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Oversight and Government Reform Committee
Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Insular Affairs
Written Testimony
Frank L. Mills, PhD
Professor of Social Sciences
University of the Virgin Islands

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This written testimony is prepared by Frank L. Mills on behalf of the University of the Virgin Islands. Dr. Mills is also the Director of the Eastern Caribbean Center (ECC), the social research unit of the University responsible for conducting the decennial census for the United States Virgin Islands. The ECC also conducts the Virgin Islands Community Survey (VICS).

Summary

For over 25 years, the USVI has worked to develop much needed statistical data on its population. The U.S. utilizes one approach to collecting data from the 50 states and Puerto Rico and another approach for the Insular Areas, creating significant disparities in the data. USVI has been alternately encouraged and discouraged by the interest of the Census Bureau in providing this data. The USVI has been disadvantaged by the lack of federally sanctioned, reliable, uniform, current statistical data on its population. The USVI seeks statutory language requiring the Census Bureau to include the USVI in the American Community Survey.

Background: The Virgin Islands and the Decennial Census

The federal decennial census of population and housing in the United States Virgin Islands (USVI) is managed through a partnership between the Bureau of the Census and the government of the USVI. This partnership is formalized by a mutually signed agreement between the Director of the Census Bureau and the Governor of the USVI. In 1979, the Governor designated the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) as the local agency responsible for the management of the Population and Housing Census in 1980, and this responsibility has been reaffirmed in succeeding decennial censuses by USVI governors. In February, 1978 UVI was also commissioned to serve as the "Census State Data Center".

In the 50 states and Puerto Rico, the decennial census is managed by the Field Division of the Bureau of the Census. The fact that there are two different approaches to conducting the Census, one type for the 50 states and Puerto Rico and another for the USVI and Island Areas is a dichotomy that results in significant disparities in methods, processing of the data and in census data products.

In the 1980 and subsequent decennial censuses, the list-enumerate method was used in the USVI and 100 percent of all households and group quarters were included in the population count. In this method, the location of every housing unit was map-spotted by an enumerator, the address of the household was listed, and the enumerator recorded the information for all persons living in the household who met enumeration requirements. In the states, however, only a one-in-six sample of households was required to complete what was known as “the long form”. The USVI has been informed by the Bureau of the Census that the relatively small size of the population compared to that of the 50 states makes it statistically necessary to enumerate the entire population. Requiring 100% participation is burdensome to the USVI just as it would be if full participation was required in all 50 states.

Despite several non-applicable questions, such as questions concerning heating, the Virgin Islands was persuaded to use the same questionnaire that was used stateside on the grounds that this obviates the need for a separate processing system, and that this would ensure a more speedy release of census data. Unfortunately, Title XIII, United States Code mandates a tabulation of the total population by states for the apportionment of Representatives in Congress within nine months after the census date of April 1, and since the tabulation of USVI census data did not fall under this decree, census data products were not returned within five years.

In the 1990 Census the non-applicable questions were removed and a question on marital status was added. This caused the USVI to be informed that because its questionnaire was not identical to that of the states, its processing would take longer. And longer it did. A *Detailed Cross-tabulations for the U.S. Virgin Islands* was added to the census products list, but even though it was an enormously useful publication, its five-year untimely arrival reduced its value to our census data users. However, the introduction of block numbering areas in census publication geography and the cessation of the enumeration district geography have removed comparability of the data with previous censuses, for example we cannot compare growth or changes in a given area from one time period to the next.

Positive Changes in the 2000 Census

The Census Bureau introduced seven positive changes in the 2000 Census of Population and Housing. The changes are as follows:

1. Advertising the census appeared to be more effective as there was a higher level of local input than in previous censuses.
2. Census questionnaires were distributed to all mail boxes throughout the Territory, but unlike the mail out/mail back practice in the states, households were instructed to retain the questionnaires until an enumerator came to collect them.
3. Current technology was utilized for many activities in the local Census Office.
4. The questionnaires were coded in the Territory, thus ensuring a higher rate of accuracy as local employees were more familiar with the use of non-standard terms.
5. Census data were published by tracts and block groups for each island.
6. The data were processed in a more timely manner than in previous censuses, despite the fact that it was not identical to the U.S long-form questionnaire.
7. Most of the data were in electronic format and therefore more easily manipulated. (However, a severe shortcoming was the absence of a Census publication of cross-tabulated data similar to the one produced in 1990. Despite a strong plea for this product, the USVI was denied it.)

