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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 Ms. Lola Leon Guerrero, Director of the Bureau of Statistics and Plans, Government of Guam

1. What data gaps are the most immediate concern for Guam and why?

The data gaps of the most immediate concern for Guam and the justification are the following:

- American Community Survey (ACS) – This survey is led by the U.S. Census Bureau and it provides up to date social, economic, housing, and demographics data. This ongoing survey helps inform how federal funds are distributed, policy formulation, and community planning. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (CDC/ATSDR) Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) relies on 16 U.S. census variables from the ACS to inform the SVI.
- Current Population Survey (CPS) – This is a monthly survey of households conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. It provides comprehensive data on the labor force, employment, unemployment, earnings, and other demographic characteristics. This survey serves as a critical tool for understanding the community's economic well-being and informing policy decisions. For example, the CPS added questions about the pandemic and its impacts on job loss, job seeking, and missed work due to illness. The impacts from the pandemic are unique to the territories as the driving economic force is tourism and federal spending. Understanding the impacts of the pandemic on the people and economy would help drive the proper planning of resources available, programs/assistance needed, etc.
- Consumer Expenditures Survey – This survey is conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau on behalf of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) to assess how consumers spend their money. Inclusion of the territories in this survey would mean up to date and accurate data that can be used for assessing living standards across diverse socioeconomic groups, evaluating economic outcomes, and consumer demand for certain goods and services.
- Current Employment Statistics Survey – This is a monthly survey conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics that provides detailed industry estimates of nonfarm

employment, hours, and earnings of workers on payrolls. Inclusion of the territories in this survey would mean access to essential information for monitoring Guam's economic health and making informed policy and business decisions.

- Population Estimates Program – This survey is led by the U.S. Census Bureau and utilizes current data on births, deaths, and migration to calculate population change since the decennial census. The results of the survey are a time series of estimates of population, demographic components of change, and housing units. While Guam is included in the Census Bureau's International Database: World Population Estimates and Projections, this tool has not been updated since 2017. We have requested Bureau officials to update the population projections since the detailed 2020 Census of Guam results have been released.
- Household and Business Pulse – This survey is led by the U.S. Census Bureau and in collaboration with multiple federal agencies to collect data to measure the social and economic matters affecting American households. The survey covers topics such as employment status, food security, housing security, and physical and mental well-being. The data collected include: Access to infant formula, Children's mental health treatment, COVID-19 vaccinations and long COVID symptoms and impact, Education, specifically K-12 enrollment, Childcare arrangements, Employment, Food sufficiency, Housing security, Household spending, including energy expenditures and consumption, Inflation concerns and changes in behavior due to increasing prices, Physical and mental health, Feelings of pressure to move from rental home, Transportation, including behavioral changes related to the cost of gas, Health insurance coverage (including Medicaid), Social isolation, Participation with the arts, and Impact of living through natural disasters.

These demographic characteristics are helpful to assess the impacts to island residents, most especially given the impacts the pandemic has had and continues to have on Guam's tourism industry.

Furthermore, the Bureau of Statistics and Plans has formally requested the release of the Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) file for Guam, based on the 2020 Census. However, it remains uncertain whether Guam's request will be granted. The PUMS serves as a valuable resource tool, enabling BSP to generate data sets at the island-wide level beyond the standard data tables provided by the Census Bureau.

Additionally, critical data gaps persist, including the absence of territorial data sets within IMPLAN and the limited availability of data for territories under the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool. Given Guam's vulnerability to climate change effects, special attention must be directed toward ensuring consistent data collection. This effort ensures that governing officials have the necessary information to effectively plan for and respond to communities facing the highest risks.

2. Does the Government of Guam currently have the capacity to fill gaps in data on Guam by collecting its own data?

The government of Guam faces challenges in independently collecting data to fill gaps

related to demographics, social, and economic statistics due to limited financial resources and staffing. However, it is essential to explore collaborative efforts and seek technical guidance from federal agencies and federal resources to address these data gaps effectively.

- a. Please elaborate why or why not?

The government of Guam lacks financial resources and staffing. We do not have a dedicated survey office responsible for implementing surveys on the island. Typically, individual government agencies conduct surveys based on their specific program or grant requirements, contingent upon available funding. Consequently, assessing Guam's capacity depends on the type of survey and the relevant government entities currently collecting data. While some survey data may be feasible to collect at the agency level, this hinges on existing data collection practices. It is essential to consider whether current forms (such as intake forms or tax forms) can be modified to capture new data or if new survey forms need to be created. Factors like infrastructure capacity, staff comprehension of collected data, and the survey's purpose also play a role.

Enhancing capacity to fill data gaps involves securing funding for survey workers, resources for data collection (including electronic methods), infrastructure for data protection and transmission, marketing the survey, data quality review, survey design, and even leasing field offices to accommodate survey staff. Furthermore, resources for qualified experts are crucial for managing survey design, data collection processes, and data review.

3. Guam is particularly prone to severe weather incidents.
 - a. How do gaps in federal data collection for Guam affect disaster recovery efforts?

The gaps in federal data collection make it difficult for Guam as well as the federal government to allocate resources effectively during disaster recovery as well as to plan, implement and coordinate appropriate mitigation efforts, preparedness, response, recovery and adaptation measures for severe weather incidents such as typhoons and flooding in vulnerable areas. In addition, the data gaps make it difficult to coordinate immediate disaster recovery efforts for the delivery of services and support to disaster-affected households and expediting the delivery of aid for those with the greatest need. Most especially to ensure recovery aid is equitably distributed to all disaster victims.

