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# Data Discrepancies between the Census and Civil Registration Systems in Kuwait: Reasons, Implications and Solutions

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**EXPLANATORY NOTE**

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# Data Discrepancies between the Census and Civil Registration Systems in Kuwait: Reasons, Implications and Solutions

**Nasra M. Shah**

**Abstract:** A comparison for 1995, 2005, and 2011 reveals large discrepancies in the two main sources of population data, the censuses and the civil registration system. Possible reasons and implications of the observed discrepancies are discussed, and suggestions are made for actions and policies that might help improve data quality. This analysis suggests that the numbers recorded by the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI) are likely to be relatively more reliable and valid than the census. However, a conclusive statement about this requires additional objective analysis. A system of post-enumeration sample surveys may be established as a usual mechanism for checking the accuracy of census data. Also, special studies designed to ensure the accuracy of PACI data should be conducted periodically.

**Keywords:** National Population, Foreign Population, Statistics, Statelessness, Kuwait.

Since 1989, Kuwait has had two main sources for collecting and publishing data on population and the labour force. The first is the periodical population censuses, held quinquennially between 1965-1985, and periodically thereafter under the auspices of the Central Statistical Bureau (CSB), Ministry of Planning. The second is the electronic database covering the civil identification (ID) information for each resident of the country since 1989, operating under the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI). The first provides a cross-sectional view of the population at specified points of time while the latter provides an ongoing picture of the number of residents holding civil ID cards, along with their major socio-demographic characteristics. Both data sources are available for public use through their websites as well as printed publications.

The censuses in Kuwait are conducted through enumerators who visit each household to fill the census form. Data collection for the census usually takes place over one month in April. In 2011, an option was provided for the first time to the population to fill the census form online if a person wished to do so. The PACI database consists of a computerized system of registration whereby all residents (not visitors), holding resident permits (iqama) are issued a mandatory identification card, regardless of age and nationality. PACI is linked through a unique computer ID for each resident with a Department in the Ministry of Interior that issues the resident permit (iqama) for that person. An automated system has been developed to facilitate the issuance of the ID card. The resident may simply request the card by telephone and pick it up a week later from a designated machine by submitting 2 Kuwaiti dinars (about \$7.5). A comparison of the two data sources for 1995, 2005, and 2011 reveals large discrepancies in the total number of residents yielded by the two sources for each of the above time periods, as shown in Table 1. The observed discrepancies raise several questions about the validity and reliability of the two sources and pose a challenge for researchers wishing to use the population data for estimating various indicators of health, economic and social development, or other aspects.

The objective of this technical note is to briefly outline the possible reasons for the observed discrepancies, discuss the implications of such discrepancies, and make some suggestions for actions and policies that might lead to a more coherent and reliable picture of the population in Kuwait.

## 1. Towards Understanding the Discrepancies between Census and PACI Data

For each of the three years shown in Table 1, the PACI counts were substantially larger than the census counts. This could have happened as a result of an undercount in the census, or an over-count in the PACI data. In the latest year, i.e., 2011, PACI estimates exceeded the census estimates by about 74,000 persons in case of Kuwaitis and almost half a million in case of non-Kuwaitis. In a population numbering only about 3.6 million in 2011, these discrepancies are indeed huge. Some possible reasons that may help us explain the observed discrepancies between the two sources are given below.

- A civil ID card is necessary for most civil and legal transactions, including a visit to the clinic or hospital, opening or operating a bank account, and renting a house. A valid civil ID is also proof of legal residence in the country. The civil ID is therefore a vital document for all residents. For non-Kuwaitis an ID card covers the period of their iqama, and is usually issued for no more than two years. Once the iqama is renewed, the person must also renew the ID card. Similarly, a civil ID card must be obtained for a newborn baby within one month of the birth.
- GCC citizens living and working in Kuwait do not require an iqama. However, they are also issued Kuwaiti civil ID cards and form a part of the PACI database. Similarly, persons without a specified nationality (bidoon) are assigned a civil ID number in the PACI database, including the newborn. However, they are not issued a civil ID card like the rest of the resident population. Hence, the PACI system is designed to capture all residents of the country.
- Participation in the census is obligatory but there are no legal implications or punishments for non-participation. However, a civil ID card must be issued within one month of the issuance/renewal of the iqama after which a fine of 20 KD (\$72) must be paid.

