

The “indigenous” category in the 2010 Brazilian National Census

In the context of the Americas, Brazil has a specific profile vis-à-vis the presence of indigenous peoples: approximately 230 indigenous ethnic groups live in the country, which thus displays one of the continent's broadest social diversities, even while the proportion of indigenous people in the country's total population is one of the lowest (less than 1%). In Brazil, as in other countries, an important challenge is to produce nationally representative statistics that allow characterizing the socio-demographic situation of indigenous peoples, which in general experience marked vulnerability, including the worst health indicators.

In recent decades, strides have been made in correcting the lack of data on indigenous people in Brazil's national statistics. This has been the case in the decennial censuses conducted by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE). Thus, the 1991 Census included the category “indigenous” as an option in response to the question on “color/race” in the sample questionnaire, and the category was repeated in 2000. Until 2000 the “color/race” item was only investigated in the sample questionnaire, but beginning in the 2010 Census the question was also included in the basic questionnaire, meaning that the entire population was counted directly. Furthermore, if the interviewees answered “indigenous” to the “color/race” question, they were asked additional questions on their specific ethnic identity and language.

The IBGE recently published the first results of the 2010 Census, including the size of the self-classified “indigenous” population. Compared to 2000, there was an increase in the number of “indigenous” persons (from 734,000 to 818,000), but the increase was much less than between 1991 and 2000 (440,000). From 2000 to 2010 there was a strong shift in territorial distribution: in 2000 there were more “indigenous” individuals in the country's urban areas (383,000) as compared to rural (351,000), while in 2010 these figures were 315,000 and 503,000, respectively. There was a decrease in the number of individuals in urban areas that classified themselves as “indigenous” (from 383,000 to 315,000) and a major increase in rural areas (from 351,000 to 503,000). In urban areas, the largest decreases occurred in the Southeast and South, with negative annual growth of more than 5% in the States of Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, and Rio Grande do Sul.

While the growth in rural areas is consistent with what is known about indigenous demographics in Brazil, the decrease in the number of self-classified “indigenous” persons in urban areas is striking. The 2000 and 2010 Censuses differed in the way the data on “indigenous” persons were captured, such that the observed changes may not have resulted exclusively from strictly demographic characteristics (fertility, mortality, and migration). The inclusion of questions on specific ethnic identity and language may have influenced whether individuals classified themselves as “indigenous”. In the 1991 and 2000 Censuses, the question on “indigenous” identity was not linked to belonging to a specific ethnic group, but this changed in the 2010 Census.

The preliminary 2010 Census findings on “indigenous” peoples already indicate a need for in-depth analyses in order to understand the processes involved. An on-going dialogue will be needed between demographers and anthropologists. Still, there appears to be consensus on one point: even with numerous challenges, Brazil has taken a successful approach by including “indigenous” people in the national statistics and thereby reducing their socio-demographic “invisibility”, with important implications for public policies, including in the health field.

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