

Testimony before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs – “Examining GAO’s Findings to Address Data Gaps and Improve Data Collection in the Territories”

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June 13, 2024

I. Introduction

Good afternoon, Chair, Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the subcommittee.

My name is Michael Levin. I worked at the U.S. Census Bureau for 28 years and spent 8 more years at Harvard University’s Population Center, before my working-retirement to Hawaii.

Today, I will outline needed statistical enhancements in the U.S. Pacific Territories of American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), and Guam. My comments do not cover Puerto Rico and only briefly touch on the U.S. Virgin Islands. I commend this committee for holding this hearing to focus on strategies to support statistical work in these territories.

II. Statistics in the Territories

Every country and major civil division, in our case, every U.S. state and territory, needs a statistical system that encompasses three general areas. These areas are: (1) censuses, (2) intercensal surveys, and (3) administrative records. Censuses, surveys, and administrative data all contribute to these data areas.

As the GAO report shows, Federal agencies limit statistical coverage in the U.S. territories. Local government statistical efforts fill gaps, but gaps remain.

Federal Data

Federal agency coverage of the territories includes population data collected by the Decennial Census, quinquennial Census of Agriculture and the Economic Census, and annual data on County Business Patterns.

This leaves extensive gaps in Federal territorial data. For the U.S. states, Census administers the continuous American Community Survey—collecting demographic and household data, the Census of Governments, annual surveys of State and Local Governments, and surveys collecting economic data on retail trade, manufacturing, and services. The government collects none of these data in

the territories. The Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics is almost absent in the territories, providing no price indices for consumers and producers and almost no employment and workforce data.

Office of Insular Affairs Support of Territorial Data Collection

The Office of Insular Affairs (OIA), Department of the Interior, started the Statistical Enhancement Project in the mid-1980s to support the statistics offices of the territories and to fill Federal data gaps. OIA funded the Census Bureau each fiscal year to provide technical help to the U.S. Virgin Islands in the Caribbean, and the 6 Areas in the Pacific: American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Guam, and what became the three Freely Associated States of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Marshall Islands, and Palau.

From 1988 to 2003 I led Census Bureau work to support OIA statistical efforts in the territories and FAS -- building local statistics capacity through formal training and through direct and in-person work on surveys and censuses. I continued working with the Pacific territories and FAS region after I left Census, and even now in retirement.

Training: Formal training was a key part of capacity building. Training occurred through a series of workshops where territorial statistical staff would meet at the East-West Center or at the Census Bureau's International Programs Center (IPC). The workshops included: Developing Statistical Yearbooks (1988), Intercensal surveys (1991), Census processing (editing and tabulation) (1992), Workshop and Conference of results of the 1990 censuses in the Insular Areas (1993), Population Estimates Workshop (1993), Vital Statistics Workshop (1993), Advanced Census Processing (1994), Trade, Medical Yearbooks, Cause of Death Coding, and Statistical Yearbooks (1995).

Surveys: Conducting surveys further built capacity and addressed Federal data gaps. The project used Census Bureau conventions for questionnaires, enumerator instructions, monitoring, and training. Local statistics offices monitored and executed survey enumeration, coded survey results, and keyed the data. I used Census Bureau procedures to edit and tabulate the data and draft the reports on survey results.

The Census/OIA project supported:

Household Income and Expenditures Surveys (HIES). The HIES provides information on consumer income and expenditure patterns by income, birthplace, ethnicity, education, and labor force participation. If the territories were States, the U.S. would include them in consumer expenditures surveys (CES). The HIES is critical to prepare local price indices and to offset the lack of Bureau of Labor Statistics price indices in the territories. These surveys have also been a "work-around" for exclusion from the U.S. American Community Survey and provide population an estimate within the 10-year Census interval.

Wage and Labor Force Surveys. If the territories were States, the U.S. would conduct wage and labor force surveys, but they currently exclude the territories. These missing U.S. surveys include the Current Population Survey (CPS), Survey of Program Participation (SIPP), and, especially, the American Community Survey (ACS).

