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- To secure justice for minority or majority groups suffering discrimination, by investigating their situation and publicising the facts as widely as possible, to educate and alert public opinion throughout the world.
- To help prevent, through publicity about violations of human rights, such problems from developing into dangerous and destructive conflicts which, when polarised, are very difficult to resolve; and
- To foster, by its research findings, international understanding of the factors which create prejudiced treatment and group tensions, thus helping to promote the growth of a world conscience regarding human rights.

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Puerto Ricans in the US

By Kal Wagenheim with the assistance of Leslie Dunbar

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PART I: A REVIEW OF PUERTO RICO’S HISTORY

Two pattern are discernible in the history of Puerto Rico: the imposition of political control by external forces and migration flows to and from the island.

Before focusing on these two themes, it would be useful to first review the island’s history in chronological fashion.

Puerto Rico’s history is traditionally divided into two major periods. The first—comprising the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries—is called “the organic era” by the distinguished Puerto Rican historian Lidio Cruz Monclova, because it involved the colonization of the island by Spain and the gradual evolution of a national identity. The second period begins with the 19th century and extends to the present.

Spanish mercantilism exercised strict control over Puerto Rico and the other colonial possessions during the first period. But this also served to spur the emergence of an insular identity, welded together perhaps by a sense of grievance against the colonial power.

At the beginning of the 19th century, unrest and revolution in Europe provided an impetus for political reform both in Spain and in its colonies. This combination of events in both hemispheres, says Cruz Monclova, “marked the transition from a traditional policy of colonial administration to a system of assimilation in which colonial possessions were granted direct participation in national affairs.”

In the 19th century, Puerto Rican liberal political movements manifested two basic trends. From 1808 to 1823, the goal was assimilation of Puerto Rico as an equal of the Spanish peninsular provinces; a radical shift took place in 1823 when an emphasis was placed on establishing an autonomous system of government, separate from, but linked with, Spain. This culminated in 1897, when Spain granted Puerto Rico a Charter of Association which, in many important respects, promised the island more powers of home rule than it currently enjoys as a Commonwealth of the United States.

In order to place the current situation of the Puerto Rican people within a proper context, an understanding of the island’s four centuries as a Spanish colony is essential.

Puerto Rico was “discovered” on November 19, 1493 by Christopher Columbus on his second voyage to the New World. (The term “discovered” is, of course, an example of the ethnocentrism frequently employed when European voyagers encountered non-white, exotic civilizations.)

At the time, an estimated 30,000 Taino Indians were living on the island, which they called Boriquén. Archeological diggings indicate two Indian cultures prior to the Tainos. First, there were the Arcaicos (Archaics), who appear to have come from southern Florida, probably first by primitive raft to Cuba, then to the other Antillean islands. The Arcaicos seem to have been fishermen, since the few remains of their culture are found near the island’s beaches.

The Arcaicos were apparently conquered by the Igorrís, a subculture of the Arawaks, who migrated in canoes from Venezuela, along the chain of Lesser Antillean islands. The Igorrís were, in turn, dominated by the Tainos, also an Arawak subculture, who lived in small tribes, bound together by a larger federation.

The Spanish colonization of Puerto Rico was begun in 1508 by Juan Ponce de León, who was appointed Governor of the tiny settlement there. Prior to that, Ponce de León had lived in neighboring Hispaniola, where in 1504 he helped to extinguish an Indian revolt.

At first, when the Spaniards met with Taino Chief Águaybana, the understanding was that both the Indians and the Europeans would share the island in cordial coexistence. But the Spaniards soon sought to control the entire island, searching everywhere for gold, and taking the best lands for cattle and crops.

In order to fulfill the needs of labor in this insular wilderness, the settlers were authorized by the King to make use of Indian labor, under the encomienda system, a thinly disguised form of slavery. Groups of Indians were “assigned” to each Spanish colonizer. Franciscan friars were dispatched to the island to teach the Spanish language and the religion of the conquistadors.

There was a series of Indian rebellions. But when the Tainos tried a major assault against Ponce de León, Spanish troops shot and killed Agûaybana, the principal chieftain, and the warriors fell back in disarray. Ponce de León offered amnesty to those caciques (chiefs) willing to fight in peace, and two of them accepted.

Other Tainos fled to the mountains, or rowed to nearby islands. Other in captivity, unable to face the rigors of slave labor, killed their young children and committed suicide. From this time on, Indian resistance to Puerto Rico was limited to scattered encounters. So many Tainos left the island that Ponce de León asked the King for a ship to pursue them. They were not brought back, there would be no one to work the mines. The Spaniards also combed the hills of Puerto Rico, capturing numerous real Indians who had started families and lived there.

Not all the Spaniards were indifferent to the way the Indians were treated. The first to protest were the Dominican friars of Hispaniola. Fray Antonio de Montesino warned that the settlers would “live and die in mortal sin because of their unjust wars and because of the servitude they impose upon the Indians. He was called to Spain to report to the King, who convened a meeting of jurists and theologians in Burgos in 1512.

At Burgos an important finding was made. The Indians were declared to be “human beings,” and subjects of the King, meaning that theoretical they were not slaves. However, the encomienda system was allowed to continue, with the proviso that the Indians receive humane treatment. Even these modest reforms established at Burgos were difficult to enforce far distant Spain, and the abuses continued.

In 1514, a census report on Puerto Rico informed the King that “counting all of your Highnesses, there are not even 4,000.” It warns that the settlers were unhappy because many had been left without a single Indian. An armada was organized to pursue and capture Indians on the nearby islands.

