

**Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Indian and Insular  
Affairs Oversight Hearing  
1324 Longworth House Office Building June 13, 2024  
11:00 AM**

- *"Examining GAO's Findings to Address Data Gaps and Improve Data Collection in the Territories."*

**Questions from Rep. Westerman** for Dr. Michael Levin, Independent Consultant, PacificWeb LLC

1. In your experience having worked for the Census Bureau, what challenges do federal agencies face when collecting data on the U.S. territories?

MJL: American Samoa and CNMI have traditionally had no problems collecting high-quality data, both in the censuses and in surveys. Usually, agencies draw samples and exclude very few units because respondents either weren't there or refused. But Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands both have problems in data collection.

MJL: The 2015 Virgin Islands Household Survey took part of two years, and the 2019 Guam Household Survey failed because of problems in the enumeration. Getting people to open their doors because of potential crime is a problem. Also, in both territories, unlike American Samoa and CNMI, people are often out of their houses in late afternoon and early evening, and since enumeration in all Areas is door to door, it is often difficult to track down the respondents. And, the income and expenditures surveys have very intrusive questions, so the respondents just refuse to answer them.

MJL: I cannot speak for the Virgin Islands since I don't continue to work there. For American Samoa and CNMI, the federal agencies should not have problems getting the administrative data. This is true for Guam as well, I think. Except that the Bureau of Labor no longer shares the microdata for subsequent analysis as they used to in the 1980s and 1990s. This is unfortunate because many times, additional useful information can come from surveys above what is initially required.

2. In your written testimony, you pointed out that formal training was a key part of capacity building efforts by the U.S. government, such as training programs hosted by the Census Bureau.

MJL: As I noted in the written testimony, OIA funded an excellent set of formal training sessions as part of the Statistical Enhancement Project. Topics included constructing yearbooks, cause of death coding, and so forth. We brought together the 6 Pacific Areas and the U.S. Virgin Islands, first to the East-West Center in Honolulu, and then, when their overheads were too high, to Washington. Because censuses and surveys use Census Bureau conventions, the Bureau should be involved in training where appropriate. However, once trained, the territorial statisticians should be able to do in-country training.

- a. Is formal training no longer provided by U.S. agencies for the territories? If so, why are they no longer provided?

MJL: The Census Bureau sends technical advisors to the territories before each decennial census, and those individuals remain until the census is complete and sent back to the Mainland. The Department of Agriculture also sends advisors to the Areas when implementing the quinquennial agriculture census. I'm not sure on the Economic Census. The Census Bureau also sent advisors when they were doing the Micronesian migrants' surveys in 2008 and 2018. Because these use Census Bureau conventions, these are training in various aspects of the process.

MJL: However, the Census Bureau used to do training on its packages – IMPS in DOS, and now CSPro in Windows – both at the Census Bureau in Washington, sometimes regionally, and sometimes in-country. They have not done this training recently. Also, the Bureau used to do analysis workshops, where representatives from the Areas came together for training in report writing. I don't think they have done this recently either.

3. According to your written testimony, the Office of Insular Affairs reduced its support for capacity building for the territorial statistic offices. While the Office of Insular Affairs continued to fund insular survey costs, it seems funding was committed to paying for expensive Census Bureau and Bureau of Economic Analysis products.

MJL: I haven't worked with the Bureau of Economic Analysis, so I can't comment on that. But the Census Bureau is expensive, as I noted in the written testimony. OIA gave us \$300,000 in 2003 to do Micronesian migrants surveys in Guam, CNMI, and Hawaii; in 2008 I had left the Bureau for Harvard, and OIA continued to go with the Census Bureau although I had submitted a proposal from Harvard. The Bureau used already available American Community Survey (ACS) data for Hawaii for the 2008 Impact round, but the Bureau selected blocks in CNMI and Guam for enumeration. The Bureau charged \$1.2 million for that survey. And, the number of items went from about 60 to less than 10, so no education, economics, etc.

- a. How much more does it cost for the Office of Insular Affairs to outsource data collection to agencies like the Census Bureau for surveys such as Freely Associated States migration data that was used for Compact Impact Grant funding?

MJL: As noted, the Census Bureau charges much more, partly because of its overheads. When I worked for OIA, my counterparts there (and I) prided ourselves on (1) keeping costs down without sacrificing accuracy, and (2) using all islanders to do the enumeration. In the 1992/93, 1997/98, and 2003 Impact rounds, except for me, all supervisors and enumerators, and coders and keyers were Micronesian. The Census Bureau used enumerators of any ethnicity in its 2008 and 2018 enumerations (they used the 2010 Census for the 2013 round). The Bureau's staff processed the surveys.

