

The birth tourism industry in the CNMI

Cornessa Dela Cruz

Northern Marianas College

Dr. Kimberly Bunts-Anderson

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Abstract

This report focuses on a research project conducted by a student from Saipan's Northern Marianas College, Cornessa Dela Cruz, on how the growing birth tourism industry has affected the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands. Data was collected through reviewing literature, surveys, interviews, and letters to experts. Findings suggest the increase of tourist births has affected the CNMI and that many individuals are not on the positive side of the issue.

Introduction

People who intentionally travel to another country to give birth for the benefit of their child's ability to claim U.S citizenship are involved in birth tourism. Birth tourism has become a major issue and topic in many places around the world. In the last couple of years, birth tourism has become a big issue in the CNMI. It is a great deal most especially because the CNMI is included amongst the 15 islands between the Philippines and Hawaii. For that reason, any individual born in the CNMI is eligible for U.S. citizenship. This research report describes a project designed to answer whether people support the ways that the growing birth tourism industry has affected the CNMI, through literature findings, interviews, surveys, and expertise input.

Literature Review

The issue of the growing birth tourism industry in the CNMI has been covered in several journal and newspaper articles. As an illustration, an article published on USA Today titled “‘Birth tourism’ in Saipan causing headaches for USA” covers the reason they are taking approaches to stop the issue, other reasons aside citizenship for why tourists travel to the CNMI, and Saipan’s tourism industry. The article stated that many of the pregnant women arrive to avoid China’s retribution, fines or worse (Coleman, 2013) which falls under China’s amended two-children policy. Also stated in the article, officials in the Northern Marianas government are at the top of this very issue to assure the United States does not revoke the visa waivers for Chinese tourists. Former Governor Eloy Inos commented that Saipan’s only hospital, the Commonwealth Health Center (CHCC), could possibly enforce tourists to pay a certain amount to fight the problem of unpaid bills. This could possibly result in a raised price of birth certificate issuances for visitors. The price range would increase from \$20 to as high as \$50,000.

In addition, “It’s not new, but ‘birth tourism’ is a growing CNMI industry” is a published periodical on the Pacific Island Times news outlet website, dated on the 5th of December 2017. At that time, also two months ago, birth tourism was a hot issue “once again” after the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was given a tip from a local doctor, commenting that there is an alleged large scale operation within the island. The Commonwealth Health Center shared that there was an increasing trend of tourists that were giving birth in the hospital. In 2009, there was only eight recorded child deliveries specifically from Chinese parents, which drastically changed by a 3,000 percent increase by the year 2012, with 282 child births. There were 314 child births throughout 2014, which leaped to 383 in 2016. (Rodriquez, 2017). To put it another way, the

Commonwealth Health Corporation's Vital Statistics Office made recordings of an increase in the child births of mostly women originating from China.

Alongside information gathered through literature, statistics provided through the Department of Commerce Central Statistics Division contain a variety of graphs and charts illustrating the vast difference from the past years to the year of 2015. The statistics are provided in the 11th Statistical Yearbook published. The data includes statistics of foreign-born populations, place of birth of parents, nativity, citizenship status, and the year of entry of all individuals within the CNMI population. An example of an informal stat provided in the statistical yearbook states that the CNMI's population consisted of 34,838 mothers and 33,541 fathers were born on non-U.S. soil during the year of 2010. Also stated in the 2015 statistical yearbook is that a total of 24,168 individuals are foreign-born amongst the whole CNMI population (Department of Commerce, 2010).

Another source of statistical information is the Maternal and Child Health 2010 Needs Assessment published through the CNMI Division of Public Health's Maternal and Child Health Program. The data provided in the document include graphs, charts, and statements explaining and analyzing the different data collections. Several of the percentages, or rates included in the 2010 Assessment preview the CNMI population and teen births by ethnicity. Within a 10- year span, there was a 531.4-percent difference with the Chinese population in the CNMI, from the year 1990-2000. The Chinese population was of 2,881 individuals in the year 1990, whereas it increased to 15,311 by the year 2000.

From the statistics, data, and information gathered from all references, the student writer developed details that will further enhance any necessary details to support the thesis statement, and the research essay entirely. The analyzed data from the statistical yearbook and assessment provides a great foundation for academic literature that the essay requires. Information provided through the discovered news and journal articles provide more insight into the rising issue, and helps get a better understanding of what the increasing birth tourism industry means to the CNMI and the commonwealth.

Research Questions

Primary Research Question:

- How could the growing birth tourism industry affect the CNMI?

