**Policy Brief: The Importance of Census in India**

**Introduction**

The census and allied statistical exercises are essential for any nation to plan and allocate resources effectively. In India, they play a crucial role in understanding the socio-economic landscape. However, the ongoing delay in India's 2021 census, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and other issues, has created significant gaps in data, limiting the government and civic society’s ability to understand their country, address pressing issues, and implement effective policies.

**The Growing Divide**

India’s decennial census provides critical data on population, housing, and socio-economic conditions; it often underpins policymaking and resource distribution. For example, it is vital to determine electoral constituencies and ensure fair representation based on population changes. Being a comprehensive assessment of demographic data, it allows researchers and policymakers alike to analyse the effectiveness of policies, e.g. the improvement in homeownership throughout the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s is very clear when the decennial census numbers are assessed. However, the longer the census is delayed, the more significant the gap between the population surveys and its trends, as well as the sample surveys, administrative data, and smaller surveys.

Conversely, the lack of data reduces the effectiveness of government schemes. Dreze and others calculated that more than 100 million people are excluded from the Public Distribution System as the government still depends on 2011 figures to determine who is eligible for aid.

Amitabh Kundu and PC Mohanan, in their Economic and Political Weekly article from 2023, observe that this divide between survey and official data is concerning in myriad ways. Their primary concern is the lack of cross-validation between administrative and survey data due to the lack of the latter. As India develops, we must ensure that no one falls behind. However, we have little reliable country-wide understanding of India's healthcare, education, and infrastructure without adequate information consistently measured over time.

**What Data Do We Need?** 

As this gap grows, there are additional concerns about the information required to understand India truly. Is the census enough? The Socio-Economic and Caste Census conducted in 2011 never released its caste-based data but was a treasure trove of information about deprivation and systemic poverty in India. Numerous other statistical sources have flourished in the subsequent lacuna of population-level statistics.

Administrative databases are frequently used to measure policy effectiveness. Every scheme now has a “dashboard” showing the policy's headline figures. However, these figures often disagree with other surveys. In the absence of a population-level study, the “true” figure is up to the reader’s discretion. For example, the National Annual Rural Sanitation Survey (2019-20), The 2018 NSSO survey on sanitation and housing, and the National Family Health Survey (2019-21) all measured access to sanitation. The NARSS found that 93.5% of the rural households had access to improved sanitation facilities - the same number was between 69% and 71%, according to the NSSO and NFHS. (Kundu and Mohannan, 2023). While different definitions of “improved” toilet and “access” could explain some of this discrepancy, the rest remains a mystery. If the government believes the NARSS survey, India could be considered open defecation-free and only needs to maintain the status quo, but the NSSO and NFHS tell a different story.

Key demographic trends remain unknown, affecting long-term planning. The lack of updated data complicates targeting beneficiaries for essential programs, exacerbating issues related to poverty and inequality. For instance, the government’s aim to provide housing and healthcare faces setbacks due to inaccurate population estimates.

The delayed census has resulted in policymakers relying on data containing discrepancies. When there is no population census, there is no arbiter to the divergence between the institutional surveys and official government reporting. The delays have triggered debates over the reliability of India’s statistical system. Discrepancies between sample surveys and administrative data have led some experts to question the validity of the sample surveys’ data, resulting in scepticism about government statistics.

**Solutions**

According to reports by Reuters earlier this year, India’s delayed census would begin this September. However, there have been no official communications to this effect. The first step to rectify this growing lacuna is to conduct the census and restore faith in India’s capacity to collect reliable information.

As the country grows and concerns over inequity rise, it is important that a focus on the Socio-Economic and Caste Census is created. In addition, the reliability of the NSSO should be improved by ensuring that it is free of political influence and operates as an independent body.

Finally, improving the access and usefulness of administrative data is important. The open data policy of the central government is an important step towards this, and developing consistent definitions, data collection policies, and ensuring consistency will allow us to improve our understanding of what is, maybe, the most populous country in the world.

**Conclusion**

India’s census is the cornerstone of its governance, providing indispensable data for planning, policy-making, and development across sectors. The delayed 2021 census has created a critical data void, hindering the government's ability to assess socio-economic progress, target resources effectively, and validate policy outcomes. Immediate action to conduct the census is essential, along with bolstering the credibility and independence of surveys like the NSSO. Additionally, enhancing administrative data reliability and transparency through consistent definitions and standards is crucial for ensuring informed decision-making in the world's most populous democracy.

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Sources and additional reading

<https://scroll.in/article/959235/100-million-indians-fall-through-gaps-in-food-safety-net-economists-urge-rethink-on-covid-19-relief>

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