



## ■ BRIEF Advancing Data Equity for U.S. Territories

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### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Residents of U.S. territories—American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands—are not equally represented in critical federal data collections in comparison to the 50 states and the District of Columbia.
- Federal statistical products are essential to meeting the needs of people in the territories, from education to health care to emergency preparedness. Policymakers, researchers, and others cannot fully understand the social, environmental, and economic challenges residents of U.S. territories face without timely and accurate data.
- The missing statistical information about U.S. territories is a racial justice and equity issue. The vast majority of the 3.6 million people in U.S. territories are people of color. Inequality in data collection programs reflects and sometimes deepens discrimination against these communities of color.

**M**ore than 3.6 million people live in the United States (U.S.) territories of American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands (NMI), Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI).<sup>1</sup> Though this population is equal to that of the five smallest U.S. states combined,<sup>2</sup> the federal government overlooks the critical data needs of Americans living in the territories. Indeed, many critical government data collection efforts and publications entirely exclude the U.S. territories. As a result, essential statistical data on housing, labor force participation, demographic changes, and more are either missing or unavailable on a timely basis.

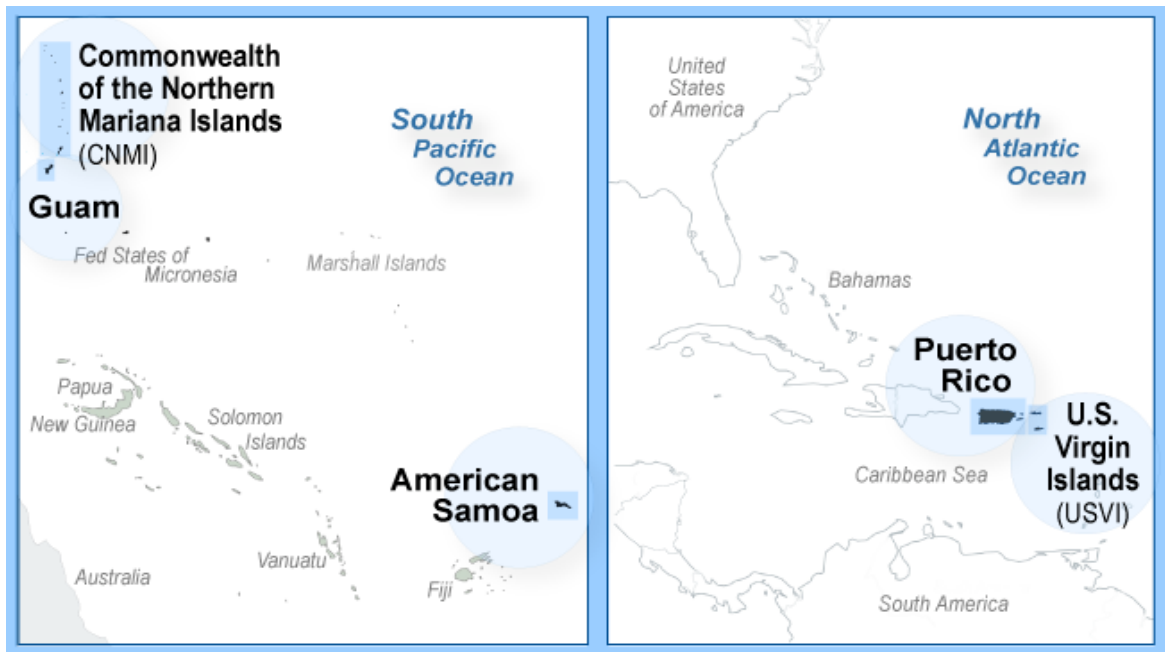
Addressing these data disparities is an urgent task. Millions of U.S. citizens and residents are rendered invisible by their unequal treatment in the federal statistical system, resulting in an incomplete portrait of the nation. These data disparities undermine the ability of policymakers, researchers, and others to understand national and local challenges, especially the unique risks posed by the climate emergency<sup>3</sup> and the pervasive challenges of social and economic inequalities.<sup>4,5</sup> The disparities also hamper the development of evidence-based policies and solutions to address challenges.<sup>6</sup>

For example, the U.S. territories experienced an alarming population decline between 2010 and 2020. Overall, the total population living in U.S. territories shrunk by 11.6 percent while the populations living in the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia (D.C.) increased by 7.4 percent over the same period—resulting in a staggering difference of nearly 20 percentage points. While the drivers of these demographic patterns are complex, significant data gaps exist in the federal statistical system. Accurate, timely, and sufficiently detailed statistical data on the territories are elusive, making it difficult to fully explain the drivers of these demographic patterns and formulate policies and programs that address their underlying causes.<sup>7</sup>

