

Indigenous peoples in the Brazilian national census

In recent decades there has been a so-called indigenous “demographic revolution” in Brazil. This revolution involves changes in demographic trends which until recently had signaled the possibility of Brazilian indigenous people’s complete disappearance. In the last 25 years, it has become evident that the indigenous peoples are not only growing, but at a rate higher than the national average (see the anthology *Demografia dos Povos Indígenas no Brasil*. Editora Fiocruz/Associação Brasileira de Estudos Populacionais; 2005).

It has always been a difficult task to investigate indigenous demography in Brazil. The information systems are still deficient, and there are important methodological difficulties. For example, the numerical systems are different in many indigenous societies, and there is no record of certain variables (such as age) in the form required in demographic analyses.

In recent years, thanks to such initiatives as the formation of the Committee on the Demography of Indigenous Peoples in the Associação Brasileira de Estudos Populacionais (Brazilian Association for Population Studies – ABEP) and the Working Group on Indigenous Health in the Associação Brasileira de Pós-Graduação em Saúde Coletiva (Brazilian Association of Graduate Studies in Collective Health – ABRASCO), there has been a renewed vigor in the field of indigenous demography in the country. In addition, in 1991 the “indigenous” category was included in the ten-yearly censuses conducted by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (National Census Bureau – IBGE).

Based on an effort by a group of anthropologists, demographers, epidemiologists, and statisticians, the IBGE is launching a publication that places indigenous demography on a new threshold (*Tendências Demográficas: Uma Análise dos Indígenas com Base nos Resultados da Amostra dos Censos Demográficos 1991 e 2000*. IBGE; 2005) The publication takes an innovative look at the census data on Brazilian indigenous peoples in relation to their spatial distribution, age structure, fertility, mortality, migration, and other aspects. It analyzes an instigating recent demographic issue for the country, namely the significant increase in the number of individuals who self-identify as indigenous, from 294 thousand in the 1991 census to 734 thousand in 2000 (a mean geometric annual growth rate of 10.8%).

Beginning with the 2000 National Census, we have learned that the schooling levels of the indigenous peoples remain very low and that there are important differences in the total fertility rate for urban indigenous women (2.7 children) as compared to their rural counterparts (5.7 children). An in-depth view of the census data also show an infant mortality rate for the indigenous peoples in 2000 (51.4 per thousand live births) that was significantly higher than the national rate (30.1 per thousand). Indigenous infant mortality is much higher than that of the other color/race groups, including that of “black” and “brown” children (34.9 and 33.0 per thousand, respectively). The infant mortality rates are also high for indigenous peoples in the more developed regions of the country (the Southeast and South).

At the current level of discussion on indigenous demography, a comparative reflection is indispensable in order to situate the indigenous parameters within the national context. Without question, Brazilian society owes a huge debt to the indigenous peoples. Demographic analyses can become exercises that identify situations of inequality while respecting the socio-cultural specificities of the indigenous peoples. The demographic indicators help us visualize this picture, which is widely familiar, but which we still need to understand better in terms of its specific contours.

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