

The Exclusion of U.S. Territories in Federal Data Leaves Policymakers With an Incomplete Picture

The five U.S. territories—American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI)—are treated unevenly across the federal statistical system and are often excluded from important data releases. Without these data, U.S. policymakers and stakeholders lack complete and accurate demographic, economic, employment, health, environmental, and agricultural information about the territories. This exclusion contributes to the underrepresentation of territorial residents and underfunding in federal programs.

While there are some significant challenges to surveying the territories, especially those with smaller populations, the federal government can do more to include the territories in federal data products. Policymakers, federal statistical agencies, and the territories themselves should work to identify the gaps in data coverage that are most important to fill. Prioritizing and addressing these data gaps will provide a more accurate picture of the territories, support economic development, and help the federal government better target its funding and resources. Ultimately, a coordinated federal approach by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget will be an important step towards providing better data coverage for the U.S. territories.

The territories are often excluded from federal data products and lack the funding to collect similar data on their own

The decentralized [system](#) of 13 principal statistical agencies and over 100 other statistical programs across the federal government only provides partial coverage of the five territories in many major data products, as shown in the table at the end of this report. This means some of the territories are not included in vital surveys like the American Community Survey and the Current Population Survey. Federal public health data sets also often [exclude](#) the territories, with only four of the 32 most commonly used federal [public health](#) data sets including all five territories.

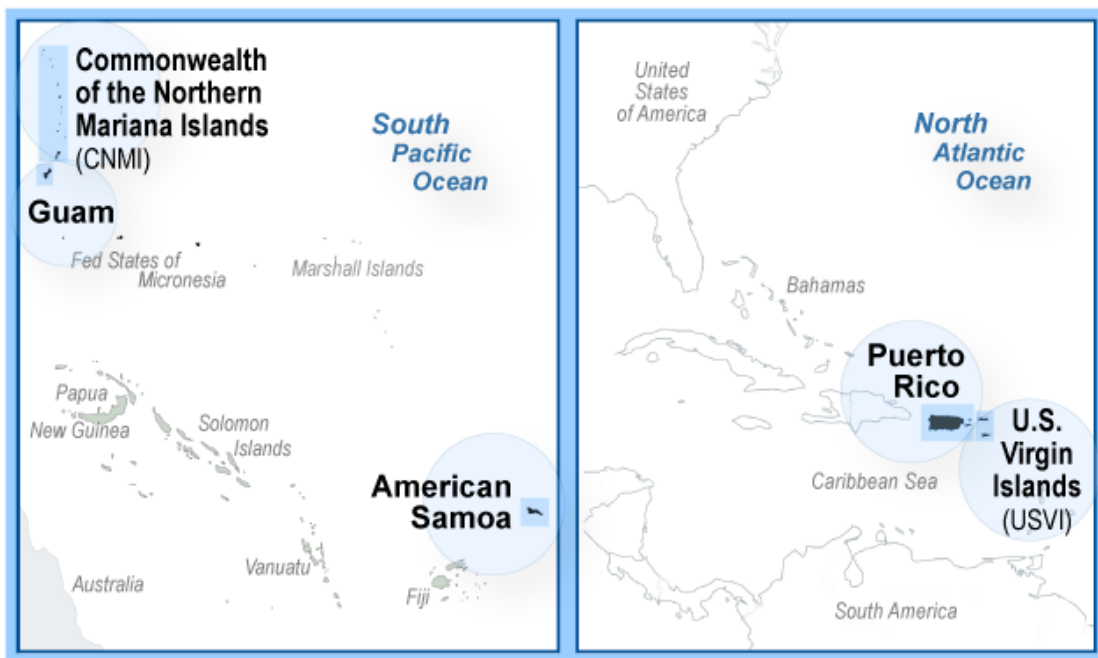
This exclusion largely stems from inconsistent or [ambiguous](#) coverage of the territories in the laws that govern the principal statistical agencies. For example, the authorizing statute for the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) does not explicitly state that territories must be included. As a result, the treatment of the territories can vary across BLS data products. Even when federal data products do include the territories, they do not always contain the same level of detail and are not always [released](#) at the same time as data collected for the 50 states and the District of Columbia. This forces policymakers to make decisions about economic development and resource allocation with data that is outdated or less comprehensive.

While the Department of the Interior's Office of Insular Affairs (OIA) has [provided](#) \$62 million in federal funding to American Samoa, CNMI, Guam, and USVI over the last five fiscal years and supported important efforts to [improve](#) territorial statistics, these funds cannot replace full

inclusion in federal data collection. Current practices pit data collection efforts against other important or acute needs for the territories, such as hurricane recovery efforts. The territories also collect some of their own data to mitigate federal data gaps, but these efforts can be limited by factors like capacity constraints and often are [not](#) acknowledged as official statistics or substitutes for federal data.