One legislative effort to address data gaps is the Territories Statistics Collection Equity Act (H.R. 8593), introduced by House Natural Resources Chair Raúl M. Grijalva (D-Ariz.) and the delegates of the five U.S. Territories. This legislation, if passed, would direct the Interagency Council on Statistical Policy (ICSP) to develop a plan to collect and publish statistics about the U.S. territories in the same manner as states.<sup>8</sup> Chair Grijalva and the territorial delegates have also asked the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to examine gaps in federal agency data collection for the territories and the consequential impact on communities in U.S. territories.<sup>9</sup>

Federal policymakers should take steps to ensure greater data parity between the territories and the 50 states and D.C. Policymakers can strengthen existing data collection protocols—which recently have improved treatment of Puerto Rico in the federal statistical system—and expand them to include the smaller U.S. territories. Additionally, policymakers should ensure adequate funding and staffing for statistical agencies to include the smaller territories in federal data collection. The disparity in federal statistics also reflects broader challenges that residents of U.S. territories face relative to their full participation in democracy in the U.S., their participation in economic security programs, and the resolution of political status and self-determination.<sup>10</sup>

**FIGURE 1. Map of the Five Permanently Inhabited U.S. Territories**



**Note:** This map shows the five permanently inhabited U.S. territories and does not show the freely associated states and uninhabited territories.

**Source:** Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2022. “U.S. Territories: Public Debt Outlook – 2021 Update.” Government Accountability Office, 30 June 2021. Available at <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-508>.

## Background

### ABOUT U.S. TERRITORIES

There are five U.S. territories: Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands in the Caribbean Sea; and Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa in the Pacific Ocean.<sup>11</sup> Spain ceded Puerto Rico and Guam to the U.S. following the Spanish-American War in 1898.<sup>12</sup> American Samoa became part of the United States through the 1900 and 1904 Deeds of Cession.<sup>13</sup> The U.S. purchased the Virgin Islands from Denmark for \$25 million in 1917.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the Northern Mariana Islands became a U.S. territory through a Covenant that was agreed to in 1976 and became effective in 1986.<sup>15</sup> Most people born in U.S. territories are recognized as U.S. citizens, but with limited rights.<sup>16, 17</sup> Territorial governments largely mirror the structure of state governments, with an elected governor, legislature, and independent territorial courts.<sup>18</sup>

Even after nearly 125 years,<sup>19</sup> the federal government continues to treat U.S. citizens and residents in the territories as second-class. Indeed, when any citizen moves to a U.S. territory, they can no longer exercise their right to vote for president,<sup>20</sup> lose voting representation in Congress,<sup>21</sup> and become ineligible or treated unequally in our systems of social supports, including public benefits programs.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, U.S. territories generally have higher rates of military service than any state, and pay billions in federal taxes—although most do not pay federal income taxes.<sup>23</sup> Residents of Puerto Rico alone paid more than \$4 billion in federal taxes during fiscal year 2021,<sup>24</sup> a total contribution exceeding those of several states.<sup>25</sup> Referring

to the discrimination against residents of U.S. territories, President Biden declared in 2021 that “there can be no second-class citizens in the United States of America.”<sup>26</sup> However, residents of U.S. territories continue to face discrimination and barriers to full economic and political participation.<sup>27</sup>

The vast majority of the 3.6 million people in U.S. territories are people of color. More than 99 percent of people living in Puerto Rico<sup>28</sup> and around 87 percent of people living in USVI are people of color.<sup>29</sup> While comparable statistics from the 2020 Census are not available as of October 2022 for the other territories, less than seven percent of people in Guam,<sup>30</sup> less than one percent of people in American Samoa,<sup>31</sup> and around two percent of people in NMI identify as white and either Hispanic or non-Hispanic.<sup>32</sup>

## FIGURE 2. U.S. Territories Have Experienced Significant Population Declines

Population totals for the U.S. Territories based on the 2010 Census & 2020 Census

