



Updated October 15, 2021

## Latin America and the Caribbean: Impact of COVID-19

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is having widespread economic, social, and political effects on Latin America and the Caribbean. As of October 14, 2021, the region had 45.4 million confirmed cases (almost 19% of cases worldwide) and more than 1.5 million deaths (almost 31% of deaths worldwide). Brazil, Mexico, Peru, Colombia, and Argentina had the region's highest numbers of deaths. Looking at mortality (death) rates per 100,000 population, Peru had the highest recorded COVID-19 mortality rate in the region, followed by Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, and Paraguay (see **Table 1**).

In its weekly press briefing on the pandemic on October 13, 2021, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) reported that COVID-19 infections were declining in Central America, although cases remained high in Belize. In South America, PAHO reported that new infections were dropping across the continent but noted some spikes within countries, including the greater Caracas area of Venezuela and Chile's southernmost regions. In the Caribbean, PAHO reported that Barbados was experiencing the highest number of cases since the pandemic began, as well as increased cases in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and some smaller islands, including Antigua and Barbuda.

Since the start of the pandemic, PAHO's director has expressed concern about the poor and other vulnerable groups at greatest risk, including those living in the Amazon Basin, particularly Indigenous communities; women, who comprise 70% of the health workforce; people of African descent; migrants in temporary settlements; and prisoners in crowded jails.

The rollout of vaccines has varied considerably, and there is concern that widespread vaccine access in some countries could be delayed until late 2022 or 2023, making populations vulnerable to new waves and more transmittable variants of the virus. According to PAHO's director, as of October 13, 2021, 39% of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean had been fully vaccinated, but in many countries the percentage was much lower. Chile and Uruguay were leaders in the region, with 75% of their populations fully vaccinated. In contrast, countries with low vaccination rates of less than 20% as of October 14 include Guatemala, Haiti, Jamaica, Nicaragua, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

PAHO has helped countries prepare for vaccine rollout and has facilitated access to vaccines through the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) Facility, a mechanism developed by global health organizations to facilitate equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines; 22 countries in the region have signed agreements to access vaccines through the facility. In addition, 10 countries in the

region—Bolivia, Dominica, El Salvador, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines—are eligible to benefit from the COVID-19 Vaccines Advance Market Commitment (COVAX AMC), launched by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, to provide donor-funded vaccines for low- and middle-income economies.

**Table 1. COVID-19 Deaths, Mortality Rates, and Vaccinations in Latin American & Caribbean**  
(countries with more than 1,000 deaths, as of Oct. 14, 2021)

Country	Deaths	Deaths per 100,000	Fully Vaccinated (percentage)
Brazil	601,574	285.04	47.19
Mexico	282,773	221.65	38.87
Peru	199,746	614.41	40.53
Colombia	126,726	251.74	37.38
Argentina	115,582	257.20	53.48
Chile	37,578	198.28	75.20
Ecuador	32,848	189.07	57.62
Bolivia	18,811	163.39	30.10
Paraguay	16,207	230.06	28.37
Guatemala	14,177	85.38	17.36
Honduras	10,064	103.26	25.46
Cuba	7,956	70.20	56.00
Panama	7,275	171.32	54.63
Costa Rica	6,744	133.61	47.17
Uruguay	6,065	175.20	75.14
Venezuela	4,652	16.31	21.71
Dom. Rep.	4,077	37.96	46.62
El Salvador	3,420	52.99	55.51
Jamaica	2,053	69.63	11.09
Trinidad & Tobago	1,572	112.69	39.92
<b>Total LAC</b>	<b>1,504,331</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>—</b>

**Sources:** Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Coronavirus Resource Center, "Vaccination Progress Across the World," at <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/vaccines/international>, and "Mortality Analyses," at <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>, Oct. 14, 2021. For Cuba, the vaccination source is Josh Holder, "Tracking Coronavirus Vaccinations Around the World," *New York Times*, Oct. 14, 2021.

**Note:** Peru revised its official COVID-19 death toll in May 2021 to account for excess deaths attributed to COVID-19 not previously counted, which tripled the country's reported death toll.

Latin American and Caribbean countries have been acquiring COVID-19 vaccines from a variety of sources. As of October 14, PAHO reported that over 61 million doses had been delivered or were in transit through COVAX. Vaccine deliveries through COVAX have been slower than expected due to supply problems and other challenges. Many countries also have signed commercial agreements with pharmaceutical companies. Both China and Russia have sold, and in some cases donated, COVID-19 vaccines to countries in the region, and the United States ramped up donations beginning in June 2021 (see below). In terms of COVID-19 vaccine manufacturing in the region, Cuba has developed and produced two vaccines, two Brazilian companies have manufactured some COVID-19 vaccines, and two other companies from Brazil and Chile announced plans to manufacture vaccines in 2022. In August 2021, PAHO announced it would start a program to boost COVID-19 vaccine manufacturing in the region.