**Table 1. Population by nationality in population census and PACI database, 1995, 2005 and 2011.**

<b>1995</b>	<b>Kuwaiti</b>	<b>Non-Kuwaiti</b>	<b>Total</b>
Census <sup>a)</sup>	653,616	921,954	1,575,570
PACI <sup>b)</sup>	695,076	1,186,174	1,881,250
Discrepancy	41,460	264,220	305,680
<b>2005</b>			
Census <sup>a)</sup>	860,324	1,333,327	2,193,651
PACI <sup>b)</sup>	973,286	1,893,602	2,866,888
Discrepancy	112,962	560,275	673,237
<b>2011</b>			
Census <sup>a)</sup>	1,089,969	1,975,881	3,065,850
PACI <sup>b)</sup>	1,164,448	2,467,561	3,632,009
Discrepancy	74,479	491,680	566,159

Sources: a) 1995 and 2005 data from [www.csb.gov.kw/social\\_statistics\\_EN](http://www.csb.gov.kw/social_statistics_EN); 2011 data from Annual Statistical Abstract, 2011 [http://www.csb.gov.kw/Socan\\_Statistic\\_EN](http://www.csb.gov.kw/Socan_Statistic_EN).

b) PACI publications for June 30, for each year

- Obtaining a civil ID card is based entirely on an automated system that does not involve any personal encounter between the applicant and the PACI administration. The forms for receiving the initial civil ID may be submitted to PACI in person, or through a courier. Renewal of civil ID is done over the telephone through an automated system and the renewed card is picked up from a machine. Thus, the respondent is not dealing with a person who might question his status. In case of the census, the census takers appear at each residential unit and this can be viewed as a potential threat by those in an irregular situation who feel the need to hide from such enumerators. Irregular residents may include not only those without valid residence permits but also those who are working for someone other than their sponsor, and are thus faced with an irregular employment situation. Such persons might hesitate to face an interviewer attempting to collect their personal and demographic information. Hence, the likelihood of a person trying to avoid participating in the census is greater than in the PACI data.
- In addition to the respondent's reluctance to participate in the census, it is also likely that the census enumerators may have failed to cover the distant and remote areas of Kuwait. Besides, certain residents of a household (e.g., domestic workers) may not have been reported by the respondent. Such omissions are less likely in case of the PACI data.
- There are some instances in which the PACI could, however, over-estimate the population, especially if it does not delete non-residents or deceased persons from its database. In case of a non-Kuwaiti who permanently leaves the country, the iqama must be canceled in order for a person to

collect his end-of-service benefits, if any. Once the iqama is canceled the person must leave the country within one month or risk becoming an illegal migrant who would have to pay a fine of 2 KD per day of overstay. Since the systems that manage the iqama and the ID cards are linked, the information about residence cancellation is automatically available in the PACI database and the published data should adequately reflect the deletion. It is possible that a person may leave the country without canceling his iqama and he is therefore counted in the records without being physically present. This is possible only for a period of up to six months, however. If a person who left the country does not return before the end of six months, his iqama is automatically canceled. However, the person is not automatically deleted from the PACI's computerized database and may result in some overestimation of the total population figures. In a large majority of cases, it is in the person's interest to cancel the residence before leaving permanently in order to collect service benefits. It is likely that some people who are counted as residents are not in the country and would therefore not be available to be counted by the census taker. This number is, however, unlikely to be very large.

- In case of deceased persons, a hard copy of the death notification is sent to the PACI, which is then expected to delete the person from its database. The annual number of deaths in Kuwait is only about 4,500 which would not explain the large difference between the data sources even if the PACI records contain some of the deceased persons.

In summary, a detailed consideration of the various reasons for the discrepancies suggests that the numbers recorded by the PACI are likely to be relatively more reliable and valid than the ones provided by the census. However, a conclusive statement about this requires additional objective analysis, not available at present.

