment further differentiates migrants from non-migrants. In Mexico, individuals who emigrated from rural municipalities are 17 percentage points more likely to have completed secondary education and nearly 6 percentage points more likely to have completed university education than those who remained in rural areas (see Table 6.1). In Chile, the gap in completed secondary education is even larger—close to 25 percentage points—while the difference in university education is similar, at around 6 percentage points.

Although this analysis does not allow for a definitive determination of whether migrants already had higher education levels prior to migrating or acquired them afterward, the evidence suggests that rural-urban migration is largely composed of young, working-age individuals with relatively higher

levels of education. This dynamic has important implications: it reduces the accumulation of human capital in rural areas and thus deepens productivity and development gaps relative to urban areas.

With respect to the profile of immigrants to rural areas, Table 6.1 shows that in Chile the average age at arrival ranges between 30 and 35 years, while in Mexico those arriving in rural municipalities are between 25 and 30 years old. In both cases, these individuals are younger than the average age of the rural population in the receiving municipalities. In terms of gender composition, slightly fewer women than men arrive in rural municipalities in Chile, while the opposite pattern is observed in Mexico. Regarding human capital, in both countries those who move into rural municipalities are significantly more educated than the resident rural population: around 13% have completed university education, compared with 3.6% and 4.5% of the rural resident population in Chile and Mexico, respectively. In addition, in Chile approximately 22% of these immigrants are returnees to their municipality of origin. In summary, rural immigration tends to rejuvenate receiving municipalities and increase their stock of human capital, but it does not entail major changes in gender composition



Rural immigration tends to rejuvenate receiving municipalities and increase their stock of human capital

Migrating toward opportunity?

While identifying the causal effect of migration on the well-being of the rural population lies beyond the scope of this report, from a public policy perspective, it is essential to understand how the living and working conditions of migrants change in order to design evidence-based instruments and incentives.

Descriptive evidence using microdata: Mexico and Chile

The descriptive analysis of census microdata for Mexico, presented in Table A.6.1 in the appendix (available in the online edition of the RED), shows that rural migrants display, on average, better

indicators of access to basic services (especially piped water and, to a lesser extent, electricity) as well as greater access to information and communication technologies, but a lower likelihood of owning their home. These patterns are consistent with the literature documenting that access to housing—and particularly to adequate-quality housing—may deteriorate as a consequence of migration and can even become a barrier to migration (Lagakos et al., 2023).

In labor market terms, Martínez Villa and Rosá (2025) show that in both Mexico and Chile migration from rural areas is associated with stronger labor market attachment and changes in occupational structure. In Mexico, migrants exhibit clearly higher employment rates and lower unemployment than those who remain in rural areas. In Chile, while employment gaps are more limited, migration is associated with lower participation in primary activities (agriculture, fishing, and forestry) and a higher likelihood of working in non-manual occupations (commerce, public administration, business and real estate services), and to a lesser extent in manual activities such as manufacturing, construction, and paid domestic work—the latter being particularly relevant for female migration (Rodríguez Vignoli, 2019).

Regional evidence: Comparing sending and receiving municipalities

To extend the analysis beyond Mexico and Chile and characterize the origin–destination patterns of migration from rural municipalities in LAC, territorial indicators from CAF’s local and regional government database (CAF, 2025a) are combined with census information to identify the ten rural municipalities with the highest population outflows and the ten non-rural municipalities with the highest attraction of internal migrants in the region (Graph 6.11). Overall, rural migrants tend to originate from municipalities with higher unemployment rates, lower human capital accumulation, and poorer access to basic services, and move toward localities that, on average, offer better infrastructure and broader service coverage.

