

Challenges of the 2019 Economic Census in Mexico

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Abstract

The history of the Economic Censuses in Mexico dates back to 1930, when the Industrial Census was conducted for the first time. From then to date, and uninterruptedly, 19 editions have been carried out every five years. Over time, the Economic Censuses have faced a series of challenges in collecting data, derived from social, political and economic changes, among others. The 2019 Economic Censuses, as in every census event, had new challenges. The purpose of this document is to describe how INEGI faced two of the main problems for the collection of data: **the growing insecurity**, which, unlike previous censuses, has permeated much of the national territory and hinders the collection of information directly in the field, and **the communication with respondents**, whose participation is the bastion of the census activities, which has increasingly required the design of specific strategies by region, state or municipality in order to be more effective.

This document describes the activities that made it possible to solve these problems in order to collect census information, which is the basis for decision making in economic matters in Mexico.

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Expert Meeting on Statistical Data Collection

Introduction

Economic Censuses are a statistical method of data generation, whose characteristics of universality, completeness, and simultaneity in obtaining information have allowed distinguishing, with a wide level of geographical and sectorial detail, the establishments that produce goods, market merchandise, and provide services.

The Economic Censuses in Mexico began to be officially conducted in a coordinated and methodical manner in 1930, when the President of the Republic issued the decree declaring the execution of the Population, Agricultural, Livestock and Industrial Censuses to be of social utility.

The Economic Censuses, of which 19 editions have been carried out up to 2019, represent a valuable information tool that allows to know how economic activities were developed and under what conditions they have been carried out in the country.

Thus, for the 2019 Economic Censuses, the information gathering process, already proven from previous censuses, was carried out through the delivery and retrieval of questionnaires by arranging visits for large establishments and companies and through walking around each block, systematically, knocking door-to-door in urban areas of the country and in selected rural areas for small and medium-sized establishments.

To achieve the expected coverage, there were different operational groups, so there were also different forms of interaction with the informants. For the systematic walking, the interview was done directly with the informants to collect data in a basic questionnaire using a mobile computing device. The informants also had the option of filling out the questionnaire via internet; or through appointments arranged for the delivery and retrieval of the questionnaire.

For the 2019 Mexican Economic Censuses, as in several of the most recent ones, changes have been perceived in the attitude of informants, making it difficult to communicate with them to obtain census information (mostly due to the current political, social, and economic conditions in the country) as well as an atmosphere of insecurity that has been increasing among the population. However, although difficulties were expected, it was an unfortunate surprise to observe that both the perception of insecurity and the reluctance of informants towards the census had increased or had spread to areas where this phenomenon was not expected. Which lead us to the following challenges:

How to deal with the growing perception of insecurity and the reluctance of informants to provide their information and achieve a successful census?

The growing perception of insecurity

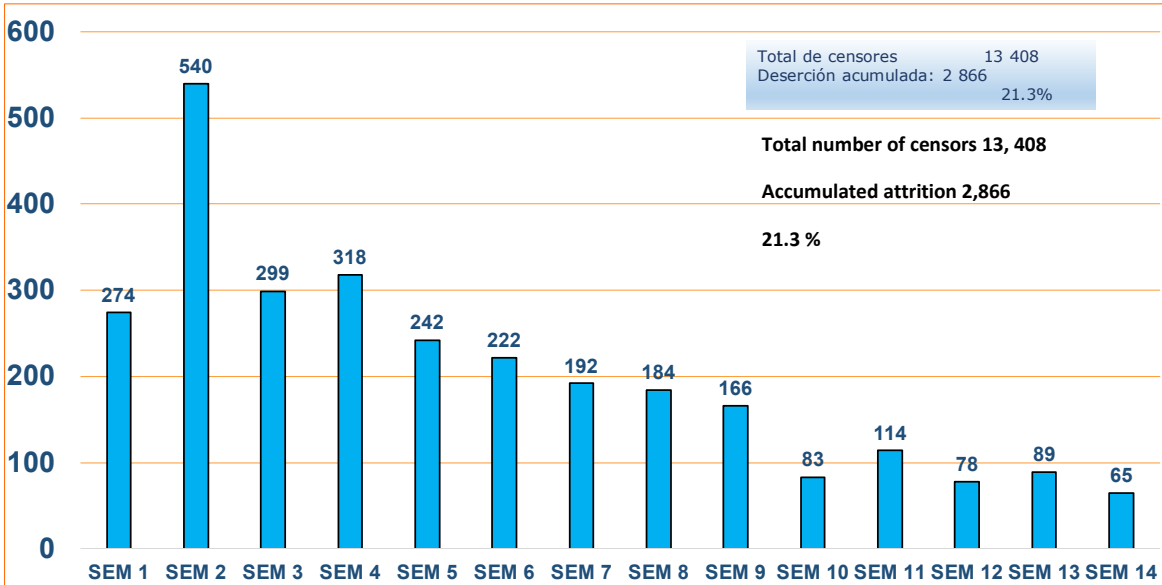
During data collection for the 2019 Economic Censuses, one of the challenges was to face the growing perception of insecurity from owners of establishments, as well as the negative experiences faced by interviewers during their work. While it is true that the phenomenon of insecurity has been present in some geographic areas of the country in recent census editions, what was unexpected was that it had spread to most of the national territory.

