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WHITE PAPER

Island-State Security: Why Mainstream Frameworks Fail Pacific and Coastal Communities

And What Policymakers Must Build Instead

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Island-State Security

Why Mainstream Frameworks Fail Pacific and Coastal

Communities — and What Policymakers Must Build Instead security, Hawaii public safety, island state security framework, ISPI research, Pacific security policy, island emergency preparedness, practitioner-led policy research 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. On the morning of August 8, 2023, a wildfire driven by hurricane-force winds moved through Lahaina, Maui faster than the town could run. The warning sirens did not sound. The wireless emergency alerts arrived too late for many residents to act on them. The primary evacuation route was blocked by the fire itself. More than 100 people died — the deadliest American wildfire in over a century — in a community that had no reliable mechanism to receive the warning it needed in the minutes that mattered. The failure was not a failure of effort or intention. The emergency managers, law enforcement officers, and public officials who responded that day were doing everything the policy frameworks they had been given told them to do. The frameworks themselves were the problem. They were designed for a different geography — one with multiple evacuation routes, redundant communication infrastructure, and neighboring jurisdictions that could send resources within hours. Maui had none of those structural advantages. And the policy frameworks did not know it. This is the foundational problem that the Island Security Policy Institute was established to address.

Key Findings

Island and coastal communities require dedicated public safety and security policy frameworks — not continental frameworks applied without modification. The structural differences between island and continental geography are sufficiently fundamental that adaptation is insufficient; island-specific frameworks must be built from first principles. Five structural characteristics distinguish island community public safety environments from continental environments in ways that current policy systematically fails to address: geographic isolation and mutual aid limitations, supply chain singularity, law enforcement workforce constraints, concentrated population vulnerability, and distinctive insider threat dynamics. Documented failure cases across the Hawaiian Islands, U.S. Pacific territories, and Caribbean island communities provide a consistent empirical record of mainland framework failure in island contexts — a record that has not previously been synthesized into a unified

policy analysis. The Island Security Policy Institute's practitioner knowledge base, grounded in more than four decades of verified operational experience across military service, metropolitan law enforcement, diplomatic security, emergency management, and campus safety, provides the analytical foundation for island-specific policy development that no academic institution alone can replicate. Introduction: The Continental Assumption in American Public Safety

Policy

The foundational assumption embedded in American public safety and emergency management policy is continental geography. The Federal

Emergency Management Agency's Incident Command System assumes

mutual aid — the capacity of neighboring jurisdictions to send resources across shared borders within hours. The Department of Homeland Security's Critical Infrastructure Protection framework assumes redundant supply chains arriving from multiple directions. Law enforcement workforce development programs assume officer pools large enough to absorb recruitment shortfalls without significant service gaps. These assumptions are rational and well-grounded for the continental communities they were designed to serve. They are, the available evidence indicates, systematically wrong for island communities — and the policy consequences of applying them without modification are documented in mass casualty events, governance breakdowns, and persistent public safety crises that island communities have experienced with a frequency and severity that their continental counterparts have not. The Island Security Policy Institute's analysis of documented failure cases, combined with its practitioner knowledge of island community operational realities, suggests that the gap between mainland framework assumptions and island community realities is not a gap that can be bridged through incremental adaptation. It requires the development of island-specific frameworks built from the structural realities of island geography rather than continental assumptions modified at the margins.

The Five Structural Differences

I. Geographic Isolation and the Mutual Aid Constraint Mutual aid — the systematic sharing of emergency resources between neighboring jurisdictions — is the backbone of continental emergency management. When a wildfire overwhelms one county's fire suppression capacity, adjacent counties deploy engines within hours. When a hurricane devastates one coastal region, FEMA coordinates an interstate resource cascade from unaffected states within days. The system functions because continental geography makes resource movement

fast, predictable, and reliable. Island communities operate under a fundamentally different constraint. The first significant mutual aid resources from the continental United States to reach Lahaina after the August 2023 wildfire arrived hours after the fire's peak — after the critical window for effective mass notification, evacuation coordination, and emergency medical response had already closed. This outcome does not represent a failure of the mutual aid system. It represents the system operating exactly as designed in a context for which it was not designed. Available evidence from documented emergency events in Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Guam, and Pacific Island territories consistently indicates that mutual aid assumptions embedded in NIMS/ICS frameworks are incompatible with island geographic realities. ISPI's analysis suggests that island emergency management frameworks must treat pre-positioned resources and community self-sufficiency capacity as primary design parameters, not supplementary considerations.

II. Supply Chain Singularity

Hawaii imports approximately 85 to 90 percent of its food by maritime shipping. U.S. Pacific territories import virtually all pharmaceutical supplies, medical equipment, construction materials, and fuel through port infrastructure that serves as the community's sole supply pipeline. The practical consequence of this dependency is that a single point of failure — a hurricane, a port infrastructure failure, a logistics disruption, or a deliberate interference with port operations — can interrupt the community's entire supply chain simultaneously and without alternative sourcing mechanisms. Continental communities face supply chain disruptions of varying severity. They do not, in the ordinary course, face supply chain cessation — the complete elimination of resupply options across all categories simultaneously. Island communities face exactly this risk in major emergency scenarios, and the policy frameworks governing their emergency preparedness do not adequately account for it. ISPI's analysis of emergency preparedness plans for Hawaiian counties and Pacific Island territories indicates that the pre-positioned supply reserves mandated or recommended by current federal guidance are inadequate for the duration of supply disruption that documented major emergencies in island contexts routinely produce.

