

Marriage Trends in Latin America: A Fact Sheet

This Fact Sheet examines marriage, divorce, and childbearing trends in Latin American countries with the highest levels of recent immigration to the United States.^{1,2} Countries discussed in this fact sheet include: Mexico in North America; El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua in Central America; and Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru in South America.



There is great diversity among Latin American countries. Different cultural norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs shape each country, and various racial and ethnic groups add to the richness of the region. For example, due to Spanish colonization and the region's involvement in the slave trade centuries ago, ethnic backgrounds vary between countries. A large portion of most countries' populations are Mestizo--mixed European and Native American heritage. In Argentina and Uruguay, the population is mostly white--the majority from Spain and Italy. In Brazil, there are large groups of white, mixed white and black, and Japanese Brazilians. Other ethnic groups in Latin America include American Indian, Creole, and other indigenous groups.³

However, there are also similarities that tie Latin American cultures together. Roman Catholicism is the predominant religion across the region⁴ and may contribute to marriage being highly valued by most Latin Americans. Marriage is generally viewed as a lifelong commitment, and separation and divorce have carried a strong social stigma in many Latin American countries – although divorce is becoming more socially acceptable.⁵ Another commonality is that Spanish is the official language of most of the countries. Other popular languages are Portuguese (the official language of Brazil), English, and indigenous languages.⁶ Latin America's urban population rate is comparable to those of the more developed regions in the world. In Central America, about 72% of residents live in cities; in South America, the rate is about 84%.⁷

Headlines/Trends

Hispanics are the largest minority population⁸ and have the highest birth rate of any ethnic group in the United States.⁹ Because of their strong presence in this country, it is valuable to examine the family formation practices and trends of Hispanics' countries of origin. Mexico is a country of particular interest due to its unique position among Latin American countries, both literally and figuratively. Two-thirds

(66%) of the Hispanics immigrating to the United States are from Mexico.¹⁰ Consequently, Mexico's close proximity to the United States bridges Latin American and U.S. cultures and studying Mexican customs and lifestyles can provide insight into marriage and family dynamics among Hispanics living in the United States

Research in 2006 suggested that heads of households (either men or women) who were separated or divorced in their countries of origin were most likely to migrate to the United States. In Nicaragua, however, women were more likely to migrate if they were legally married. In Mexico and Costa Rica, men have been more likely to migrate than women.¹¹

Since 1950, crude rates of marriage and divorce in Latin America have been consistently lower than rates in the United States and have fluctuated minimally over the decades. At the same time, the rates of consensual unions and nonmarital births are substantially higher than in this country.

Definitions

Crude marriage and divorce rates describe the number of marriages or divorces per 1,000 individuals in the population. The crude rate is mainly used to provide a sense of how common marriage and divorce is over time. Limitations of the crude rate are that it includes children and currently married individuals—populations that are not “at risk” of marriage. In addition, the rates only represent a single point in time. Crude marriage and divorce rates provide rough descriptions of trends in marriage and divorce over time, and allow comparisons between the United States and other countries.

Consensual unions are men and women living together as a married couple without a marriage formally registered with the laws and/or religion of the country. In the available data, it is possible that some persons reporting themselves as married may, in fact, be in a consensual union.