When the island’s gold resources petered out, the settlers turned to agriculture. This led to the importation of African slaves, who were considered stronger and more skillful than the Indians. In 1519, an epidemic of smallpox, reportedly transported to the island by the newly arrived Africans, killed nearly one-third of the Indians and a goodly number of Spanish settlers. Two years later, Emperor Charles V ordered the freedmen of all Indians assigned to the Crown, or to persons not living on the island or whose owners had died. They were rounded up, all 600 of them, and assigned to a type of “pacified village”—the royal farm in Tenos.

The once-thriving Indian society of Puerto Rico had virtually disappeared less than three decades after the Europeans colonized the island. By 1531 a report shows, Puerto Rico’s gold was nearly exhausted, and the island economy was in ruins. A census showed 426 Spaniards, 1,148 Indians (free and slave) and 2,077 African slaves. These figures did not include young children, nor all the Indians, some of whom had hidden deep in the mountains.

Soon afterwards, the island’s economy was based primarily on sugarcane. The island’s weather was excellent for this crop, and African slave were a source of cheap labor. The nature of Puerto Rico’s society gradually changed. The first generation, dominated by adventurers and miners, may have been a new class of landlords seeking a comfortable, wealthy life. A class of shopkeepers and artisans began to emerge in the capital city of San Juan.

By now, Spain had built a rich empire in the Americas. It authorized the fortification of San Juan, otherwise enemies would seize the island. By the 18th century, commerce with Spain was unavailable. The Spaniards also combed the hills of Puerto Rico, capturing numerous real Indians who had started families and lived there.

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Juan was declared a defense station of “the first order” and the massive fortifications of the city were expanded. When the British closed the ports of Jamaica and Barbados to the American mainland, Puerto Rico’s trade was cut off and much of its population fled toward the Spanish St. Domingo or to the U.S. mainland.

In exchange for farm produce, including molasses, which the American colonists were eager to buy, the British promised to cease the status of “first class colony” and “passbook” (libreta) for slaves.

By 1800, after slavery was abolished in the Spanish colonies, the Spanish government encouraged immigration from Spain and other European countries, seeking to populate the island with more settlers. This led to a demographic shift, as the slave population declined and the free population grew.

A census in 1787 showed 103,000 inhabitants and revealed that Puerto Rico was a major supplier of sugar and coffee to Spain's mother country. The British War of Independence and the French Revolution caused many settlers to leave Puerto Rico, leading to a decrease in population.

The reforms of 1765, allowing European settlers to buy lands held by the Spanish crown and creating incentives for the cultivation of sugar cane, had encouraged immigration and resulted in dramatic population growth. In 1815, a royal decree known as the cedula de gracia, also designed to settle the countryside and increase sugar cane production, offered grants of free land to qualified settlers.

Due largely to these incentives, between 1800 and 1820, Puerto Rico’s population soared from 150,000 to nearly a million. Many of the new arrivals were Spanish colonials—soldiers, merchants, and landowners—fleeing from turmoil elsewhere. In addition to the large populations of creole whites, Africans, mulattoes, and resident Spaniards, there were also small colonies of French, English, North American, Danish, German Dutch and Italian immigrants. In the 1840s, a labor shortage brought Chinese coolies to Cuba and Puerto Rico, where, in the latter, they helped build the Central Highway. When slavery was ended in the century, farmers and laborers came from the Spanish province of Galicia, and from the Canary Islands. Corsicans and Lebanese also spiced the ethnic bouillabaisse.

As early as 1809, Puerto Ricans were referring to the island as their amada patria (beloved fatherland), although politically it was an overseas possession of Spain.

That year, when Napoleon invaded Spain, the provinces rebelled and formed juntas under the Supreme Junta of Cadiz, which declared Spain’s colonies to be integral parts of the mother country. This, technically, converted Puerto Ricans from colonial subjects to citizens, with increased civil rights. One of the delegates elected by the Puerto Rican leadership to represent the island in the Spanish Cortes (parliament) was Ramón Power y Giralt. He took with him a list of demands: for free trade with foreign nations, for a university, for equal job opportunities for natives in government posts. There was also the significant request that, if Spain were conquered, Puerto Rico should be granted liberty “to choose its own destiny.” This list of demands constituted perhaps the first official manifestation by the Puerto Ricans of their growing national identity.

A few of the asked-for reforms were granted, but in 1812 Spain approved a new, more liberal constitution and Puerto Ricans became full-fledged citizens of Spain. However, the next year, when Napoleon retired his troops, and King Fernando VII returned to the throne, the liberal constitution was discarded and there was a return to absolute government.

While the island’s economy continued to thrive, no advances were made in civil and political rights. In 1825, when the island’s deputy to Spain presented a bill to the Cortes, seeking more autonomy for the Antillean provinces, it was rejected. In 1826, another bill was presented, recommending that the island be granted the same civil rights as the provinces of Spain. However, the bill was not even discussed in the Cortes.

The Charter of Autonomy

Now, at least on paper, Puerto Rico had more political freedom than ever before in its history. The reforms this time were unprecedented. First, Puerto Rico would have 16 deputies and three senators, with full voting rights in the Spanish Parliament.

A Governor General, appointed by the King, would be responsible for the maintenance of public order and security in Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico would elect its own insular parliament, divided into a 32-member House of Representatives, and eight of the 15 members of the Administrative Council (seven members were named by the Governor General).

The insular parliament was empowered to pass on all matters of local importance, fix the budget, determine tariffs and taxes, and accept or reject legislation that had been introduced by Spain without local participation.

While autonomy did not mean that Latin America's social and political structures were dismantled, as Mexico’s liberal Constitution of 1824 had written, it “indicated a profound and unequivocal change in Spanish colonial policy ... The old concept of unlimited, all-embracing power of the metropolis vis-a-vis the colony was replaced by a concept of moderate and relative power, establishing the principle that the colony was entitled to a recognition of well-being and happiness on the basis of human rights.”

