A SUMMARY OF PUERTO RICAN MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

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THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENT in understanding Puerto Rican migration is perhaps the least visible one: the historical context. In the nineteenth century, Puerto Rico had been receiving people, rather than exporting them. Yet by the middle of the twentieth century, Puerto Rico began to experience a concentrated exodus of people (see Figure 5.1). Although this migration has fluctuated, the flow has continued. In net terms, it has been so significant that it has been referred to as the "Puerto Rican diaspora." The net result of this unprecedented migration is that by 1980 over 40 percent of Puerto Ricans lived outside Puerto Rico, primarily on the U.S. mainland. Aldorondo (1990) projects that by the year 2000, 38.8 percent of Puerto Rico's population will have migrated to the mainland.
CAUSES OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY OUT-MIGRATION

Why have so many Puerto Ricans left the island during the twentieth century? Early theorists like Chenault and Handlin argued that overpopulation in Puerto Rico was the major factor inducing migration. Others have argued that this overpopulation had come about as a result of health and medical improvements made under U.S. mainland policies. Senior and Watkins, Mills et al., and Perloff have posited that job opportunities elsewhere were the major factor motivating migration.

More recently, researchers have tended to see migration in more macro terms, i.e., as the response of surplus labor to the economic transformations occurring in Puerto Rico. Influenced by the larger context of economic and political dependence on the mainland, these transformations are seen to have yielded increasingly larger numbers of displaced and surplus workers who were forced to migrate elsewhere for jobs.

Microlevel analyses have focused on economic push and pull factors. For example, when the mainland national income goes up and unemployment goes down, Puerto Rican migration increases. Relative wages and unemployment rates in Puerto Rico and the mainland have also been found to affect migration to the mainland and back to Puerto Rico. In essence, Puerto Ricans migrate when job opportunities look better on the mainland and/or when they look worse in Puerto Rico. It has also been found that Puerto Ricans do not migrate to secure greater welfare benefits.

Other scholars have emphasized the role of mainland companies in recruiting Puerto Rican labor to work on the mainland. A 1944 issue of Business Week confirms this recruitment. In an article entitled "Labor Recruited" it noted that three large mainland firms were recruiting skilled Puerto Rican workers for jobs on the mainland in cooperation with the War Manpower Commission. It also noted that the Commission expected that more workers would be recruited by other firms.

According to Morales, Puerto Rican labor was attractive to employers on the mainland because Puerto Ricans were citizens and because of their agricultural background. He notes that Puerto Ricans were "greatly valued" by their employer and they were seen to be "excellent workers." The low wage rates paid to these workers also produced "substantial profits" for these employers and enhanced the attractiveness of Puerto Rican laborers.

Other scholars have cited the role of the government of Puerto Rico in encouraging migration. Although the official position of the government during the era of the Bootstrap was that it did not encourage or discourage migration, some authors dispute this. Padilla maintains that the Puerto Rican government requested that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) set low rates for air transportation between Puerto Rico and the mainland, while Lapp argues that the government's Migration Division office in New York facilitated migration.

Undoubtedly, migration has resulted from a combination of these factors. There are additional factors that have received less attention. Ancez-Korrol points out that the mainland's 1921 legislation restricting immigration and the conferring of citizenship status on Puerto Ricans in 1917 induced Puerto Ricans to migrate. After the Second World War, there may also have been era-specific factors that contributed to the migration, such as greater participation in the armed forces; pent-up travel demand; surplus aircraft and pilots making for cheaper and more accessible air travel; and greater opportunities on the mainland. What is perhaps the most important factor in propelling the Puerto Rican
migration, however, is what is perhaps least visible to the migrants. This is the political and economic relationships between Puerto Rico and the mainland.

**THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIP**

The political relationship between Puerto Rico and the mainland resulted not just in political dependence, but also in economic dependence. Changes in the Puerto Rican economy after the mainland invasion were dramatic. The economy went from a diversified subsistence economy around the turn of the century with four basic crops produced for export (tobacco, cattle, coffee, and sugar) to a sugar-crop economy with 60 percent of the sugar industry controlled by absentee owners from the mainland. The decline of the sugar cane-based industry (combined with no reinvestment and continued population growth) in the twenties resulted in high unemployment, poverty, and desperate conditions in Puerto Rico. These factors propelled the first waves of Puerto Ricans to the mainland in search of a better life. The thirties saw more migration as workers sought to deal with the then stagnant economic situation on the island.

In the forties, the Second World War boosted the flagging economy somewhat. The Puerto Rican government initiated a series of reforms and entered into what has been variously called its "state capitalist development phase," or its "socialist" venture. A series of government-owned enterprises were established and run by the Puerto Rican Development corporation. These included glass, pulp and paper, shoe leather, and clay products corporations as well as a hotel and a textile mill that were financed but not run by the government. Influenced by the New Deal philosophy, this program stressed both "social justice and economic growth" goals. In these regards, the program was "ahead of its time." Had this program succeeded, greater economic independence would have been achieved. These efforts were frustrated, however, by a combination of technical problems, ideological opposition from conservatives in the U.S. Congress, the local press, business interests both in Puerto Rico and on the mainland, and government bureaucrats.

Between 1947 and 1951 there was a changeover from government development of industry to promotion of private investment. The new approach, which was firmly established by 1951, was called "Operation Bootstrap." A forerunner of the economic development strategies subsequently developed throughout the world, the idea was to industrialize Puerto Rico by luring foreign companies, mainly from the U.S. mainland, to Puerto Rico with the promise of low wage and tax incentives. The tourism industry was also developed at this time. Puerto Rico began its thrust toward industrialization and its clear incorporation into an emerging global economy.

Much in Puerto Rico improved during this period, e.g., education, housing, drinking water, electrification and sewage systems, road and transportation facilities. To the residents of Puerto Rico there was a clear and present sense of development and progress and, for some, the perception of a more equitable distribution of income.

The industries that were attracted to the island turned out to be increasingly capital intensive, however, to have little commitment to the development of the island, and to be integrated into sourcing and distribution networks on the mainland or other countries, not in Puerto Rico. As a result, these industries had little indirect employment effects and did not provide sufficient jobs. With increased population growth and displacement from traditional labor pursuits, the result was a growing surplus population that could not be
accommodated in Puerto Rico's new industrial order. Much of the surplus labor migrated to the mainland.\textsuperscript{2,11,12}

Thus, Operation Bootstrap in Puerto Rico foreshadowed what was to happen in numerous former colonies and developing countries, namely the development of off-shore operations by foreign capital or multinational corporations which siphon off profits so that there is little or no economic benefit to the island. Today, the distinctions between colonies and client states have become less clear-cut. In today's world economy we may no longer need a colonial framework to find conjunctions of political and economic dependence that induce migration. Economic and political dependence are no longer so clearly distinguishable when it comes to the flow of labor, capital, or goods.

The political and economic ties between Puerto Rico and the mainland also helped to fan the migration in a number of other ways. For example, without the ties, tax breaks would not have been granted to mainland firms doing business in Puerto Rico; duty-free exports and imports would not have been allowed between Puerto Rico and the mainland; capital could not have flowed without controls; and American factories and American management would not have come to Puerto Rico in such large numbers during the fifties and sixties. In addition, without this context, increases in national income or employment on the mainland would not have provoked emigration as quickly from Puerto Rico; there would not have been open borders, a military experience for Puerto Rican men and women, citizenship status, accessible and frequent air travel, and early communications and education systems that were tied to the U.S. mainland. In the end, this context made Puerto Rican "colonial immigrants," i.e., similar to Algerians, Tunisians, Moroccans, and West or East Indians who have immigrated to English, French, and Dutch "fatherlands" over the past two decades.

