



June 21, 2024

Re: Testimony on “*Examining GAO’s Findings to Address Data Gaps and Improve Data Collection in the Territories*”

Dear Chair Hageman and Ranking Member Leger Fernández:

Thank you for holding a hearing to address data gaps and the improvement of data collection in U.S. territories. At Right to Democracy, our nonprofit is focused on building a movement to confront and dismantle the undemocratic colonial framework that impacts 3.6 million people in U.S. territories - 98% of whom are people of color. One stark example of the effects of this colonial framework is the lack of parity in federal data collection programs between people living in U.S. territories and those in other parts of the United States. We agree with Congresswoman Velasquez: “Puerto Rico is a colony. It is the responsibility of the U.S. Government, it is the responsibility of the U.S. Congress, to provide the funding so that the federal agencies include Puerto Rico and the territories in the data collection.” She is right that “life or death can be defined by the lack of data,” something people in U.S. territories continue to experience every day in myriad ways. The importance of advancing data equity in U.S. territories reflects a broader need for the United States to recognize it has a colonial problem - and to act with urgency to address it.

In 2022, our predecessor organization issued a report with the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality titled [*Advancing Data Equity for U.S. Territories*](#). As we explained then, “[m]illions of U.S. citizens and residents are rendered invisible by their unequal treatment in the federal statistical system.” Building from this report, we write to further articulate the detrimental impacts of the existing data gaps and what they mean for those living in the U.S. territories of Puerto Rico, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, U.S. Virgin Islands and American Samoa. Exclusion from federal data collection and statistics is an expression of how the worth and dignity of people in U.S. territories is too often unrecognized by the federal

government. One way to show that people in the territories count is to actually make sure they are counted.

It is necessary for communities in the territories to have the information needed in order to make proper policy decisions and to be able to have effective governance. As a majority of people in the territories are people of color, data inequalities enable discrimination and deepen systemic racism. In order to redress these inequalities, policymakers, researchers, and other advocates and leaders need to be able to gather or access rigorous and comprehensive data in order to fully understand and propose solutions to the social, environmental, and economic challenges communities in the territories face.

Better and more regular data is needed to understand the dynamics leading to the dramatic population declines in U.S. territories over the last decade. Between 2010 and 2020, The population in U.S. territories [shrank](#) by an average of 11.6%, while the population of the 50 states and the District of Columbia increased by 7.4% over the same period. Information that sheds light on patterns and reasons of migration, among other types of data, is crucial to understand the population decline and why this pattern is so different from the other parts of the United States.

Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge the importance of federal statistics in guiding federal funding and investment. Within the four major federal statistical datasets—the Decennial Census, American Community Survey, Population Estimates, and Current Population Survey—the territories are often excluded in part or in whole. While all are included in the Decennial Census, none are included in the Current Population Survey, and all but Puerto Rico are excluded from the American Community Survey and Population Estimates. Puerto Rico is, nevertheless, excluded from the American Housing Survey. Exclusion of the territories is highly detrimental as these statistical products play a critical role in guiding more than [\\$1.5 trillion in federal funding](#) each year and serving as inputs for economic indicators, various program-specific measures, and geographic classifications. This leaves the limited allocation of federal funding and the assessment of public needs to be based on statistics that are inaccurate, outdated, or both. This inequality is compounded by the heightened degree of poverty in the territories, ranging from 2-5 times the national average by territory.

Even when territories are included in statistical products, they are often excluded from reporting of those statistical products and experience delays in receiving such information. For

example, when the 2020 Census results were released in 2021, the population counts for the smaller territories (all but Puerto Rico) were released [six months later](#) than the rest of the United States. While some territorial governments and public institutions have made efforts to find information about their own populations, these statistics do not guide federal funding and can be overlooked by national organizations and foundations that otherwise use ACS data in grantmaking decisions.

The unfortunate ramifications of data inequality are exacerbated during times of national and global strain, such as during the pandemic. The addition of new questions to the Current Population Survey (CPS) was a measure taken by the Census Bureau in order to equip policymakers, researchers, and advocates with actionable information and insights in the States [during the pandemic](#). Nevertheless, the territories are [excluded](#) from the CPS. This left local governments in the territories with the challenge of gathering information without proper resources and having to resort to ad-hoc solutions that at times relied on employers during a time of intensified need, such as [occurred in the Northern Mariana Islands](#). The U.S. government has the responsibility of providing the needed resources and capacity to the territorial governments and agencies in order to avoid leaving them in such a vulnerable position during times of crisis.

Federal data gaps also impact how territories are able to [respond to the climate crisis](#), which is significant since these areas are “experiencing the impacts of warming oceans, more frequent and violent storms, and bleaching coral reefs.” The GAO’s [recent report](#) on data gaps in U.S. territories reveals that territories are missing important data—like those regarding demographics, economics, and agriculture—that are useful in the creation of climate policy. For example, American Samoa is negatively affected by the undercounting of farms by the census, as they may be relying too heavily on the presence of electric meters, which is especially detrimental as subsistence agriculture is becoming increasingly important to address gaps in food security. In Guam, which is frequently hit with typhoons and natural disasters, there is a concern that the lack of inclusion in the federal Social Vulnerability Index may lead to underestimates of resources they need.

We hope that Congress and the Biden Administration will act on the GAO’s recommendations. But it should also go further. We [recommend](#):

- Revising and strengthening the standards, policies, and norms in federal departments and agencies regarding the treatment of U.S. territories in the statistical system.

- Working with territorial governments, organizations and leaders to better integrate U.S. territories into decennial census operations and data product releases;
- Ensuring adequate federal funding and staffing to consistently include all U.S. territories in major statistical surveys and programs.

We note the challenges distance, relative size, and geography can create in U.S. territories. 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. It is important to solve the discrimination against people in U.S. territories by closing the data gap. It is urgent that local realities be reflected in the creation of federal policies, and local groups and organizations are consulted as to best practices to achieve that. Improved data collection in the territories is necessary to promote effective local governance.

Closing territorial data gaps is more a question of political will than legal authorization - notably there was no mention during the hearing that federal agencies lacked existing authority to take such actions. Congress can and should do more to improve federal data collection in the territories, such as by passing the bi-partisan [Territories Statistics Collection Equity Act](#) and increasing congressional appropriations to cover any added costs associated with improving data collection in the territories. But the Biden Administration need not wait for Congress to act. President George H.W. Bush took executive action in 1992 to help close some of the data gaps impacting Puerto Rico - President Biden should take similar executive action for all the territories today. Ultimately, both Congress and the President have the duty and responsibility to ensure people in U.S. territories count and are counted the same as people anywhere else in the United States.

Sincerely,



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