Disparities in federal data collection lead to underrepresentation of the territories

Inadequate federal data collection means that the 3.6 million [residents](#) of the U.S. territories—more than the combined population of the five smallest states—are [underrepresented](#) in these federal data products. Without collecting data at the federal level, policymakers [know](#) less about things like job growth, unemployment, educational attainment, health insurance coverage, housing arrangements, nutrition, pregnancy mortality, drug and tobacco use, poverty, and veteran status for the territories.



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-106050

Specifically, the exclusion of four of the territories from the American Community Survey (ACS) and all five territories from the Current Population Survey (CPS) create significant challenges, given those datasets' role in federal funding decisions and timely economic analysis. While Puerto Rico is included in annual ACS statistics, the other territories have to wait 10 years until the Census Bureau [collects](#) ACS-like data via a supplement to the decennial census. This is harmful because the ACS provides the federal government [with data](#) used to calculate Fair Market Rent to determine payments for housing assistance programs; evaluate the needs for veteran health care, education, and employment; and enforce employment antidiscrimination laws, among other uses. Additionally, state and local governments [use](#) ACS data to evaluate the need for new roads, schools, hospitals, and other infrastructure; emergency planners use it for disaster preparedness and recovery efforts; and businesses use it to make strategic decisions about their operations.

Separately, the CPS is one of the primary sources of monthly labor force statistics for the U.S. population, and the territories have [indicated](#) that the absence of CPS data prevents them from knowing detailed labor force information. For officials from Puerto Rico, the lack of labor force information from the CPS impedes their ability to address the needs of veterans and persons with disabilities. At the same time, officials from USVI and CNMI note that their exclusion from the CPS made it harder to assess economic recovery efforts during the pandemic and forced them to rely on outdated labor market data, respectively. CPS data also [forms](#) the basis of many poverty measures, meaning that policymakers do not get these key data on the well-being of families in most of the territories.

Underrepresentation in federal data collection also denies representation for millions of [people of color](#). In Puerto Rico, almost 99% of the population [identifies](#) as Hispanic or Latino, while in USVI, a majority of the population identifies as Black. In American Samoa, CNMI, and Guam, a majority of people [identify](#) as Asian or Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders. Underrepresentation in federal health data sets is also a [health equity](#) issue, especially given that the territories have some of the most challenging health outcomes. This data underrepresentation can mask the health disparities and needs of the territorial populations.

A coordinated federal approach is needed to ensure better data coverage for the territories

Due to the complexity and scale of the federal statistical system, a coordinated federal approach is needed to standardize the treatment of territories within federal data products. A Government Accountability Office [report](#) released in May 2024 found that agencies largely have not studied the cost or feasibility of efforts to better include the territories in federal data products and recommended that the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) coordinate these efforts. Specifically, GAO recommended that the OMB director should ensure that the Chief Statistician of the United States develops a government-wide approach—in coordination with the territories and other stakeholders—to examine the costs, benefits, and feasibility of including the territories in federal data products. This falls under one of OMB's important responsibilities of [coordinating](#) the federal statistical system.

A more coordinated federal approach can be accomplished both by OMB implementing these recommendations, or through legislation like two bills that were introduced by Rep. Grijalva and the delegates of the five U.S. territories—Representatives Aumua Amata Radewagen (American Samoa), Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan (CNMI), Jim Moylan (Guam), Jenniffer González Colón (Puerto Rico), and Stacey E. Plaskett (USVI). The Territories Statistics Collection Equity Act would [direct](#) the Interagency Council on Statistical Policy (ICSP) to develop and implement a plan to collect and publish statistics for the U.S. territories in the same manner as states within four years. The bill focuses on the ICSP because one of its key roles is to [advise](#) OMB on statistical policy and facilitate coordination across the federal statistical system. Separately, the Special Advisors for Insular Areas Act would [establish](#) a Special Advisor for Insular Areas in each executive department. This would improve intra- and interagency coordination while ensuring that territories are not overlooked in federal policy.

Policymakers should identify priority data needs that fill the most important data gaps

Policymakers, federal statistical agencies, and the territories themselves need to work to identify which missing data would be most important to have, as better data inclusion does not necessarily require parity with states. Most federal surveys conducted in the 50 states and the District of Columbia were not designed with territories in mind, which introduces challenges around cost, survey design, statistical reliability, cultural competence, respondent burden, and confidentiality. Policymakers should consider these issues while prioritizing how to better include territories in federal data releases.