Thus, within this larger structure, we see that economic push and pull factors were involved in the decision to migrate, and they still are. The most recent analysis of migrants leaving Puerto Rico found that the majority (69 percent) were not employed, and this was especially the case for women.\textsuperscript{29} As the Junta de Planificacion points out, however, employment was not the decisive factor for all those leaving because 52 percent of those with 16+ years of education had job before they left.\textsuperscript{34}

But pull factors have also always been important. Puerto Ricans were (and are) pulled by the promise (or hope) of a better life, a life like the one they perceived Americans to have—a life to which they, as American citizens, were also entitled. They were also undoubtedly pulled by connections to family that were already living on the mainland. These connections expanded into networks that became self-reinforcing pulls; these pulls grew as the migration continued. Finally Puerto Ricans were pulled by an adventurous perspective—one that proposed they try their luck in a new land, that they strive for something better.

\textbf{Patterns of Settlement}

There have been Puerto Ricans, and even Puerto Rican organizations, in New York since the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{19,35} However, it was only after 1900 that significant numbers of Puerto Ricans came to the city, while the bulk of the migration occurred in the fifties and sixties (see Figure 5.1). The migration of Puerto Ricans after the U.S. takeover in 1898 has been classified into three major periods.\textsuperscript{36} During the first period, 1900-1945, the pioneers arrived. The majority of these "pionero" settled in New York city, in the Atlantic
Avenue area of Brooklyn, El Barrio in East Harlem, and other sections of Manhattan such as the Lower East Side, the Upper West Side, Chelsea, and the Lincoln Center area, while some began to populate sections of the South Bronx. During this period, industrial and agricultural labor under contract also arrived and “provided the base from which sprang many of the Puerto Rican communities” outside of New York City.\textsuperscript{21}

The second phase of the migration, 1946-1964, is known as “the great migration” because the largest numbers of Puerto Ricans arrived. During this period the already established Puerto Rican communities of East Harlem, the South Bronx, and the Lower East Side increased their numbers as well as their borders. Settlements in new areas of New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Chicago, and other areas of the country appeared and grew, but the bulk of the Puerto Rican population continued to reside in New York.

The last period, from 1965 to the present, is termed “the revolving door migration,” and involves a fluctuating pattern of net migration as well as greater dispersion to other parts of the mainland. As Figure 5.1 illustrates, the last few years have shown net outflows from Puerto Rico that begin to rival those experienced in the early fifties. By 1980, the majority of Puerto Ricans on the mainland were living outside of New York State.\textsuperscript{37}

Contract laborers have been another stream in the Puerto Rican migration. They have generally received less attention in the literature because many returned to Puerto Rico after their contracts were completed, while others moved quickly out of agricultural contract labor and settled in more urban settings. Initially recruited by companies and then by family members and word-of-mouth, these migrants formed the nucleus of Puerto Rican communities that would subsequently develop in less urban areas or in areas outside of the New York metropolitan area. The communities in Hawaii, Arizona, and other southwestern states, San Francisco, Gary, Indiana, and Lorain, Cleveland, and Youngstown, Ohio began in this way.\textsuperscript{5} Contract labor migration began soon after 1898 and continued throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, the very first wave of migration after the 1989 takeover of Puerto Rico by the United States was a contract labor group that went to Hawaii.

The class composition of the Puerto Rican communities has changed over time, but the communities have always retained a distinctive diversity. The late nineteenth century Puerto Rican community on the mainland was made up of generally well-to-do merchants, political activists closely allied with the Cuban Revolutionary movement, and skilled workers, many of whom were “tabaqueros” (skilled tobacco workers).\textsuperscript{19,35} By the first quarter of the twentieth century the Puerto Rican community is described by a number of scholars as consisting of people who were employed in predominantly working-class occupations.\textsuperscript{4,5,38} It was in the post-World War II period that migration from Puerto Rico to the mainland accelerated, causing the communities to grow rapidly. The composition of these communities continued to reflect diversity but with a strong working-class base.