With respect to the future, he notes, the Charter of Autonomy “left all roads open, since from the hierarchic association between unequals
which it embodied, Puerto Rico could move towards egalitarian association or even towards independence." 

The U.S. Takes Possession

Puerto Rico's new autonomous government appointed its first cabinet in February of 1898; general elections for legislators were held in March, and in July the government officially began to function. But the rules of the game had changed. That April, the Spanish-Cuban-American War broke out.

The United States, plagued by a savage depression, sought to expand its markets and influence abroad. Part of America's "Manifest Destiny," it was declared, was to rid the hemisphere of all European influence, and to seek a foothold in Asia.

When hostilities broke out in 1898, letters from American business men to the State Department urged the annexation of Puerto Rico as "a garden spot." On July 11, 1898, an article on the editorial page of the New York Times said there was "no question" about "the wisdom of taking possession of the Island of Puerto Rico and keeping it for all time." The island was "the real gem of the Antilles," it continued, explaining that its "profitable" soil would be an asset, and it would make a fine naval station with a "commanding position between the two continents."

Noting that the Cubans had long been engaged in a war for independence from Spain, the article said, "We are not pledged to give Puerto Rico to seek a foothold in Asia.

The beneficent sway of the United States than to engage in doubtful enterprises. Besides, it would be much better for her to come at once under American citizenship as the bond between us."

Two contingents of 16,000 American troops arrived at the south coast town of Guánica. By August 13, Spain had surrendered. The Puerto Rican campaign had lasted only 17 days. Of the 16,000 American troops who landed, only four were killed and 40 wounded. Flamboyant American correspondent Richard Harding Davis called it "a picnic." In his dispatch to Scribner's Magazine he wrote: "Peace came with Porto Rico occupied by our troops and with Porto Ricans blessing our flag, which must never leave the island."

U.S. Military Rule Established

Upon taking possession of Puerto Rico, the U.S. established military rule. The local cabinet and municipal assemblies were at first left intact, but were essentially powerless. By 1899, the second military governor, General Guy V. Henry, had chosen a new cabinet, and oversee the change to American currency.

President McKinley had appointed a Protestant clergyman, Dr. H.K. Carroll, to investigate Puerto Rico. After lengthy hearings on the island, he issued a voluminous report, concluding the Puerto Ricans were "moral, industrious, intellectually able, obedient and respectful of the law." He recommended that Washington grant full territorial status and allow the islanders to elect their own legislature. But the military governor, General George W. Davis, urged the War Department to overlook Dr. Carroll's view. "The people," said Davis, "generally have no conception of political rights combined with political responsibilities."

President William McKinley named a Governor-General of Wisconsin, General Horatio Lane, to oversee the island's Department of Education. He spoke no Spanish, in a country where barely a soul knew English. As the twentieth century approached, the United States was faced with a dilemma: what to do with its newly acquired territory of Puerto Rico, where a foreign language prevailed, and which was far poorer than any part of the American nation.

U.S. Secretary of War Elihu Root knew that the military could not continue to rule; he recommended a civil government in which the key roles would be given to Americans appointed by the President. Puerto Ricans would be given a gradually increasing voice when this proved "safe."

The Foraker Act

The Foraker Act, approved April 12, 1900, was the successor to the military rule. With this law, the U.S. Congress created a body politic called "the people of Puerto Rico," who were neither American citizens nor citizens of an independent nation. There would be a Governor appointed by President, an 11-member appointed Executive Council (with a majority of Americans), 35 elected Puerto Ricans in the House of Delegates (whose laws were subject to Congressional veto), and an elected Resident Commissioner to speak for Puerto Rico in the U.S. House, but without a vote. The law also regulated commercial and judicial matters. Puerto Rican leaders, hoping for a plebiscite that would result in some degree of self-government, were deeply disappointed. (To add insult to injury, Washington changed the island's name to "Puerto Rico," a term which prevailed until 1972 when a joint Congressional resolution, restoring the original name, was approved by President Hoover.) Independence sentiment grew as Congress ignored Puerto Rico's demands, and island leaders chafed under control by a foreign governor. Hatred of the Foraker Act was so virulent that by 1909 the House of Delegates refused to approve any legislation. It sent a memorial to Congress and President Taft, complaining of the "unjust law which makes it impossible for the people's representatives to pass the laws they desire."

"We have gone somewhat too fast in the extension of political power to them (Puerto Rico) for their own good," President Taft said. Taft sent his Secretary of War to the island, who reported that "it is clear that the United States was a wealthy country, and a democratic one at that, which might mean a more liberal political climate on the island."

General Miles reinforced this sentiment in his first public speech: "We have not come to make war upon the people of a country that for centuries has been oppressed but on the contrary to bring you protection . . . to promote your prosperity, and to bestow upon you the immunities and blessings of the liberal institutions of our government."

As joint U.S. and Spanish military delegations met to negotiate the peace, however, confusion reigned among the leaders of Puerto Rico's "American" government, who were not consulted. On October 18, 1898, Spain's flag was lowered at La Foraleza (the governor's mansion), ending 405 years of Spanish reign. On December 19, 1898, the Treaty of Paris was signed, and Spain ceded the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico to the United States. It also renounced power over Cuba, which became a U.S. protectorate. The United States declared that "the cession of Porto Rico is on account of . . . compensation for the losses and expenses occasioned . . . by the war."