Lingering Challenge

A persistently challenging area that the Census Bureau has not yet mastered is that of the geography of census data collection. In previous censuses, each enumerator was supplied with a map on which to map-spot households. But the maps that have been supplied have been notoriously inadequate due in many instances to the paucity of any recognizable physical feature on the map. The result is that coverage is not as certain as it could be, and this always carries with it the potential to undermine the thoroughness of the census count. The situation is exacerbated primarily by the lack of street names and visibly posted house addresses and numbers. Enumerators tend to find most of the maps in non-urban areas to be difficult for map-spotting, but there does not appear to have been any efforts made to resolve this challenge in the field. The University has conducted a number of local scientific surveys in which GIS—Geographic Information System—and GPS—Global Positioning System—technology has been applied in

the production of maps and the use of hand-held units to precisely locate housing units.

The 2010 Census

Planning for the 2010 Census of Population and Housing is already well under way and the start-up process is likely to begin in a timely manner. There is no indication at this point in time of the way in which the processing of the 2010 data is going to take place. However, through a series of meetings in the USVI between Census Bureau staff and the local Census Interagency Committee within the past two years, a number of small but useful enhancements are expected to be made.

In light of the information presented above, the following four recommendations are offered to reduce the disparities in the census process between the states and the USVI for the 2010 decennial:

1. Advertising should be crafted in such a way that they allow more local input to maximize the USVI knowledge of the Territory;
2. An enlightened approach should be made to resolve the inefficiency of the map-spotting procedure in census geography data collection. We strongly suggest the use of current technology, combined with recent digital aerial photography of the islands;
3. Local residents should be utilized for more effective, efficient and reliable data entry. In 2000 data coding was found to be more effectively carried out in the Territory by local residents.
4. Census products should include a publication of cross-tabulation of the more relevant demographic, social and economic and housing data.

History of Unavailability of Current Reliable Data

Up until the 1990 Census of Population and Housing, there was very little demographic data in the USVI besides the decennial census. The Office of Insular Affairs (OIA) in the Department of the Interior began a series of training workshops for the Island Areas under the Statistical Enhancement Program, and it soon became apparent that data needs were at a critical stage. The data that were needed to inform decisions on policies, programs, services simply were not readily available, and there was no established mechanism to generate them regularly.

The realization of the dire need for intercensal data followed the 1980 census after the Territory had passed through its greatest population explosion of the 1960s and 1970s due largely to undocumented immigration. Thus began a 15-year effort that targeted the Current Population Survey (CPS) of the states as the vehicle that

could fill the dearth of demographic data on age, sex, race, marital status and educational attainment; educational data on employment, unemployment, disabilities, earnings, hours of work, school enrollment, occupation, industry, class of worker and income; and housing data on occupancy, home values, tenure, water supply and utilities.

For the USVI, the Bureau of the Census became the obvious point of interest for data from the CPS since this is the federal agency that collected the field data. The simple response to our request was that the survey was sponsored by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and that this is where the request should be lodged. After three attempts over the years to seek the patronage of BLS to be included in this survey, BLS politely indicated that it had no mandate to include the USVI in the survey, and that funding was the primary deterrent.

The Advent of the Virgin Islands Community Survey (VICS)

The first intercensal population and housing survey was conducted in 1995 by the University of the Virgin Islands with partial funding from Office of Insular Affairs (OIA). The continual requests for “the latest” demographic and housing data—instead of the dated 1990 census data—by local government agencies, academics, students and non-government offices made it obvious that a genuine need existed for current meaningful and reliable data. The Census Bureau continued to publish annual population estimates for each of the three islands, totally bereft of any detailed data. The estimates literally only included one estimated population number for St. Croix, one for St. John and one for St. Thomas. The Estimates Branch of the Bureau of the Census that previously published these annual estimates simply ceased doing so in 1998 and literally declared that the USVI was on its own as far as intercensal data were concerned.