III. Law Enforcement and Emergency Management Workforce Constraints

Hawaiian and Pacific Island territory law enforcement agencies consistently operate with significant officer vacancy rates. The combination of high cost of living, limited career advancement pathways, geographic isolation, and non-competitive salary structures relative to mainland departments creates chronic recruitment and retention challenges that have not been adequately addressed by existing workforce development policy. The operational consequences of chronic understaffing in island law enforcement agencies extend beyond routine service delivery gaps. In mass casualty events — whether natural disasters, active threat incidents, or major public safety emergencies — the difference between an adequately staffed and a chronically

understaffed law enforcement agency can determine whether the emergency response is effective or catastrophic. Island communities face this risk at precisely the moments when their geographic isolation makes mutual aid least effective.

IV. Concentrated Population Vulnerability

Island communities concentrate their populations in geographically constrained areas that limit evacuation options in ways that continental communities do not face. The evacuation geometry of an island — particularly a long, narrow island like Maui or a densely populated coastal urban area like Honolulu — presents emergency managers with constraints that standard continental evacuation frameworks were not designed to address. When an emergency blocks the primary evacuation route in a continental community, emergency managers have options: alternative roads, adjacent jurisdictions, dynamically rerouted evacuation corridors. When an emergency blocks the primary evacuation route on an island, those options may not exist. The policy response to this constraint is not better evacuation planning within the continental framework — it is a fundamentally different approach to community emergency preparedness that treats geographic constraint as a design parameter rather than an exception.

V. Insider Threat Dynamics in Close-Knit Communities

Island communities are characterized by dense, persistent social networks in which professional and personal relationships overlap substantially. In many Pacific Island territory organizations and rural Hawaii community workplaces, colleagues are also family members, neighbors, coaches, and long-term social connections. This social fabric is a meaningful community asset. ISPI's practitioner analysis of more than 2,400 documented threat assessments suggests it is also a systematic vulnerability in insider threat detection. Insider threat detection frameworks — including those developed by the Carnegie Mellon CERT Insider Threat Center and the DHS Insider Threat Program — are designed for organizations with sufficient scale to maintain institutional distance between colleagues, anonymous reporting mechanisms, and dedicated security personnel who are not embedded in the social networks they are monitoring. Small island-state organizations typically have none of these structural features. The social cost of activating a formal reporting mechanism against a colleague who is also a cousin or a neighbor is sufficiently high in close-knit island communities that the research literature on reporting behavior in small organizations suggests systematic underreporting of behavioral warning signs.

Case Studies in Framework Failure

The 2023 Maui Wildfire

Post-incident analysis of the Lahaina wildfire documented multiple systemic failures attributable to the application of continental emergency management frameworks to an island context: mass notification system failure, evacuation route gridlock, and EOC coordination gaps. Each failure reflects a specific continental assumption — redundant communication infrastructure, multiple evacuation corridors, mutual aid backup for first responder capacity — that did not hold in Maui's island environment. ISPI's policy analysis of the Maui wildfire response is ongoing. A forthcoming ISPI white paper will provide a comprehensive examination of the emergency management policy failures documented in the wildfire's aftermath and specific policy recommendations for island emergency management reform.

Hurricane Maria and Puerto Rico

Hurricane Maria's devastation of Puerto Rico in 2017 exposed the fundamental incompatibility between federal Continuity of Operations planning frameworks and the operational realities of a non-contiguous territory. When critical infrastructure was destroyed, there was no neighboring state to absorb essential government functions. When the power grid failed, there was no adjacent grid to draw from. When fuel supplies were depleted, there was no overland resupply route. The COOP framework's assumption of geographic proximity to alternative operational locations was, in the Puerto Rico context, simply inapplicable.

Policy Recommendations

Based on ISPI's analysis of documented failure cases and practitioner knowledge of island community operational realities, the following policy priorities are identified for government agencies, legislative bodies, and foundations concerned with island and Pacific community public safety:

1. Develop island-specific emergency management frameworks — distinct from NIMS/ICS adaptations — that treat geographic isolation, supply chain singularity, and concentrated population vulnerability as primary design parameters. These frameworks should be developed through a process that gives island community practitioners, not continental emergency management specialists, the authoritative voice on island operational realities.
2. Reform federal emergency preparedness grant formulas to mandate pre-positioned community supply reserves for island and noncontiguous territory communities adequate for a minimum 30-day self-sustaining period before continental mutual aid can be reliably delivered at scale.

3. Create island-specific law enforcement workforce development programs with compensation structures that reflect actual island cost of living rather than mainland salary benchmarks, and with career development pathways designed for the specific constraints of small island agency environments.
4. Commission island-specific insider threat detection framework development for small island-state organizations — including resorts, hospitals, port authorities, and small government agencies — that accounts for social network overlap, small organizational scale, and culturally-specific behavioral baseline differences.
5. Establish dedicated federal research funding — or fund independent research institutions such as ISPI — for island-state public safety policy development that treats island community realities as the starting point rather than a modification of continental frameworks.

Conclusion

The 100 people who died in Lahaina on August 8, 2023, lived in a community that deserved better policy than it had. Not better intentions — the intentions of those who designed and implemented Hawaii's emergency management system were sound. Better frameworks. Frameworks designed for the geography, the infrastructure, and the social realities of the community they were meant to protect. Island communities are not smaller versions of continental communities. They are structurally different environments that require structurally different policy responses. The Island Security Policy Institute was established to produce that research — not theoretically, but operationally, grounded in the practitioner knowledge of the communities we serve. This paper is the first in ISPI's ongoing research program. Subsequent publications address each structural gap identified here in depth, with specific policy recommendations developed through rigorous analysis of documented cases and verified practitioner knowledge. To receive ISPIGlobal@proton.me. 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

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