	Population (2020)	Population (2010)	Percent Change
Puerto Rico	3,285,874	3,725,789	-11.8%
Guam	153,836	159,358	-3.5%
U.S. Virgin Islands	87,146	106,405	-18.1%
American Samoa	49,710	55,519	-10.5%
Northern Mariana Islands	47,329	53,883	-12.2%
<b>Total Population of U.S. Territories</b>	<b>3,623,895</b>	<b>4,100,954</b>	<b>-11.6%</b>
<b>Total Population of the 50 U.S. States and D.C.</b>	<b>331,449,281</b>	<b>308,745,538</b>	<b>7.35%</b>

**Note:** According to the Census Bureau’s evaluation, the 2020 Census had a net overcount of people in Puerto Rico by 5.7 percent, or about 174,000 people. While this represents an increase in the overcount from the 2010 Census (which had a 4.5 percent overcount), the difference is not statistically significant. Official estimates of census net over- and undercounts are not available for the other territories.

**Source:** Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality analysis of 2020 Census and 2010 Census data, 2022. Available at <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/state-by-state/puerto-rico-population-change-between-census-decade.html> and <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/2020/planning-management/release/2020-island-areas-data-products.html>.

## ABOUT THE U.S. FEDERAL STATISTICAL SYSTEM

The U.S. federal statistical system is highly decentralized, with 13 principal statistical agencies and 96 other statistical programs.<sup>33</sup> The Census Bureau alone conducts more than 130 surveys and programs.<sup>34</sup> This brief, however, focuses more narrowly on four critical federal datasets constructed by the Census Bureau: the Decennial Census (Census), the American Community Survey (ACS), the Population Estimates, and the Current Population Survey (CPS).

These four datasets are among the premier sources of information about the U.S. population, households, and workforce.<sup>35</sup> The data are critical to various policy areas, including those related to housing, education, health care, manufacturing, political representation, and transportation.<sup>36</sup>

Together, the Census, ACS, Population Estimates, and CPS play a foundational role in the U.S. federal statistical system. The statistical products also play a critical role in guiding more than

\$1.5 trillion in federal funding each year and serve as inputs for geographic classifications, economic indicators, and various program-specific measures.<sup>37</sup> For example, the CPS—the primary source of labor force statistics in the U.S.<sup>38</sup>—is a critical input for determining the Official Poverty Measure (OPM) and the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM).<sup>39</sup>

**FIGURE 3. Puerto Rico Is Included in More Federal Statistical Datasets Compared To Other U.S. Territories**

Comparison of the U.S. territories & their inclusion in select major federal statistical datasets

	American Samoa	Northern Mariana Islands	Puerto Rico	U.S. Virgin Islands	Guam
<b>Decennial Census</b>	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included
<b>American Community Survey</b>	Excluded*	Excluded*	Included	Excluded*	Excluded*
<b>Population Estimates</b>	Excluded	Excluded	Included	Excluded	Excluded
<b>Current Population Survey</b>	Excluded	Excluded	Excluded	Excluded	Excluded

**Note:** \* For the 2020 Decennial Census, the Census Bureau enumerated the residents of American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam through a separate operation called the “Island Area Census (IAC).” Though the four territories enumerated through the IAC are excluded from ACS data collection, the islands receive a census “long-form” questionnaire once a decade, similar to the ACS questionnaire.

**Source:** GCPI ESOI analysis of technical documentation from the Decennial Census, Population Estimates, and Current Population Survey, 2022. Available at <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/technical-documentation/island-areas-tech-docs/demographic-profile/2020-iac-dpsf-technical-documentation.pdf>; <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/technical-documentation.html>; and <https://www.bls.gov/cps/definitions.htm#geo>.

## Territories Lack Sufficient Representation in Major Statistical Datasets

The U.S. territories receive unequal treatment compared to the 50 U.S. States and D.C. in the federal statistical system.<sup>40</sup> Notably, none of the territories are included in the CPS. However, Puerto Rico tends to have greater representation in the federal statistical system than other island territories through its inclusion in various datasets, due to its relatively larger population size and as a result of executive action.<sup>41</sup> In 1992, President George H.W. Bush signed a Presidential Memorandum<sup>42</sup> directing federal departments, agencies, and officials to “treat Puerto Rico administratively as if it were a State.”<sup>43</sup> Today, Puerto Rico is covered in the ACS (through the Puerto Rico Community Survey) and the annually updated Population Estimates.<sup>44</sup> American Samoa, Guam, U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands are not covered in the ACS (see Figure 3).<sup>45</sup> The Census Bureau collects data comparable to the ACS in the latter four territories through the once-in-a-decade census “long-form” questionnaire. The long-form questionnaire would not be necessary if all of the territories were included in the ACS.<sup>46</sup>