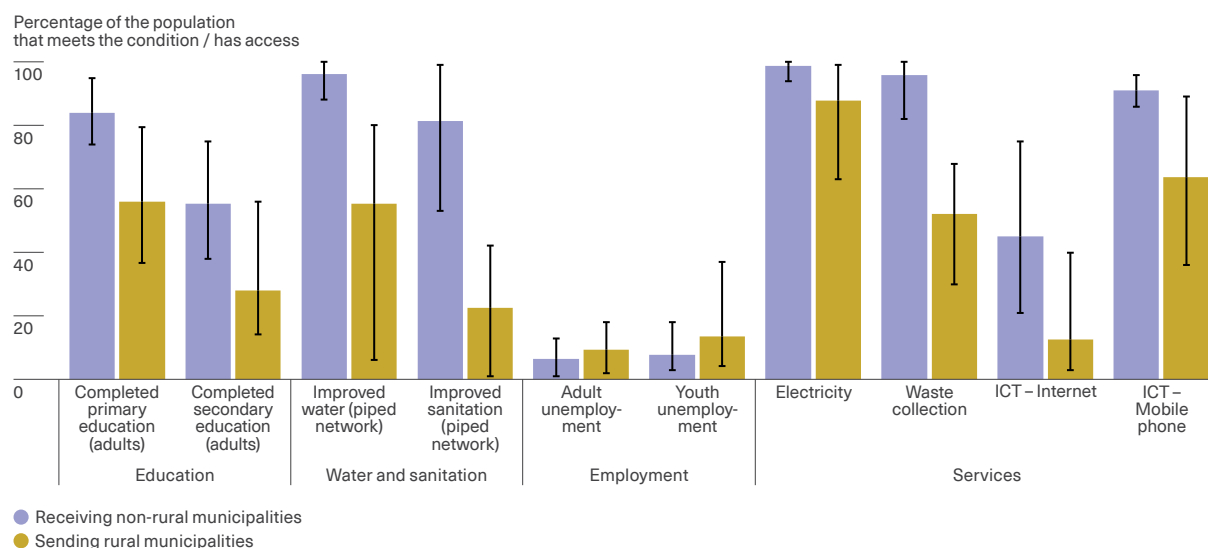


Overall, rural migrants tend to originate from municipalities with higher unemployment, lower human capital accumulation, and poorer access to basic services, and move toward localities that, on average, offer better infrastructure and service coverage

When accounting for cross-country heterogeneity, Martínez Villa and Rosá (2025) show that in Bolivia, Colombia, Honduras, and Panama unemployment rates—particularly youth unemployment—can be higher in the urban municipalities receiving migrants than in the rural municipalities sending them. This suggests that migration to cities does not guarantee a generalized improvement in labor market opportunities. This pattern is consistent with two non-mutually exclusive interpretations: (1) that rural migrants, who are positively selected in terms of age and education, are not necessarily moving toward labor markets that are less attractive from their individual perspective, and (2) that a share of migrants does settle in cities with lower dynamism and poorer aggregate employment conditions. The latter interpretation aligns with the literature on urban congestion or saturation and high informality (Busso et al., 2023; Fields, 1975; Inquilla-Mamani et al., 2023; Lara et al., 2020; Maloney, 2004), which documents how large inflows of population into low-dynamism urban labor markets can raise unemployment and informality and limit the city’s potential as a pathway for upward mobility for some rural migrants. The scarcity of studies with causal identification on rural emigration in LAC, however, constrains the ability to precisely identify which mechanisms dominate this process.

Graph 6.11

Profile of the rural municipalities with the highest outflows and the non-rural municipalities with highest inflows of rural population



Note: The graph shows the mean values of selected development indicators for the ten cities receiving the largest number of rural migrants among those analyzed (Santa Cruz de la Sierra in Bolivia; Brasília, Fortaleza, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador de Bahia, and São Paulo in Brazil; Bogotá in Colombia; Distrito Central in Honduras; Tijuana in Mexico; and Lima in Peru), compared with the ten rural areas with the highest outflows. Error bars show minimum and maximum values within each group. Sending municipalities (Campo Formoso, Cometá, Novo Repartimento, Santana do Acaraú, and Santa Luzia in Brazil; Coqueta in Colombia; Chone and Guaranda in Ecuador; Juticalpa in Honduras; and Hato Mayor in the Dominican Republic) were identified by ranking all rural subnational areas included in the MIALC censuses and matrices by total number of emigrants and assigning development indicators using information from CAF (2025a). See Martínez Villa and Rosá (2025) for a country-level disaggregated analysis.