\textbf{PUERTO RICANS’ SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS: A PERSISTENT DISADVANTAGE}

For quite some time now, Puerto Ricans on the mainland have been in a most difficult and highly vulnerable economic situation. Soon after the “great migration” of Puerto Ricans to the mainland in the fifties, government and scholarly reports began to highlight the economic adversities Puerto Ricans were experiencing on the mainland. Despite these early warnings, little was done and the situation of Puerto Ricans received little attention by policy-makers.
More recently, however, there has been an emerging interest in the “persisting disadvantage” of Puerto Ricans. Much of the current interest in Puerto Ricans derives from the results of new studies that have found them to be uniquely disadvantaged relative to other groups in mainland society. That is to say, while other minorities experienced a period of socioeconomic advancement during the 1960s, followed by a phase of limited gains during the 1970s, the Puerto Rican experience is one of continuously growing disadvantage since 1960. During the 1980s, government data and research reports provided growing evidence of the uniquely disadvantaged position of Puerto Ricans within postwar U.S. society.40,41

The deteriorating relative position of Puerto Ricans is reflected in the variety of indicators. In 1960, Puerto Rican median family income was lower than that of African-Americans, other Hispanics, and Native Americans. Puerto Ricans were the only Hispanic group not to have narrowed the family income gap relative to Caucasians during the seventies.39 By 1980 the difference had widened. In 1987, median family income for Puerto Ricans was less than half that of Caucasians.40

Moreover, during the late eighties, the incidence of poverty among Puerto Ricans continued to be higher than for any other group, remaining similar to the poverty rate of a decade earlier.40 Data on labor force participation present the same story of relative disadvantage. Puerto Ricans (in 1980) exhibited participation rates lower than that of other groups, and those employed worked fewer hours on the average.41 Analysis of trends by gender indicates that participation rates for Puerto Rican males steadily declined between 1960 and 1980, while that of women improved modestly during the same period.39 The disadvantaged situation of Puerto Ricans, relative to other groups, has been so severe that it has led some to speculate about whether Puerto Ricans are becoming a Hispanic underclass.42

![Figure 5.2 Hispanics on the U.S. mainland, by origin, 1989.](image-url)
Figures 5.2 through 5.9, based on data published by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, present selected aspects of the current situation of Puerto Ricans relative to non-Hispanics and other Hispanic groups on the U.S. mainland. Figure 5.2 shows the number and percentage distribution by origin of Hispanics on the mainland. Figure 5.3 presents similar information with Puerto Ricans living in Puerto Rico added to the mainland total. As may be seen in Figures 5.2 and 5.3, the Puerto Rican share of the total mainland Hispanic population rises from 11.6 to 24.7 percent if those living in Puerto Rico are included. Given that government programs and other funding activities often extend to Puerto Rico, it would seem important to include Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico as part of the total U.S. Hispanic population.

Figure 5.4 presents the poverty rate (percentage of families below the poverty level) for the various Hispanic groups residing on the mainland. The poverty rate is a widely used indicator of socioeconomic disadvantage, and Puerto Ricans have the highest rate. Figure 5.5 shows the median household income for Hispanics, which is another indicator of relative disadvantage. On this indicator, Puerto Ricans score the lowest. Associated with poverty, as cause or consequence, is a low participation rate in the labor force. Figure 5.6 indicates that Puerto Rican women have the lowest labor force participation rate of all Hispanic groups. Figure 5.7 shows another distinguishing characteristic of Puerto Ricans residing on the mainland: a high percentage of female-headed households and a low percentage of male-headed households.
Educational attainment is also an indicator of a group’s relative socioeconomic advantage/disadvantage. Figure 5.8 shows the percentage of the mainland population that has completed four years of high school or more according to Hispanic/non-Hispanic origin and two broad age groups. In both age groups, Puerto Ricans rank below the total for non-Hispanics; considerably below the total for Hispanics in the 35 years and over age group, but substantially above in the 25 through 34 years of age. While, irrespective of origin, younger adults have more schooling than older adults, the age disparity is wider in Puerto Ricans than in other Hispanic groups, suggesting recent gains for Puerto Ricans (see Figure 5.9). This, in all probability, reflects recent gains achieved by mainland-born Puerto Ricans as well as gains achieved by the Puerto Rico-born migrating to the mainland.

