

Chapter 1

Map Overlays: a geographic “big idea” that can help us understand the world.

Overlaying maps is a useful geographical skill.
It can help us see if things are related to each other.

In this introductory chapter, we will focus on
a map that shows where people live in the world.

We will overlay maps that show

- 1) locations of high mountains,
- 2) areas that are especially cold or dry, and
- 3) where large cities were located in ancient times.



The bright areas on this image are where many people are using electric lights.

Can you explain why these bright areas are where they are?

Source: National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

Geography – “Geo” = earth, “Grafia” = study of

Geography is the study of the earth, and how people live in different places on the earth. The subject is important because of one simple fact –

Things that are OK to do in one place might not be OK in another place.

- In kindergarten, kids learn where it is OK to yell and run around.
“It’s OK on the playground. It’s not OK in church, at a concert, or in a museum.”
- High-school students learn that they should drive on the right side of the road (unless they are in England, where they should drive on the left side. That’s an example of a geographic fact.)
- Adults decide where to build roads and malls. They decide where to put smelly smokestacks. They decide where people should play baseball, buy cars, shoot animals, or launch missiles from a drone.

Think about it – somebody makes all these choices, and they have reasons for their choices.

So let’s start by asking a simple question – why do you live where you do?

I know, for many students, the answer is “because that’s where my family lives.” That’s true, but it doesn’t really answer the question. Why did your family decide to live where they do? Why do some people choose to live in crowded cities, while others live in suburbs, and still others in rural areas? (See photos.)



Rural area

Low population density
(few people per square mile)
This is called *sparse* population.



Suburb

Medium population density

Urban area (city)

High population density
(many people per square mile)
This is called *dense* population.



So . . . why do *you* live where you do? And why do other people choose to live in different places? You could ask questions like these at many different *scales*.

Definition. A **geographic scale** is the size of area you are looking at.
Scales can range from a single house to a town, state, country, or the whole world.

Here's a big point: the *geographic pattern* of population at a state, national, or global scale is really just the result of a large number of decisions that people made at the scale of a family.

Definition. A **geographic pattern** is a description of how things are arranged.
Are they scattered evenly, or are they bunched together? Are they lined up?
Does their arrangement on a map look like waves, or rings, or some other shape?

Question: Why are we are interested in geographic patterns?

Answer: Because geographic patterns can give us clues about causes and effects.

Here is a simple example of cause-and-effect logic. Police stations often have a map on the wall. Officers put pins or notecards on the map to show where things happen. They mark the locations of car crashes, burglaries, traffic stops, and so forth. They may even put the maps on computers linked by radios to the patrol cars. Then they study the geographic patterns on the maps.

For example, what if nearly all of the stolen cars are close to an old factory? Maybe someone is using the old building to hide and repaint stolen cars. Or maybe the car thief lives close to that building.

In any case, the map helps the police decide where to pay extra attention.

How do you start learning how to analyze geographic patterns?

Here is an honest answer: You can start in many different ways. That's one reason why this book comes with a number of activities. You (or your teacher) can choose which activities you think might be best as a starting point.

In a book like this, we have to start somewhere. So let's look at why people choose to live where they do. This is a good topic for two reasons. First, it's important. Second, a world map of population is a good way to illustrate the basic skill of map overlaying. When we have mastered the skill, we can use it for many other topics, at many other scales.

So, there's the plan: we will find a map of where people live, and we will overlay maps that show other kinds of information. We will look for things that have similar patterns on maps.

Remember the main point:

We study geographic patterns because they might give us clues about cause-and-effect.

Here's the general question for this chapter: why do you think people live where they do?

Here's a specific version of this general question:

Why do nearly all of the people of the world live on less than 5 percent of the earth?

(Does that fact mean that the earth could hold 20 times as many people?)

Let's start by making some generalizations about the earth as a whole.

Some generalizations about the earth

The earth is a big place.

It has nearly 200 million square miles.

It has more than 7 billion people.

You can do the math.

That's about 30 people for every square mile.



How to “do the math” in geography

When we say “do the math” in this book, it does not mean “calculate some numbers as accurately as you can.”

Frankly, that is usually a waste of time, because *numbers that are important in geography are rarely precise.*

For example, one website reported that the world had 7,240,915,447 people when I wrote this sentence. (Check it yourself at <http://www.census.gov/popclock/>).

That might have been true at one instant in time, but population is always changing.

A baby is born about every 8 seconds. A person dies every 13 seconds or so. Population changes. Even simple numbers about births and deaths can change.