Source: Authors based on IPUMS (Ruggles et al., 2025), INEC (2024), census data processed from MIALC (CELADE–Population Division of ECLAC, n.d.), Schiavina et al. (2023), and CAF (2025a).

Balance of the evidence and public policy challenges

In sum, migration from rural municipalities in LAC—although it has slowed, due both to reduced emigration and the incipient rise in rural immigration in several countries—continues to contribute to rural population decline and is linked to limited service provision, low productivity, and scarce economic opportunities at origin. Migrants tend to be younger and relatively better educated, suggesting positive selection and the potential for widening of rural–urban gaps. Population outflows reduce density and may discourage investment in infrastructure and services, reinforcing a vicious cycle of lagging development. For those who

are able to migrate, descriptive evidence points to improvements in labor outcomes, access to services, and human capital accumulation, but also to significant housing-related costs and heterogeneous outcomes depending on the country and city of destination.

Beyond this descriptive evidence, what is known using (quasi-)causal identification in LAC remains limited and is concentrated almost exclusively on Brazil, with a focus on receiving cities. These studies document impacts on labor markets, housing, urban services, and crime (Busso et al., 2025; Egger, 2022; Feler & Henderson, 2011; Ferré, 2011; Ferreira et al., 2025; Imbert & Ulyssea, 2022), but provide less evidence on the welfare of rural households at origin. In parallel, descriptive work

for the region indicates that rural migrants often gain access to better jobs, but to more precarious housing and services (Busso et al., 2023; Rodríguez Vignoli, 2017), reinforcing the need for causal studies that allow for a comprehensive evaluation of the costs and benefits of migration.

The international literature complements this picture. Experimental and structural studies—primarily in Asia—show that migration, often seasonal, can operate as an insurance mechanism against income shocks and generate substantial welfare gains for poorer households (Bryan et al., 2014; Lagakos et al., 2023; Meghir et al., 2022; Morten, 2019), although extrapolating these findings to a highly urbanized region such as LAC

is not straightforward. Evidence on long-term effects is even more limited: outside the region, Ward (2022) documents sizable intergenerational income gains associated with internal migration in the United States, but no comparable studies exist for LAC.

In this context, the public policy debate remains open. Migration subsidies may provide relief to vulnerable households but risk deepening territorial inequalities, while strengthening basic services, infrastructure, connectivity, and risk-management mechanisms in rural areas seeks to ensure that migration is an option—rather than the only available strategy—for accessing opportunities.

Human development indicators: Health and education

Alongside profound demographic changes and declining poverty, the region has experienced significant social transformations. Among them, the expansion of human capital—encompassing skills, educational attainment, and health—stands out as a key dimension of well-being. Human capital formation is essential for improving life trajectories (Berniell et al., 2016), and inequalities in this process constitute a central mechanism through which intergenerational gaps are reproduced

in the region (Berniell et al., 2025). A healthier population also reduces pressure on health and care systems, while a more skilled population boosts productivity and adaptability in a context of technological and environmental change (Álvarez et al., 2018; Fernández et al., 2025). Although these improvements have also reached rural areas, gaps relative to urban areas persist and continue to constrain the development opportunities of the rural population.

Educational coverage

LAC has achieved sustained increases in basic education coverage, at both the primary and secondary levels. This progress has helped narrow gaps with urban areas (De la Mata et al., 2022). The improvements are reflected in higher years of schooling among younger generations. On average, according to CEDLAS (2025), while people aged over 55 living in rural areas accumulated five years of education in 2023 (compared with eight in urban areas), those aged 15 to 24 accumulated ten years (11 in urban areas), as shown in Panel A

of Graph 6.12. With the universalization of primary education in the region, primary school enrollment rates in 2023 reached 98% in rural areas, matching those observed in urban areas (Panel B of the same graph). At the secondary level, rural enrollment in 2023 stood at 75%, compared with 85% in urban areas. These gaps tend to be larger in countries with a relatively higher share of rural population (Fernández et al., 2025).