4. When looking at the Census Bureau's data collection for Freely Associated States migration data from 2003 to 2018, was this data reliable and consistent?

MJL: The Census Bureau data should be good because they are interested in the sampling error, and so provide ranges in the publications, with the actual counts being somewhere within the range. However, OIA distributed the funding on the determined "count" and did not include the sampling error in the calculations, as expected. The major problem was we asked about population and housing characteristics as late as 2003. But the Bureau, with OIA's approval, only asked limited numbers of questions to find out who the Compact migrants were.

MJL: I would like to give you a couple of paragraphs on the FAS migrants' surveys. As noted in the written testimony and in this note, in the Impact surveys taken in the 1990s and in 2003, we used the "snowball" method, going to all known units from a place and finding subsequent ones during enumeration. Because the respondents knew the enumerators, and they often collected the enumeration in the vernacular, we had cooperation and what I consider excellent data. Federal agencies used the results if they needed counts. And, as noted, we asked the items on the U.S. Census long form, with some modifications because of the migration itself.

MJL: The need for this type of data has not gone away. The Census Bureau now has enough data on Marshallese and Palauans in the American Community Survey to provide information on the migrants. Not all desired information, but much more than ever before, and as reliable as the Bureau can do. This procedure, so far, does not work for the FSM migrants because of all groups (Chuukese, Pohnpeian, etc.) and the fact that some Marshallese and Palauans and other islanders report "Micronesian".

MJL: In 2012, we did surveys of FSM migrants in CNMI, Guam, Hawaii, and the Mainland – small samples, not all random – for about \$200,000. The costs are not insignificant, but the Micronesians and agencies got data to assist in planning for the current and future flow of the Impact migrants. Groups in Hawaii, Arkansas, Portland-Seattle, and Kansas City are asking for migrants surveys. If OIA or another agency funded them, I think that would be money well spent.

5. Would it be fair to say that capacity building is a more cost-effective solution than funding these expensive projects in the long run?

MJL: I'm not sure how to respond to this. The Decennial, Agriculture, and Economics Censuses must continue since they provide the baseline for intercensal surveys and work involved in obtaining administrative data for the yearbooks. The censuses will normally be expensive because of Bureau involvement. But, CNMI did a complete census in 1995, which was much less expensive, and provided a sampling base, which the Decennial does not since the Bureau does not release census microdata to the Areas. And only provides Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS) for Guam and the Virgin Islands; they say American Samoa and CNMI are too small to sample.

MJL: So, capacity building is involved in these endeavors. Also, as noted above, the local offices gain capacity as they do the work. And they pass that capacity on to others in the statistical office and in other agencies through collaborative work.

- a. Is it also fair to say that outsourcing this data to other agencies does not guarantee high quality data?

MJL: This is a difficult question. As GAO and others show, in order to reduce sampling error, you need a much larger proportional sample in the Area than in a State. So, then you have to decide if you will accept a less certain tabulation because of the smaller sample size. If you are doing a labor force survey to assess employment and unemployment, immigration to the Area, and other characteristics, you might want to accept a less stringent draw just to get information on these topics for planning and policy formation.

MJL: Except for a few exceptions, like Guam's 2019 HIES, the Areas have done an excellent job of data collection over the years. Even though no outside agency was involved in the 2015 HIES for American Samoa, CNMI, and the Virgin Islands, the resulting data provided the market basket items and all three use those initial distributions to follow inflation.

6. In your written testimony, you state that the territorial statistic offices reduced their own data efforts, including on the statistical yearbooks.

MJL: CNMI has only two professionals in the office because the CNMI government is not allocating more positions. The staff must collect the administrative data for the yearbooks, develop and administer surveys, and respond to questions from government and private sector users. I have been helping as much as I can, but then I take institutional knowledge with me (inadvertently).

MJL: American Samoa also has a small office staff for the needed work. Both CNMI and American Samoa structure their statistical work in a Statistics Office, much as the British do in the Commonwealth countries. Guam uses the U.S. system more, distributing statistical activities in various agencies; in the Bureau of Stats and Plans; labor force surveys in the Department of Labor; and, non-labor surveys, like the HIES and Micronesian Migrants surveys at the University of Guam. This is a bulky system, but should be able to cover the needed statistical work.

- a. In your opinion, is this a capacity issue or something else?

MJL: Yes, it is a capacity issue. The governments do not see the importance of good, reliable, and continuing statistics, and so don't adequately staff the offices.

7. The GAO report notes that the Census Bureau cited the lack of street address data as a reason for the lack of data collection for the territories.