Secondary Research Questions:

- Has the growing birth tourism industry been beneficial to the CNMI?
- Do people of the CNMI support the tourism birth industry?
- What are the statistics/rates of the growth between the years 2010-2018 (current)?

Methodology

This section explains the process of the conducted research through step by step strategies, which includes how the questions were developed and prepared, and how the data was collected and analyzed.

The researcher came up with several questions to ask through a survey shared on Google Docs with other English Composition students attending the Northern Marianas College. A pilot survey was developed using SurveyMonkey.com and shared through the Google Docs containing links for other students' surveys as well. The survey included questions which seek answers regarding the survey participant's knowledge of the issue, their definition of 'birth tourism', their opinions of the issue, and whether they have had any encounters or experiences with a pregnant tourist woman (see Appendix A). Upon the instructor's approval and with feedback from the researcher's classmates and peers on the pilot survey, the researcher finalized and uploaded the final survey's link on a shared document available to other English Composition students. The survey was not limited to a specific group of individuals or a certain age range. Also, the survey was designed to welcome all interested survey-taking individuals with no limitations to how many people can take the survey. With that said, the researcher received 30 responses from other NMC English Composition students as well as from family members and friends.

There are several ways to proceed with gathering information on the birth tourism issue in the CNMI. One of the best approaches that the researcher took to gather information was by speaking with and interviewing several individuals that work closely with the issue. The researcher was able to gain information through interviews with an airport Corrections officer

(see Appendix B) and Representative Ed Propst (see Appendix C). To gain even more of a variety of input, the researcher also conducted interviews with peers about what they know regarding the birth tourism industry. (see Appendix D).

In addition, the researcher developed letters to experts residing outside of the Commonwealth. The drafted letters included questions pertaining to personal opinions on the issue of birth tourism and any encounters the experts may have experienced. Out of four letters that were sent through email, the researcher received a response from one individual, Wileen Hernandez from the California Hospital Medical Center (see Appendix E).

Alongside information gathered through reviewing literature, the researcher was able to obtain more information through distributing surveys, conducting three interviews, and sending letters to experts containing questionnaires. After reviewing and finalizing all the collected data, the searcher concluded that the growing birth tourism industry is not supported by many because it has affected the CNMI over the last couple of years. The researcher included all the finalized data and information in the researcher's final report and presentation to be viewed by other NMC English Composition students and the instructor.

Analysis and Findings

The researcher concluded the research project with a variety of information obtained through several approaches. Alongside reviewing several types of literature such as articles and statistics from CNMI government agencies, the researcher developed a survey that was available to other NMC English composition students and distributed to friends and relatives. Upon availability, the researcher also conducted interviews with peers, a CNMI Customs office, and Representative Ed Propst. In addition, the researcher developed letters to experts and received feedback from expert Wileen Hernandez from the California Hospital Medical Center.

Through the information gathered by conducting a survey, the researcher concluded that many survey participants are somewhat aware of the issue and are mutual about whether the birth tourism industry has been beneficial to the CNMI or not. Out of 32 survey participants, 20 were Chamorro and/or Carolinian. The nationalities of the remaining participants include American, Palauan, Filipino, Samoan, Korean, and Pohnpeian. 53.13% of the survey participants knew more than one person who had given birth for the purpose of their child claiming U.S. citizenship, while the remaining 46.88% of survey participants didn't know anyone who had given birth for those same reasons. Suggested actions in which the government can take to help the decline of the birth tourism industry included restricting access to mothers at a certain period in the pregnancy, penalizing people involved in the industry, making stricter policies for the designated entry places of incoming individuals, and raising awareness.

Questionnaires answered by a CNMI Customs Officer, Representative Ed Propst, and expert Wileen Hernandez gave the researcher more insight on the rising issue. Through

interviews, the researcher got more input on support of the birth tourism industry and whether it has been beneficial towards the CNMI. It was concluded that it is not supported by interviewees Representative Ed Propst, Wileen Hernandez, an ongoing NMC student and CNMI Customs officer. During an interview with Representative Ed Propst, the researcher discovered that the CNMI government officials have had meetings with the U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials concluding that realistically, there is no solution unless the Commonwealth changes its U.S. immigration laws and follow in the footsteps of other countries such as Australia, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

With that said, the researcher determined that birth tourism is beneficial towards our economy within the tourism industry aspect and with generating funds towards our economy. Although there are a few positives about the birth tourism industry, it still remains a concern towards the CNMI's visa waiver program that makes the tourism industry possible within the Commonwealth. People seeking solutions towards the rising issue would need to reach out to people of higher positions, such as President Donald Trump or the United States Congress. Finding solutions to the rising issue of birth tourism would take a great amount of dedication and time as it will need to involve people outside of the CNMI.