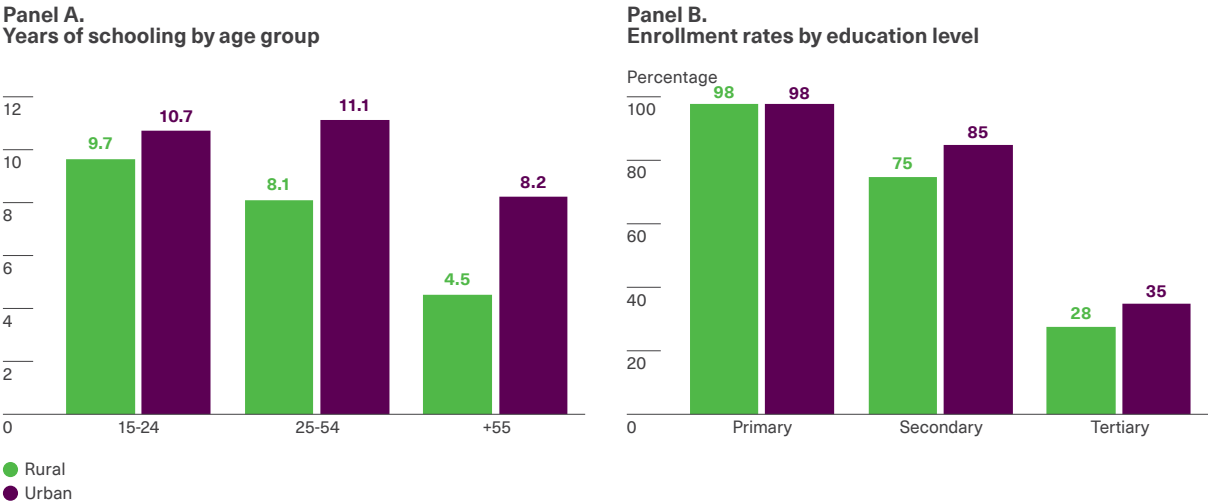


Rural ethno-education project for modular school construction supported by CAF in Timbiquí, Colombia.

Tertiary enrollment rates remain significantly lower in rural areas, reflecting limited opportunities for advanced training and specialization (see Panel B of Graph 6.12). To some extent, these gaps are expected, as the supply of education at this level tends to be concentrated—due to scale and cost considerations

(see Chapter 8)—in urban areas and, within them, in large cities. In addition, technical education and short-cycle programs, which have proven to be a viable option for expanding postsecondary education in geographically underserved areas, remain scarce in the region (Ferreya, 2017; Ferreyra et al., 2022).

Graph 6.12
Educational indicators in rural and urban areas. Average for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2023



Note: Simple average calculated using data from 14 countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay).
Source: Authors based on CEDLAS (2025).

Learning outcomes in primary and secondary education

The substantial improvements in education coverage have not succeeded in closing learning gaps for students attending rural schools. These lags reflect, in part, the structural socioeconomic

disadvantages faced by the rural population, but they are also linked to differences in the quality of education provided, as discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8.



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Despite major gains in education coverage, learning gaps among students in rural schools persist

Graph 6.13 presents the ratio between scores obtained by rural and urban students on standardized tests at the primary level (third and sixth grade) and at the secondary level (15-year-olds) in 2018.¹⁶ A value above one indicates a rural advantage, while a value below one reflects a disadvantage relative to urban areas. At the regional average (indicated by the dashed lines in the graph), the ratios remain below one at all education levels, pointing to a systematic learning gap in rural areas.