## 2. Some Implications of the Discrepancies

There are several implications of the prevalent discrepancy in the two data sources, some of which are highlighted below:

- The presence of more than one valid data source results in confusion for non-specialists who wish to use these data. In fact, the census constitutes the traditional source of population data and might be treated as the only source of information by those who do not know that PACI has a comprehensive website which may be used. In case a person is knowledgeable about both sources, he/she is then faced with a dilemma in terms of which source to treat as the valid one. For example, if a physician wishes to calculate the mortality rate due to a specific type of cancer in relation to the population, he/she would end up with very different estimates, depending on his/her choice of data source.
- A major problem arises for planners and policy makers faced with the discrepant data offered by the census and PACI. Planning for the future requires population projections which would differ greatly depending on which of the two sources is used. Hence, realistic planning for health, education, and other services may suffer due to faulty assumptions.

- The collection and production of data by two different departments on essentially the same pieces of information comprises a massive duplication of effort and resources. Even though Kuwait is a rich country, these resources could perhaps be used more effectively in some other endeavor.
- The questions raised by the discrepancies detracts the concerned departments from focusing on other relevant issues that may provide additional information necessary for social and human development. The census could collect in-depth information through its enumerators about many different aspects of the population such as health indicators, family type and living arrangements, family income and assets etc.
- In view of the apparent undercounts in the last three censuses, a fundamental question arises about the validity of the previous censuses conducted between 1965 and 1985. Since the census was the only source of population data during that time, and no post-enumeration surveys were done, it is not possible to assess the validity of those censuses.
- The lack of institutional coherence between the two main bodies responsible for collecting population information results in a defensive rather than collaborative posture by the two institutions.

### 3. Suggestions for the Future

An urgent need exists for addressing the discrepancies between the population data yielded by the CSB and PACI in a systematic and dispassionate manner. It must be recognised that the continued presence of such discrepancies is problematic. It poses many challenges for research as well as adequate planning. In order to arrive at a meaningful resolution of the discrepancies, the following steps are necessary.

- The question of discrepancies in the data should be addressed and resolved in an objective manner and not as a tool to punish, belittle, or embarrass the various institutions involved in the data gathering activities.
- The objective of this exercise should be to comprehensively analyse the reasons for the observed discrepancies, resulting from over- or under-enumeration in either source.
- Third, this analysis should be conducted by a neutral body, or group, that has no stake in proving or disproving the relative validity and accuracy of the two sources.
- Finally, a system of post-enumeration sample surveys may be established as a usual mechanism for checking the accuracy of the census data. Post-enumeration surveys following the census are conducted by many countries, including the United States. The US Census Bureau has used post-enumeration surveys with dual system estimation to measure coverage in the Decennial Censuses of Population and Housing since 1980. The primary goal of the post-enumeration surveys is to measure coverage error in the census such that this information can be used to improve the coverage of future censuses ([http://www.census.gov/coverage\\_measurement/post-enumeration\\_surveys](http://www.census.gov/coverage_measurement/post-enumeration_surveys)).

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- At the same time, special studies designed to ensure the accuracy of the PACI data should be conducted periodically.

## Conclusion

Data on the size, characteristics, and growth of the population form part of the essential information necessary for constructing the social, demographic, economic, political and other indicators that help us in understanding the level of human development in a society and to plan for its optimal future. Inaccuracies in such data can lead to inadequate planning. Therefore, the concerned authorities should launch periodic and ongoing evaluation of the two data sources to ensure accurate inputs into building the country's future.



### About the Author



**Nasra M. Shah** is Professor of Demography at the Department of Community Medicine and Behavioral Sciences at the Faculty of Medicine, Kuwait University. Professor Shah's research has focused on several different demographic issues in the context of health and societal development. She has conducted extensive research on the Asian region, especially Pakistan and the major South Asian countries and, since almost 30 years, on Kuwait. Labor migration, especially from Asian countries to the oil-rich Gulf countries, has been one of the consistent themes in Dr. Shah's research for more than 35 years. During the mid 1990s, she was part of a UNFPA funded global project that examined emigration dynamics in four major sending regions. She was Chairperson of the South Asia region. She serves as a referee for most leading migration journals and is on the Editorial Board of the Asia and Pacific Migration Journal, International Family Planning Perspectives, and Migration and Development. Her many publications include books on Asian Labor Migration: Pipeline to the Middle East; Pakistani Women; Basic Needs, Women and Development; and Population of Kuwait: Structure and Dynamics.

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