

Latin America

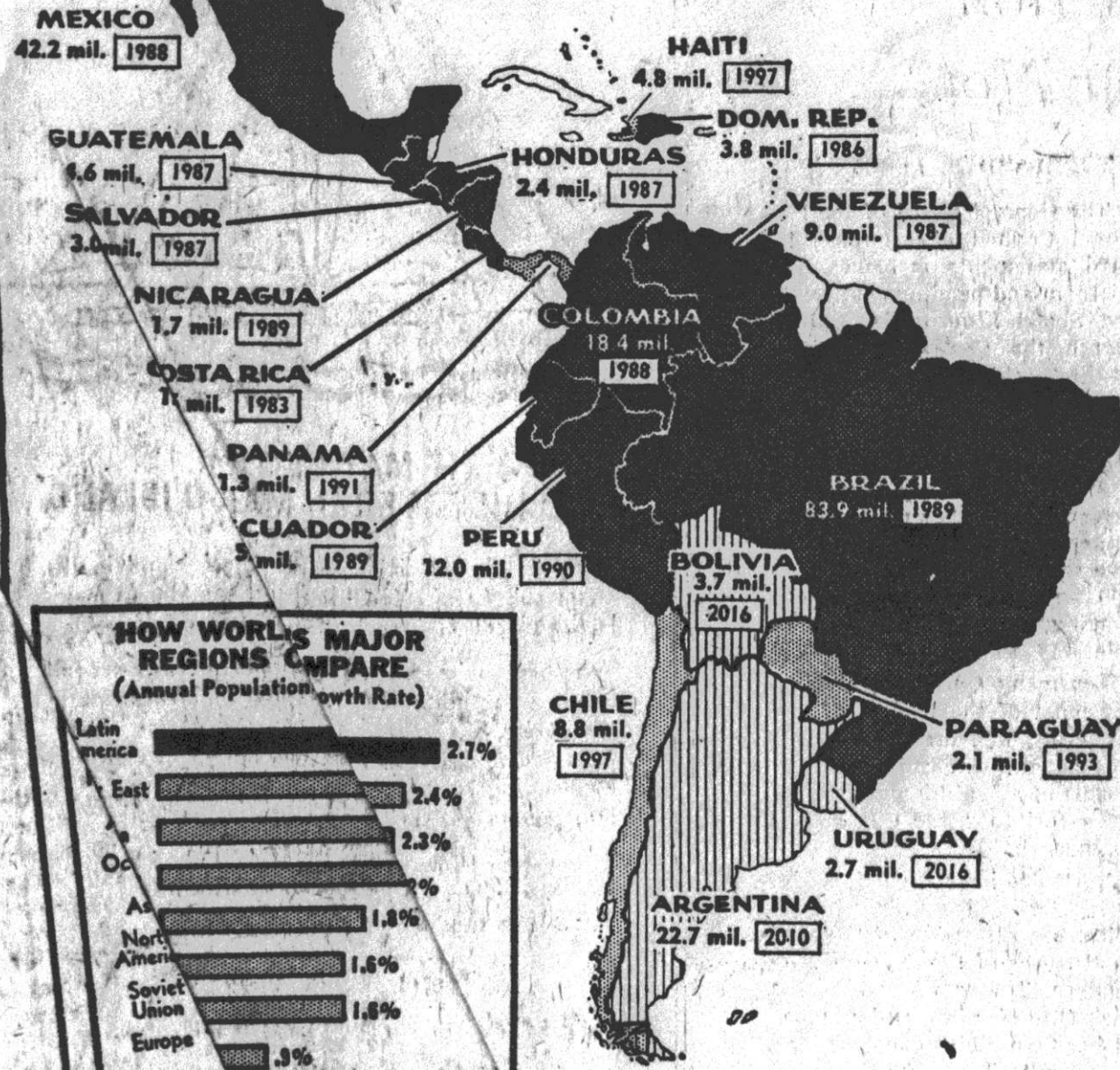
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POPULATION GROWTH RATE IN LATIN AMERICA IS THE HIGHEST IN THE WORLD

Annual Population Growth Rate: 1.9% and under 2.0%—2.9% 3.0% and over

Figures under country names indicate 1966 population
Dates indicate year when population will double



Population

For the Latins the Birth Rate Spells Disaster

By PAUL L. MONTGOMERY

CARACAS — The women of Latin America, from the wretched hillside slums of Lima to the dusty Bolivian lowlands, call it "la sonda"—the probe. Doctors call it "el carnicero"—"the butcher."

It is a pointed metal implement about a foot long, crude and unclean. Sometimes it is a knitting needle. Sometimes it is made from a broken length of car aerial.

La sonda is used by the women, most of them married and with children, to rupture the placenta protecting their unborn, unwanted babies. This causes convulsions and eventual expulsion from the uterus of the destroyed fetus. The jagged instrument is used several million times a year in Latin America, and in many cases produces massive hemorrhages, tenacious infections and painful deaths.

Cause of Death

According to some studies, la sonda is the leading cause of death among Latin American women between the ages of 15 and 45. It is certain that it has been a prime reason for turning the attention of the teeming region toward population control.

Perhaps the most significant

manifestation of the sudden interest in family planning has been the first inter-American conference on population policies, which was held here last week.

The government-level conference, which would have been unheard of even two years ago, brought together representatives of the United States and 16 Latin American governments—all the members of the Organization of American States except Mexico, Uruguay, Paraguay and Haiti—to discuss with demographers and economists the problems of population in relation to economic and social development.

In the background of the conference was the birth rate in Latin America, the fastest growing region in the world (see map). The average annual population growth of 2.7 per cent—encompassing rates ranging from 1.4 per cent in Uruguay to 4.3 per cent in Costa Rica—will swell the area's population from the present 250 million to 365 million in 1980, and 650 million by the end of the century.

Large parts of Latin America are not equipped to care for their present populations, and these are precisely the areas where the birth rate is highest.

Some economists say the nations have a simple choice: Control population growth now, or have the population growth controlled automatically in the future by starvation and economic ruin.

The conference discussed many aspects of population—statistics, training of demographers, the effect of growth on educational and health facilities, the adequacy of food production, unemployment, migration from rural to urban areas. Its principal recommendation was that future population rates and movements be taken into account in development planning—something that is not presently done.

The Next Step

Birth control was barely mentioned. But in the opinion of most of the experts, it was implicit in all the discussions. In this view, the sponsors of the conference, especially the O.A.S., want to consolidate public discussion before they go onto the next logical step of promoting national family limitation plans.

In fact, family planning programs have already been established by Chile, Columbia, Peru, Honduras and Costa Rica. These programs include clinics that

give advice and dispense contraceptives.

It seems clear from the studies presented at the conference that Roman Catholic opposition to chemical and mechanical methods of contraception has had its main effect on the political level. Public officials are still wary of repercussions from advocacy of family limitation, but the people appear to have chosen it already.

Use of contraceptives is increasing among Latin Roman Catholic women. It is estimated that 1.5 million Latin Americans of the middle and upper classes now use the pill. The majority of Catholics surveyed in a number of studies replied that they would use contraceptives if they were available.

The Latin American hierarchy, which used to thunder pronouncements at every mention of birth control, has been largely quiescent lately. It is assumed that the bishops, like some governments, are waiting for the new statement from Rome on family limitation. The statement, which could include liberalization of current doctrine, is expected around the end of the year.