It was hard at the time to imagine that the Americans could do worse to Puerto Rico than had the Spaniards. After four centuries under Spain, Puerto Rico had a tiny educated upper class, a tiny middle class, and a huge mass of rural poor. On an island of nearly 1 million people, almost all of the 300,000 blacks and mulattoes were at the bottom. Only 13 percent of the populace was literate. Of 300,000 school-age children, only 21,000 were studying. Many families still lived in crude wood and thatch huts, subsisting on one meager meal a day. Jobs, when available, paid a few cents a day. Land distribution was lopsided: two percent of the island's 39,000 farms contained 70 percent of the cultivated land. There were only 175 miles of hard-surfaced roads on an island approximately 100 miles long by 35 miles wide (land area is 3,435 square miles); many of the rest were impassable when it rained.
U.S. Citizenship for Puerto Rico

The Jones-Shafroth Act, which Wilson signed on March 2, 1917, proclaimed American citizenship for Puerto Ricans. In previous hearings, the island’s majority Unionist Party, pressed for “Puerto Rican citizenship.” Luis Muñoz Rivera, now Puerto Rico’s Resident Commissioner in Congress, declared at Senate hearings that “according to the understanding of the Puerto Rican people, the concession of (U.S.) citizenship would interfere with their ambitions for independence.” But Congressmen John F. Shafroth of Colorado, the co-author of the bill, replied, “This talk of independence is an idle dream . . . it would be better to resolve the affair right now.” Puerto Ricans were faced with a single option. Unless they signed a document refusing it, they were automatically U.S. citizens. Only a handful refused. José de Diego, leader of the insular House of Representatives, said, “Never before in the realm of international law has such a thing been seen in the democratic nations of the world: 1,200,000 human beings who, by the law of the Congress of a Republic, are stripped of their natural citizenship, [but] under the menace and coercion of losing their right to vote or be eligible for public office.”

The Jones Act did allow for more self-government in Puerto Rico, such as the election of a local Senate, but it also contained a contradiction, allowing the American governor to retain final veto power over legislation. On its way through Congress the bill was tinkered with by several U.S. legislators. A senator from North Dakota, for example, added an amendment that imposed the prohibition of liquor, despite the fact that the island’s impoverished economy derived great revenues from rum sales. This, too, was accepted by the powerless Puerto Ricans. Above all, the Jones Act, while “tying” Puerto Ricans to the U.S. in terms of citizenship, did nothing to resolve the long-range issue of political self-determination.

The Struggle for Home Rule Continues

Two years after the passage of the Jones Act, Puerto Rico’s legislature asked Congress to permit a plebiscite, which would allow the islanders to express their views on political status. But this request died in Congressional committee.

In 1920, when Republican President Harding went on record as being against Puerto Rican independence, a flood of bitter anti-American cables and letters reached the House Insular Affairs Committee, whose chairman sent a note to the island legislature saying: “I assure you that there is not now and there is not likely to be any considerable sentiment in this country for the independence of Puerto Rico. There is a legitimate ground for a larger measure of self-government, but that has been greatly injured by independence propaganda.”

The next year, Harding’s new governor in Puerto Rico, a Kansas City businessman, said in his inaugural address, “My friends, there is no room on this island for any flag other than the Stars and Stripes. So long as Old Glory waves over us, it will continue to wave over Puerto Rico.” He later wrote a letter to Union Party leader Antonio Béreol, saying, “I want you to fully understand that I shall never appoint any man to any office who is an advocate of independence. When you publicly renounce independence and break loose from your pernicious and anti-American associates, then I will be glad to have your recommendations.”

In 1922, Béreol tried a new approach, suggesting a type of autonomy, called the Estatleo Libre Asociado (Associated Free State), modeled after the 18th Free State, which would include a “permanent, indestructible bond” between Puerto Rico and the U.S. But a bill introduced in the Congress died in committee.

When, in 1928, the famous aviator Charles Lindbergh flew to Puerto Rico on a goodwill tour and received a tumultuous welcome, local leaders persuaded him to deliver a note to President Coolidge, which said, “Grant us the freedom that you enjoy, for which you struggled, which you worship, which we deserve, and you have promised us.” Coolidge, irked, replied: “Certainly giving . . . greater liberty than it has ever enjoyed and powers of government for the exercise of which its people are barely prepared cannot . . . be said to be establishing herein a mere subjugated colony.”

Despite the political problem, during the first three decades of political rule the Puerto Rican economy hummed with activity. But a great part of the riches were being pocketed by large U.S. corporations, which had bought up most of the good sugarcane land and exercised strong lobby power in Washington. Then two hurricanes and the Great Depression brought a virtual collapse.

The Rise of Nationalism

The 1930’s were terrible years in Puerto Rico, marked by hunger, mass unemployment, and political anarchy. In many ways, times were harder than during the Spanish colonial period. In reaction to this economic crisis, and to Congressional indifference, a militant Nationalist Party was formed, led by Pedro Albizu Campos. Albizu argued that, since Puerto Rico had been granted autonomy from Spain in 1897, the U.S. takeover the next year was illegal.

Albizu’s message was well-received in many sectors of Puerto Rican society, because the first three decades of U.S. occupation had shown mixed results. Improvements were evident in public health, education, and roads. But American corporations had steadily absorbed key sectors of the economy. The sugar industry, tobacco and fruit growing, banks, railroads, public utilities, steamship lines and many lesser businesses were partially or completely dominated by absentee U.S. interests. In 1929, unemployment in Puerto Rico was 36 percent, higher than it had been at the turn of the century. Due to higher prices and depressed wages, day laborers were spending more of their time to earn basic food staples than they had under Spain.

There soon followed a series of violent confrontations between the Nationalists and the insular police. In February of 1936, the island police chief, E. Francis Rigs, was cut down by Nationalist bullets. In March of 1937, police fired on a parade of Nationalists marching through the streets of Ponce; there were soon 20 dead (including two policemen) and 100 wounded (many of them innocent bystanders) in what has since come to be known as “The Ponce Massacre.”