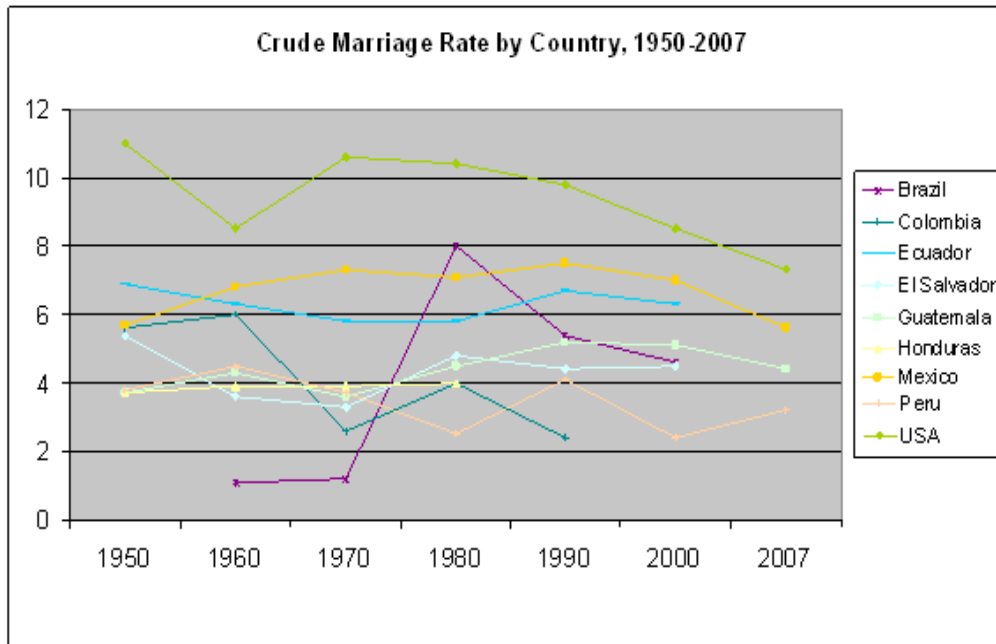
Data

Marriage

Chart 1 shows the crude marriage rate for the selected countries from 1950 to 2007. For comparison, each of the countries has had a lower crude marriage rate than the United States during the time period. This may be related to the popularity of consensual unions as an accepted alternative to marriage.

Mexico is the Latin American nation with the highest crude marriage rate, but it has experienced a steady decline since 1990. While the United States has shown marked decline since 1950, the majority of the Latin American countries with more recent data have had little change over a similar period. Research has indicated that unlike some Western cultures, such as the United States or Western Europe, there has been little relationship between marriage and economic development in Latin American cultures.¹² The sharp increase in Brazil's rate may be due to changes in data collection. Brazil began collecting national vital statistics in 1974;¹³ the crude marriage rate for that year was 7.9, according to the United Nations. In the previous decade, the average rate was 2.4 and never rose above 4.6.

Chart 1: Crude Marriage Rate, 1950-2007¹⁴



Note: In the event that data were not available for a country for a particular year, the nearest year's data were used.

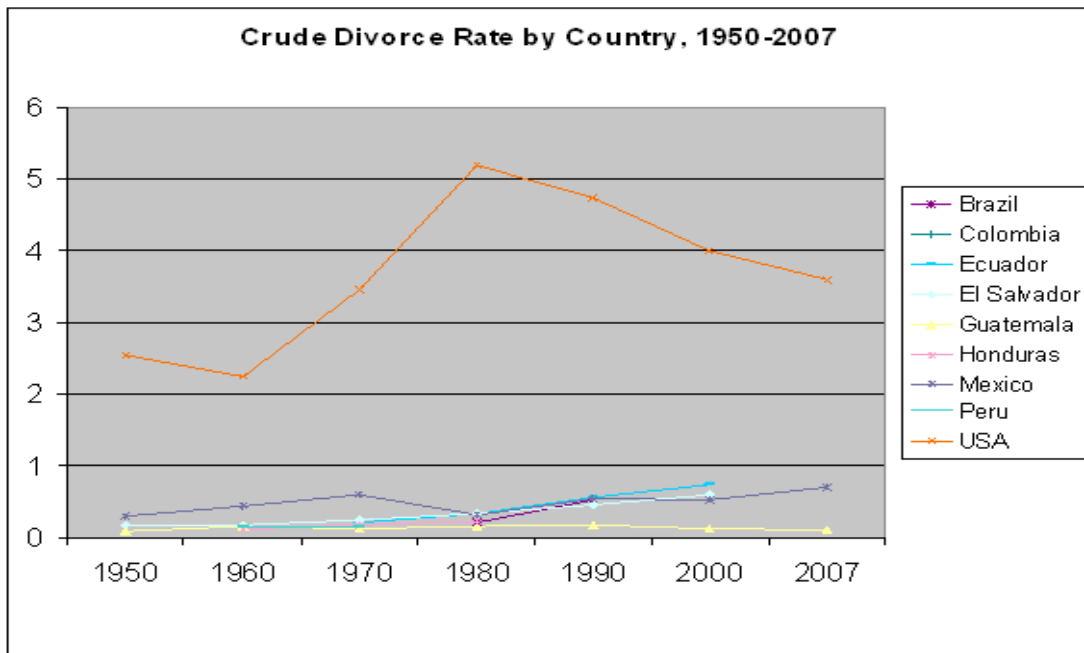
Divorce

Research reveals that family unity is highly valued in Latin American culture, and couples may be taught to avoid divorce and remain together, even in abusive relationships.¹⁵ Because of the strong influence of Catholicism in Latin America, the laws and perceptions of divorce in society have been shaped by the views of the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁶ In some Latin American countries, more progressive changes in divorce laws have occurred during dictatorial regimes, as conflict between church and state increased.¹⁷ Divorce was not legalized until relatively recently in some of these countries. Although Mexico legalized divorce in 1917,¹⁸ Brazil and Argentina did not make divorce legal until 1977 and 1987, respectively.^{19,20} In recent times, due to more Western cultural adaptations and increased financial autonomy, women face less of a stigma when divorcing and have greater freedom to choose this option.²¹

