



Reliable information as a tool for closing diversity gaps

When closing diversity gaps, one of the major challenges in Latin America and the Caribbean is the limited amount of data reflecting this topic. The few statistics that are available on vulnerable groups such as indigenous peoples and African descendants, LGBTQ+ persons, and people with disabilities reflect economic and social gaps in several areas. For example, indigenous persons and African descendants [have worse labor outcomes](#) compared to the rest of the population. In 2017, the monthly salary gaps for the indigenous peoples and African descendants compared to the rest of the population stood at around 27% and 17%, respectively. Additionally, African descendant and indigenous persons have high rates of poverty that, in most countries of the region, are higher than for the rest of the population^[1]. Additionally, LGBTQ+ people face significant disadvantages throughout life. For example, 75% of LGBTQ+ students in Colombia^[2] experience homophobic comments at school, while half of all LGBTQ+ patients in Mexico^[3] reported that healthcare workers are not trained to meet their needs. At the same time, people with disabilities [obtain lower academic outcomes](#), participate less in the economy, and have higher poverty rates compared to populations without disabilities. Children with disabilities are 10 percentage points less likely to attend school than peers without disabilities.

Policies designed to promote the inclusion of these groups requires identifying them and knowing what socioeconomic gaps they are facing and the causes of these inequalities. However, there are difficulties in accessing this type of information, which vary depending on the group in question. For example, there are differences between self-identification and external identification of a person as indigenous or as African descendant due to the stigma caused by a long history of discrimination. In this regard, the evidence from surveys conducted in Peru shows that the individuals interviewed tend to self-identify to a lesser degree as indigenous and to a greater degree as white compared to how they are perceived by interviewers^[4]. LGBTQ+ people also tend to underreport their gender identities and sexual orientations over fear of discrimination or stigma. For example, in Costa Rica, 58% of LGBTQ+ persons do not identify as such at their workplaces over fear of experiencing acts of discrimination, harassment, or ridicule or of being fired^[5]. People with disabilities face a similar problem. For example, the evidence reveals an underreporting of mental illnesses due to the stigma associated with them^[6].

How can the indigenous peoples and African descendants be counted?

Bias problems. In Latin America and the Caribbean, two approaches are used to collect data on ethno-racial identities. The first is asking which languages are spoken. Out of 19 countries in the region, [only nine included questions about ethnicity and race](#) in their household surveys between 2015 and 2016, and of those, six use the criterion of language spoken. However, this criterion tends to underestimate the size of the indigenous peoples as not all indigenous persons speak the traditional language. In fact, less than a third of indigenous persons attending primary school speaks an indigenous language^[7]. The other criterion is self-identification, and it consists of asking individuals if they consider themselves to belong to an ethno-racial group based on culture, beliefs, way of life, or ancestors. Out of the nine countries of the region that asked about race and ethnicity in household surveys between 2015 and 2016, [eight included self-identification questions](#). The second criterion has become the golden rule for measuring race and ethnicity, but it has its own problems. First, the way in which the question is asked can have a big influence on the results. For example, a person may consider herself indigenous based on her culture but may not consider herself part of an indigenous group because she is not formally registered as such. An additional problem is that self-identification may not be static. An individual may have more than one identity at the same time, something that is common due to the *mestizaje* of Latin America and the Caribbean. Also, identities may change based on context—for example, depending on the identity of the person asking the

question. Lastly, the long history of discrimination that both groups have experienced can be an incentive to hide a racial or ethnic identity or claim a mixed identity in an interview, especially in the absence of affirmative action policies or any tangible benefit for self-identification.

Innovations in identifying ethno-racial identity. The region has begun to put some innovations for measuring ethno-racial identity into practice. One of these is the provision of multiple self-reported identities—that is, allowing an individual to self-identify with more than one ethno-racial group at the same time. This type of question with a multiple response option has been incorporated by Uruguay into its household survey (Encuesta Continua de Hogares). Mexico has implemented another type of innovation in its 2016 Inter-generational Social Mobility Module^[8]. In addition to the question on ethno-racial self-identification, the survey contains retrospective questions for analyzing the inter-generational transmission of economic status and a question regarding [self-perception of skin color based on a color scale](#). All these indicators put together can help provide a better picture of the indigenous population by enabling self-identification that goes beyond physiological characteristics. For example, the survey in Mexico found that 4.3% of people who self-identify as African descendants and 6.6% of those who consider themselves indigenous persons indicated that their skin tone corresponded to one of the three lightest tones in the color palette.