This lag is even more concerning given that urban performance levels in the region are already low compared with those of higher-income countries.

Notably, the rural–urban gap widens as students progress through the education system: ratios are lower at the secondary level than at the primary level, suggesting a cumulative process of disadvantage in skill acquisition (Berniell et al., 2016). In addition, at the secondary level, higher dropout rates in rural contexts may bias results upward, since students who remain in the system tend to perform better than the average of their cohort; as a result, actual learning gaps may be even larger than those observed under conditions of higher school retention.

Graph 6.13

Rural–urban ratio of average scores on standardized mathematics tests for third grade, sixth grade, and 15-year-old students in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2018



Note: The rural–urban ratio is calculated as the average score obtained by rural students on standardized mathematics tests divided by the average score of urban students. A value <1 indicates a rural disadvantage in test performance. For indicators derived from ERCE, the definition of rural and urban corresponds to that used by each country in those assessments. For PISA-based indicators, the rural variable is constructed using locality size.

Source: Authors based on CEDLAS (2025), using microdata from ERCE and PISA assessments.

¹⁶ The calculations use data from the Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (ERCE), a standardized assessment coordinated by UNESCO in Latin America and the Caribbean to measure student learning and its determinants, and from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), coordinated by the OECD.

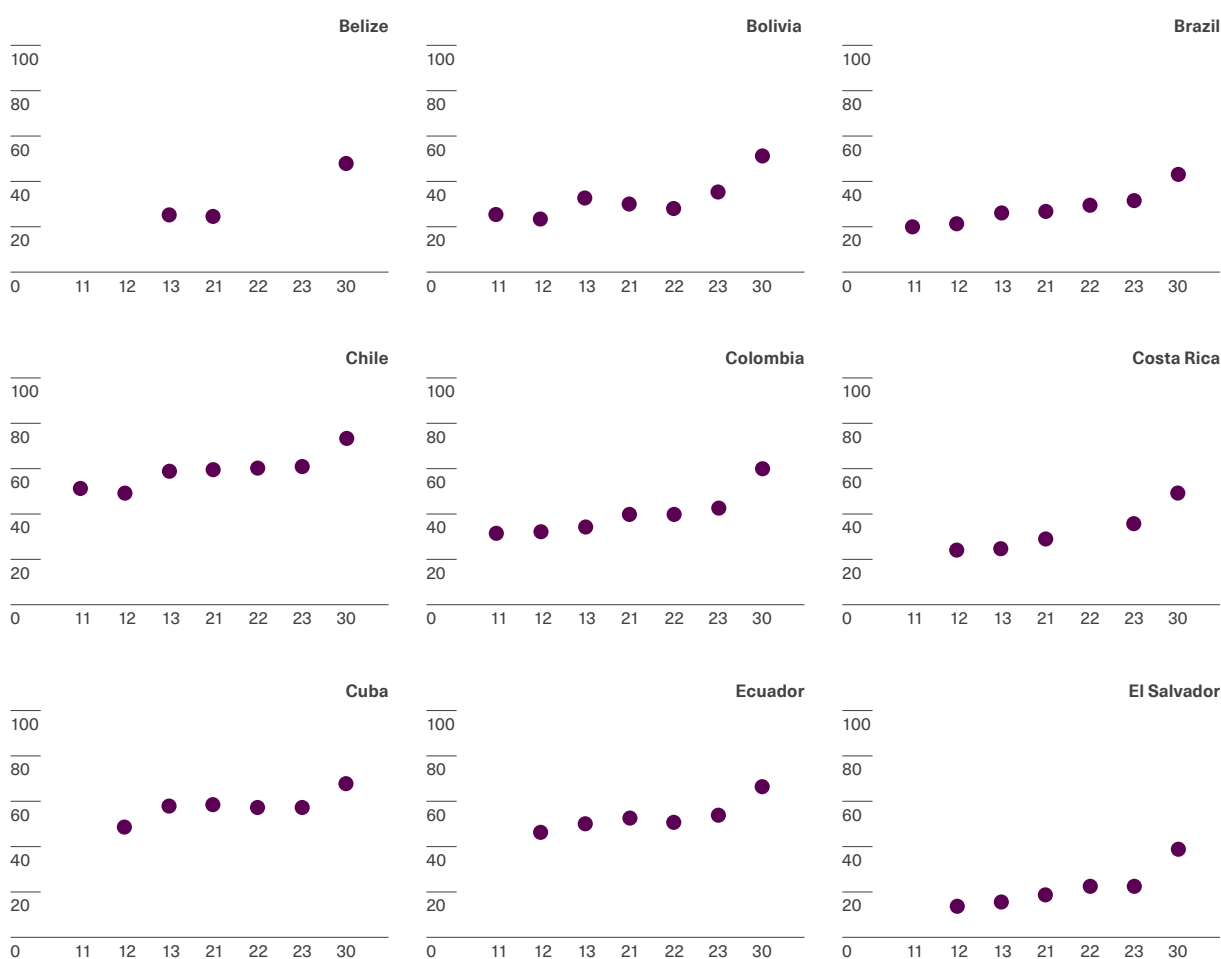
Education along the rural–urban continuum