Here is some advice about how to learn geographic numbers:

**Ignore the little details,
and
make simple comparisons to help you remember the rough numbers.**

Do not try to memorize a world population of 7,240,915,447. It is both easier and better to remember “just over 7 billion people” and “about 30 people for every square mile.”

“About 30 people for every square mile” is a geographic generalization.

If you try to apply a generalization to a specific place, you learn another important fact:

Generalizations are likely to be wrong, if you apply them to specific places.

For one thing, the earth does not have 200 million square miles of good land. In fact, about 140 million square miles under ocean water. It's hard for people to live in water!

So, the earth has about 7 billion people, and most of them live on about 60 million square miles of land. Do the math - that is more than 110 people for every square mile of land . . . BUT

That is still a generalization, because every square mile of land is not able to support 110 people.

Why not? Because places are different.

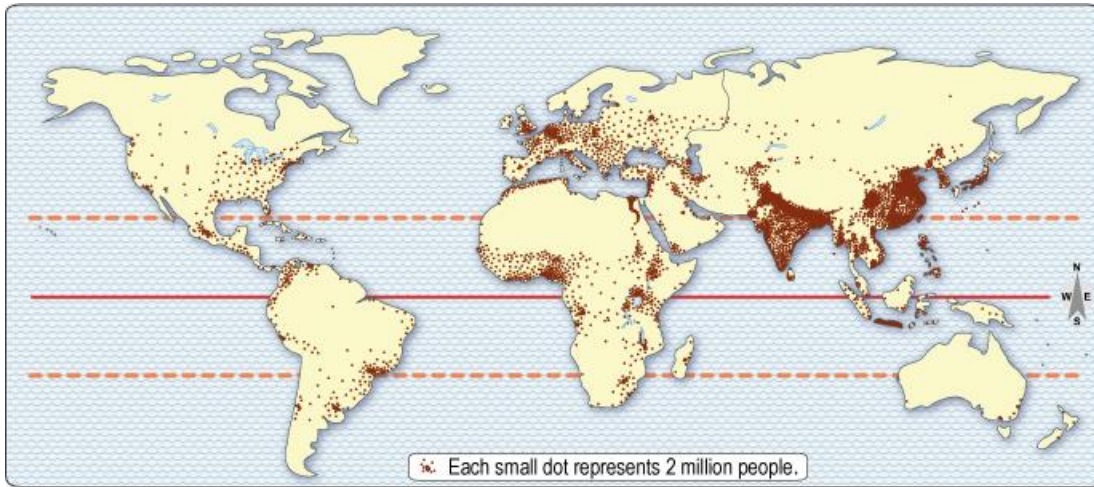
The earth is a big place. It is impossible for any human being to remember facts about every square mile. Our brains just cannot keep track of that much information.

Our goal in this book is to find better “ways of knowing.” We are looking for ways that are easier and more effective than memorizing facts.

One great way is to find *thematic maps* that deal with the topics you are investigating.

Definition. A **thematic map** uses symbols to show the geographic pattern of a specific topic or *theme*, like rainfall, crop yield, political party, or language (or even “weirder” topics like Bigfoot sightings or the houses of movie stars).

In this chapter, we will investigate the geographic pattern on this thematic map. It uses dots to show where people live.



Two pages back, we made a generalization: “There are more than 110 people for each square mile of land in the world.” Do you think each square mile of land on this map has 110 people?

No – it is obvious that many people are crowded together in a few small areas.

Other fairly large areas have few people living in them.

Still other areas have scattered dots, with empty space between them.

This does not mean that two million people are living in the exact place where each dot is printed.

It does not mean that no one is living in the empty spaces between the dots.

It does mean that two million people are living in the general area around each dot. These people may be scattered around. Or, they may be bunched together in towns that are separated by less crowded areas. The map doesn’t tell us.

In other words, *a dot map is also a generalization.*

To read a map correctly, you have to understand how it was made. This is another purpose of this book – to illustrate the skills needed to read maps well. These skills can also warn you when someone makes a map that could mislead you.

(That’s all we are going to say about that now. We can’t do everything in the first chapter. Map skills will be a part of every chapter.)

Reasons for geographic patterns on maps

Our goal in this chapter is to learn how map overlays can help us answer two key questions:

Where do most people live? Why do they choose to live there?

We can start by making guesses. Do you think statement 1, 2, or 3 is most likely to be true?

1. Most people live near mines where they can dig for gold and other valuable minerals.
2. Most people live in areas that have enough rain and sunshine to grow food crops.
3. Most people live in places where they make things like shoes, cars, phones, or skateboards.