Discussion

Some very important information gathered throughout the research included statistics and factual information regarding the birth tourism industry in the CNMI, specifically Saipan. The researcher discovered that within the years 2010 and 2012, births of the Chinese ethnicity had rose 175%, outnumbering individuals of any other ethnicity (Zach Coleman, 2013). Also, the researcher came across information stating that the birth tourism industry had become a great business with travel agencies in China. Travel agencies were reportedly offering pregnant Chinese women tour packages to the island of Saipan, paying \$1,000 per month (Mark Rodriguez, 2017). According to U.S. Congressman Gregorio Kilili Sablan, birth tourism remains a serious concern for the CNMI due to the possible threats it may hold for the parole program the CNMI has. The parole program makes tourism possible for the Commonwealth. Although birth tourism is an issue within the CNMI, it is also a major issue in the U.S., which several individuals are working towards to find solutions to assist with the decline of the birth tourism industry.

Future Plans

The researcher had decided to seek ways in which the collected information can be distributed to the community and its people. It is believed that one of the best ways to help with the decline of the birth tourism industry is to spread awareness and make people more knowledgeable of the issue. The researcher concluded that one of the most effective ways to reach out to people would be through social media, which is very commonly used amongst all ages in today's societies. Although the researcher is still unsure about any other approaches, time will be made to develop a variety of materials in which can be shared with other individuals in the CNMI's communities to spread awareness.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research project was to gather answers as to how the birth tourism industry has and would affect the CNMI, and whether people of the CNMI support the growing industry. The researcher gathered information and data through reviewing literature such as journal articles and statistics published by government agencies, developing and distributing a survey, interviewing three different individuals associated with the topic, and by sending letters to experts. The research project process took approximately 14 weeks. Throughout the 14 weeks, the research established research questions, gathered literature, distributed surveys, conducted interviews, developed letters to experts, and drafted three different essays relative to the research project.

The researcher discovered that majority of the research project participants do not support the birth tourism industry, are somewhat aware of the issue, and believe that birth tourism is not beneficial towards the CNMI. The rates of tourist births in the Commonwealth has only increased since the year 2011. Valid statistics were collected from the Department of Public Health's Maternal and Child Health 2010 Needs Assessment and the 11th Statistical Yearbook published by the Department of Commerce. After gathering and organizing all collected data and information, the researcher developed a final research report including every piece of necessary information.

Appendix A
Survey Questions

1. What is your nationality?
2. Were you born in the CNMI? (yes or specify other)
3. How well is your knowledge/awareness of the CNMI's growing birth tourism industry?
4. How would you define BIRTH TOURISM?
5. How many people do you know that has given birth for the purpose of their child claiming U.S. citizenship?
6. Do you think the growing birth tourism industry has affected the CNMI's economy?
7. The birth tourism industry has been beneficial to the CNMI.
8. What actions do you think the government can take to avoid an even bigger increase of the birth tourism industry here in the CNMI?

Appendix B
Interview with CNMI Customs officer

1. In your opinion, how has the growing birth tourism industry affected the CNMI over the last couple of years?

Response: The birth tourism industry has brought in large amount of cash but did not contribute to our local tax. All the cash flows to private operated facilitations, none is reported. The birth industry is also jeopardizing our visa waiver program for tourists that want to enjoy our islands without the need to apply for a visa that is also the CNMI main attraction comparing to the other islands. The visa waiver program is strictly for tourism purpose the pregnant tourist is taking advantage of it.

2. Have you had any encounters with pregnant tourist women? If so, what happened?

Response: Yes, many encounters. (does not like it)

3. Are there any specific procedures you must follow when encountering pregnant tourist women trying to enter the CNMI?

Response: (no comment)

4. Do you support the growing birth tourism industry?

Response: No, I don't.

5. Do you think the growing birth tourism industry is beneficial to the CNMI?

Response: No, it is not.

6. What are ways you think the government, or commonwealth and its people, can provide solutions to this rising issue?

Response: (no comment)

Appendix C
Interview with Representative Ed Propst

1. In your opinion, is the birth tourism industry beneficial to the CNMI?

Response: I don't think birth tourism is beneficial to the CNMI. If anything, it tarnishes our image and makes the CNMI appear to be desperate for tourists. The truth is, on a local level, we have no control over birth tourism, as the United States is in charge of our immigration system.

2. What do you think are the pros and cons of the growing birth tourism industry?

Response: The cons are the stigma associated with birth tourism that include negative, offensive terms such as "anchor babies." The "anchor baby" term refers to a child born to a non-citizen mother in a country which has birthright citizenship. A pro could be the revenue generated from the births that go toward CHCC and private health clinics on island.

