

## The Azores and Emigration

**Autor(a):** Gilberta Pavão Nunes Rocha | **Saiba mais sobre o(a) autor(a)**

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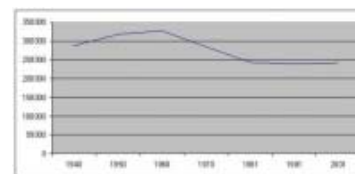


Figure 1. Evolution of total population in the Azores between 1940 and 2001

### RESUMO

Emigration was a key factor in understanding population increases and decreases in the Azores and the balances and imbalances in age and gender. It can be considered the central element in the demographic and social dynamics of the region and of each of its islands, until about twenty years ago. This scenario was only altered in the final years of the last century, not only due to a significant decrease in the emigration flow, but also due to the arrival of foreigners who have been settling in the region in recent years.

### CONTEÚDO

Over the centuries, international mobility, in particular emigration, was a key factor in understanding population increases and decreases in the Azores and the balances and imbalances in age and gender; it even visibly influenced birth and marriage rates. Emigration can, in fact, be considered the central element in the demographic and social dynamics of the region and of each of its islands, until about twenty years ago (Rocha 1991). This scenario was only altered in the final years of the last century, not only due to a significant decrease in the emigration flow, but also due to the arrival of foreigners who have been settling in the region in recent years.

Even though the desire to depart is a strictly personal motivation, we all know that the main reason for emigration lay in the great economical and social rifts which, for years and even centuries, characterized Azorean society. Between 1866 and 2001, a period which generally corresponds to the destination of North American, the number of Azorean emigrants rose to around 440,000 (100,000 in the nineteenth century and 340,000 in the twentieth century). In the first years of the second half of the nineteenth century, most emigrants were from the islands of the central group, namely in the former District of Horta, whilst only later did the inhabitants of the former Districts of Angra do Heroísmo and Ponta Delgada head for the New World.

Despite the yearly differences, I think it is legitimate to consider four great stages during this long period. Each of them presents distinct characteristics, not only in terms of the migratory volume, but also in the economical, political, social, and even cultural context of Azorean society. Nonetheless, the social conditions and the immigration laws of the countries of destination should not be ignored; in fact, they should be considered as one of the key causes of the intense Azorean emigration to the North American continent, which justifies many changes in the islands' demography and supports the aforementioned periodicity.

In the first period, which extended up to the first two decades of the twentieth century, the migration flow was intense and open, without entry restrictions to the country of destination, a condition that ceased in the 1920s. The demographic consequences in the archipelago were essentially visible in a reduction in the number of the total population and in an age and gender imbalance, this latter factor being especially evident on the islands of the central and western groups, where it certainly influenced marriage and, consequently, birth rates (Rocha 1991). The probable return of elderly emigrants to some islands during the 1920s should also be noted, such as the case of Graciosa, where the level of population aging is already at odds with the social characteristics in which this imbalance occurred, which is a result of our current modernity, as we all know. It is my belief that the demographic dynamic of this period, and even of previous periods, had consequences that are still visible today and that are a determining factor in understanding the population diversity of the different islands and, consequently, the regional plurality also observed in the second half of the twentieth century.

Clearly different from the previous scenario, the emigration flow of the second period was much reduced, an effect of the social and economical context of the years following World War I, which in the United States led to laws greatly restricting immigration, a situation which only changed more than a decade after World War II. The population of the archipelago considerably increased in this context, because the natural population growth, resulting from the evolution of mortality and especially natality, was fairly positive, with this period additionally witnessing a rebalance between the quantity of men and women and even a certain demographic rejuvenation. But the most evident fact was the increase in the number of residents, which justified many of the opinions voiced at the time, as exemplified by the words of Luis da Silva Ribeiro:

Today, for certain, no one in the islands will bring up the old, obsolete arguments against emigration or unleash, once again, ridiculous, whining laments upon the impoverishment of our economy due to the absence of manpower. Facts, with all their power to convince, and the sad experience of two decades when emigration virtually did not exist, must have been enough to demonstrate that we are dealing with a natural demographic phenomenon, which is absolutely indispensable to our life, because it is useful in all aspects, from the population balance to the beneficial repercussion on the economic balance sheet (Ribeiro 186).

If the lack of emigration, with visible consequences in the population increase, seems to emerge as the main cause of the economical and social problems for this and other intellectuals, who I believe were concerned about the well-being of their fellow citizens, we can see that the views on emigration are not limited to isolated reflections, but rather to a broader political strategy. Armando Cândido, a member of the National Assembly, exemplifies it in his book of 1952, where he compiles a series of texts about the demographic debate presented to the aforementioned assembly, and where he puts forward his own thoughts, which I have summarized below: The emigrant who settles in a foreign country is the best of propagandas, free, alive, permanent. . . Currently, without resorting to emigration, we cannot satisfactorily accommodate our demographic balance, especially in the regions of the Minho, the Azores and Madeira.

Later, through a gradual reduction, it would be possible to do without emigration as an outflow process, but even when this could take place, besides the aforementioned historical and political reasons, plus a greater facility in regularizing wages . . . the economical conveniences would remain, materialized in the sums of money emigrants can save and send or bring back to their home country and in the volume of trade that they bring about and feed by continuing to demand national products, while publicizing these products in the places they have travelled to and where they live (Cândido 133-35).

Notwithstanding the references to these opinions in previous works (Rocha 2001), I still consider Armando Cândido's views as the most elucidative in terms of the importance given to emigration, not only from the Azores but also from the country as a whole. This importance is emphasized by the documented manner in which the author approaches the topic, citing the work of international experts, who are a reference in the demographic science of the time, a rare fact in the Portuguese context of the 1940s and '50s. Even so, the ideological factor is clearly present, evident in the way that both the advantages of maintaining stability and the propaganda for the country are regarded. I therefore consider that one should stress the relevance given to emigration as a solution in this period, or rather as "the" solution, highlighting its positive effects in economic, social, and even political terms. Furthermore, emigration is also alleged to be the main cause of the problems of a society that should not be questioned, let alone altered. It is the emigrant population that should serve the interests of the organization of the country (of the state, of a social group), rather than the country (the state) that should organize itself to provide living conditions for its population. Besides being the solution for unemployment and the consequent watering down of social unrest, from this point of view, emigration meant profit, free from expenses and purely generating income. Demography was considered the main source of problems and emigration the most beneficial solution, with desirable effects in all areas of national

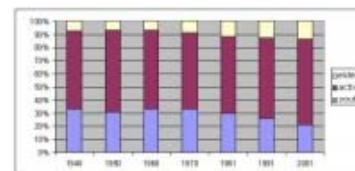


Figure 2. Evolution of population age structure in the Azores between 1940 and 2001