

ISLAND SECURITY POLICY INSTITUTE

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POLICY BRIEF

Governing in the Gap

Public Safety Policy for U.S. Pacific Territories

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American Samoa, CNMI, and the Limits of Federal Jurisdiction emergency management, US Pacific territories security policy, island territory governance, Pacific Island public safety, federal jurisdiction Pacific territories, territory emergency preparedness, Pacific Island law enforcement policy the State of Hawaii. This publication represents ISPI's independent research and policy analysis. The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position of any funder, sponsor, or affiliated organization. ISPI maintains full editorial independence on all research outputs. Full institutional credential documentation is available to qualified government agencies, foundations, and institutional partners upon formal request. Guam — a U.S. territory, home to 160,000 Americans, and among the most strategically significant military installations in the Indo-Pacific — receives less dedicated public safety policy research than a mid-sized mainland county. American Samoa, the CNMI, and the U.S. Freely Associated States are, in the mainstream think tank research landscape, largely invisible. The policy consequence of this invisibility is a systematic underdevelopment of the security and emergency management infrastructure that these communities need and that American strategic interests in the Pacific require. ISPI is the first dedicated research institution to address U.S. Pacific territory public safety policy as a primary research focus. This policy brief identifies the most consequential policy gaps and recommends specific remedies.

Key Findings

U.S. federal public safety and emergency management frameworks apply to Pacific territories through jurisdictional structures that create systematic gaps between the protections available to mainland Americans and those available to American nationals and citizens in Pacific territories. Federal emergency management and law enforcement grant formulas that calculate eligibility on per-capita or populationbased metrics systematically underfund Pacific territory agencies relative to their operational needs, which are driven by geographic isolation and infrastructure constraints rather than population size. The public safety policy research literature on U.S. Pacific territories is sparse to the point of absence. No major think tank has produced comprehensive public safety policy research dedicated to Guam, American Samoa, CNMI, or the Freely Associated States. ISPI's establishment as a dedicated islandfocused research institution begins to address this gap.

The Jurisdictional Complexity

Public safety governance in U.S. Pacific territories involves a layered jurisdictional structure that has no exact mainland parallel. Guam is an unincorporated territory whose residents are U.S. citizens but cannot vote in federal elections and whose relationship with federal public safety frameworks

involves specific exclusions and modifications that do not apply to the fifty states. American Samoa is an unincorporated territory whose residents are U.S. nationals — not citizens by birth — creating a distinct legal status with specific implications for the federal programs and protections available to them. Each jurisdictional structure creates specific public safety policy implications: which federal grant programs apply, which federal law enforcement agencies have jurisdiction and under what conditions, which emergency management frameworks are mandatory versus discretionary, and how federal-territorial legal relationships affect operational law enforcement in practice. These implications require specialized policy analysis that continental-focused think tanks are not equipped to provide.

The Federal Funding Formula Problem

Federal emergency management and law enforcement grant programs predominantly calculate funding eligibility using population-based metrics — per capita allocations, percentage of national population, or formulas that blend population with geographic size. These formulas produce systematically inadequate funding for Pacific territory agencies for two independently sufficient reasons. First, the public safety challenges facing Pacific territory agencies are not proportional to their populations. A 50,000-person Pacific Island territory must maintain port security infrastructure covering maritime approaches that span thousands of square miles, emergency management capacity for geographic conditions that create unique mass casualty risk, and law enforcement coverage for communities where the ratio of law enforcement personnel to geographic area is far less favorable than any continental analog the funding formula was designed around. Second, the cost of delivering public safety services in geographically isolated Pacific territories carries significant premiums over mainland cost baselines. Equipment procurement, personnel recruitment and retention, training access, logistics, and infrastructure maintenance all cost more in island environments — and those cost premiums are not reflected in the mainland cost baselines embedded in federal grant calculation formulas.

Policy Recommendations

1. Reform federal emergency management and law enforcement grant calculation formulas to incorporate verified geographic isolation factors and documented island operational cost premiums, rather than relying on population-based allocation metrics that systematically produce inadequate funding for Pacific territory agencies.
2. Develop Pacific territory-specific public safety policy guidance —

distinct from the mainland state guidance currently applied by default — that addresses the jurisdictional complexity of territorial governance, the specific legal frameworks applicable to each territory's status, and the operational realities of island geographic environments.

3. Commission dedicated research on Pacific territory public safety needs through institutions such as ISPI that can provide islandpractitioner-grounded analysis rather than continental policy analysis adapted after the fact.
4. Establish a Pacific territory public safety coordination mechanism that creates direct policy input channels from territorial law enforcement, emergency management, and community safety agencies to the federal policymakers whose decisions most significantly affect their capacity to protect their communities. The Island Security Policy Institute (ISPI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization based in Honolulu, Hawaii. ISPI produces practitioner-led research, policy analysis, training programs, and commissioned research on public safety, emergency preparedness, insider threat, and security policy for island and coastal communities worldwide. ISPI's research draws on verified operational experience across U.S. military service, metropolitan law enforcement, diplomatic security operations, FEMA-certified emergency management, and campus safety administration. ISPI is registered as a federal contractor on SAM.gov under NAICS 541720. To commission research, subscribe to ISPI publications, request the ISPI Policy Advisor institutional access, or inquire about training programs and speaking engagements: purposes with full attribution to the Island Security Policy Institute. For commercial reproduction or translation rights, contact ISPIGlobal@proton.me.

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