As a result of the above, there was an increase in distrust and reluctance from informants to provide their financial data; in addition, there were more residential, commercial, and service areas with restricted access, which slowed down the interviewers' activities.

During the field work, criminal events took place; these events directly or indirectly affected the operational activities (these events were mostly threats, physical or verbal aggressions and theft of personal objects or survey material like mobile computing devices, uniforms, questionnaires, among others). An immediate consequence was the unexpected increase in personnel turnover that far exceeded expectations, which implied hiring new staff and conducting express trainings, causing in turn, a delay in census data collection due to the drop in the productivity previously established. The following graph shows the weekly interviewer attrition:

Weekly interviewer attrition

Deserción de censores por semana



In these conditions, it was necessary to reinforce the planned operational and communication strategies, as well as to implement new actions to confront the growing wave of insecurity. Among the actions that were reinforced, the following stand out:

- Dissemination of the census before, during and after its conclusion. TV and radio spots were produced and broadcasted, highlighting the usefulness of the information and the importance of the participation of business owners in the country. Posters, tarpaulins, advertisements in social networks and internet sites, among other media, were also used.

- Personnel accreditation. The staff was provided with various elements that gave certainty to the informant about staff's identity, such as: credential with photograph and hologram, presentation document signed by the head of the General Directorate of Economic Statistics, uniform consisting of vest, hat, and backpack with institutional insignia, as well as the possibility of verifying the identity of the interviewer on the official website of INEGI.
- Arrangement of support with public security institutions. Negotiations were held at the national, state, and municipal levels for police patrols and accompaniment of operational personnel in risky work areas.
- Hiring a special group. In each state office, a special group of interviewers was hired in addition to the operational staff to gather information in conflictive areas, including unsafe areas. These special groups had specific functions and specific types of organization, such as working in groups, collecting information on paper questionnaires, visiting establishments at night, and traveling in official vehicles.
- Establishing a safety protocol. During the training, talks were given to personnel from the administrative and civil protection areas on the security protocol for field personnel, emphasizing the steps to follow in case of being a victim of a crime.
- Forming work brigades with field personnel. Within staff in the field, brigades of groups of interviewers and field chiefs were formed to address risky areas; even when the original strategy was modified, the geographic coverage for the census was not.
- Establishing special work schedules. Working hours were established according to the work zones identified as unsafe in order to safeguard the integrity of the personnel.
- Targeted consultations. Talks were held with neighborhood leaders and leaders of commercial zones, like markets, with a high level of insecurity to agree on schedules and ways of collecting information.
- Weekly progress, evaluation, and feedback meetings. Weekly progress presentations were held with the entire staff where solutions to insecurity issues were also shared. In particular, each state coordination applied actions specific to their circumstances.

In addition to those activities, some new actions (not done in previous censuses) were also carried out:

- Implementation of the Territorial Incident System (SIAT). This system was incorporated in the 2019 Economic Censuses, to support actions to safeguard the integrity of the interviewers, where it was possible to know and address the facts, in real time and the geographic location of the risky event through cell phones. This application helped the interviewers to feel supported and protected, since they would be helped when they requested it.
- Paradoxically, in some areas the interviewers chose to dispense with the census uniform to go unnoticed and not attract the attention of criminals, in order to be able to carry out their activities without being bothered.
- Other actions of local scope such as acceding to the demands of organizations that control certain geographic areas, such as the payment of "right to operate", ("derecho de piso", a Mexican idiom) and other types of demands.

Reluctance of informants to provide their information

In each census, society is informed that data collected is treated confidentially and is used only for the generation of statistics and economic indicators, and likewise; respondents have also the obligation, by law, to provide truthfully and timely data and reports requested, by the competent authorities for statistical, census and geographic purposes.

However, as mentioned above, the economic and social-political situation, as well as insecurity, have caused a growing distrust and dissatisfaction among informants to provide their data, constituting a barrier in communication with the interviewer, considerably complicating their work to obtain the information.

The management of businesses has also undergone changes, highlighting the increasing hiring of external accountants, which hinders direct communication with the informant; this results in the delay in the response of the census questionnaires.