Even when the territories are included in a statistical product, the territories remain on unequal footing. For example, while all five territories are included in the Census,<sup>47</sup> the U.S. population count announced to the public often excludes people living in the territories. In April 2021, when the Census Bureau announced the first 2020 Census results, the agency noted that “According to the 2020 Census, the number of people living in the United States was 331,449,281.”<sup>48</sup> However, this total excluded the roughly 3.6 million residents of the island territories.<sup>49, 50</sup> Further, the population counts for the smaller four territories were only published six months later, in October 2021.<sup>51</sup> Data for the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands are also excluded from all decennial census products and programs. For example, none of these four smaller territories are included in evaluations which provide insight into how accurately the census enumerated different areas and groups.<sup>52</sup>

## WHY DOES FEDERAL DATA COLLECTION IN U.S. TERRITORIES MATTER?

Policymakers, researchers, and other groups cannot fully understand the social, environmental, and economic challenges in the territories without timely and accurate data. The data deficiency hampers efforts to develop evidence-based policies and plans to address these challenges.<sup>53</sup> Despite experiencing significantly higher poverty rates than the U.S. overall,<sup>54</sup> the territories do not have the timely statistical information required to reliably measure and understand economic insecurity. The CPS is the basis for poverty measurements in the 50 U.S. states and D.C.; however, this important survey excludes all of the territories.<sup>55</sup>

Though ACS information is available in Puerto Rico,<sup>56</sup> the four smaller territories are the only areas in the U.S. to rely on statistical information from the once-in-a-decade census “long-form.”<sup>57</sup> For example, the ACS is a key datasource for calculating Fair Market Rent (FMR). A statistic produced by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), FMRs determine payments for various housing assistance programs, including Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher programs. Since the ACS is unavailable for the smaller territories, HUD initially calculates FMRs based on the census “long form” but then updates the statistics based on the national ACS data, which may not reflect local trends and developments. As a result of the exclusion of the territories from key surveys, the allocation of federal funding and assessment of public needs for roads, schools, hospitals, and other services in those territories may be based on statistics that are outdated, inaccurate, or both.<sup>58</sup>

Some territorial governments and public institutions have made additional efforts to collect information about their populations, such as the Virgin Islands Community Survey (VICS) conducted by the University of the Virgin Islands.<sup>59</sup> However, statistical products produced by these stakeholders are not acknowledged by government entities and other datausers as official statistics and as substitutes for federal government datasets.<sup>60</sup> For example, the federal government does not use VICS data to guide federal funding; the data also may be overlooked by national organizations and foundations that otherwise use ACS data in grantmaking decisions.<sup>61</sup>

## BOX 1

### CASE STUDY: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC & EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

The COVID-19 pandemic caused massive job losses and significant changes to the labor force across the U.S., including within the five territories.<sup>62</sup> Recognizing this unprecedented moment for workers, the Current Population Survey (CPS) added questions in May 2020 about the pandemic and its impacts on job loss, job-seeking, and missed work related to illness into its monthly household surveys to understand the pandemic's effects and equip policymakers, researchers and media with actionable data.<sup>63</sup>

The five territories, excluded from the CPS, had no equivalent, timely data source to understand the pandemic's effects on their residents and inform policy and funding decisions.<sup>64</sup> In February 2022, a GAO report on workforce trends summarized the pandemic's impacts, finding large declines in employment, particularly among low-paid workers.<sup>65</sup> Apart from these top-line findings, part of a Congressional effort to examine the ratio of U.S. workers to foreign workers in the Northern Mariana Islands,<sup>66</sup> the report illustrates the limitations in data gathering in the territories.

First, unlike the CPS, which surveys workers at a household level each month to understand granular labor force dynamics,<sup>67</sup> the Northern Mariana Islands data are based on self-reported employer data collected annually.<sup>68</sup> Participation in the employer survey dropped significantly in 2020 and 2021.<sup>69</sup> Although the GAO warned that the results “should be interpreted with caution,” it nevertheless used the employers' self-reporting because it was the “best available data” on employment and wages.<sup>70</sup> The GAO reports on workforce trends are conducted biennially under the Northern Mariana Islands U.S. Workforce Act of 2018, but the reports are not intended to provide timely labor force data.<sup>71</sup>

Second, although the period the GAO report examined, 2019 to 2021, coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, the report notes that the effects could not be disaggregated from the lingering impacts of Super Typhoon Yutu.<sup>72</sup> Super Typhoon Yutu, a Category 5 hurricane that devastated the Northern Mariana Islands at the end of 2018,<sup>73</sup> also significantly affected the region's tourism and service sectors.<sup>74</sup> As recently as October 2022, the Northern Mariana Islands are still receiving grant money for reconstruction from the Federal Emergency Management Agency in response to Typhoon Yutu.<sup>75</sup> This demonstrates the extensive amount of time it takes for U.S. territories to recover and rebuild with limited resources and assistance.

