

OUTDATED CENSUS DATA KEEP 10 CR. OUT OF PDS: ECONOMISTS

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues Related to Poverty, Inclusion, Employment & Sustainable Development

Over 10 crore people have been excluded from the Public Distribution System because outdated 2011 census data is being used to calculate State-wise National Food Security Act (NFSA) coverage, according to economists Jean Dreze and Reetika Khera.

The disastrous impact of this gap is being seen in the middle of a crippling lockdown, as people who have lost their livelihoods depend on PDS for daily survival.

Under the NFSA, the PDS is supposed to cover 75% of the population in rural areas and 50% of the population in urban areas, which works out to 67% of the total population, using the rural-urban population ratio in 2011. India's population was about 121 crore in 2011 and so PDS covered approximately 80 crore people.

However, applying the 67% ratio to a projected population of 137 crore for 2020, PDS coverage today should be around 92 crore. Even taking into account growing urbanisation, the shortfall would be around 10 crore people who have slipped through the cracks, said the two economists and Right to Food campaigners in a statement on Wednesday.

Big gaps

The biggest gaps are in Uttar Pradesh, where 2.8 crore people may have been left out, and Bihar, which would have had almost 1.8 crore people excluded from the NFSA. State-specific birth and death rates from 2016 were used to calculate the population growth rate and projected population estimates, said the statement.

When the NFSA came into effect in 2013, State-wise ratios were worked out for rural and urban areas, using National Sample Survey data, in such a manner that everyone below a given national "per-capita expenditure benchmark" is covered, meaning that PDS coverage should be higher in poorer States.

While the population data from the 2011 census was used to translate these ratios into absolute numbers, Right to Food activists have long argued that the numbers should have been updated using projected population figures, allowing State governments to issue new ration cards over time. Instead, the Centre's calculation of the actual number of people to be covered in each State has remained "frozen."

Many State governments are reluctant to issue new ration cards beyond the numbers that will be provided for by the Central quota, making it difficult to reduce exclusion errors in the PDS.

For example, there are about seven lakh pending applications for ration cards in Jharkhand, because the State government stopped issuing new ration cards several years ago to avoid exceeding the numbers provided for by the Central government, said Dr. Khera and Dr. Dreze.

With the 2021 census process being delayed due to the COVID-19 crisis, any proposed revision of PDS coverage using that data could now take several years.

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