MJL: I discussed the use of maps in general enumeration. But for the 1992/1993, 1997/1998, and 2003 Micronesian migrants surveys, we used a different method. An earlier GAO report approved this method as the best in this case in an earlier GAO report. For these surveys, we worked with leaders/elders to get a listing of all householders among the migrant community, based on their sending location. So, the representatives from Yap Proper would list all housing units on Guam with a Yap Proper head of household. And, a Yap Outer Islands representative would try to list all of their households. Then we would assemble the lists, and the enumerators would start going to houses on the lists.

MJL: When the enumerators found an appropriate unit, they would do the questionnaire. And, then, at the end of the session, they would turn to the back of the questionnaire, and ask if this family knew of anyone else from their community whom we might have missed and so not on the list. If the house was already on the list, the enumerator didn't record it again. But, we added any new units to the enumerators' lists, and they would eventually go to those units as well. This procedure continued until they counted all Impact units. Of course, this was early in the migration. It is much harder to do that now, but the migrants generally know where people from their own islands are staying on Guam, CNMI, or Hawaii.

a. Do you believe this reason is justified?

MJL: The reason WAS justified in the past. As noted by GAO and my written testimony, none of the 4 territories have street addresses (and neither do Palau, FSM, or the RMI). So, in the past, when enumerators selected their own units because of little central choice, they would hear a baby crying in a house they were to go to, and skip to an adjacent house.

MJL: But, now, with GPS, units can be located with their geographic coordinates, and so offices can select them when even sketch maps are all that are available. And, with tablets, the enumerators can easily find and do their work at the units. Both CNMI and American Samoa do continuous map updating when funds are available for this, and so they can scientifically select the units. The coordinates often now go on the records to help if the enumerator or supervisor has to go to the unit. Most units in these two Areas are single family, detached units (not apartments) so easily identified.

MJL: Guam also has a complete count of housing units at the Guam Power Authority. The GPA units are those with electricity, but most of Guam is hooked up. But Guam has apartments, and so enumeration has to take that into account in sample selection.

MJL: Because of these operations, agencies doing surveys should be able to select their samples with confidence.

- b. Has the Census Bureau overcome this hurdle in the past? If so, how?

MJL: In the 2008 and 2018 Impact enumerations, the Census Bureau used its own maps to randomly select blocks in CNMI and Guam to look for Compact Micronesians. The supervisors trained the enumerators to find the block to be counted, and to call on each unit in the block. They skipped those units which were not migrants (which missed the chance to get a check on the total population distribution). So, yes, the Census Bureau has overcome this hurdle in the past.

- 8. The GAO report notes that the Census Bureau claims that none of the Pacific territories have proper mapping for sample selection.

- a. Do Guam, American Samoa, and the CNMI have workable maps? MJL: I covered this above.

- b. If so, why was this claim made? MJL: I covered this above.

- 9. The Department of the Interior used to play a larger role in supporting federal data collection for the U.S. territories. However, this role has largely decreased by the mid-2000s as the Department of the Interior shifted from proactive support to reactive grants.

MJL: I don't think there's a question here, but if I am mis-reading, please let me know and I will respond.

- a. As someone who has worked in the U.S. federal statistical system during this period and continues to collect data on the Pacific territories, how has this affected the availability and quality of data for the Pacific territories?

MJL: As noted above, one area that OIA excelled in was the training sessions on various topics. Usually, two staff from each of the territories (the 6 in the Pacific and the Virgin Islands) would come together for training in survey development, editing, and tabulation, analysis, and so forth for two weeks. Then, when they went back to their own office, if they ran into a problem, say in an edit, they could (and did) contact others in the workshops to see how they approached the problem. These procedures enhanced the quality of the data.

MJL: Guam used to have quarterly labor force surveys. Every quarter. But, in recent years, they have been much fewer and far between. Even Guam has seasonality, particularly in the summer when school is out, and they need to consider this over the year. It seems the Guam legislature is not interested in following up on this, and re-instituting the quarterly surveys.

10. Do you have any recommendations for addressing the gaps in federal collection for the U.S. territories?

MJL: The territories all get excellent censuses from the Census Bureau. But those only come every 10 years. The American Community Survey (ACS) currently does not include them, but easily could. [Currently, the territories use the “long form” in the Decennial Census that the U.S. no longer uses, since the ACS replaced it]. The ten years between enumerations is just too long. As I outlined in the written testimony, they could introduce the ACS into the territories and get continuous information instead of every 10 years.

MJL: Also, the yearbooks should become more complete (except in Guam, which actually has too much), and they should be uplifted to online with the ability of users to download in Excel tables needed for planning or research or schooling.

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss the statistical work in the U.S. territories.