In 1997 OIA provided partial assistance to conduct the first local Household Income and Expenditure Survey in the Territory. The data from this survey formed the basis for the establishment of a basket of goods and services upon which a set of items was selected to determine a consumer price index. It is this kind of data collection experience that led the University, with the Office of the Governor, in 2001 to take the initiative to conduct the first Virgin Islands Community Survey (VICS). This survey is not in any way related to the American Community Survey. A local Advisory Committee on Surveys was constituted primarily with members of the Census Interagency Committee representatives, who were largely middle management government supervisors who would be more directly knowledgeable about the details of data that their offices need for their regular work. The driving purpose behind the introduction of this survey was to provide the USVI with annual population and housing estimates, as well as to

measure the demographic, housing, social and economic characteristics of the Territory.

The Office of Insular Affairs in the Department of the Interior partially supported the Virgin Islands Community Survey by funding through the International Programs Center of the Bureau of the Census for the electronic processing and tabulation of the VICS data. OIA determined that its focus in the Statistical Enhancement Program was no longer in demographic data collection, but rather in economic data for economic performance indicators. To this end, OIA signed an agreement with the University to conduct the 2005 Household Income and Expenditure Survey so that the data could be used to update the basket of goods and services for the local consumer price index. However, in the middle of the field work, OIA, without warning or explanation, insisted on a cessation of data collection. This is a survey statistician's worst nightmare. Added to this withdrawal of support for the field work, OIA seems to have terminated its reimbursable agreement with the IPC in the Census Bureau under which VICS data were electronically edited and tabulated for the USVI.

The VICS program has reached a crossroads. There seem to be few options available. The abandonment of annual data collection is not an option. The reasons below are considered compelling in order to maintain the survivability of the VICS program, at least until the USVI can be assured it will be included in the American Community Survey.

- VICS is the only local source for annual demographic, social, economic and housing information for the USVI.
- For each successive year after the 2000 decennial census, the data become more dated and of less value for planning, decision making and policy development.
- VICS data provide invaluable information on income and poverty levels at the insular level, as well as housing rental costs and homeownership rates; it is also the only source of (non-administrative) levels of unemployment and the ethnic mix of the population that is largely influenced by immigration.
- Every local government agency has at one time or other since the 2000 census turned to VICS data for required programmatic reporting to the federal government.
- Government agencies regularly request VICS data for supporting information in their application for federal grants.
- The Bureau of Economic Research in the Office of the Governor needs annual population estimates for several of reporting statistics.

- Many non-government agencies, including off-island businesses, turn to VICS data for regular decision making.
- VICS is the primary source of information for tracking the well-being of families and the elderly.
- The local *Kids Count Data Book* depends considerably on VICS data to enable it to produce indices of well-being of Virgin Islands children.
- VICS data are requested regularly by the general public and by academics and university students for class assignments and for research papers.

The Office of the Governor has funded VICS from 2001-2008. Unfortunately, VICS data, due to a lack of full funding, is not available electronically, and is not part of the federal data base. Most significantly, VICS is not approved by the Census Bureau. It does not have the imprimatur of the federal government so it cannot accurately be used in determining federal support.

While there may continue to be a need for VICS data for local needs, clearly the use of the American Community Survey for the USVI is long overdue.

American Community Survey

The USVI is very much aware of the progression of the American Community Survey (ACS) from its inception demonstration program in 1996, through full implementation in January 2005, to its current plan to begin publishing three-year estimates on an annual basis for areas in the states with a population over 20,000. Statistical representatives of the Island Areas were very much encouraged when Puerto Rico was also included under the ACS program.

Current Census Bureau literature describes the ACS as a “survey designed to provide communities a fresh look at how they are changing” for “it will replace the decennial long form in future censuses and is a critical element in the Census Bureau’s reengineered 2010 census”. The following statements are even more poignant in the case for the USVI that is made below, for what holds true for the states holds even more so given that the USVI has no fully supported surveys:

“Since [the census] is done only once every 10 years, long-form information becomes out of date. Planners and other data users are reluctant to rely on it for decisions that are expensive and affect the quality of life of thousands of people. The American Community Survey is a way to provide the data communities need every year instead of once in ten years.”

The rest of the information goes on to say the ACS “will provide estimates of demographic, housing, social, and economic characteristics every year for all states, as well as for all cities, counties, metropolitan areas, and population groups of 65,000 people or more.”

