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Drug-related Conflicts, Other Violence Could Affect 2010 Census

by *Carlos Navarro*

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On May 31, the Mexican government launched its 2010 census amid concerns that drug-related violence and certain localized conflicts would limit citizen participation. Authorities have taken extraordinary measures to protect and assist census workers, especially in states like Tamaulipas and Chihuahua, which have experienced a surge in drug-related violence in recent months. The government's statistics bureau (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, INEGI), which administers the census, also had to put out a couple fires ahead of the census, including allegations from some Roman Catholic officials that the census was "anti-Catholic."

Hundreds of thousands of households might be missed

The possibility of violence was the primary concern for INEGI as it sent out workers to knock on doors to conduct this year's census (Censo de Población y Vivienda 2010), which will be carried out between May 31 and June 25. The census is held every 10 years, although authorities conduct a more limited count halfway through the 10-year period. INEGI director Eduardo Sojo Aldape said 180,000 workers had been hired this year to do the door-to-door surveys.

Sojo said INEGI expects to fall short of its goal of reaching 30 million households because of violence and other factors. The INEGI official said as many as 540,000 households might be missed.

The concerns about violence have prompted INEGI to arrange with the Secretaría de Seguridad Pública (SSP) and the Secretaría de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) to provide special protection to census workers in some of the most dangerous locations. INEGI is also taking certain precautions, such as sending census workers in groups and avoiding some neighborhoods that have been identified as extremely dangerous. "We have developed a strategy to protect the interviewers, who in certain zones will travel in pairs or in groups," said Sojo.

There is special concern in the northern states of Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo León, which have been hit in recent months by extreme drug violence ([SourceMex, March 11, 2009](#)), and ([April 14, 2010](#)). INEGI officials said the 5,900 census workers operating in Tamaulipas will receive special life-insurance policies in case they get caught in crossfire. But some Tamaulipas officials are confident that the process will go smoothly. "We are experiencing a period of peace," said Reynosa Mayor Óscar Luebbert Gutiérrez.

Exodus might make border communities difficult to count

The drug-related violence has other indirect effects on communities along the US-Mexico border. In many towns and cities, including Ciudad Juárez, residents have fled their homes because of the violence, making it difficult to develop an accurate count.

City planners in Juárez estimate that 110,000 houses have been abandoned in the past year alone. "With no mail form, census workers need to knock on doors numerous times to ensure houses are indeed abandoned," said The El Paso Times.

But INEGI officials say the census has always been difficult in border cities like Juárez, where much of the population consists of people who were deported from the US or who are biding their time until they get a chance to enter the US. "At one point, the floating population made the count really difficult," said María Tomasa Badillo Almaráz, who is heading the census efforts in Chihuahua. "It would require very dynamic operations."

Joel Esquivel Martínez, who is coordinating the census in Tamaulipas state, said INEGI would continue the practice of not counting the transient population in Reynosa and other border cities. "If an interviewed person does not identify an established residence, then he or she will not be counted," Esquivel Martínez told Milenio.

The communities and neighborhoods in the drug-conflict zones in the northern states are almost certainly among the 44,000 sites that INEGI has identified as difficult. Officials would not comment directly about any of the sites. "We are not allowed to identify these locations where we face obstacles, but we have developed definite strategies for these sites," said Miguel Cervera, INEGI's director of socioeconomic studies. These are the locations where SSP and SEDENA personnel will be assisting with the census operations.

Another area probably considered difficult is the Triqui region in Oaxaca state, where conflicts among several indigenous communities have made the area dangerous to outsiders. In late April, a human rights caravan was ambushed as it tried to deliver supplies to the remote community of San Juan de Copala ([SourceMex, May 5, 2010](#)). "We are going to talk with the leaders of the various organizations," said Jorge López Guzmán, an INEGI official in Oaxaca. "If they do not give us the necessary facilities to conduct door-to-door interviews, then we won't risk our lives unnecessarily."

Catholic Church, government butt heads over religious-affiliation question

INEGI officials also found themselves embroiled in a controversy with some Catholic Church officials regarding some census questions. Just days before the census was to begin, Cardinal Norberto Rivera took exception to the question regarding religious affiliation. The census not only offered the Roman Catholic option, but 11 other classifications registered with the Mexican government, such as Traditional Catholic, National Catholic, and Reformed Catholic. Rivera voiced his objection by hinting that he might encourage Catholics to boycott the census because of these concerns.

But not all bishops objected to the census question. Cardinal Juan Sandoval Íñiguez of the Diocese of Guadalajara said he saw nothing wrong with the format of the question and would support the census.

The concerns raised by Rivera prompted a meeting with Alejandro Poiré Romero, INEGI's director of population, migration, and religious matters. Poiré reassured the cardinal that there was no intention to dilute the Catholic numbers in Mexico and that all answers in the different categories would be grouped under the Roman Catholic classification.

Still, the issue raised by Rivera reflect an even greater concern, which is the decline in the number of Mexicans who identify themselves as Roman Catholic. Elio Masferrer Kan, president of the Asociación Latinoamericana para el Estudio de las Religiones (ALER), said its studies indicate that 75% of Mexicans identify themselves as Roman Catholic, and this should be reflected in the 2010 census. The ALER projection compares with about 88% of the population who identified themselves as Catholic in the 2000 census.

In an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada, Masferrer said the Catholic hierarchy does not want to see a reduction in its numbers because this would show that the church is in the midst of "crisis," resulting in a loss of power and influence. In recent years, the Mexican Catholic Church has been very vocal about its opposition to legislation dealing with gay marriage and abortion rights ([SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2008](#)) and ([Feb. 17, 2010](#)). But church officials have been just as vocal about issues related to the environment, capital punishment, and the drug trade ([SourceMex, May 14, 2008](#)), ([Feb. 4, 2009](#)), and ([Dec. 16, 2009](#)).

Spokespersons for the church acknowledged that there might be some decline in numbers but said the losses would not be steep. "There is no need for fear, but a need to face reality," said Manuel Corral, Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano (CEM) secretary for public and institutional relations. "We live in an environment that is increasingly secularized."

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