### Economic Impact

In the October 2021 update of its *World Economic Outlook Database*, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reported a 7.0% economic contraction for Latin America and the Caribbean in 2020. Caribbean nations that depend on tourism had deep economic recessions, several with estimated economic declines over 15% in 2020. Several South American nations hard-hit by the pandemic registered economic contractions over 10%. Most countries in the region are expected to begin recovery in 2021, with the IMF projecting 6.3% regional economic growth. Yet, economic recovery may be a protracted process in countries that rely heavily on global trade and investment. Moreover, the course of the pandemic, including governments' responses and vaccine availability and distribution, is an important factor in the region's recovery.

The regional economic contraction in 2020 increased poverty and exacerbated income inequality. Latin America already was the most unequal region in the world in terms of income. A March 2021 U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean report estimated 22 million people in Latin America moved into poverty in 2020, with poverty rising to 33.7% from 30.5% in 2019.

Numerous countries in the region have implemented relief programs to help protect their economies and vulnerable populations, and many have needed external financing to address the pandemic and associated economic downturn. In response, the IMF, Inter-American Development Bank, and World Bank, significantly increased lending to countries in the region.

### Political Impact

Even before the pandemic, public satisfaction with the quality of democracy in several Latin American and Caribbean countries was eroding. Several broad political and economic factors drove the decline and help explain the eruption of social protests in the region in 2019. Political factors include an increase in authoritarian practices, weak democratic institutions, politicized judicial systems, corruption, and high levels of crime and violence.

Economic factors include stagnant or declining growth; high levels of inequality and poverty; and inadequate public services, social safety net programs, and advancement opportunities. The pandemic exacerbated these factors, contributing to increased protests in the region since late 2020. In 2021, pandemic-related protests have erupted in several countries, notably in Colombia, Cuba, and Brazil. Human rights groups and other observers also have expressed concern about leaders taking advantage of the pandemic to advance their own agendas and restrict freedom of expression.

### U.S. Policy Considerations

Congress has provided some \$17 billion in international affairs funding (through two FY2020 supplemental appropriations measures, P.L. 116-123 and P.L. 116-136; the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, P.L. 116-260; and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, P.L. 117-2) to help countries worldwide respond to COVID-19. The funding supports global health interventions, humanitarian assistance, and contributions to multilateral efforts. For example, P.L. 116-260 included \$4 billion as a contribution to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, which supports COVAX AMC and coordinates implementation of the COVAX Facility, both of which benefit Latin American and Caribbean countries. As of June 2021, the U.S. Agency for International Development had obligated nearly \$218 million to support the region's pandemic response. Congress is now considering the Biden Administration's FY2022 budget request, which would provide nearly \$2.1 billion of aid to help the region recover from the pandemic and address other challenges.

Some Members of Congress have called for President Biden to prioritize Latin America and the Caribbean in donating COVID-19 vaccines. The Biden Administration has pledged to donate over 1.1 billion vaccine doses globally. The vaccines are being provided bilaterally and through the COVAX Facility and COVAX AMC.

As of mid-October 2021, the United States had delivered over 44 million vaccine doses to 27 Western Hemisphere countries (including Canada), according to the State Department (at <https://www.state.gov/covid-19-recovery/vaccine-deliveries/#wha>). Top recipients of the U.S. vaccine doses include Mexico (7.5 million); Colombia (6 million); Guatemala (4.5 million); Argentina (3.5 million); Brazil, Honduras, and El Salvador (3 million each); Paraguay, Peru, and Ecuador (2 million each); Bolivia (1 million); and Costa Rica, Haiti, Panama, and Uruguay (0.5 million each). In August 2021, the State Department announced it would donate nearly 5.5 million vaccine doses to Caribbean Community (CARICOM) countries.

Some Members have argued for and against a proposal at the World Trade Organization to waive intellectual property rights for COVID-19 vaccines. In May 2021, the Administration announced its support for negotiating such a waiver due to the pandemic's extraordinary circumstances. The proposal has yet to be adopted, however, due to opposition from the European Union and others.

---

**Mark P. Sullivan**, Specialist in Latin American Affairs

---

**Peter J. Meyer**, Specialist in Latin American and Canadian Affairs

---

## Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.