Of utmost importance is the need for an updated SVI as the SVI plays a critical role in disaster response by identifying communities that may need support during emergencies. Emergency responders and agencies use the SVI to allocate resources where they are most needed. The SVI informs community preparedness efforts. Thus, it is important that Guam is included in the ACS.

4. Why is it important for the federal government to address the gaps in data collection for Guam sooner rather than later?

It is crucial the federal government address the gaps in data collection for Guam for the following reasons:

- **Equitable Representation:** Accurate data ensures that Guam's unique needs and challenges are considered in federal policies and resource allocation. Without reliable data, Guam may be overlooked or underserved.
- **Informed Decision-Making:** Reliable data informs policy decisions, resource allocation, and planning. It enables leaders to make evidence-based choices that benefit the community.
- **Program Effectiveness:** Data helps design effective programs and services. By understanding local needs, Guam can tailor interventions to address specific challenges.
- **Resource Allocation:** Accurate data ensures efficient use of resources. Whether it's infrastructure development or healthcare services, data guides where investments are most needed.
- **Disaster Preparedness:** Guam is vulnerable to natural disasters. Data on population density, infrastructure, and environmental risks is essential for disaster planning and response.
- **Economic Development:** Reliable data attracts investment and supports economic growth. Businesses need information on local markets, workforce, and consumer behavior.
- **Advocacy:** Data empowers Guam to advocate for its interests at the federal level. It strengthens the territory's voice in policy discussions.

While Guam has administrative records and statistical yearbooks that offer valuable insights for decision-making, active participation and inclusion in the federal statistical system are crucial to addressing the distinct needs and challenges of the territories.

5. During the hearing, an idea for a pilot program or demonstration program for federal data collection in the territories being run by the territories themselves was brought up. You mentioned that you would support that idea if there were the federal resources to do so.
 - a. Please clarify, would you support Guam managing federal data collection via a pilot program or demonstration?

Yes, I will support Guam managing federal data collection through a pilot program or demonstration.

This would depend on the resources that need to be secured for the pilot or demonstration program. For example, individuals with qualified backgrounds such as statisticians or economists with survey or data collection design, collection, and analysis will need to be identified to provide the necessary support to run a survey to collect data. Additionally, the hiring of survey staff will need to be secured and should be appropriately funded to secure and maintain survey staff. For example, 2020 Guam Census enumerators were hired at a rate of \$18.64. The positions identified for the Census project are covered under Guam Public Law 30-58

allowing for temporary recruitment and employment of personnel, consistent with U.S. Census Bureau guidelines. The hourly rates as approved/negotiated with the Census Bureau also makes it unique to this survey effort. Employees hired to do survey work under the Government of Guam, other than Census, are currently paid \$12.37 regardless of the complexity of the survey project.

b. Why or why not?

The Government of Guam will support a pilot program or demonstration program with proper planning to ensure all resources are identified, available, and secured to successfully implement the survey project.

This can be achieved through consistent collaboration and technical guidance with our federal counterparts in the planning and execution of federal statistical surveys. Similar to what was conducted with the decennial census operations and the COFA Enumerations, territorial and federal collaboration took place in the planning and execution of the federally mandated projects. Federal technical advisors were on-island and provided technical support and guidance in the implementation of the projects (i.e. setting up operations, recruitment, training, methodology, field enumeration responsibilities and field follow-ups, and data verification). The Bureau of Statistics and Plans, in cooperation with the federal government, will coordinate with the respective local agencies on statistical surveys to be conducted

c. What specific federal resources do you think are needed for this idea to be successful?

The following are the specific federal resources needed for this data pilot or demonstration program to be successful:

1. Technical Advisors and Support from the Federal Government: Engage technical advisors to ensure compliance with federal standards during data collection and processing. Their expertise can guide best practices and maintain data quality.
2. Training Programs: Allocate funding for training in critical areas such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), survey sampling, operations, questionnaire development, and data processing. Building local capacity through skilled workforce training is essential.
3. Staffing: Allocate funding for recruitment of survey staff or enumerators, statisticians, economists with competitive salaries.
4. Infrastructure and Technology: Allocate funding for reliable infrastructure (e.g., internet connectivity, data centers) and accessible technology for data collection to include mobile apps, cloud-based systems, computers, laptop, tablets, and GIS tools can enhance efficiency.
5. Materials/supplies: Allocate funding for materials and supplies to conduct surveys.

6. Short term vehicle lease and or mileage reimbursement: Allocate funding for short term vehicle lease and or mileage reimbursement for field work if needed. Due to Guam's high price of fuels, low mileage reimbursement rate, and wear and tear of vehicle survey workers prefer not to use their vehicles.

Furthermore, technical assistance provided by the federal agency throughout the duration of the project – planning stages, implementation, project closeout, data compilation and reporting are vital to the success of the pilot program or demonstration program.

- d. Are there any factors you see as being needed for this idea to be successful?

In order to run or operate a successful pilot program or demonstration program for federal data collection the following factors are needed:

- Interagency coordination and collaboration between territorial and federal governments to ensure adherence to federal statistical conventions and practices, maintaining data integrity and information quality. There is a need to ensure there are standardized protocols - clear protocols for data collection, ensuring consistency across agencies and programs. There is a need to ensure privacy and security measures are in place to protect the data and for compliance. There is a need to ensure the data collection is streamlined and we are not duplicating efforts.
- Investment in training and building local capacity. This will include hiring and training personnel skilled in data collection, analysis, and management.
- Reliable infrastructure and accessible technology for data collection.
- Public outreach and education about the program's purpose, benefits, and confidentiality to encourage participation and transparency.
- Adequate funding for the pilot program. Budget for personnel with competitive pay scales, technology, outreach, and ongoing maintenance.