The degree of rurality of the municipality of residence has a significant influence on educational opportunities. Graph 6.14 shows the percentage of the population with completed secondary education in municipalities classified by their level of urbanization according to the DEGURBA criterion. In most countries in the region, a clear gradient is observed: the higher the degree of urbanization of the municipality, the higher the share of people who

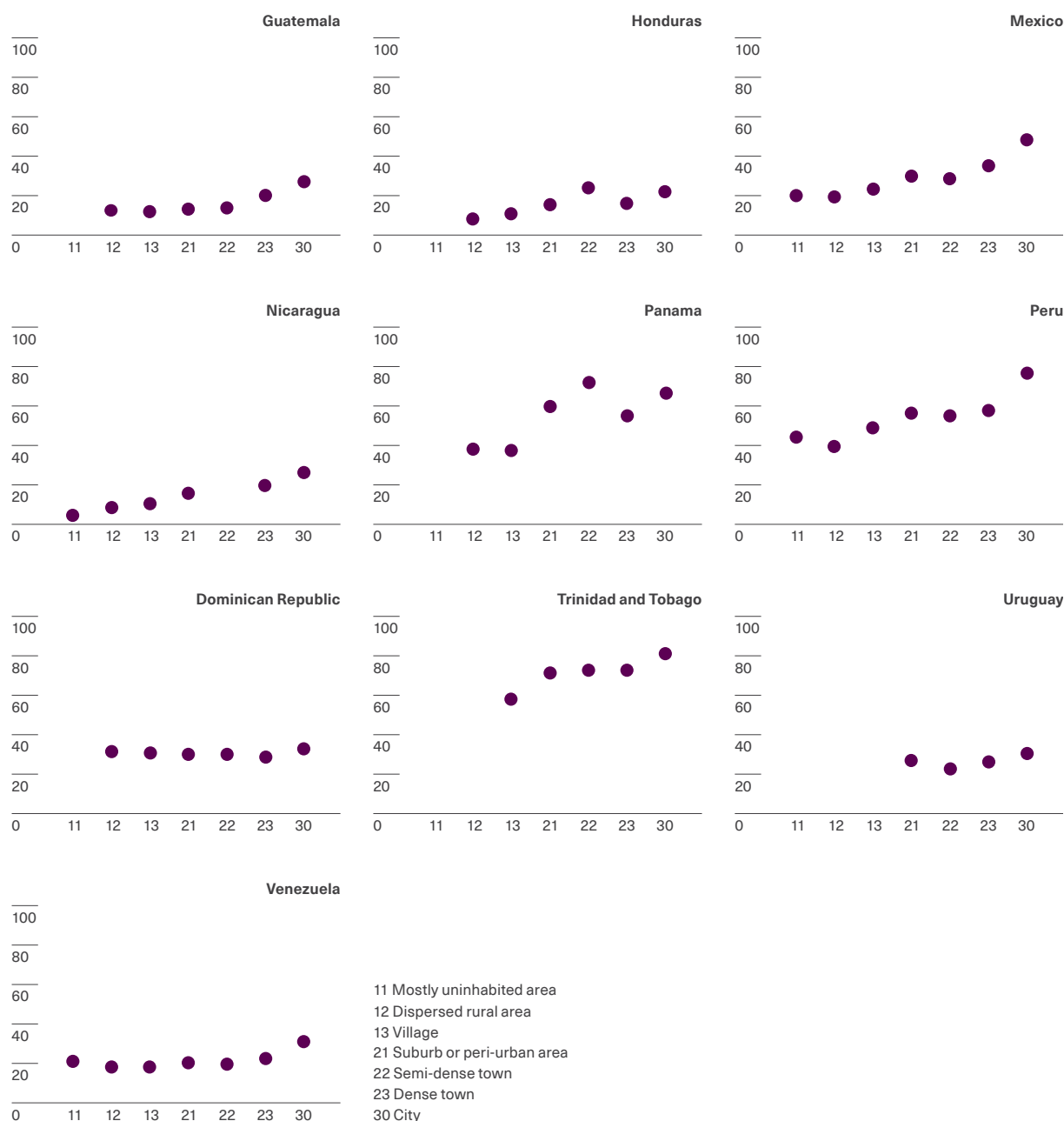
complete secondary education. Rural municipalities (villages, dispersed rural areas, and mostly uninhabited rural areas) consistently display the lowest completion levels for this education level, while semiurban municipalities (suburbs and dense or semi-dense towns) exhibit intermediate levels. This pattern highlights their potential role as spaces for territorial articulation in education policy.