Behavioral Risk Surveys. The territories started annual behavioral risk surveys.

Micronesian Migrant Surveys. Beginning in 1992, and every 5 years, I supervised full censuses of FAS migration to the CNMI, Guam, and Hawaii (beginning in 1998) using Micronesian enumerators and supervisors. This provided OIA with counts and characteristics of the migrant populations in CNMI, Guam, and Hawaii.

GDP and CPI. Other Census and other Federal staff worked with the territory statistics offices to prepare Gross Domestic Product benchmark information for 2002 and consumer price indexes.

Over time, OIA reduced its support to build insular statistics office capacity. While OIA continued to fund insular survey costs, its funding committed to paying for expensive Census Bureau productions of FAS migration data and to pay the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) to produce annual territory GDP data.

FAS migration data. While the Census 2003 FAS migration data cost OIA about \$300,000 to cover Guam, CNMI, and Hawaii, the Bureau charged OIA \$1.2 million for the 2008 FAS migration data. OIA and the Bureau limited the items on the CNMI and Guam questionnaires to only provide counts of migrants and not collect information on education, employment, and other characteristics. For Hawaii, Census had detailed information from the ACS. For the 2013 report, the Census Bureau used 2010 CNMI and Guam Census data and Hawaii ACS data. Census returned to its 2008 procedure for the 2018 data round. Compact III does not include compact impact funds, so they no longer require enumerations to distribute funds.

Territorial GDP. Beginning in 2008, OIA annually pays BEA to produce territorial GDP. These are data produced by BEA for the 50 U.S. States and the District of Columbia each quarter.

The practice of OIA paying BEA to produce GDP contrasts with the Puerto Rico experience. In 2018, BEA started a project to calculate the GDP for Puerto Rico to support its economic recovery following devastating hurricanes in 2017. The project addressed recommendations from the Congressional Task Force on Economic Growth in Puerto Rico and from GAO that BEA calculate the GDP for Puerto Rico.

Territorial Statistics Office Activities

As OIA reduced its engagement and support for territorial statistics offices, offices reduced their own data efforts.

Statistical Yearbooks. One important contribution of territorial statistics offices is to pull together government administrative records and publish annual Statistical Yearbooks. Most countries publish Statistical Yearbooks to provide information from administrative records in a timely manner and using accepted statistical conventions. Common

administrative records include vital statistics (births and deaths), education (school enrollments), labor force activities, and migration through immigrants and emigrants. Statistics collected internally, like school enrollments, are important for planning schools and classrooms. When the OIA program started, only American Samoa produced Statistical Yearbooks regularly and Guam produced a series of tables in the back of its annual Economic Review. The CNMI and the Freely Associated States did not produce annual yearbooks. By the mid-1990s, under the OIA program, most territories were producing at least limited yearbooks, and they improved year by year. Unfortunately, they lost momentum.

Labor surveys. American Samoa has not done labor force surveys. CNMI did periodic labor force surveys until 1995 and did quarterly labor force surveys from 1996 to about 1998. These then drifted off into semi-regularity, and then mostly unfunded, not done at all. Guam had quarterly labor force surveys, starting at least during the 1980s. The Guam's Bureau of Labor's website shows quarterly reports from 1993 to September 2023.

The statistical offices could design labor surveys to maintain a smaller and professional group of enumerators. To organize such a survey, I would suggest pulling a 6 percent sample from the complete housing listing, and then dividing it into 3 parts. If the territory centers the quarterly labor force survey in February, the enumerators would go to one-third of the units in January, then one-third in February, and then the last one-third in March, making the 6 percent sample centered in February. When they select the next 6 percent sample (or use the same sample again over a year), the first one-third in April can combine with the February and March samples to get a 6 percent sample centered on March. Because the surveys would need few enumerators for these procedures, a group of super-enumerators could work continuously over the year with appropriate payment.

