

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

April 5, 2022

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
United States Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

Current and complete information is essential to good decision-making and it is important for Congress to understand the obstacles presented in U.S. Territories by the unavailability of current population, economic, labor force, or agricultural data.

Enshrined in the Constitution, the Decennial Census is the most important way to measure the population of all jurisdictions in the United States and has a critical role in determining allocation of federal program dollars and apportioning of seats in legislatures throughout the country. In March of 2021, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported on significant data collection challenges, lower completion percentages, and other challenges brought on by natural disasters nationwide.¹ In that report, you found that these natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic created problems in completion rates and delayed timeframes for the 2020 Census. In addition, you reported additional findings in February of this year that highlighted lessons learned from the 2020 Census cycle that will help inform the 2030 Census cycle.²

The Census, however, is not the only method of collecting reliable information on the U.S. Territories. The 13 statistical collection agencies in the U.S. government collect information on the Territories differently. For example, in 2008, the Department of the Interior's (Interior) Office of Insular Affairs testified that reliable information on the U.S. Territories does not often exist, despite being included in the Census Bureau's Decennial Census and five-year Economic Census, and the Department of Agriculture's Census of Agriculture. More recently, Interior's Deputy Assistant Secretary Keone Nakoa said that "The lack of parity in data collection

¹ Government Accountability Office. *Decennial Census: Bureau Should Assess Significant Data Collection Challenges as It Undertakes Planning for 2030*. Washington, D.C., March 22, 2021. GAO-21-365.

² Government Accountability Office. *2020 Census: Lessons Learned from Planning and Implementing the 2020 Census Offer Insights to Support 2030 Preparations*. Washington, D.C., February 11, 2022. GAO-22-104357.

continues to be an issue for the U.S. Territories as their governments strive to make the most informed decisions for their residents.”

Improving the government’s capacity for collection and analysis of data is critical in understanding issues related to the U.S. Territories. Natural disasters are even more prevalent in the U.S. Territories of American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Further, these U.S. Territories already have varying levels of participation in certain federal programs and are denied adequate representation in Congress. As the committee of jurisdiction over issues relating to the U.S. Territories, the Committee on Natural Resources is concerned about the accurate counting and publishing of other data products for the U.S. Territories.

We are requesting a review of the data collection gaps related to the U.S. Territories. Specifically, we would like a review of:

1. Existing data collection gaps from federal statistical agencies related to American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.
2. What is known about the impact of any of those data gaps on the provision of federal funds to the Territories.
3. Any administrative actions that can be taken to close data collection gaps and the cost of doing so.
4. Any legislative actions that can be taken to close data collection gaps.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva
Chair
Committee on Natural Resources



Jenniffer González-Colón
Member of Congress



Stacey E. Plaskett
Member of Congress



Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen
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