These statements are *hypotheses* – cause-and-effect statements that we think might be true.

Definition. A **hypothesis** is a carefully worded statement about cause-and-effect.
We test hypotheses in order to see if they are true.

How can we test these hypotheses?

- We could interview a million people and ask them why they live where they do.
- We could look at census records to see if people live near mines, cropland, or factories.
- We could ask factory owners a simple either-or question.
 - Did they build their factories near places that already had a lot of people?
 - Or did they build them in empty places and then ask people to move there to work?

These investigations are all possible, but they all would take a lot of time. An easier way is to compare maps. To do that, we try to find maps that show the locations of things like good farmland. Then we compare these maps with our map of population.

Map comparison is easier if we can find (or make) maps that are the same size and *projection*.

Definition. A **map projection** is a strategy for showing a large round earth on a small flat screen or piece of paper. All map projections involve some stretching and/or cutting. As a result, they can be misleading.
We will say more about different kinds of projections later.

If two maps are the same size and projection, we can *overlay* them, putting information from one map right on top of the other. With a computer, we can turn different kinds of information on or off separately. That can help us see how things seem to line up. With the right kind of software, we can even make things partly transparent. Then we can “look through” things on one map to see how they line up with things on another map.

These are the skills we will use in this book. This kind of map comparison is an easy way to investigate the conditions that might influence where people choose to live.

Note: We will provide a different “clickable” computer map for each chapter in this book. These maps are designed to you study different topics in different chapters.

For example, the clickable map for the chapter about Latitude in Africa has about 30 different layers of information. You can turn these maps on or off in any combination. This will let you compare the geographic patterns of things like rain, wildfires, lions, ancient capitals, slave traders, and diseases like malaria. Comparing maps can make it easier to identify possible cause-and-effect relationships.

(This, in turn, might help in your science and history classes!)

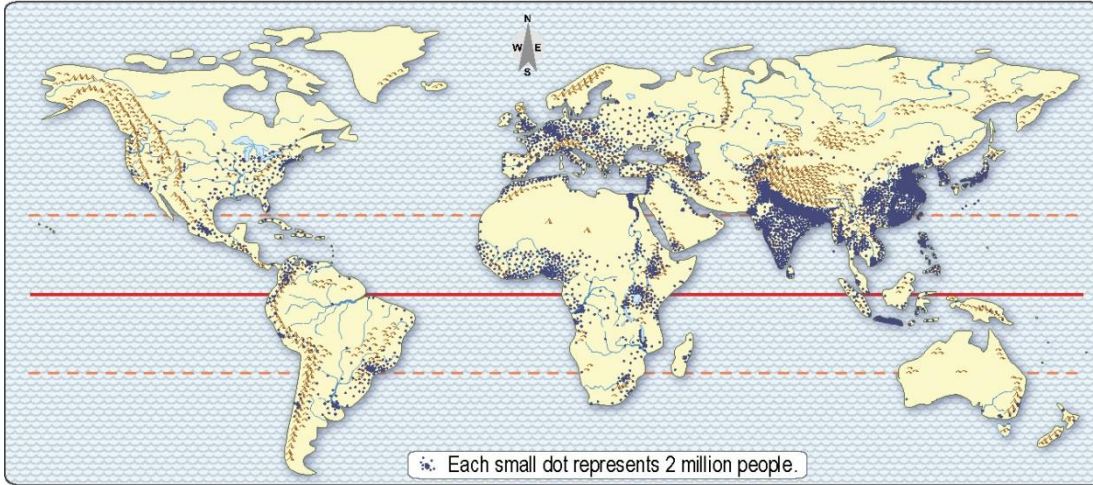
So . . . let’s get started on a map-based investigation of why people live where they do.

We will do this by looking at several different hypotheses, one at a time.

Hypothesis #1. It is hard for people to live in rugged mountainous areas.

To test this hypothesis, we can overlay the map of population on a map of mountains. When we do that, we see that the mountainous areas of the world generally have very few people living in them.

(To read this kind of map, look for upside-down Vs that represent mountainous areas.)



Mountains make life difficult in many ways. People can fall off steep cliffs. Landslides can damage houses. It's hard to drive tractors and other farm machines on steep land. Even goats do not like to graze on really steep slopes. Just getting around is not easy, because it is hard to build roads or railroads on steep land.

A road in the Andes Mountains of South America.

Obviously, it would be hard to build factories or houses next to this road. You probably couldn't even build a gas station here! As a result, there are very few dots in this area on the world map above.