As in the case of insecurity, the strategies planned to improve the communication with informants were reinforced and new ones were implemented to reduce informant reluctance. Among the actions that were reinforced, the following stand out:

- Dissemination of the census event. Dissemination was carried out before, during and after the event. The different mass media (print, digital, radio, television, website) and social networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram) were used to inform Mexican society about the need to know the economic aspects of the country and the relevance of census information in decision making for the development of public policies.
- Dissemination and consultation talks. Meetings were held with chambers and business organizations, as well as with accountants' associations to publicize the census and request that their members be urged to provide the required information.
- Attention via a Call Center (CAT). This center was made available to informants to resolve their doubts, as well as to follow up on their demands or complaints through a 800 number.
- Diversifying the means for obtaining information. To encourage the participation of the informant, questionnaires were made available in different modalities: printed, computer mobile device, and Internet. The latter option was available 24 hours a day.
- Constant training for the interviewer. Staff was continuously trained to be able to provide arguments for handling the interview with the informant, who was made aware of the benefits of providing their data.
- Continuous communication with informants. Constant follow-up was provided to informants by e-mail or telephone, especially in the case of large establishments, where official documentation was handed out highlighting the importance of providing their data.
- Personalized counseling. This consisted of visiting informants to support them in filling out the questionnaires, mainly the sectoral ones.
- Staff motivation. During the weekly meetings, the training sessions and the visits made by the command staff to the census offices, the staff was motivated about the importance of the census and their participation.

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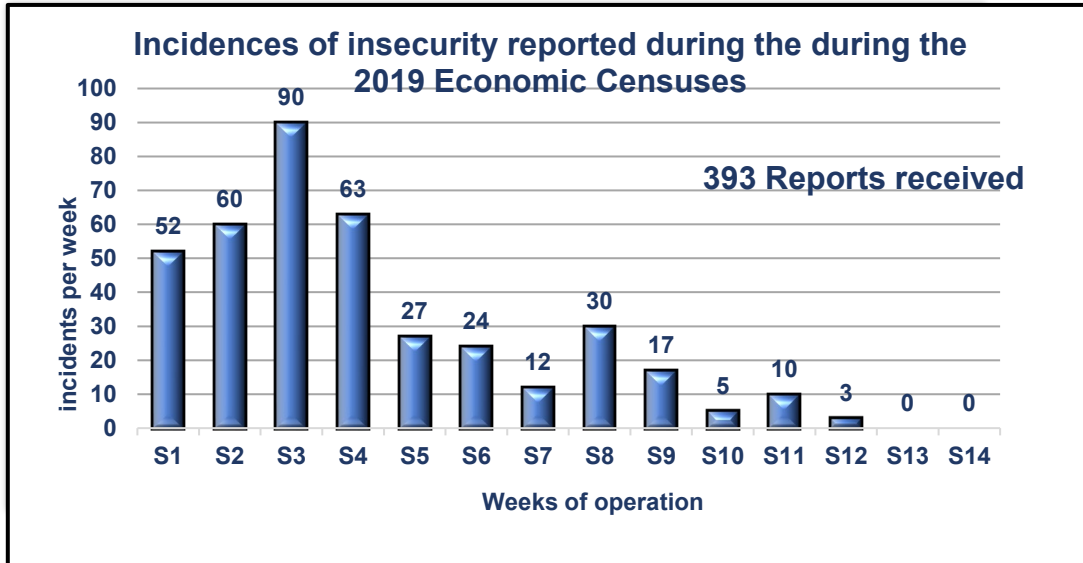
- Use of the "Prepare your answers" format, that was provided in advance to the establishments, with the idea that quantitative data were registered in such format by the accountants of the establishment, for the informant to complement the qualitative information at a later stage.
- Provision of interviewer's business card. This was implemented to formalize the identification of the interviewer and to provide him/her with his/her contact information to maintain frequent communication with the informant.
- Establishing a help desk. A support desk was set up in the different census offices all along the country to follow up on cases of repeated absences of the informant. Its activities included arranging appointments for interviewers.
- Reinforcement of the dissemination campaign. Due to the persistence of pending cases, during the stage of data collection, the dissemination campaign was intensified in the mass media to motivate the participation of informants.
- Implementing strategies for buildings and companies with restricted access. These places had a higher level of attention. Personalized letters were prepared with data and photographs of INEGI's staff who would visit them, addressed to the administrators and requesting their collaboration.
- Use of social networks. Arrangements with institutions and opinion leaders were made to encourage the participation of informants through their social networks, as well as those of the INEGI itself.

Results

The results of the 2019 Economic Census were considered successful despite the challenges faced, proving that the actions and strategies implemented to minimize the negative effects caused by the insecurity and the distrust of informants worked well, in general terms.

The above statement is because a total of 5,642,656 establishments were surveyed and only 64,938 remained pending, representing 1.14% of the existing establishments.

In terms of insecurity, only 26 blocks were not visited for this reason, which represents 0.0017% of the total of 1,575,221 that make up the census universe. The following graph shows the decrease in the number of criminal events as the census was carried out, which reflects the effectiveness of the measures adopted to counteract insecurity.



Regarding communication, the greatest challenge was the interaction with informants in large and very large establishments, where repeated visits were required to obtain the information, as well as constant telephone calls or e-mail communication.

While it is true that the census was successful, the process was not without some unfavorable results. One of them is that the number of pending cases in percentage terms with respect to existing establishments was 1.14%, preventing the achievement of the historical goal of less than 1%, which in other censuses was achieved. Another undesirable situation was that the time established to obtain the backlogs was longer than expected and in the case of large and very large establishments, the period concluded until February 2020, when it had been considered until November 2019, originally.