As island areas, the territories are more vulnerable to the impacts of extreme weather events and the climate crisis, including rising sea levels and intensifying hurricanes.<sup>76</sup> The lack of current federal statistics and infrequent data collection undermine efforts to study the impacts of extreme weather events and track the social and economic recovery after these events on the territories' people and communities. The lack of timely and regularly collected statistics also hinders government officials' and emergency aid organizations' effective planning for and response to such events.<sup>77</sup> In Guam, the Social Vulnerability Index (SVI)—which uses decennial census data—is used to identify individuals that may be particularly vulnerable to hazardous weather conditions.<sup>78</sup> However, outdated and unreliable data sources present a barrier to the full realization of the benefits of such index measures for populations in Guam.

## CHALLENGES TO DATA PARITY

The Census Bureau and other statistical agencies may exclude the territories—American Samoa, Guam, U.S. Virgin Islands, and Northern Mariana Islands, in particular—due to various reasons such as cost and operational challenges. For example, given the smaller population sizes of some of the territories, the U.S. Census Bureau has indicated that it would be difficult to produce statistical products for territories based on a population sample rather than a more resource-intensive enumeration of the entire population.<sup>79</sup> However, similar challenges exist in the 50 U.S. States and D.C., such as remote areas of Alaska where the Census Bureau does conduct its censuses and surveys, demonstrating this is an issue of prioritization, not simply cost or logistical obstacles.<sup>80</sup> The Territories Statistics Collection Equity Act (H.R. 8593) would make federal data collection in U.S. territories a higher priority and help policymakers better understand and find solutions for these data inequalities.<sup>81</sup>

## Recommendations

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- **Conduct a comprehensive review of data collection gaps, the impact missing data have on territorial communities, and the steps required to include territorial residents in key federal data collections.** The Government Accountability Office could undertake a rigorous and comprehensive examination of the ways territorial residents are excluded from federal data collection, including the impact this has on those communities. This step would align with the written request by Rep. Grijalva and the five territorial delegates to the GAO.<sup>82</sup> Further, GAO could identify which reforms can be accomplished administratively without any further legislative action, which reforms require legislative action, and their respective costs. Such a report could also examine and compare how the U.S. census and other federal data collection programs successfully operate in other American communities that present challenges in terms of logistics and cost.
- **Revise and strengthen standards, policies, and norms in federal departments and agencies regarding the treatment of U.S. territories in the statistical system.** Partly due to the 1992 Presidential Memorandum signed by President George H.W. Bush, Puerto Rico receives more state-like treatment in the statistical system. Strengthening this standard and expanding it to include all of the U.S. territories may result in a statistical system that is more inclusive of all of the nation's residents and citizens.
- **Better integrate U.S. territories into decennial census operations and data product releases.** The Census Bureau's data collection, processing, and coverage evaluation operations for the smaller U.S. territories should be brought more in line with the operations for the 50 U.S. states, D.C. and Puerto Rico. For example, the Census Bureau could extend the Post-Enumeration Survey (or develop an alternate method) to evaluate the accuracy of census estimates for the smaller U.S. territories. The bureau could also produce Master Address Files for the smaller territories ahead of the next census and announce the population totals at the same time as the rest of the nation.
- **Ensure adequate federal funding and staffing to consistently include all U.S. territories in major statistical surveys and programs.** During the decennial census, the Census Bureau deploys temporary advisors to help guide data collection efforts in the smaller territories. However, the inclusion of the territories in major, continuing federal statistical surveys such as the ACS would likely require full-time enumerators and the establishment



of permanent offices to work local operations and undertake data collection closely with local stakeholders. The establishment of permanent offices and full-time enumerators could improve the cost efficiency of including territories in routine federal surveys as well as improve the accuracy of data collected. Alternate methodologies should be explored and considered for the territories if their adoption would improve the timeliness, availability, and cost of statistical data without sacrificing the quality of the data.

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# Endnotes

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