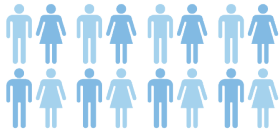


LATVIA

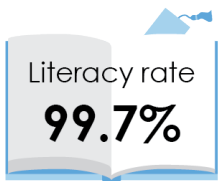
Situated in northeastern Europe with a coastline along the Baltic Sea, Latvia shares borders with Estonia, Russia, Belarus, and Lithuania. It also has a maritime border with Sweden to the west. It has linguistic links with Lithuania and historical and religious ties with Estonia. The country has a temperate seasonal climate and its landscape is marked by wide beaches as well as dense, sprawling forests. For centuries, Latvia was primarily an agricultural country with seafaring, fishing, and forestry as other important factors in its economy. Like its Baltic neighbors, in the decade after independence, Latvia made a rapid transformation to embrace the free market. Latvia was welcomed as a European Union member in May 2004. Latvia's capital is Riga, home to notable wooden and art nouveau architecture, a vast central market, and a medieval old town. Although Latvian is the national language, more than a quarter of the population is Russian-speaking, and their rights have been a thorny issue since independence. The currency is the euro.



Population
1,866,647



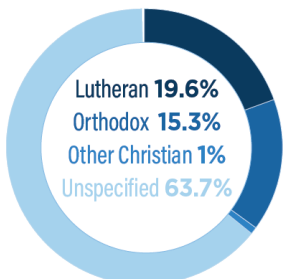
24,938 MI²
Slightly larger than
West Virginia



Ethnicities



Religions



FAMILY LIFE

Latvian households traditionally include two parents with 1-2 children. There are an increasing number of single parent households, and in some cases grandparents live in the home as well. Both parents often work and share financial responsibility for the family. Families generally eat meals together. Teenagers interact informally with all of their family members. Siblings usually ask before borrowing personal items, but it is common to share especially when they are the same gender.

Teenagers have chores at home which include washing dishes, cleaning their room/bathroom, doing laundry, picking up after themselves, and generally contributing to the cleanliness of the house. Chores are usually assigned according to traditional gender roles. It is common for teenagers of both genders to cook, but it is more typical that the parents prepare a meal in advance or prepare food that students can heat up later.

Parents monitor the time their children spend online. It is common for family members to spend time pursuing their own individual interests, and parents encourage students to start planning and using their free time independently by joining clubs or activities, or spending time with friends. Parents may give their children a modest allowance depending on their financial situation. Teenagers usually do not work while they are in school. Parents expect their children to make decisions independently, with some supervision, and future career and personal plans are often discussed together. Decisions that require financial contributions are always discussed with parents.

It is common to have pets both in city and rural areas, and many adopt pets from shelters. If the family owns a second house outside of the city, pets may live outside and sometimes be let inside. Latvians also love to buy toys, special food, and sometimes even clothes for their pets.

FRIENDSHIP

In Latvia, teenagers often go to the movies, cafes, coffee shops, parks, or malls with their friends. It is common for them to have friends of the opposite sex and to socialize one-on-one. Friends may borrow small amounts of money from each another, but it is always expected to be paid back.

People tend to reserve the term "friend" for very close relationships. People usually have several close friends, and one or two "best friends." It is common for teenagers to make eye contact when speaking with adults.

SCHOOL LIFE

Students have the same classmates through all 12 school years beginning in first grade. Students are evaluated on a variety of tasks including daily homework, class participation, reports, and periodic (usually written) exams. Students do not have the option to study subjects at different levels of difficulty in their schools. If a student cannot keep up with their classmates, they usually take supplemental private lessons outside of school. There typically are no strict policies for fighting, bullying, or sexual harassment in schools, and sexual harassment is a topic that is not commonly discussed. A common consequence for fighting or bullying is calling the parents in to talk to the principal. It is rare for students to bring a lunch to school since most schools do not allow students to eat outside of the cafeteria or to have food in the classrooms.

Respect for teachers in Latvia is shown by listening and being engaged in class. Students often have friendly and informal relationships with their teachers, but there are some teachers who require more formal communication and interaction. Boys and girls are separated in physical education classes, but all other subjects mixed.

Students usually participate in extracurricular activities outside of school since they are generally not offered in the school setting.

FOOD

Food allergies are becoming more common, and people are aware of and may adhere to many types of dietary restrictions. There are many small specialty shops or markets where those with special dietary needs usually buy their food. Vegetarianism is also becoming more popular.

RELIGION

Most families are not very religious, and holidays like Christmas and Easter are mostly celebrated at home with close family or visiting grandparents and relatives. Churches do not serve as community centers, and are solely places of worship.

PERSONAL CARE

Teenagers are expected to take a quick shower daily but may shower twice a day if they are involved in physical activities. It is considered normal to wear some clothes several days in a row, and it is not common to wash clothes after each use, with the exception of underwear. Teenagers usually do not do their own laundry.



The Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. FLEX provides competitively selected secondary school students from 22 countries in Europe and Eurasia with the opportunity to spend the academic year in the U.S. living with a volunteer host family and attending a host high school. Begun in 1993, FLEX now has over 29,000 alumni.