(Photo provided by Connie Weil)



Mountains also influence climate. High places are colder than surrounding lowlands. They get a lot of rain and snow. Really high mountains stay cold and the snow never melts.

On the other hand, mountains can protect people from attack. Steep slopes make it hard for tanks or soldiers to move. It is no accident that some of the most successful terrorist groups are based in mountainous areas. They know that it is hard to attack them there.

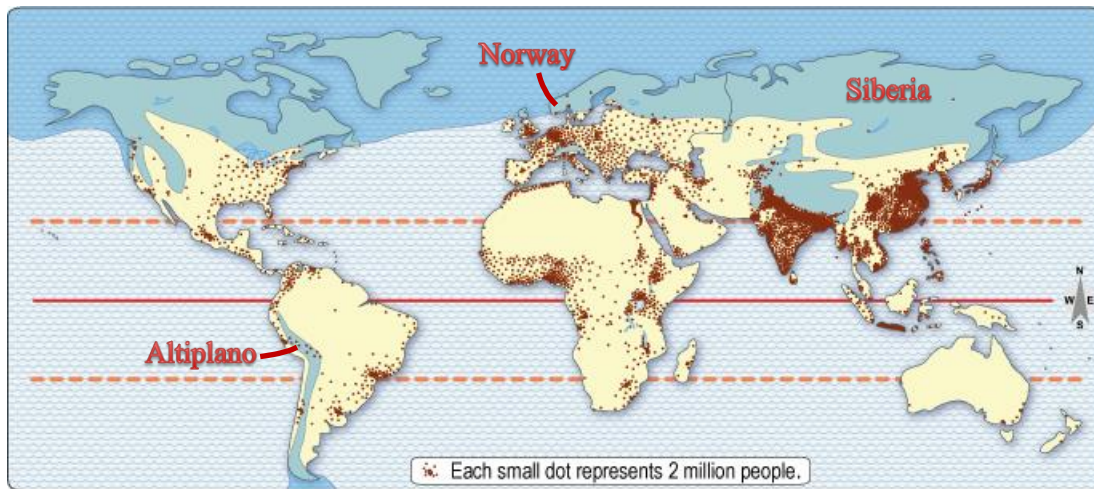
In the chapters on Europe, Russia, and South America, we will explore other effects of the processes that build mountains. Here, we just note that few people live in mountainous areas.

Hypothesis #2. Most people do not want to live in really cold places.

To test this hypothesis, we can overlay a map of cold places on our map of population. There is a problem, however. There are several different ways to define “cold place.”

- We could make a map that shows the lowest temperature measured at different places.
- We could show the average temperature of the coldest month, or the entire year.
- We could look at the climate from a corn plant’s point of view.
(Corn needs about 90 frost-free days to get started, grow, and make corn.)

It turns out that the last definition of “cold” is the best for our study. On the map below, we have overlaid a blue color over the general areas where summer is not long enough or hot enough to grow grain crops like corn or wheat.



You can clearly see that few people choose to live in places where it is too cold to grow grain.

We could investigate each dot in the blue areas, to see if there is a reasonable explanation. For example, many people in Norway make a living by fishing. They don’t try to grow corn! In recent years, they also discovered oil in the shallow water near Norway. Some people now work as oil-well drillers. Others transport oil. Still others build equipment for use in oil wells.

Other parts of the world have different stories. For example, some people live near large metal mines in Siberia. In South America, many people live on a flat area high in the mountains. (This area is called the Altiplano, which means “high flat area” in the local language.) This high area is cooler and more comfortable than the hot rainforest near sea level.

We will look at Russian miners and South American mountain people in other chapters. Here, we will focus on the global scale. The map overlay on this page helps us see why few people live on millions of square miles of land in Canada, Russia, and other northern countries. But the “empty areas” on the map are not all shaded blue. In other words, a map of growing season can help us explain part of the pattern of population, but not the whole pattern.