As the decade of the 1930’s came to a close, Puerto Rico was in desperate straits. A coalition of reformist liberals was created under the banner of a new political organization: the Popular Democratic Party. It was led by Luis Muñoz Marin, the son of Luis Muñoz Rivera, who had been the driving force behind Puerto Rico’s autonomist movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The populist thrust of the Popular Democratic Party was quite unsettling to the conservative business sector both in Puerto Rico and the U.S. But the New Deal administration in Washington viewed the pragmatic Muñoz Marin and his Popular Democrats as a far more reassuring option than the militant Nationalists.

The Muñoz Era

The November 1940 elections in Puerto Rico marked the rise to power of the Popular Democratic Party, headed by Luis Muñoz Marin, the dominant political figure in the island’s history.

During Muñoz’s 24 consecutive years in power (the first eight as Senate majority leader under an American governor), Puerto Rico would experience more change than in four previous centuries. The Muñoz administration would preside over and give impulsion to a new form of government, the building of an industrial economy, and great leaps forward in health and education. This was accomplished, however, at considerable cost. And, despite his great efforts, Muñoz did not manage to solve the perennial problem of Puerto Rico’s political status.

In 1940, per capita income in Puerto Rico was a mere $118 a year; farmworkers, who formed the bulk of the labor force, were earning six cents an hour. The “elite” labor class, construction workers, earned 22 cents an hour. The masses survived on starchy vegetables. Meat was beyond the reach of the poor. Seven out of ten persons were still illiterate (after four decades of U.S. control) and only half the children were in school. Life expectancy was 46 years, as thousands of infants still died of diarrhea, gastroenteritis, pneumonia and influenza, and hundreds of thousands of adults were weakened by intestinal parasites.

While many of the Popular Democrat leaders favored independence, the party platform for the 1940 election made this surprising declaration: “the final political status of Puerto Rico is not an issue.” This pledge united talented men and women of diverse political leanings, all willing to focus upon economic development. Their slogan was Pan, Tierra y Libertad (Bread, Land and Liberty). The Popular Democrats won the 1940 elections, drawing only 38 percent of the votes cast, against a long entrenched Republican machine, which was backed by large U.S. business interests and which was notorious for buying votes for a few dollars or a new pair of shoes.

Puerto Rico’s economic crisis continued. When World War II broke out the next year, German submarines in the Caribbean endangered shipping and caused severe food shortages.

By the next elections, in 1944, the Popular Democrats had strengthened their hold on government, and won 60 percent of the votes, as well as
4 out of 58 legislative seats. However, some party elements split away the following year; they favored independence and grew impatient with Muñoz' reluctance to resolve the political status issue. The Puerto Rico Independence Party was formed by this group.

In 1946, when Governor Rexford Guy Tugwell resigned, President Truman appointed Puerto Rico's first native governor, Jesús Pinero, who had been the island's Resident Commissioner in Washington. Between 1900 and 1946, Puerto Rico had been governed by 15 North American appointees of the U.S. President.

The following year, while members of the Independence Party appealed to the United Nations for help in resolving "the colonial status in an era when the world is repudiating colonialism," the U.S. decided to allow Puerto Rico to elect its own governor. The bill, the Crawford-Butler Act, was signed August 4, 1947 by President Truman.

In 1946, the island's first gubernatorial elections in history were held, and Senator Muñoz became the island's first elected leader. The Popular Democrats finally took a stand on the political status, proposing an Estado Libre Asociado (Free Associated State), allowing Puerto Rico autonomy, while preserving ties with the U.S.

On July 4, 1950, President Truman signed Public Law 600, which allowed Puerto Ricans to draft their own constitution under the "Commonwealth" form of government, the English term chosen as an equivalent of Estado Libre Asociado.

As Puerto Rico moved towards achievement of this new status, there were violent reactions from the Nationalists, who set off armed uprisings in several island towns, and attempted to assassinate President Truman in Washington. Pedro Albizu Campos and other Nationalist leaders were given long prison terms for their involvement in these acts.

On July 25, 1952 (the 54th anniversary of the American landing at Guánica), a solemn ceremony was held in San Juan as Governor Muñoz raised Puerto Rico's flag next to the Stars and Stripes, to inaugurate the new commonwealth government. Then, in 1955, the People's Party again won the gubernatorial elections with 61 percent of the votes, but the Independence Party polled a surprising 19 percent, and the Statehood Republicans were third with only 13 percent.

Shortly after these elections, the U.S. advised the United Nations that Puerto Rico was "a self-governing territory." Until then, the U.S. was in the awkward position of having to issue annual reports to the U.N. on Puerto Rico. And on June 24, 1952, on Independence Day, a bitter debate, the U.N. committee voted, 22 to 18, that the relation between the U.S. and Puerto Rico was embodied in a compact that could not be unilaterally amended, and by a 27-17 vote authorized the U.S. to stop submitting the reports.

On March 2, 1954, exactly 37 years after President Wilson signed into law the Puerto Rico citizenship bill, a small band of Nationalists opened fire from the visitors' gallery of the U.S. House of Representatives, wounding a member of the leadership.

While the spirit of nationalism remained very much alive, the Popular Democrats managed to retain firm control of the electorate, sweeping the 1956 and 1960 elections by 60 percent margins. The Independence Party dropped to 12.5 percent in 1956 and to only three percent in 1960, while the Statehood Republicans gained force, with 25 percent and 32 percent in two elections.

But there were still charges that the Commonwealth political status was transitory, inferior and colonial. In 1959 the Popular Democrats proposed a bill (called the Fernós-Murray Bill) in Congress that would have eliminated all U.S. supervision and restrictions over Puerto Rico, except for those few common links (such as citizenship and defense) needed to maintain permanent union. But Congress was apprehensive about the sweeping powers of the proposed new autonomy and never acted upon it.