The same Title XIII United States Code that authorizes the Census Bureau to conduct the decennial censuses in the states also enjoins it to conduct the census in the USVI. What is more directly relevant to the USVI in its quest for current and reliable data is the following language in Title XIII U.S.C. Section 181. In speaking to “intervals between each census”, the Code specifies that the Census Bureau “shall annually produce and publish for each state, country, and local unit of general purpose government which has a population of fifty thousand or more, current data on total population and population characteristics...” At least both Guam and the USVI had reached this 50,000 population threshold several decades earlier.

Armed with this compelling legal federal requirement, it was with great hope that the Census Data Center directors of the Island Areas met in January 2004 with the former director of the Census Bureau, and made an impassioned plea to have the Island Areas included as part of the ACS as specified by Title XIII U.S.C. Previously the Island Areas had always been told that a lack of funding precluded intercensal surveys in the IA. Almost a year later, the response from the Census Bureau to the USVI was that the Territory did not have an address system, and that a comprehensive address list is the basis on which household selection is to be made.

Such a claim by the Census Bureau appears to be a perpetuation of the idea that these comparatively small jurisdictions of the United States are relatively irrelevant. The assertion appears even more perplexing given that the Census Bureau utilized the list-enumerate procedure during the 2000 Census in the USVI, and therefore has in its possession a comprehensive address list of every dwelling unit in the USVI in that year. Remotely rural areas of Alaska are sampled in the ACS, and in Puerto Rico as well. We believe that the Census Bureau, with some of the most renowned sampling statisticians in the world, can develop a methodology that can overcome the limitation of an incomplete address system that would allow the collection of reliable sample data. Sample data collection technology has developed to the point where the traditional method need not be a limiting condition.

Negative Impacts on our Communities

Had we been included in the Current Population Survey (CPS) or in the more recent American Community Survey (ACS) our communities would have been

more appropriately recognized and served. Every year more than \$300 billion in federal funds are allocated to localities based on census numbers. An annual, uniform, verifiable survey would ensure that our communities get their fair share of government and business funding.

For example, Medicaid is the largest formula grant program. We can only imagine how many of our residents are in fact eligible for these services, yet can't receive them because the federal government has placed little importance on serving the needs of our comparatively small jurisdictions. Further, with annual data we would be able to assess local needs, such as where to build new roads, schools or senior centers.

In addition, the exclusion of the U. S. Virgin Islands from the American Community Survey has resulted in the USVI's exclusion from the National Kids Count book produced by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. While the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands has published a USVI Kids Count book locally since 2000, this local publication does not get comparable distribution, visibility, recognition and use by national policy makers committed to enhancing outcomes for children and families. By being left out of the ACS, the Virgin Islands cannot be compared to other states, comparisons which are critical to understanding the extent of child poverty in the Virgin Islands, and the challenges facing our communities.

The exclusion of the Virgin Islands from national data sources also leads to the disparate consideration of the USVI from legislation critical to the well-being of our children and families, such as the "No Child Left Behind" Act. National organizations and foundations also use the ACS to determine need for funding. A health initiative by major national foundation overlooked the inclusion of the USVI because our numbers were not in the ACS which was their basis for grant-making consideration. Finally, because there is no public access to the Virgin Islands Community Survey, national policy makers and grant-makers cannot easily obtain information about the Virgin Islands on any number of indicators.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The residents of the USVI are disadvantaged in a myriad of ways by not being in the American Community Survey. Federal funds are allocated based on Census data; foundations use the ACS in making their grants; and policy discussions are based on ACS data.

There is every statistical reason to believe that the Census Bureau could utilize the list-enumerate procedure in the field to capture the address of every housing unit in the USVI as the basis for the USVI's inclusion in the ACS. Therefore, the

argument that the USVI does not have an address list is no longer valid. Title XIII negates the Census Bureau argument that it does not have the mandate to conduct the ACS in the USVI. Finally, the argument that there is a lack of funding can be overcome through congressional directive.

The USVI wishes to submit the following recommendations:

- Congress should adopt legislation that would direct the Census Bureau to include the USVI in the American Community Survey.
- USVI inclusion in the American Community Survey should begin in the year immediately following the 2010 Census.
- The legislation should specifically identify the necessary assistance and support to enable such inclusion in the American Community Survey.

The demographics of our population are changing dramatically year to year. In order to maximize our resources, ensure our economic growth, and the overall health of our communities, the USVI must be in a position where it can access current and reliable data for its development, just as any other local government area in the states.