The Census Bureau does not currently have the budget to [cover](#) the \$52 million cost of conducting a long-form census for the territories each year, nor does it have the permanent offices or staff in the territories who can help administer in-person surveys. The territories' small populations (aside from Puerto Rico) create distinct challenges for survey implementation, as statistical agencies must sample a large proportion of each territory's population, or even survey the full population, to produce accurate estimates. This would raise response burden, as the same households would have to respond to surveys more often than Americans living in states.

None of these challenges are new. They have been identified by [numerous reports](#) and analyses, and the statistical agencies have been aware of them for decades. While these issues present legitimate challenges, they do not mean that federal statistical agencies cannot do more to better integrate the territories in key data releases like the ACS or CPS. For example, statistical agencies could tailor territorial surveys to focus on the highest impact survey questions to both reduce respondent burden and cost.

Additionally, parity in all data is not a realistic target as some data products are either impractical or not applicable to the territories, making them less of a priority for data inclusion efforts. For example, American Samoa, CNMI, and Guam presently cannot participate in the Current Employment Statistics (a survey of businesses that forms half of the monthly jobs report) or the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (a major source of wage data) because these territories [lack](#) the permanent unemployment insurance programs that underpin these two data products.

Conclusion

Efforts to expand data coverage will rely on greater funding and capacity for the principal statistical agencies and their [surveys](#). In addition to adequate funding levels, statistical agencies can further ensure better data collection for territories by establishing permanent presences in territories or hiring and expanding field staff, and by providing technical assistance to and contracting with territorial governments. These measures, along with the administrative and legislative action outlined above, would ensure that federal data are more inclusive of the territories, equipping policymakers and stakeholders with a more complete snapshot of the population while also leading to better policy and funding outcomes. Like each state, each territory has a unique population and faces unique challenges, but without timely and accurate data, policymakers and stakeholders cannot understand them fully.

The table below shows whether each territory is included in the major federal data products released by the 13 principal statistical agencies.

Federal Data Products in the U.S. Territories						
Principal Statistical Agency	Data Products with Coverage of At Least One Territory	American Samoa	Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands	Guam	Puerto Rico	U.S. Virgin Islands
Census Bureau (Commerce Department)	American Community Survey	No	No	No	Yes	No
	Decennial Census	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Population Estimates	No	No	No	Yes	No
	Economic Census	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Business Formation Statistics	No	No	No	Yes	No
	County Business Patterns	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Current Population Survey	No	No	No	No	No
Bureau of Labor Statistics (Labor Department)	Current Employment Statistics	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
	Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Local Area Unemployment Statistics	No	No	No	Yes	No
	Injuries, Illnesses, and Fatalities	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Bureau of Economic Analysis (Commerce Department)	Consumer Price Index	No	No	No	No	No
Bureau of Economic Analysis (Commerce Department)	Gross Domestic Product	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bureau of Justice Statistics (Justice Department)	Prisoners (annual)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bureau of Transportation Statistics (Transportation Department)	State Transportation Statistics (U.S. Airline Traffic by Airport)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Principal Statistical Agency	Data Products with Coverage of At Least One Territory	American Samoa	Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands	Guam	Puerto Rico	U.S. Virgin Islands
Economic Research Service (Agriculture Department)	N/A					
National Agricultural Statistics Service (Agriculture Department)	Census of Agriculture	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
National Center for Education Statistics (Education Department)	Common Core of Data (public schools)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
National Center for Health Statistics (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)	Life Stages and Populations	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	National Vital Statistics System	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	U.S. Small-area Life Expectancy Estimates Project	Yes	No	No	No	No
National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (National Science Foundation)	Survey of Science and Engineering Research Facilities	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Science and Engineering State Indicators	No	No	No	Yes	No
	Survey of Graduate Students and Postdoctorates in Science Engineering	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Office of Research, Evaluation, and Statistics (Social Security Administration)	Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Social Security Disability Insurance	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Statistics of Income (Internal Revenue Service)	N/A					
Energy Information Administration (Energy Department)	State Energy Data System	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Congressional Research Service, Bureau of Labor Statistics

Note: This is not a comprehensive list of all federal data products. This table shows federal data products CRS was able to identify that cover at least one U.S. territory. Data products in U.S. territories do not necessarily have the same standards or release schedule as those conducted in the 50 states or the District of Columbia. Data products refer to surveys and other data collection activities conducted by a principal statistical agency that are made accessible to the general public. "N/A" is listed next to a principal statistical agency if none of its data products cover the U.S. territories.