In 1964, Luis Muñoz Marín decided not to run for re-election. He had been in power for 24 years, either as Senate Majority Leader or Governor, and became a virtual father figure to the mass of Puerto Rican people. He chose Robert Sánchez Vilella, a long-time aide and Secretary of State, to be the party's candidate. That November, Sánchez won easily, becoming the island's second elected governor.

But Muñoz, and Puerto Rico, continued to be plagued by the still poorly-defined relationship between the island and the U.S. The Popular Democrats pushed a bill through the legislature calling for a July 23, 1967 plebiscite.

Many opposition leader protested, arguing that the plebiscite would be more of a popularity contest (in which Muñoz and the PDP would emerge the winner) than a choice on political status. But the independence and statehood options were represented.

Muñoz campaigned vigorously prior to the plebiscite. Independence, he argued, was economically "impossible." Statehood, he said, meant the cultural assimilation of Puerto Rico, and "we are not just a bunch of people, we are a people."

The combination of the island's economic development under Commonwealth in the previous 15 years, plus the immense weight of Muñoz' personal prestige, accounted for a landslide vote. More than 60 percent of the 702,000 voters in the plebiscite chose to maintain the Commonwealth status. The statehooders won nearly 39 percent, and the pro-independence option attracted only 0.6 percent.

It appeared, after the plebiscite, that the Commonwealth status was on its way to acquiring increased autonomy via negotiations with the U.S. Congress. But there was another hurdle ahead in November 1968, the gubernatorial elections.

**Commonwealth Forces are Split**

Earlier in 1968, a serious split occurred in the Popular Democratic Party, and Governor Sánchez was denied nomination as the gubernatorial candidate at the party's convention. Angered, Sánchez left the party and formed his own, the People's Party. This proved enough to deny victory to the Popular Democrats, and permit the pro-statehood New Progressive Party to come to power, led by industrialist Luis A. Ferré, a loser in three previous bids for the governor's post.

On November 4, 1968, Ferré was elected with 44 percent of the 875,000 votes cast, compared with 42 percent for the Popular Democrats. The 81,000 votes won by Governor Sánchez and his People's Party had made the difference, thus breaking 28 consecutive years of rule by the Popular Democrats.

According to Ferré, the results of the 1968 elections had, in effect nullified the results of the 1967 plebiscite. He then announced his party's strategy for achieving statehood. First, an ad hoc committee would be named to try to gain the U.S. Presidential vote for Puerto Rico by the 1972 elections.

Also, presupposing a New Progressive Party victory in 1972, another plebiscite would be scheduled, with the hope of a large statehood majority. But Puerto Rico during Ferré's four years was beset with economic problems and labor strife, as well as several scandals involving governor officials.

Ferré tried desperately to reverse the negative course of events, but to little avail. Even his good contacts with Republican leaders in Washington proved of little value in eliciting Federal aid, as the Nixon Administration and the U.S. economy slid downhill to recession.

Ferré's main challenger in 1972 was Rafael Hernández Colón, the young Senate majority leader of the Popular Democrats, and a protege of Muñoz Marín. By now, the People's Party which four years earlier had won 1 percent of the votes had dissipated in strength. Hernández Colón's campaign received a strong boost when 74-year-old Muñoz Marín returned from two years of self-imposed "exile" in Europe, just a few weeks prior to the election, and made numerous radio speeches on behalf of the young candidate.

The 1972 elections resulted in a clean sweep for the Popular Democrat who won 51 percent of the vote, took control of both legislative houses, and won 72 of 76 mayoralty races. Ferré's New Progressives managed to hold the same 44 percent as in the previous election, but this time the Commonwealth forces were not divided.

But Governor Hernández had no more success in dealing with Puerto Rico's economic problems than did his predecessor.

New U.S. investment in factories diminished because of "tight money in the U.S. The island government—required by law to balance its budget each year—had to borrow $100 million to make ends meet, because the revenue was much less than anticipated. A number of strikes erupted. Unemployment soared to 14 percent and inflation continued at double the U.S. rate. In the midst of these crises, Hernández tried to fulfill promises made to make the island more self-sufficient and autonomous. The telephone company was purchased for $346 million. Three major U.S. shipping lines were also purchased, to give the island its own maritime fleet and, it was hoped, reduce the cost of imported goods.

Some of Puerto Rico's "essential contradictions" were becoming "unfix visible," said an editorial in the San Juan Star. The governor, it said, "was "carried to Washington the traditional fight for more autonomy in Federal laws. But in the same briefcase, he carried pleas for more Federal dollars."

In many respects, Puerto Rico was back to where it was nearly a century before. Although enjoying greater individual liberty and wealth, the island was once a poor stepchild of Spain—was now in somewhat the same position under the U.S. Puerto Rico's emissaries now hopped jets to Washington just as they once boarded ships for the arduous voyage to Madrid.

By the November 1976 elections, a disenchanted Puerto Rican electorate did what it had done four years before: it got rid of the incumbent governor.
The candidate of the pro-statehood New Progressive Party. He won 48.3 percent of the vote, compared with 45.3 percent for the Popular Democrats and 6.4 percent for two independence party candidates.

During the previous four years, the Popular Democrats had sought to achieve some improvement in U.S.-Puerto Rico relations by means of a “new compact” which would transfer to the island jurisdiction over such matters as regulating the entry of aliens, setting minimum wage levels, and preserving the environment, all matters under the control of Congress. Lengthy hearings had been held on the proposed “new compact.”

But on January 1, 1977, in a dramatic and unexpected step taken just weeks before he would leave office, President Ford called for the admission of Puerto Rico as the 51st state of the Union. The action reportedly took the government and people of Puerto Rico by surprise. Ford said he had not personally been in touch with the new governor Romero in advance of announcing his proposal. In his statement, Ford was critical of attempts to achieve more autonomy, saying that “the proposed compact, significant and important as it is, does not advance as rapidly as it might freedom and opportunity for the American citizens of Puerto Rico. I believe the appropriate status for Puerto Rico is statehood.”

