

Disappearing people - audio summary

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Transcript

Speaker 1: Welcome to the deep dive. Today, we're plunging into something that sounds a bit dry, maybe, but is actually critical: population data, and specifically a quiet crisis that's threatening it. Before we get started, just a quick note on how we bring this deep dive to you. You're hearing voices generated by AI. They're derived from source material uploaded by WorldPop. And importantly, our audio has been meticulously edited, checked and validated by human experts at WorldPop. That's to ensure both accuracy and clarity. OK, so let's set the scene a bit. I mean, ever since ancient Rome, right, the sense is knowing how many people live where and who they are has been absolutely fundamental for governing. You need it for hospitals, for schools, figuring out the tax base, everything. But something alarming is happening now. What exactly is going on?

Speaker 2: Well, it's fascinating, isn't it, how utterly foundational this data is? And yet its collection is well, it's faltering, badly in some places. The core issue is really twofold. Fewer countries are actually completing their censuses on time or at all, and even when they do, we're seeing these really significant undercounts. It's gotten bad enough that people are calling it a global demographic data crisis.

Speaker 1: A quiet crisis, as you said. It's pretty shocking when you look at the numbers. Like by mid-2020. Or what was it? 24 countries hadn't published their 2020 round census results.

Speaker 2: That's right, 24. And that represents about a quarter of the entire world's population. It's a huge difference compared to the 2010 round.

Speaker 1: And it's not just delays, is it, though these undercounts you mentioned.

Speaker 2: Exactly. South Africa's 2022 census estimates suggest an undercount may be as high as 31 percent. 31.

Speaker 1: Wow.

Speaker 2: And perhaps even more broadly, there's an estimate that maybe one in three Africans just weren't counted in this latest census round.

Speaker 1: So this really raises a critical question, doesn't it? What actually happens to communities when they sort of disappear from the official data like that?

Speaker 2: The consequences are frankly dire. When groups aren't counted accurately or at all, they risk being completely left off the policy agenda. Think about it. Under representation and political processes, totally inadequate resources allocated for their needs. Just to give you a sense of scale in the US alone, that census data directs over \$1.5 trillion in federal funding every year.

Speaker 1: 1.5 trillion.

Speaker 2: OK, so when the data quality drops, it's not just a statistical problem. It really undermines the whole basis of evidence based policy and you know, fair governance.

Speaker 1: So why is this happening now? It feels like, I don't know, a perfect storm.

Speaker 2: That's a good way to put it. You definitely had COVID-19 throwing a massive spanner in the works. There are also severe budget cuts hitting statistical offices. About 63% of countries said they faced significant financial challenges. And maybe underlying a lot of this there's this declining public trust in institutions generally. Around 70 percent of countries expressed concern about managing public perception and trust during data collection. People are just more wary.

Speaker 1: Right. Budget, trust, the pandemic hangover. That's already a lot.

Speaker 2

And there's one more piece, which is really important when you look at the global picture, it's the collapsing international support. This kind of data collection, especially in lower income countries, often relies on international partnerships and funding. And that seems to be weakening.

Speaker 1: Can you give an example of that?

Speaker 2: Sure, a big one is the demographic and health surveys programme. The DHS. It's been supported by the US for like four decades, providing absolutely vital health data in 90 countries. But that programme is set to be terminated, losing that kind of consistent long term support, it's a huge blow, especially for countries with fewer resources of their own. It's like disinvestment in the global public good.

Speaker 1: OK, so the picture looks pretty challenging. Are there solutions? What's being done? Is technology helping at all?

Speaker 2: Yes, definitely. And this is where it gets quite interesting. Many countries are absolutely leveraging new approaches. Things like register based censuses, where they use existing administrative data like birth registries, tax records, that sort of thing. Instead of just relying on door to door counts.

Speaker 1: OK, using data that already exists.

Speaker 2: Exactly. And then you've got really cutting edge stuff like using AI to analyse satellite images, identify building footprints and then model population estimates from that. This is super useful in places that are hard to reach or where traditional methods are just too expensive or dangerous.

Speaker 1: That sounds really innovative. But I guess technology alone isn't going to fix the trust issue or the funding issue, right?

Speaker 2: Precisely. Tech is a tool, a powerful one, but it's not the whole answer. The source material we looked at really stresses this point. It says for academics, for data scientists, now is the time for humility and collaboration, not salesmanship. It signals a need to move beyond just pushing the newest tech and instead focus on what actually works on the ground. And that means building trust and crucially, really fostering genuine collaboration.

Speaker 1: So collaboration with who? Who needs to be involved?

Speaker 2: Well, the key message is the need to co-create solutions with the national statistical offices, the NSOs. Those are the government bodies actually responsible for this data.

Especially the call is to work closely with NSOs in low- and middle-income countries, listening to their needs, prioritising usability. You know what they can actually implement and sustain rather than just what's technically novel.

Speaker 1: OK, so partnership with the national agencies is key.

Speaker 2: Yeah, and it's not just academics and governments. The private sector has a role too. Big tech companies like Microsoft, Google, they develop a lot of these relevant tools, like the satellite image analysis. The point made is that their innovations need to complement the core work of government statistics offices, not try to replace them. And crucially, they need to invest in building capacity with their partners, especially those with fewer resources, so these solutions are sustainable.

Speaker 1: Right, complementing not replacing that seems vital for maintaining the authority and accountability of official statistics.

Speaker 2: Absolutely.

Speaker 1: So wrapping this up then this deep dive really shows population data is in a precarious state, but the way forward seems to be less about a single magic bullet and more about, well, teamwork.

Speaker 2: That's it exactly. It's about building partnerships, rebuilding trust and focusing on practical, usable solutions developed together. Because accurate population data, it isn't some kind of luxury item, it's essential infrastructure like roads or power grids. It's fundamental for healthy, resilient, fair societies. So maybe the question for you, for everyone listening is what role can we all play? How can we champion these partnerships and make sure that data truly serves every single community?

Speaker 1: A really important question to think about. Thanks for joining us on this deep dive. Keep diving deep into the issues that matter.