Chart 2 shows crude divorce rates for selected countries since 1950. All of the Latin American countries examined have divorce rates below one per 1,000 persons. In comparison, the United States had a divorce rate above five per 1,000 persons in 1980 that declined to 3.6 in 2007. While Latin American divorce rates remain well below both Western and Eastern countries,^{22,23} there has been a slight, but steady, increase in most of the selected countries since 1980. Mexico is among the countries experiencing an increase in divorce rates, and an even more compelling phenomenon is that the divorce rates across the country steadily increase from the southern states moving north closer to the U.S. border.²⁴ Divorce rates should not be viewed as the only indicator of family dissolution in Latin American

countries. Consensual unions, entered into by many couples in Latin America, do not end in a legal divorce yet have similar impacts on families.

Chart 2: Crude Divorce Rate by Country 1950-2007 ²⁵



Note: In the event that data were not available for a country for a particular year, the nearest year's data were used.

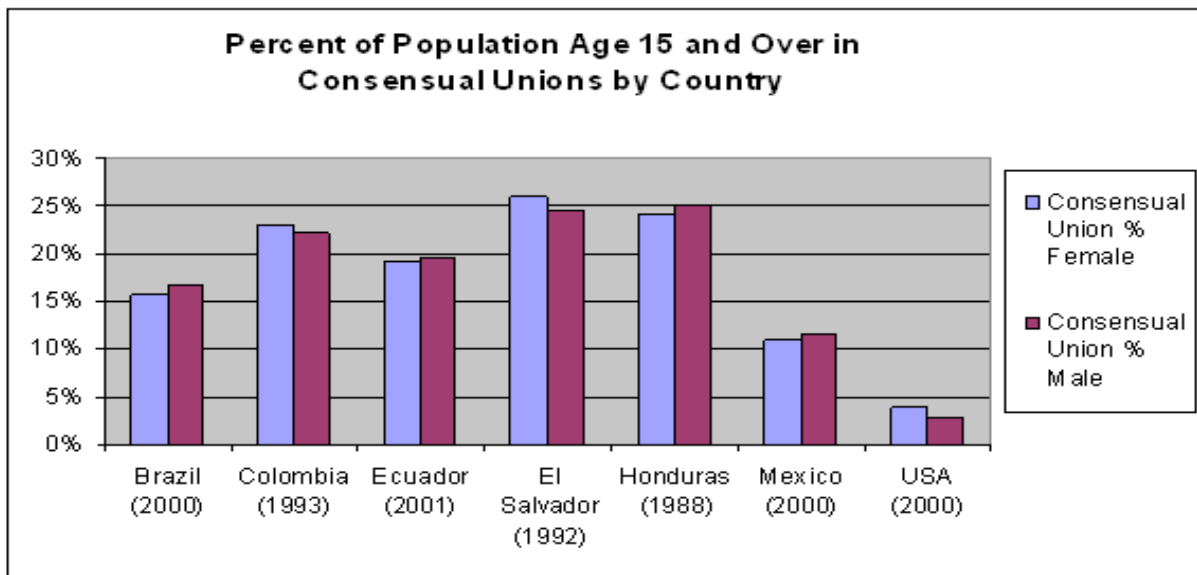
Consensual Unions

Consensual unions have historically been accepted in many Latin American cultures. Studies indicate this acceptance may originate from male colonizers sanctioning relationships with indigenous women through consensual unions.²⁶ In the United States and other Western societies, cohabitation often precedes marriage, but in Latin America, consensual unions can be alternatives to marriage for both young and old. Formal marriages can be too expensive, and rural communities may be alienated from or not geographically close to legal or religious authorities such as judges and priests.²⁷ Moreover, in countries with complicated divorce laws or those that prohibit divorce, couples may separate and form new long-term relationships through consensual unions.²⁸

During the steady migration from rural to urban areas in Latin America from 1950 to 2000, consensual unions began to decline. More recently, however, these arrangements have increased among urban and middle class populations in South America.²⁹ Well-educated urban women in some Latin American countries are adopting a more Western view of consensual unions, treating them as a precursor to marriage instead of an alternative.³⁰

Chart 3 shows the percentage of the population ages 15 and above in consensual unions by gender. The data show that all of the Latin American countries have higher proportions of cohabitation than the United States, as well as most Western European nations. El Salvador and Honduras are among the countries with the highest rates. Colombia's data from 1993 show the third highest proportion of consensual unions, while, as was noted in Chart 1, its crude marriage rate was the lowest of the examined countries in that time period. As with previous charts, Mexico falls between the United States and the rest of Latin America in rates of consensual unions.