The next day, at his inauguration, Governor Romero made no mention of President’s Ford’s statement, nor of statehood, since he had promised during his campaign that he would make the economy, and not statehood, his administration’s prime concern.

That same day, President-elect Jimmy Carter took a more even-handed approach to Puerto Rico’s status than had President Ford. His official message, read at the ceremony in San Juan, said: “My party’s platform, on which I ran for the presidency, clearly states the recognition of Puerto Rico’s right to political self-determination. I fully subscribe to and support this expressed right, whatever your choice may be.”

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After four more lackluster years, in which Romero was also unable to resolve the structural problems of Puerto Rico’s depressed economy, he sought re-election in November 1980; his principle opponent would be the man he defeated in 1976, Rafael Hernández Colón.

This time, however, Romero felt that his incumbency would permit an even more decisive victory, enabling him soon after to call for a plebiscite in which Puerto Ricans would, he hoped, voice a preference for statehood.

But again the island’s electorate, reflecting wide-spread discontent with the economy, and a lack of faith in its political leadership, offered no clear mandate.

Romero was re-elected, but by a margin so thin (only 3,000 votes in a total of 1.5 million cast) that it took weeks to recount the ballots and declare him the official winner. The opposition Popular Democrats regained control of the legislature. A disappointed Romero was forced to cancel plans for the status plebiscite.

This did not prevent the new U.S. President, Ronald Reagan, from “tilting” Washington in favor of statehood again.

In February 1980, while still seeking the presidential candidacy on the Republican ticket (and while wooing Puerto Rico’s votes at the nomination convention), Reagan’s essay in the Wall Street Journal made a strong plea for statehood. “If we in the U.S. cannot design a model for a political economy that is sufficiently attractive,” wrote Reagan, “if we can’t win over our fellow citizens of Puerto Rico to the capitulations that statehood involves, how can our model succeed as an instrument of foreign policy anywhere in the world?”

A Stagnant Situation

By the close of 1982, Puerto Rico’s economy was again in terrible straits, and the political status was at a point of stagnation.

Unemployment had reached 24 percent, business and personal bankruptcies had reached record levels, and about 60 percent of the island’s families remained below the U.S. poverty line. Only massive injections of Federal grants, payments and loans kept the island’s economy afloat, accounting for $4 billion a year, compared with a total gross product of $11.7 billion.

And, on the political front, after 84 years under the U.S. flag, Puerto Rico has yet to achieve the powers of home rule obtained as an autonomous part of Spain.

All three political movements are displeased with the status quo.

Ever since the U.S. takeover, the pro-independence movement has been met with hostility by Washington. Puerto Ricans have, in a very real sense, been “taught” over the past eight and one-half decades that to seek independence is not only unrealistic in economic terms, but also somehow a subversive act. Because of this, the pro-independence movement has sought U.N. intervention to resolve Puerto Rico’s “colonial” status. It has received support in the U.N. Committee in Decolonization, but—due to fierce resistance on the part of the U.S.—has been unable to have the topic debated at the level of the General Assembly.

Supporters of autonomy and statehood also desire change, but they view elections and lobbying in Washington, not U.N. intervention, as the acceptable path to follow.

The Popular Democrats know that their only hope for more autonomy lies in a convincing defeat of the statehood party in a future election, coupled with the victory of a Democrat in the White House, since the Republicans have traditionally sided with Puerto Rico’s statehood supporters.

As for Puerto Rico’s statehood advocates, despite U.S. Republican rhetoric, little of substance has been done to advance their cause. In fact, under President Reagan, there has been at least one important setback, which could have very serious long-range consequences.

In recent years, Puerto Rico has received “state-like” treatment for most Federal aid programs, with benefits equal to those of the 50 states. But in July 1982, the Congress (mainly through Republican pressure) yanked Puerto Rico out of the Food Stamp program and gave the island a reduced block grant to run its own smaller nutritional assistance program. This is one of the reasons that even Governor Romero, a staunch advocate of U.S. statehood, said that “vestiges of colonialism” mar the island’s relationship with Washington.

Puerto Rican society has literally been overwhelmed by the U.S. food stamp program. While no one quarrels with the goal of providing all American citizens, despite their income, with adequate nutrition, the transplanting in Puerto Rico of a program designed for a different reality (the more affluent continental United States) has caused serious dislocations.

By U.S. standards, so many of the island’s people are poor that 56 percent of Puerto Rico’s population is eligible for food stamps. In Fiscal 1981-82, the island received about $875 million in food stamps. This was roughly 10 percent of all U.S. funds spent on the program, although Puerto Rico’s population is less than 2 percent of the U.S. population.

Federal officials (both in Congress and the U.S. Department of Agriculture) became so alarmed at the growing food stamp expenditure in Puerto Rico that a bill was passed, effective July 1, 1982, denying the island “state-like” treatment in the food stamp program.

Instead, Puerto Rico was given a block grant of $825 million for Fiscal 1982-83, and allowed to devise its own plan of doling out benefits. The island government opted for a “cash-out” system, mailing out monthly checks (not food stamps) to beneficiaries, hoping that the funds will be spent on food.

No matter how the funds are spent, there is a widespread consensus among Puerto Rico’s political and business leaders that a program which, in effect, provides a monthly welfare check to nearly six of every ten residents of the island has dealt a serious blow to the work ethic. This program has split Puerto Rico into two groups, those who receive food stamps (not checks) and the hard-pressed middle class, which does not, and resents the poorer half of the society with growing intensity. The food stamp program has also promoted an increasing mood of dependency, in a society which for nearly five centuries has been subjected to one form of colonial rule or another.