Migration data. Among the most problematic statistics are those concerning migration. Guam has experimented in the past with entry and exit "cards" or sheets. Currently, both Guam and CNMI collect entry forms, including agriculture and voluntary tourism and returning resident information, but they are not making efforts to collect exit information. Considering that tourists overwhelm this data collection, it is not surprising that the territories do not make more efforts to collect these data. But, given the responses to changing economic conditions, governments might make more effort. And the statistical summaries might then appear in the yearbooks.

Territorial Statistics Office Needs

Today the Territorial Statistical Offices vary in terms of their capacity and needs.

Guam has capable statisticians in both the public and private sectors who can generate the statistics it needs for planning and policy development. Guam's problem is the dispersion of statistical activities among the agencies, with the Bureau of Statistics and Plans, Department of Labor, Public Health and Social Services, and the University of Guam each taking part in separate ways in collecting and disseminating statistical activities. The government should designate one office as

the central agency, with all statistical activities going through it to eliminate duplication and to make sure that agencies cover appropriate areas. A single agency, like those in American Samoa and CNMI, would enhance the communication between government agencies and produce better and more reliable statistics.

The **CNMI** government does not understand the need for constant and consistent statistical work. The CNMI government is not providing sufficient staff to cover work on the CPI, labor force, and other surveys, or their statistical yearbook. Congress and the OIA might fund a couple of positions to assist in at least bringing the program up to a minimal level. The CSD Director is exceptional, but he cannot do it alone.

American Samoa has a different challenge. The chief statistician recently retired after 40 years in that position. The office has few employees, but because it is in the Department of Commerce, it uses staff from other areas when needed. Since they do not undertake labor force surveys (although they should), and only have a single survey in the mid-decade, most work goes to administrative data and publishing their yearbook.

The **Freely Associated States (FAS)**: Although the GAO report does not cover the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau, their need for technical help is even greater than the remaining U.S. Areas. None of the three National Statisticians were university trained in statistics, and that shows. Palau publishes a good annual yearbook, but FSM and the Marshalls do not. The Pacific Community (SPC) assists the FAS with their surveys, especially the HIES. SPC uses UN statistical conventions rather than U.S. conventions, so that FAS data is not always compatible with U.S. Federal agency program requirements. For example, the SPC considers subsistence activities as working, whereas the U.S. uses paid employment. Thus, FAS employment and unemployment data are not compatible with U.S. measures. Previously, the OIA Statistical Enhancement Project included the FAS.

Even without direct technical help, the FAS governments should track the flow of the emigrants to Guam, Hawaii, and the U.S. Mainland, using scanned passport information. The flow is extraordinarily strong: the Marshall Islands' population decreased from 55,000 to 42,000 over a decade and it looks like FSM will report a similar decrease if they finish processing their late census. Periodic surveys of the migrants or inclusion in labor force surveys could provide valuable information to Guam on these migrants from the FSM.

III. Are street addresses a survey problem?

Sample selection. As noted in the GAO report, the Census Bureau cites the lack of street addresses as an excuse for excluding the territories from Census survey work. None of the three Pacific territories (and the U.S. Virgin Islands) have complete street addresses, allowing for sample selection based on a list of physical addresses.

However, the Census Bureau overcame this hurdle in the past. For both the 2008 and 2018 Micronesian Migrants Surveys for Compact impact reporting, the Census Bureau selected blocks and attempted to enumerate all housing units in those blocks in Guam and Saipan. Further, part of

the effort to implement the 2020 Census in the territories required the mapping and listing each home, apartment, and shelter by enumerators before door-to-door in-person household interviews.

Guam has other sources for sample selection. For its Labor Force surveys, Guam continuously updated maps to assist enumerators in locating survey sample housing units. Coastal Zone management was also making detailed maps and staff in the administration were attempting to combine the two. For the 2019 HIES, we used the Guam Power Authority's Excel spreadsheets of all housing units on the island attached to electric power and drew a 5 percent sample from that.