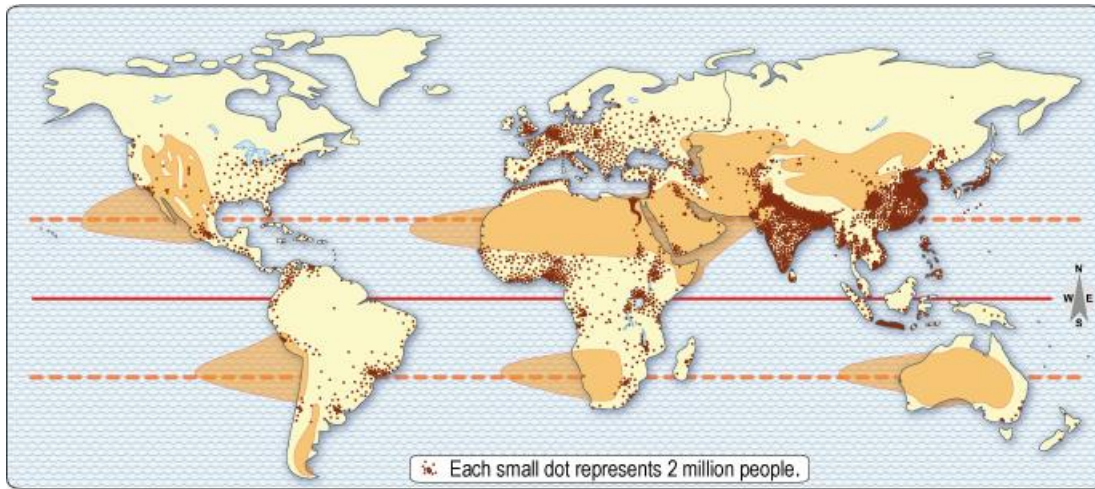
Very few geographic patterns are so simple that we can explain them with only one cause.

You should remember that fact whenever someone tries to tell you that there is a single cause for something like business success, crime, poverty, or terrorism.

Geographic analysis can help us understand all of these topics. But the geographic patterns of things like good beaches, successful businesses, or terrorist attacks are usually the result of *many* influences.

Hypothesis #3. Few people live in places where there is not enough rain to grow food.

To test this hypothesis, we can find a map of dry areas and overlay it on the map of population. The tan color on this map shows deserts – areas that get very little rain or snow.



In general, people do seem to avoid dry areas. There are not many dots inside the large deserts in Australia, north Africa, or south Africa.

(South America does not have any really large dry areas. The chapter on South America will explain how the mountains change the pattern of rain on the continent.)

If you look closely at the map above, you can see that a few dry places have a lot of dots.

Look at Southern California, for example. Millions of people are living in places that are too dry to grow crops without irrigation. The reason is hidden in the phrase “without irrigation.” People in California pay a lot of money to bring water from distant mountains or rivers.

This “artificial river” is part of the California Aqueduct system. The system uses dams to block rivers high in the mountains. These dams make reservoirs (man-made lakes) to store water from melting snow. Then artificial rivers (like this one) and huge pipes bring the water to the fields and cities of California.



You might also have seen a video or read a book about Egypt. It’s where ancient people built pyramids. On this map, Egypt is a curving line of dots near the Nile River in northeast Africa.

Other chapters in this book have more about water. The topic is important because control of water is a major cause of conflict. TV announcers often blame wars on religion or crazy leaders. Many wars, however, actually start as arguments over resources like water or oil.

Rule: If you don’t understand the causes, you are less likely to win a war!

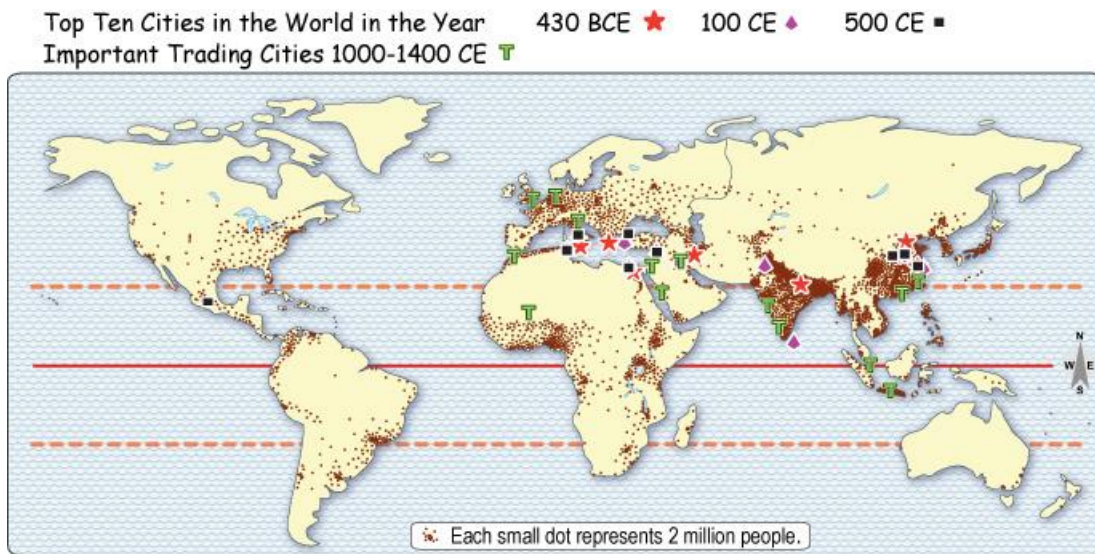
Wars and terrorist attacks are like population in one important way. To understand where they occur in the world, you usually have to look at several causes, not just one.