Graph 6.14

Percentage of the population with completed secondary education by degree of municipal urbanization



Continued on the next page →



Note: Subnational administrative units are classified by degree of urbanization using the DEGURBA criterion (level 2). Under this classification, mostly uninhabited areas (11), dispersed rural areas (12), and units identified as villages (13) are considered rural. Units categorized as suburbs or peri-urban areas (21), semi-dense towns (22), or dense towns (23) are classified as semiurban, while units identified as cities correspond to urban areas (30). See Boxes 6.1 and 6.2 for a detailed description of the DEGURBA methodology. Census years by country are as follows: Belize, 2010; Bolivia, 2012; Chile, 2017; Colombia, 2018; Costa Rica, 2011; Ecuador, 2022; Guatemala, 2018; Honduras, 2013; Mexico, 2020; Nicaragua, 2005; Panama, 2023; Peru, 2017; Uruguay, 2011; and Venezuela, 2011.

Source: Authors based on CAF (2025a) and Schiavina et al. (2023).



The degree of rurality of the municipality of residence has a significant influence on educational opportunities

However, in some countries, this gradient is weak or even nearly flat. In other cases, it takes a U-shaped form. For example, Chile, Cuba, and Trinidad and Tobago show high and relatively homogeneous completion levels across all types of territories,

suggesting greater territorial equity. In countries such as the Dominican Republic, Uruguay, and Venezuela, some intermediate categories (suburbs or dense towns) display completion levels similar to—or even lower than—those observed in rural areas, indicating that the rural–urban pattern does not always follow a linear progression. These results underscore that closing education gaps requires improvements in both coverage and quality, with a territorial approach that addresses structural inequalities associated with the degree of rurality.

Health

Health is another key dimension of human development. Graph 6.15 presents the rural–urban ratio for several health indicators for children and adolescents and for adults. Because these are negative indicators of health outcomes and access, values above one indicate a rural disadvantage, while values below one reflect an advantage relative to urban areas.