Measurement of the number of LGBTQ+ persons

Lack of representative measurements and potential bias in the surveys. The region has very few surveys on [sexual orientation or gender identity](#). Among the few that are available, the majority does not define a sample based on a population census, and, therefore, there is no way of knowing the share of LGBTQ+ people in a country's total

population. Along with this are possible measurement biases due to a lack of proper protocols to guarantee the privacy of interviewees when conducting the survey and the confidentiality of the information provided. One example of this is a youth survey conducted in Mexico, which asks several members of a household (young people) about gender identity

1. The opposite may also occur. In Paraguay, the “language spoken” criterion overestimates the size of indigenous peoples as a significant part of the population speaks Guaraní but does not identify as indigenous.

in face-to-face interviews, implying that [participants have to provide their answers in front of the rest of their families](#) ^[9]. Even when privacy protocols are implemented in the field, individuals who identify with a non-heteronormative identity or sexual orientation may avoid being truthful because of the harsh stigmatization and discrimination against LGBTQ+ persons in the region. In fact, the few surveys in the region that attempt to take these types of measurements tend to obtain a high non-response rate. For example, in Chile in 2015, 2% of young people said they were homosexual, and 1% said they were bisexual, but 13% preferred not to answer the question ^[10]. The way in which these questions are asked can also produce bias. Improper handling of concepts of gender identity, sexual orientation, and sexual attraction, as well as the potentially loaded way in which these questions are asked, can cause additional problems in measuring the number of LGBTQ+ persons and the extent of the particular issues they face.

Some progress and the agenda that remains pending for Latin America and the Caribbean. The international practices on measuring the number of LGBTQ+ persons, reviewed in [GDLab studies](#), can show the way to setting standards in terms of sample design, question formulation, and procedures in the field. International experience indicates that the sample must be representative of adults older than 18 at the national level and must include subsamples that over-represent the population groups of interest, such as, for example, the most vulnerable ones. The recommendation is to conduct face-to-face interviews with each individual member of the household, asking first the sex assigned at birth, then gender identity, and then questions on sexual orientation. It is important for interviewers to be trained on how to define LGBTQ+ identities and that they know the steps to take in the event of a situation that may endanger the safety of the individual interviewed.

How should we measure the number of persons with disabilities and their situations?

Measuring the number of persons with disabilities. Most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean collect information on people with disabilities in their censuses or household surveys. The figures available indicate that [people with disabilities represent around 13% of the region's population](#). However, comparing statistics between countries (or of a single country over time) has always been problematic due to the [different definitions of disability used](#). In recent decades, the way in which disability is measured has changed as countries have gone from using direct and general questions such as “do you have a disability?” to asking people about specific difficulties they may have in doing basic activities such as walking, climbing stairs, hearing, and seeing as well as cognition, communication, and self-care. The expectation is that this makes it possible to build homogenous series that can be used to design proper public policies.

Disability and violence against women and children. Women with disabilities run a greater risk of becoming the victims of violence when compared to women without disabilities. Evidence from Colombia indicates that in 2015, 67% of Colombian women suffered at least one type of violence (psychological, physical, sexual, or economic) at the hands of a spouse or partner at some point in their lives. This [rate increases to 72% for women with disabilities](#) ^[11]. Measuring violence against women and children with disabilities raises additional difficulties for those who are specifically measuring this phenomenon as the disability itself may limit interaction with surveyors, preventing them from identifying the respondent as a victim. In the region, aside from Colombia, only Haiti has conducted surveys that collect information on disability and violence against women and girls. The inclusion of questions on this issue in surveys on disability requires the use of larger samples in order to obtain precise estimates when crossing the rates of the prevalence of both phenomena.

How can we move forward?

It is crucial to continue moving forward in measuring the size of the issues faced by the region's most vulnerable groups, such as indigenous peoples and African descendants, LGBTQ+ persons, and people with disabilities. The existence of stigma and discrimination within societies produces bias in self-identification, raising the challenge of producing innovative tools for measurement. Proper reporting is crucial for progress in gauging the unique barriers that each group faces and working toward their effective inclusion.

The current context of the COVID-19 pandemic may have a particularly strong impact on vulnerable groups. Progress must therefore be made on an agenda focused on measuring and monitoring the impact of the pandemic on these diverse groups to design solutions and policies that are specifically oriented toward them.

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