Hypothesis #4. If an area had a large population in the past, it probably still does.

Populations tend to grow unless something really bad happens.

Wars, diseases, and famines can kill a lot of people. So can natural disasters like earthquakes, floods, droughts, or volcanos. These events, however, rarely reduce the population of an area for long. As a result, places that had large populations in the past, for whatever reason, are still likely to have a lot of people today.

We can test this hypothesis by looking at maps of ancient cities. A clickable world map would let you show each group of cities separately. Here, we will combine several map layers to save space and printing cost. These layers show the top ten cities for three time periods. The map also shows some important trading centers in the Middle Ages.



Question: What does this map show us?

Answer: Note the locations of big cities long ago. Most of these areas still have a lot of people.

The conditions that led to population growth in ancient times – good soil, flat land, good trade connections, and so forth – have not changed. In Egypt, 80 million people now live in the Nile Valley. This is where the ancient pharaohs built their pyramids, thousands of years ago.

In modern China and India, hundreds of millions of people are living on the same fertile plains that supported many ancient cities.

The modern world, however, also has large numbers of people living in a few places that did not have big cities in ancient times. For example, you can see groups of dots on each coast of North America. One group is near New York. Another group is around Los Angeles. There are areas of large population near cities like Lagos and Johannesburg in Africa. There are clusters of dots around cities like Bogota, Sao Paulo, and Buenos Aires in South America.

Don't worry if you cannot easily find all of these places right now. We will look at them again in the chapters on each continent. There, you will learn reasons why people live in each of these areas. We do not want to clutter the main point of this chapter by going into details now.

On this page, we just want to emphasize how a map of ancient cities is like the maps of mountains, short growing season, and dry areas. Each of these maps can help us understand some of the modern map of population, but not all of it.

Hypothesis #5. People can move to places where they think they will do better.

Here is another fact that can affect the map of population: *people can move*.

Suppose someone makes a new discovery or invention. When that happens, people often move to take advantage of it.

Here is a simple example.

Some people found gold in California in 1849. Many people decided to move there to look for gold. (That's what they called "the Gold Rush!")

Here is a more complicated but much more important example.

People invented tractors and other farm machinery. With these machines, a few people could do jobs that required hundreds of workers using old tools. Many people lost jobs as farm workers. These people often moved to cities in order to look for new jobs.

This process is called *rural-to-urban migration*. It can help us see why many cities grew. For example, it can help us understand the history of American cities like Detroit, Chicago, or Los Angeles. Today, it is still going on in China, India, Africa, and South America.

Definition. Rural-to-urban migration is the movement of people from farms and small towns to large cities and their suburbs.

Another important change came when people invented air conditioners. This invention made it much more comfortable to live in hot places. People moved to cities like Atlanta, Houston, Phoenix, and Los Angeles. Air conditioning also aided the growth of cities in other hot places around the world.

Can you think of other inventions that may have persuaded people to move to new places?

Here again, we will not go into a lot of detail in this first chapter. We will simply note that the process of migration is important. It can help us understand the map of human population.

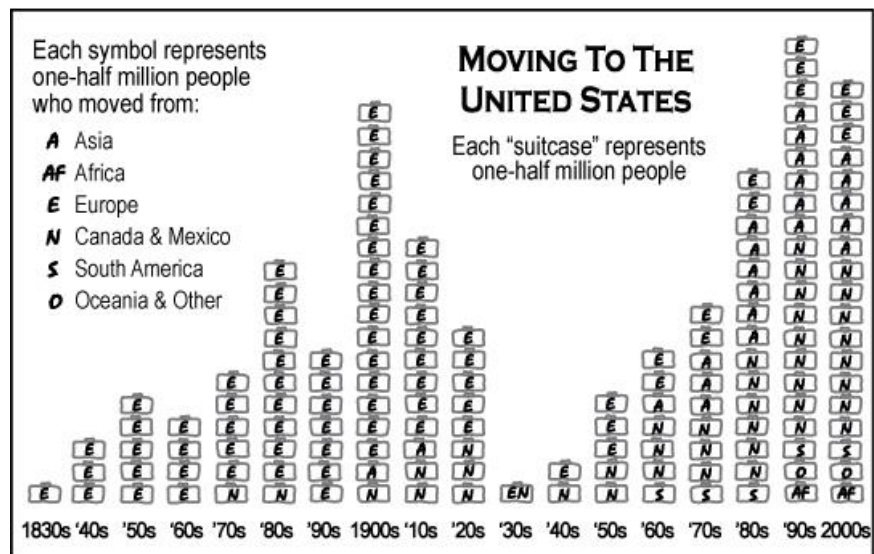
Your history book can give you more details about people migrating to the United States.