3. In what ways do you think will help the decline of this industry?

Response: It is not illegal for visitors from other countries who enter legally to give birth here in the CNMI or in the United States. The only way we can see a decline is for immigration laws to change. The CNMI's overwhelming majority of birth tourism cases come from China, and the only realistic way to see this eliminated or greatly reduced is if the parole status for Chinese visitors is revoked. That would not be good for our economy, as Chinese tourists comprise almost half of all our visitors.

4. Have you had any encounters relative to this issue?

Response: Not on a personal level, no.

5. Who do you think is the key person to reach out to about this issue so that we may come up with possible solutions?

Response: President Trump and the United States Congress.

6. Do you have any suggestions of solutions to this rising issue?

Response: We have had meetings with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials and realistically speaking, there is no solution to this rising issue unless we change U.S. immigration laws and follow in the footsteps of other countries (Australia, France, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United Kingdom) that grant citizenship by birth only if at least one parent is a citizen of the country or a legal permanent resident who has lived in the country for several years.

Appendix D
Interview with current NMC student

1. In your opinion, is the birth tourism industry beneficial to the CNMI?

Response: Yes, because when they give birth, they pay the hospital which generates into the economic system. But it's definitely all for the wrong reasons as well.

2. What do you think are the pros and cons of the growing birth tourism industry?

Response: Pros would be the tourists paying the hospital. Cons would be having a lot of tourists coming into the CNMI just to give birth so their child can become a US citizen. That will then have our islands filled with a lot of tourists when they should be back where they came from, if they intendedly only come here to give birth.

3. In what ways do you think will help the decline of this industry?

Response: If they stop allowing pregnant tourist women into the CNMI just because they want to give birth so that their child can become a US citizen.

4. Have you had any encounters relative to this issue?

Response: No I haven't but seeing it happen to our home, it's a big concern for our people and land just because one day it'll become overpopulated with all these tourists and their families.

5. Who do you think is the key person to reach out to about this issue so that we may come up with possible solutions?

Response: I would think it would have to be the Governor and Immigration.

6. Do you have any suggestions of solutions to this rising issue?

Response: I would just have to say with denying pregnant tourist women into the islands, and maybe allow a certain amount of days for visitation/vacation. That would probably cause a big issue with tourism, but anything to save our islands from having such a big issue with birth tourism.

Appendix E
Letter to Expert Wileen Hernandez

Dear Ms. Wileen Hernandez,

My name is Cornessa Dela Cruz. I am an English composition student studying at the Northern Marianas College in Saipan, and I am writing to request your assistance with a research project. I am working to find information associated with the growing birth tourism industry here on the island of Saipan, just as it has been increasing in the mainland and other parts of the world as well. As a professional with expertise in the topic of individuals, more so pregnant tourism women and labor/delivery, I would like to ask you about any encounters, experiences or opinions of this rising issue. I would love to meet for a short interview or I am happy to schedule a time to speak with you through Skype or any social media chat lines if you prefer. If you do not have the time to accommodate an interview, I've provided a list of questionnaires below for you to answer through email. I would like to thank you in advance for any time you may provide to assist me with this research project.

Best regards,

Cornessa Dela Cruz

cornessa.delacruz@my.marianas.edu

Questions:

1. In your opinion, is the birth tourism industry beneficial to the CNMI and the United States?

Response: In my opinion, birth tourism is not beneficial to the CNMI or the United States for any reasons other than increased diversity.

2. What do you think are the pros and cons of the growing birth tourism industry?

Response: Some pros would be that generally, tourists benefit towards the tourism industry, helping the economy. Some cons would be that the birth tourism industry could affect the visa waiver programs available in the designated areas that provide these waiver programs.

3. In what ways do you think will help with the decline of the growing birth tourism industry?

Response: Some ways that will help the decline of the growing birth tourism industry would be strict, grounded rules that everyone complies with, more so individuals that are stationed where these pregnant tourists may enter from, and through outreach and spreading awareness.

4. Have you had any encounters with a pregnant tourist woman? Someone from non-US soil? If so, what was the encounter and how did you approach the situation?

Response: I specifically have not had any encounters, but have seen several pregnant tourists in our facilities and around our areas.

5. Who do you think is the person to reach out to about this issue so that we may come up with possible solutions?

Response: I believe that the best person, or people, to reach out to about this issue will be individuals associated with our government or the tourism industry in general, because they are probably more knowledgeable and well-involved with the issue and any persons that fall under this issue.

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