Chart 3: Percent of Population Age 15 and Over in Consensual Unions by Country³¹

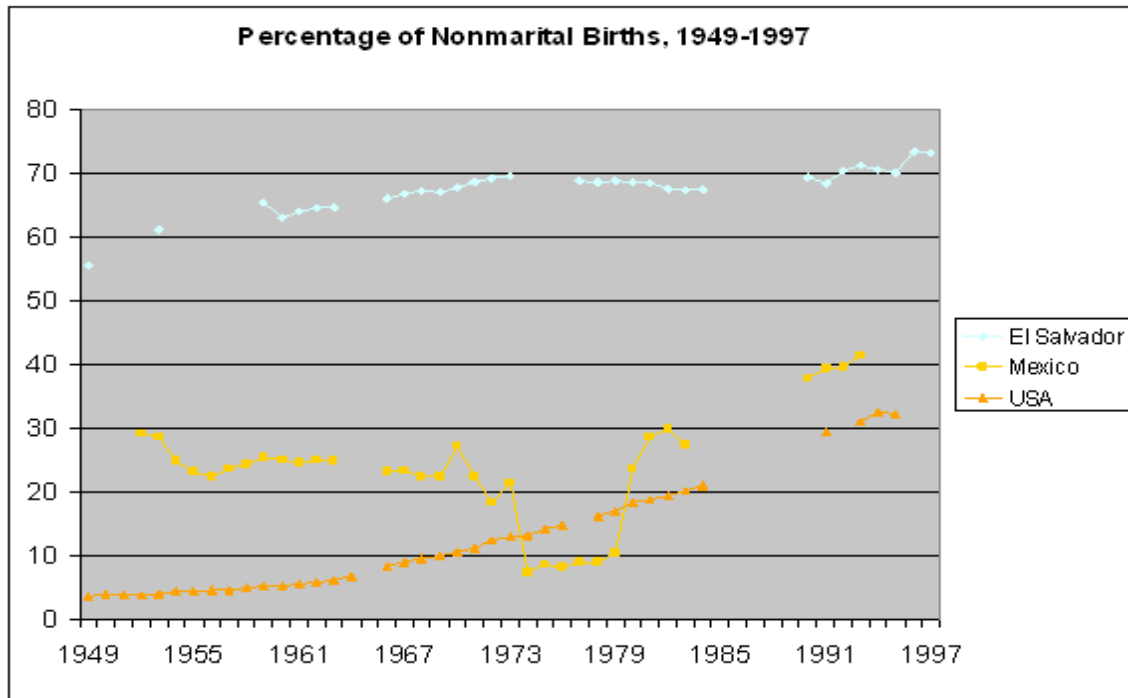


Note: In the event that data were not available for a country for a particular year, the nearest year's data were used.

Nonmarital Births

Recent nonmarital birth data are not available for most of the countries examined in this fact sheet, as not all countries report this. However, we can compare percentages for El Salvador, Mexico, and the United States from 1949 to 1997 in the chart below. El Salvador's nonmarital birth rate has steadily risen over the time period, from about 55% in 1949 to 73% in 1997. Mexico's rate declined from 1949 to the 1970s, but then increased since the 1980s and surpassed the rate of the United States. As noted in the previous section, consensual unions have a long history of acceptance in Latin America and likely play a role in the comparatively high nonmarital birth rates.

Chart 4: Percentage of Nonmarital Births, 1949-1997³²



Note: In the event that data were not available for a country for a particular year, the nearest year's data were used.

Conclusion

While there have been fluctuations in marriage rates, the majority of the Latin American countries examined have returned to similar rates as the 1950s. Through economic, legal, and cultural changes, the crude divorce rates in all of these countries have remained below one per 1,000 persons since 1950. By comparison, the United States divorce rate has been at least three times higher through the majority of the half-century. Due to historical and economical factors, the rates of consensual unions are much higher in Latin America than the United States. Across all of these measures, Mexico is the most similar to the United States of all the Latin American countries examined. While there has been a rise in women's economic and social independence and a "westernization" of views on consensual unions, marriage and divorce trends in Latin America have remained similar to their 1950s levels.

Data Sources

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