You might not have to read about it, however. Your own parents or grandparents might be able to tell you about the time when your family migrated. If you are sitting in a school in the United States, your family probably moved from some other part of the world!

A "symbol graph" that shows you how many people decided to move to the United States from each continent during each decade from 1830 to 2010.

You can make this graph easier to read by coloring the boxes for each continent a different color.

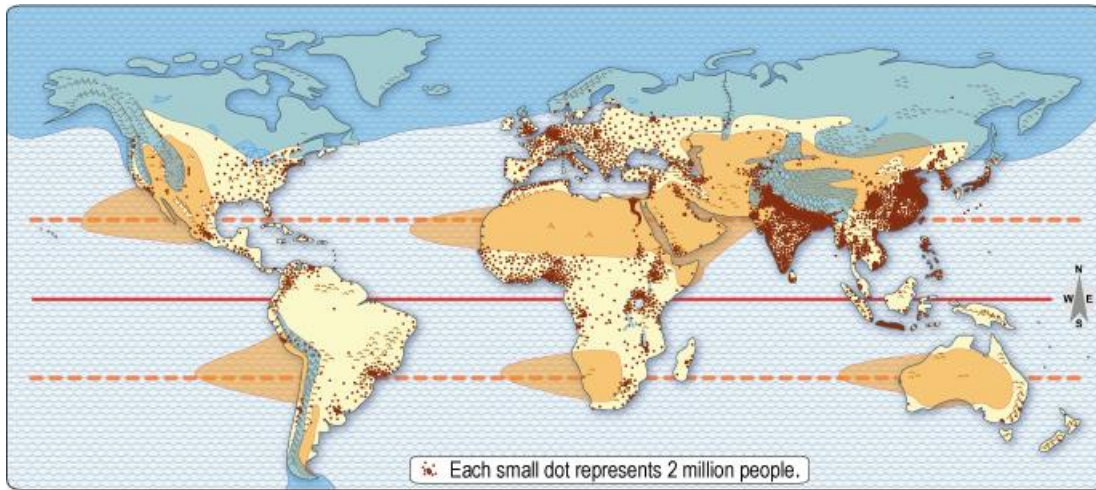
Adapted from
Teaching Geography
(Guilford Press)



Hypothesis #6. Overlaying several maps can help us understand a map pattern better.

To test this hypothesis, we can overlay several of the maps that we have used so far. When we do that, we see that few people live in areas that are cold, dry, or steep. In other words,
several conditions can explain the pattern of population better than any one condition.

On the other hand, you can still see areas that have very few dots but are not cold, dry, or steep. There must be more reasons why people decide not to live in certain places. In other words, we need to think of even more hypotheses to test.



We will not keep doing this investigation right now. It would take a long time, because the world pattern of population is a complicated topic. This is not surprising, for two reasons:

- 1) The world has a lot of people. (It has about 7 billion, remember?)
- 2) People have many different reasons for living where they do.

With just a few maps, however, we have narrowed the search by identifying areas that seem to be too cold, too dry, or too steep. The areas add up to nearly half of the earth's land area.

These statements, of course, are also generalizations. For one thing, someone could invent something that could change how people live. For example, what if someone discovered a new kind of corn that can grow in places with only two warm months? What about building cities under heated domes? What if they find a way to make fresh water out of ocean water? If someone did any of these things, large numbers of people could live in areas that are nearly empty today. In other words, the world pattern of population depends on the tools and skills that people have. This leads to another important rule:

If technology changes, maps of things like population and wealth might also change.

Jobs in Geography. This is one of the most important uses of geography. People study geography in order to predict where people might get richer when conditions change. Trained geographers often work as advisors for business leaders or government officials. These are high-pay jobs!