Among children and adolescents (Panel A), indicators such as stunting, adolescent motherhood, and inadequate prenatal care show higher incidence in rural areas in all countries, with the exception of Barbados, Costa Rica, and Suriname for stunting. These patterns reveal structural shortcomings in access to essential services during critical stages of the life cycle (Bancalari et al., 2025).

Among adults (Panel B), some conditions, such as excess weight or hypertension, are equally prevalent or even less common than in urban areas. However, rural areas exhibit greater difficulties in the treatment and follow-up of chronic conditions, such as untreated hypertension, as well as in access to reproductive health services.



Health and education indicators show improvements in rural human capital, but progress remains insufficient to close the structural gaps that limit well-being and development opportunities

Taken together, health and education indicators show that human capital in rural areas has improved, but progress remains insufficient to close the structural gaps that continue to constrain well-being, productivity, and development opportunities for these populations. While part of these gaps in human development indicators is associated with poorer economic conditions and higher food insecurity among the rural population—that is, demand-side factors, as documented in Chapter 1—significant supply-side barriers also persist. These are analyzed in detail in Chapter 8 and include limitations in both access to and quality of education and health services.

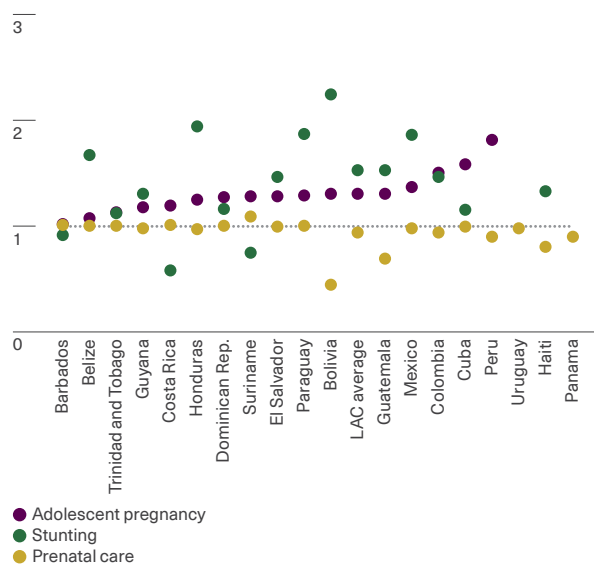


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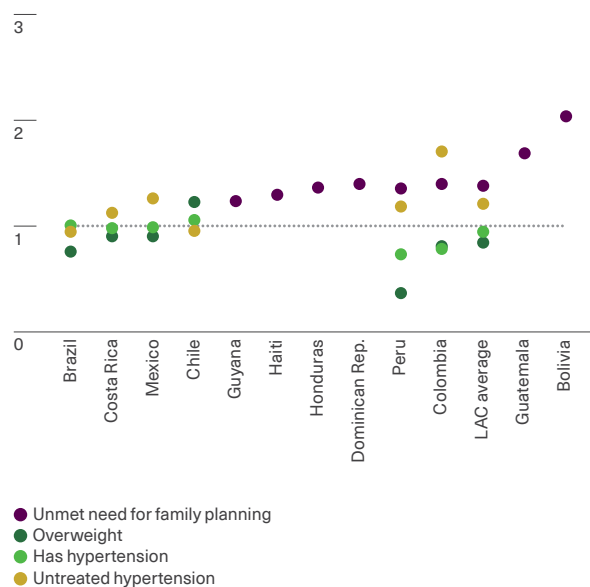
Graph 6.15

Rural–urban ratios for health indicators and access to health services

Panel A.
Children and adolescents



Panel B.
Adults



Note: The rural–urban ratio is calculated by dividing the value of each indicator in rural areas by the corresponding value in urban areas. Because these are indicators of poor health performance, values greater than one indicate a rural disadvantage in health, except in prenatal care, where values less than 1 indicate rural disadvantage. The most recent available data are used for each country. See Bancalari et al. (2025) for a detailed description of the indicators.

Source: Authors based on Bancalari et al. (2025), using Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), and national health surveys.