

Indigenous Peoples



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Census-based profile of the Pygmies in Gabon

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There are more than 40 ethnic groups in Gabon, but according to the country's 2003 census, the Pygmies account for only 0.1 percent of the population. Among the oldest inhabitants of Central Africa, the Pygmies have a semi-nomadic lifestyle that has persisted largely unchanged for thousands of years, with a livelihood focused on hunting, fishing, and gathering wild fruits and nuts. Yet because of such factors as urbanization and deforestation, many Pygmies have become sedentary, leaving them disadvantaged and vulnerable.

Evidence from Latin America suggests that poverty is higher, more severe, and more persistent over time among indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities than among the general population. But empirical evidence on the well-being of indigenous peoples in Africa is scarce, largely because of lack of good data. Household surveys in the region generally do not collect data on ethnicity or do not sample enough indigenous peoples to yield robust conclusions about their living standards. This note uses census data on 245 self-identifying Pygmy households in Gabon to assess the socioeconomic status of the country's Pygmies.

While many Pygmies in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo live in extreme poverty given those countries' low GDP per capita, the Pygmies in Gabon, a medium-income country, may seem better off. But inequality is high in Gabon, with a third

of the population living below the poverty line in 2005 and a higher poverty rate among the Pygmies. Employment, education, and access to basic infrastructure indicators also suggest that the Pygmies are especially disadvantaged.

Census data do not include information on consumption and poverty, but estimates can be obtained by combining census and survey data and using poverty mapping techniques. Such analysis suggests that 70.1 percent of Pygmies in Gabon live in poverty, compared with 32.7 percent of other groups (table 1). Other poverty measures such as the poverty gap and the squared poverty gap also show large differences between the Pygmies and the rest of the population. Average per capita consumption of the Pygmies is less than half that of the non-Pygmies.

Labor force participation rates among the Pygmies are significantly higher than those for the overall population for both men and women. Unemployment is lower among the Pygmies, perhaps because they are so poor that they cannot afford not to work. But the share of workers who are not paid for their work is much higher, suggesting low productivity jobs. The Pygmies also tend to work in agriculture and in occupations that provide services to other households more than other groups, which may contribute to higher poverty.

School enrollment rates among the Pygmies are much lower than among other groups,

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TABLE 1

Poverty and welfare indicators in Gabon, by ethnicity, 2003

Indicator	Pygmy	Non-Pygmy
<i>Poverty (percent)</i>		
Share of population in poverty	70.1	32.7
Poverty gap	30.0	10.7
Squared poverty gap	16.4	4.9
<i>Per capita consumption (thousands of CFA francs per year)</i>		
Average	343	760
Median	303	588

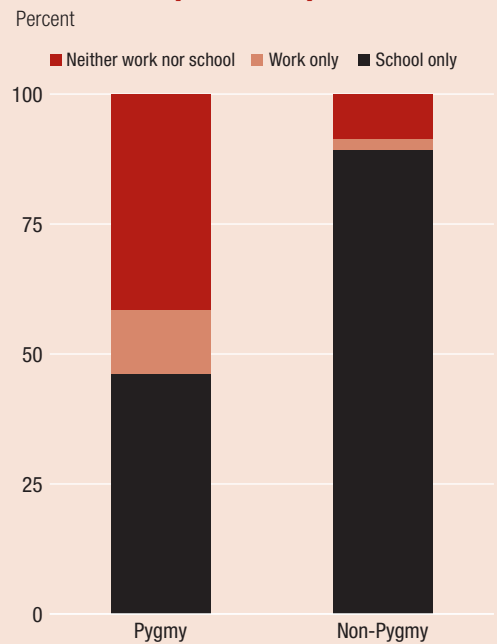
Source: Authors' estimates based on 2003 census data.

especially at the secondary level. Gross secondary enrollment is only 4.4 percent for the Pygmies, compared with 80.3 percent for non-Pygmies. Differences are also large at the primary level, including for net enrollment rates.

Lower school enrollment among the Pygmies may have both demand-side (high costs, weaker cultural emphasis) and supply-side (households located farther away from schools) causes. On the demand side one reason for lower schooling may be the opportunity cost of schooling in terms of income and other benefits lost if schooling reduces the ability of a child to work and thereby support its family. This may be a factor in Gabon, where Pygmy children are more likely to work than children of other groups (figure 1). At the same time, the probability that Pygmy children are neither working nor at school is also higher.

Average years of schooling are 3.0 for men and 2.8 for women among the Pygmies, compared with 6.5 years for both men and women among the non-Pygmies. Regression analysis shows that even after controlling for other observable characteristics such as household composition, age, geographic location, and the like, Pygmy children have a substantial and statistically significant lower probability of being enrolled. Because of limited schooling, Pygmies are also much more likely to be illiterate.

FIGURE 1

Share of children's activities in Gabon, by ethnicity, 2003

Source: Authors' estimates based on 2003 census data.

In terms of basic infrastructure the Pygmies are less likely to have access to safe water and electricity; more likely to live in dwelling whose walls, roof, or floor is made of temporary materials; and less likely to have adequate sanitation. Even compared with rural households, the Pygmies fare worse in all housing dimensions.

Reliable comparable data on the socio-economic status of indigenous peoples in Sub-Saharan Africa are often lacking, but 2003 census data for Gabon show that the Pygmies are lagging behind the general population in terms of wealth, education, and access to basic infrastructure. While these findings do not point to specific policies that the government could implement to improve the Pygmies' living conditions, they do suggest the need for more qualitative and institutional analysis of measures to target this especially vulnerable segment of Gabon's population.