In this book, we are trying to build a solid foundation for this kind of investigation.

In a way, investigating any interesting geographic question is like overlaying maps of rainfall, growing season, steep land, and population. We cannot always come to a conclusion after looking at just a few maps. But we can get a really good start! We can rule out some obviously wrong answers.

Summary – how can the big idea of map overlaying help us understand world patterns?

Ultimate cause: People make choices. They choose where to live and what jobs to do. They choose what kind of house to build, where to buy things, where to travel, and so forth. The success of those choices, however, often depends on where they are.

A good choice in one place might turn out to be a really bad choice in another place.

Big idea: Overlaying thematic maps can help us see what conditions may be important influences on the choices people make.

For example,

overlaying maps can help us test hypotheses about why people live where they do:

Hypothesis #1: It is hard for people to live in rugged mountainous areas.

Hypothesis #2: Most people do not want to live in really cold places.

Hypothesis #3: Few people want to live in places that do not get enough rain to grow food.

Hypothesis #4: If an area had a large population in the past, it may still have many people.

Hypothesis #5: People can move to places where they think they will do better.

Hypothesis #6: Putting several maps together can help us understand a map pattern better.

General summary: This chapter used a skill called map overlaying to test these hypotheses. Map overlaying is a big idea in geography. The goal in this book is to find a small handful of big ideas that can help us understand a large number of things in the world around us. You can find a list of these big ideas in this book at the end of this chapter.

These ideas will make it easier to interpret news stories about issues in many places around the world. You now have a good idea of where people have chosen live in the world, and where it seems to be cold, dry, or steep.

Understanding the big ideas of geography can also help you make personal decisions. For example, the big ideas of geography can help you to decide about where to live, work, or go on vacation. They can help you decide how to make money in specific places. They can even help you decide what kinds of clothes to pack when you travel.

Technical footnote about the importance of map scale and map projection

World maps are easier to compare if they have the same scale and projection.

Definition. A **map projection** is a way of stretching and/or cutting an image of the earth so that a large round earth can be shown on a flat piece of paper or a computer screen.

Different map projections have different kinds of distortion. That's another way of saying that no flat map can show the curved earth surface without bending or stretching something. A good map reader understands this, and therefore does not memorize the wrong facts when looking at a map. This is another goal of this book – to illustrate the skills needed to get an accurate message from a map. Our goal is to get an accurate message, *even if the map is badly designed, or, worse, deliberately designed to mislead you.*

Review: make a mental snapshot of the maps in this chapter. Then look at the map of bright lights on the first page. How much of the pattern of lights now seems to make sense to you?

Twelve Big Ideas in Geography

In this book, we will look at twelve big ideas in geography. Each of these concepts can help us understand a surprisingly large number of different facts about places all around the world. Here are the twelve ideas:

Map pattern comparison can help us test hypotheses about map patterns.

Region – Dividing an area into subareas that have similar conditions can help us understand places better.

Distance – It costs money and time to move things, people, or ideas.

Elevation – The air gets colder as you go up from sea level.

Latitude – Solar energy, temperature, rainfall, and many other environmental conditions depend on distance from the equator.

Area – Large areas are likely to have more resources, but they can also pose problems for transportation, communication, and government.

Resources – Natural resources can support jobs and make people wealthy, but they can also help make places less democratic.

Population density – The number of people per square mile in an area can have many influences on life there.

Culture – Different groups of people can have different ideas about how to live, even in areas that have similar conditions.

Complexity – Complex arrangements of coastlines, mountains, rivers, and other resources can offer people many different ways to make a living.

Legacies – Choices people made in the past can limit the options we have today.

Systems – The continents and oceans are linked together by complex movements of energy, water, and chemical elements like calcium, carbon, and nitrogen.

Each of these big ideas can help us explain even more of the details in the world map of population. They will also help us understand many other important facts about the world. This understanding, in turn, can help us figure out the geographic conditions that may be influencing the news today. These “headline events” include:

- economic facts, like the rise of China and India as industrial and military powers,
- social facts, like the movement of people to cities, especially near the Equator,
- technological facts, like the impact of inventions like cell phones or electric cars,
- and even military facts, like the locations of terrorist attacks around the world.

Geography is not just about headlines, however. Understanding the big ideas of geography can also help you make personal decisions about where to live, work, or go on vacation. It can even help you decide what kinds of clothes to pack when you travel, or how to make money in specific places!

Keep this basic idea in mind while reading this book:

The goal of this book is to illustrate a small handful of big ideas that can help us understand a large number of things in the world around us.