

Viewpoint

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Equal treatment for P.R. by U.S. Census

Last week, the U.S. House Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, led by Del. Donna M. Christensen (D-U.S.V.I.), and the U.S. House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, Subcommittee on Information Policy, Census, and National Archives, led by Rep. William Lacy Clay (D-Mo.), held a joint oversight hearing on "Census Data: Special Issues Related to U.S. Territories." The objective of the hearing was to examine the disparate treatment of the U.S. territories by the Census Bureau and the unavailability of current and reliable data of these areas. While this may sound like an arcane topic, it is undeniable that reliable, current and complete information is essential for good decision-making, whether in government, business or private households.

The U.S. Census Bureau has been conducting a Decennial Census of Population and Housing in Puerto Rico since 1910. However, Puerto Rico is excluded from certain special tabulations of the Census data that are requested by different government agencies and which are used to prepare special reports. For example, according to Francisco Cimaedevilla's testimony during last week's hearings, Puerto Rico is excluded from the special tabulations for the compilation of the Equal Employment Opportunity File which addresses gender inequality in 250 occupational categories. Therefore, while mainland states have data available for 250 occupational categories, Puerto Rico has just 125. This information could be extremely useful for Puerto Rico's Justice and Labor Departments, as well as for other local government agencies called to address gender discrimination in the labor force.

Perhaps more important than the exclusion from special tabulations, is the fact that Puerto Rico is not covered at all in other important surveys carried out by the U.S. Census Bureau. Among these, we note the absence of coverage in three very important surveys. First, the island is not included in the Survey of Income and Program Participation. This survey collects the



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source and amount of income, labor force information, program participation and eligibility data, and general demographic characteristics to measure the effectiveness of existing federal, state, and local programs. It is used to estimate future costs and coverage for government programs, such as food stamps, and to provide improved statistics on the distribution of income and measures of economic well being in the United States.

The survey is designed as a continuous series of national panels, with sample size ranging from approximately 14,000 to 40,000 interviewed households. Its content is built around a "core" of labor force, program participation and income questions designed to measure the economic situation of people in the United States. These questions expand the data currently available on the distribution of cash and non-cash income and are repeated at each wave of interviewing.

Second, Puerto Rico is excluded from the Current Population Survey. The CPS is used to provide estimates of employment, unemployment and other characteristics of the general labor force, of the population as a whole and of various subgroups of the population. Monthly labor force data gathered from the CPS are used by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to determine the distribution of funds under the Job Training Partnership Act. In

addition to the labor force data, the CPS provides annual data on work experience, income, and migration from the Annual, Social, and Economic Supplement and on school enrollment of the population from the October Supplement.

Third, Puerto Rico is not included in the American Housing Survey. The AHS provides a current and continuous series of data on selected housing and demographic characteristics. Analysts and policymakers use AHS data to make informed housing policy decisions and design housing programs.

The value of the information gathered through these three surveys should be obvious to any person with decision-making responsibilities, either in government or the private sector. Academic researchers also benefit from access to this information. The SIPP, to be specific, is used by social science researchers who are interested in analyzing poverty trends, the dynamics of income inequality and the effectiveness of social welfare policies.

In addition, data from these reports and surveys is oftentimes used to determine eligibility for federal programs and for allocating federal funds. Furthermore, local policymakers could certainly use reliable and accurate socio-economic data when formulating policies and enacting local legislation. Finally, community leaders and non-governmental organizations could use this additional data to better serve their constituents and in their advocacy efforts, all to the benefit of the Puerto Rican people.

In sum, the inclusion of Puerto Rico in these surveys and studies is a win-win proposition for Puerto Rico and the United States, as the benefits of such inclusion certainly outweighs the costs, while the exclusion of the island cannot be justified on any rational grounds.

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