

The census of 2018 and its implications in Colombia

The national census of population is an essential statistical instrument in any country . It is a basic input so that both the public and private sectors have the relevant information to design their policies in the best way and thus achieve the proposed objectives.

In the Colombian case, the census has been the object of many criticisms and objections insofar as, according to the population projections made by the National Department of Statistics (DANE, by its acronym in Spanish), according to the 2005 census, the population calculated was 50 million people; however, the 2018 census found that we are 45 500 000, that is, a difference of 9%.

According to experts in census and demography it is normal that the projection of the population is bigger than the count, but in the Colombian case the difference is very high. Juan Daniel Oviedo, director of DANE, recognizes when affirming: “In all the round of 2010 the lapse of the population clocks in Latin America, in average, is of 5.7%. We are presenting a 9% lapse that it is important to check”.

If the geographical coverage of the 2005 census is compared with that of 2018, it is found that in the first one it was of 97% and in the second one of 99. 8%, which is relevant insofar as it allows having an image more approximate of size and composition of the Colombian population and housing conditions. For the above, it is worth asking: What are the reasons for this lapse? First, the census should have been carried out in 2015 because, according to the international parameters, the ideal is that the period between the two census is 10 years; besides that, neither the adjustment of annual projections nor corrections were made in the last three years; secondly, women’s access to the labor market, which influences the fact that households are smaller and have a smaller number of children; and, thirdly, according to Ernesto Morales, former director of DANE, the issue of demographical transition which is that as social development improves, birth and mortality rate diminishes, and therefore, the rate of population growth is reduced.

In fact, as stated by the director of DANE, before the final version is submitted and is under discussion in Congress, a commission of experts of highest level, consisting of national and foreign experts of World Bank, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL, by its acronym in Spanish) and of the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF) to check the collected data and, thus, a census final document is obtained as credible and reliable as possible and that the obtained figures give security to the different users to formulate the most convenient public policies .

From the point of view of public policies, census data have an impact on economic, social, political and business matters. In economic terms, when fewer people register, GDP per capita will no longer be \$ 6700 but \$ 7,363, that is, an increase of close to 10%, which would make Colombians look “richer”. Likewise, if we analyze the data in terms of per capita consumption for being less than the actual population the projected one, consumption will record an increase, as well as the number of people who have access to public services such as electricity, water supply and sewerage, among others.

In social terms, by varying the age structure of the country would affect Colombian education. The director of DANE puts it this way: the population under 25 years in the 2005 census was 20 million people, in 2018 is 17 million, which represents a decrease of 15%, which necessarily translates into that “the educational policy of the country could stop worrying about coverage and, rather, prioritize resources towards the quality of that education”. In social matters, the most worrisome is, perhaps, that according to the census, the population is getting older, since in the 2005 census the percentage of aging (percentage of older adults for every 100 young people of 15 years) was 20.5, in contrast, in the 2018 it was 40.6. This will push the national Government to get the right solution to provide health and care services as well as ensuring a minimum for the maintenance of those adults who do not have a pension or who are homeless.

Politically, it is recalled that some public positions such as Municipal Councilors, Deputies and Representatives are determined according to the population of local entities. The same happens with the electoral census, whose measurement takes into account the total population. It is important to emphasize that if the census had been carried out in 2015 or in 2016, and its results had been ratified, the electoral consultation would have been approved.

In business terms, if there are a smaller number of registered Colombians, the market studies would be based on different projections, affecting the demanders’ potential, which would necessarily modify both the consumption levels and the investment decisions of the companies.

In short, the size and composition of the population of a country resulting from the census, are important both for the national Government and the private sector howsoever it allows them to design their plans, programs and strategies in a more accurate way, to the extent they have the necessary information at the national, departmental and municipal levels. It is expected that with the adjustments made by the commission of experts, the DANE will publish the final document and present it to the Congress for debate and the corresponding approval, and, consequently, it will become law of the Republic. However, obviously the final outcome is going to produce controversy in the House of Representatives, since some states will win political influence and others will lose it. It is possible that the Congress of the Republic does not approve the census, as it already did with the censuses of 1995 and 2005, and so the document would not have the repercussions above outlined.

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