Mapping. As noted in the GAO report, the Census Bureau claims none of the three territories has a proper mapping for sample selection. This excuse excludes the territories from Census survey work. But the areas do have workable maps.

Both CNMI and American Samoa do continuous map updating, so they select samples as required for surveys. The 2015 Household Income and Expenditures (HIES) in American Samoa derived a 20 percent sample of housing units, as it also did in 1995 and 2005. American Samoa's Department of Commerce has developed samples for health and other surveys. The CNMI maintains GIS shape files for islands (Saipan, Tinian, and Rota), villages, political boundaries (districts), census blocks, roads, and housing units and updates them periodically to use them as the sampling frame for surveys. CNMI keeps Excel workbooks listing housing units for sample selection. Most samples are 5 or 10 percent of the units. CNMI used these samples for the 2012 survey of Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) migrants, the 2016 HIES, and the 2017 Labor Force Survey. Both American Samoa and CNMI have an advantage over Guam for sample selection "on the ground" because neither has the level of apartment buildings that Guam has.

In 2019, when we started the Guam HIES, Guam's Power Authority provided an Excel spreadsheet of the housing units on Guam with detailed address information. I selected a 5 percent sample, by starting with a random number and then selected each 20th household after that. Because the enumerators were unlikely to go to 2,500 units, I then made 5 one percent samples. Despite the success of the sample selection, the survey failed because of the lack of enumerators, the lack of publicity, and worries about crime, making people not open their doors for interviews.

IV. Suggested actions for OIA, Census, and Congress

Office of Insular Affairs. The Department of the Interior's Office of Insular Affairs is the lead agency to support statistical work in the Pacific territories. The OIA Statistical Enhancement Project through the Census Bureau in the late 1980s through the early 2000s got continuing statistical data through surveys and improved administrative records. The territories would benefit from funding a similar program with central supervision, allowing the individual territories to improve their statistical work, and to share their results with the other territories, with Federal agencies, and the Congress.

One example of work for OIA to support is labor force surveys. Guam is undertaking a form of quarterly labor force surveys. OIA might provide funding to American Samoa and CNMI to do

quarterly labor force surveys. The questionnaire, other materials, training, editing, and tabulation should follow Census Bureau standards so be compatible with the Census and other surveys.

There is again a need for OIA to focus on building capacity. The CNMI and American Samoa currently have limited capacity within their statistical offices. OIA could assist in developing capacity through placing territorial staff in work-study programs at the Census Bureau, Department of Labor, and other appropriate agencies. Also, U.S. agencies would place appropriate staff in the territorial statistical offices to enhance the use of statistical procedures and staff development.

U.S. Census Bureau. The Census Bureau has a mandate to do the Decennial Census and its enabling legislation allows for collecting survey information if Congress provides funds for these activities. The experience with the Micronesian migrants surveys shows that Census run surveys cost more than surveys that OIA funds as projects directly with the territories.

However, all Federal agencies recognize Census Bureau data, so OIA should selectively fund the Bureau. The Census Bureau and the CNMI are now using (and updating) the same maps (shape files) for villages, census blocks, political boundaries. But they do not share the housing units' shape files. The Census Bureau could develop and use updated maps in the three territories to develop samples for surveys.

Congress. Congressional interest in territorial statistics is welcome. Requesting follow-up work from the GAO on the statistical needs of the territories and tracking Federal agency actions could be among the next steps. Congress should fund needs discussed above.

V. Conclusion

In closing, I thank the subcommittee for this opportunity to speak with you today. The territories of American Samoa, the CNMI, and Guam are integral to U.S. security interests and needs in the North and South Pacific. Statistics are crucial for planning and for making policy decisions for the territories themselves and for the United States as a whole. Congress can take pro-active steps to strengthen statistics in the U.S. Pacific territories. I look forward to any questions you may have.