**CONCLUSION**

It is clear from the scholarly information reviewed that the causes for the migration of Puerto Ricans to the mainland are many, complexly interwoven, and difficult to extricate from the mass of data. Economic and social changes in both the U.S. mainland and Puerto Rico appear to have created a series of pull and push factors that seem to explain the peaks and valleys observed in year to year net migration figures. The most propelling force for the original and the continuing migration, however, is likely to be the unique political relationship existing between Puerto Rico and the mainland. This relationship, relatively speaking, makes movement from the island to the mainland effortless because it
Figure 5.5 Median household income of Hispanic families residing on the U.S. mainland, by origin, 1989.

is a right of citizenship. The right is not any different from the right that residents of the fifty U.S. states have to cross state boundaries either temporarily or permanently. That is not to say that without the unique political relationship, migration would not occur. It is conjectured that it would not be as great, and as in the case of Cubans, politics would play a larger role. In addition, the socioeconomic characteristics of those migrating would be more likely to be skewed toward the upper rather than the lower socioeconomic levels.

Figure 5.6 Percent of all Hispanic women 16 years and over residing on the U.S. mainland who are in the civilian labor force and unemployed, by origin, 1989.
This chapter has also reviewed the socioeconomic disadvantage of Puerto Ricans on the mainland over time, as well as in comparison to other Hispanic and non-Hispanic groups at a particular point. The persistence of the disadvantage over the years and the size of the current disadvantage relative to other Hispanic and non-Hispanic groups begs for explanations supported by facts. Unfortunately, only conjecture are possible. One such conjecture is the pattern of settlement which has led to the concentration of Puerto Ricans in the most decaying urban regions of the U.S. mainland. These regions also happen to be experiencing drastic dislocations in their industrial economies and to be suffering from
extremely high levels of unemployment. This, coupled with intractable patterns of job discrimination and residential segregation based on social class and/or imputed racial identity, is creating a situation of persistent poverty for many Puerto Ricans that would be hard for any group to escape.

Indications are that the Puerto Rican population on the mainland may have increased between 18 and 29 percent since 1980, making Puerto Ricans one of the fastest growing ethnic groups on the mainland. Close to 40 percent of all Puerto Ricans currently residing on the mainland are below 20 years of age, with about one-fourth of that 40 percent being five years of age or under. Typically, these are the age groups with the greatest health, education, and social needs, which, in conjunction with the extremely high rates of poverty and female-headed households, translate into a high demand for publicly supported services. Such high demands can only be met to a very limited degree as Puerto Ricans are concentrated in localities with inadequate public services and with economies likely to remain drastically impaired for years to come. A series of well-financed initiatives to improve the situation described is justified. This would require a high level of cooperation between the states where Puerto Ricans are concentrated, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and agencies of the federal government. A joint commission similar to the one operating along the U.S.-Mexico border should be considered.

Figure 5.9 Difference in percent completing 4 years of high school or more between U.S. mainland Hispanics aged 25-34 and those 35 years and over (Hispanics, by origin, 1989).

NOTE

1. For analyses of the New Deal period in Puerto Rico see Stahl, 29, Gonzalez, A., 26, Reynolds, 9, Hanson, 30, Goodsell, 3, Lewis, G., 32, Carr, 28, Dietz, 27, and Wells, 33.
REFERENCES