Critics of the food stamp program claim it was “imposed” by the United States to literally smother any possibility of independence for the island.

Even those who do not advocate independence suggest that $825 million in U.S. funds could be spent each year in a far more productive manner, providing public works employment in return for monthly payments. This, they say, would reduce somewhat the island’s 23 percent unemployment, provide the jobless with skills, instill in them a sense of worth and dignity, and also help improve the island’s infrastructure. At present, say the critics, the food stamp monies enter the island, are used to buy food (mostly imported from the U.S.), and leave no positive impact. Puerto Ricans have become addicted to a type of Federal aid that only tends to perpetuate further dependency.

Paralleling the past four decades of intense debate over Puerto Rico’s political status, there has occurred a mass movement of people between the island and the United States which is likely to play an important role in determining the outcome of the debate.
PART II: MASS MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

More Puerto Ricans live in New York City today than in the island’s capital, San Juan. More live in Chicago, or Hartford, than in many towns of the island.

With 3 million people on the island, and more than 2 million in the United States, Puerto Rico has been characterized by some observers as “a divided nation.” This situation is a relatively recent development. In 1940, when the island’s population was about 2 million, there were fewer than 70,000 Puerto Ricans residing in the United States. But a number of factors combined, at the end of World War II, to provoke a massive movement of people northward, in search of a better life.

This wave of humanity found upon arrival (mainly in New York) small but long-established barrios of Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics. During the 1839’s, for example, the founding members of a Spanish benevolent society in New York included several Puerto Rican merchants. By the middle of the 19th century, Puerto Rico was engaged in more commerce with the U.S. than it was with Spain, and the sea route between San Juan and New York was well traveled. Late in the century, the movement for independence from Spain was being planned in New York City by groups of Puerto Rican and Cuban patriots. (In fact, it was on December 22, 1895 that a group of Puerto Rican patriots, meeting at Chimney Corner Hall in lower Manhattan, first unfurled a newly designed flag, which is today the official flag of Puerto Rico.)

The granting of American citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917 made travel to the U.S. less complicated. But it still entailed a long sea voyage. In the 1930’s, while conditions in Puerto Rico were terrible, the Depression in the U.S. offered little attraction, and there was actually a four-year period of reverse migration (see Table 1), as more Puerto Ricans returned to the island than came to the U.S.

The end of World War II in a sense “triggered” the move northward for varied, complex reasons that can only be touched upon here. When peace came, an economic boom in the U.S. generated plentiful jobs for unskilled and semiskilled labor. This attracted many Puerto Ricans from their homeland, where chronic unemployment and underemployment remained at high levels, and where wages lagged far behind those in the U.S. At that time, Puerto Rico’s male labor force consisted to a great extent of rural landless workers, who had only seasonal jobs harvesting sugar cane or other crops. The hope of year-round employment, at higher wages, was a strong magnet. For women, unable to find regular jobs on the island, the possibility of piece-work in New York’s garment center also proved attractive. Tens of thousands of Puerto Rican men had served in the U.S. military and had traveled through, or been stationed in, the U.S. during their time in service. With their military savings, and the benefits of the G.I. Bill, many decided to try their luck in the U.S., either to study, or seek work. Another critical factor in this equation was the availability of inexpensive air travel. The airplane made the 1,600-mile trip in a matter of hours, and the ticket (often purchased on credit) cost little more than a week’s salary. With air travel, there also arose a large seasonal migration of farmworkers, men who cut sugarcane half the year.

\[ TABLE 1 \]

**Migration Between Puerto Rico and the United States**

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<th>Fiscal Year</th>
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<th>Travelers to Puerto Rico</th>
<th>Net Migration to U.S.</th>
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<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>287,325</td>
<td>230,585</td>
<td>56,740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>334,392</td>
<td>287,632</td>
<td>46,760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>350,481</td>
<td>325,828</td>
<td>24,653</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* A minus sign (−) denotes return migration from the U.S. to Puerto Rico.

Note: Figures from 1920 through 1946 are for total passenger traffic between Puerto Rico and all other destinations (U.S., U.S. Virgin Islands and foreign nations) but the net migration figures accurately represent migratory trends between Puerto Rico and the U.S.

Source: Data from the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico Planning Board published by Migration Division, Commonwealth of Puerto Rico Labor Department, based on statistics from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, Defense Department, Puerto Rico Police Authority, Airlines and Steamship Companies operating in Puerto Rico.
in Puerto Rico, and spent the other half in the fields of New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut, harvesting fruits, vegetables, and tobacco. As Fitzpatrick has noted:

The Puerto Ricans have come for the most part in the first great airborne migration of people from abroad; they are decidedly newcomers of the aviation age. A Puerto Rican can travel from San Juan to New York in less time than a New Yorker could travel from Coney Island to Times Square a century ago. They are the first group to come in large numbers from a different cultural background, but who are, nevertheless, citizens of the United States. 

Between 1940 and 1950, the Puerto Rican population in the U.S. more than quadrupled, to 301,000 (this included 226,000 persons of Puerto Rican birth and 75,000 born in the U.S. to Puerto Rican parents). (Table 2)

### TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percent Increase</th>
<th>Born in Puerto Rico</th>
<th>Born in U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>1,513</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>11,811</td>
<td>680.6</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>52,774</td>
<td>346.8</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>69,967</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>301,375</td>
<td>330.7</td>
<td>226,110</td>
<td>75,265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>887,662</td>
<td>194.5</td>
<td>615,384</td>
<td>272,278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>1,429,396</td>
<td>61.0</td>
<td>783,358</td>
<td>646,038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>2,013,945</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Various Reports of the U.S. Census Bureau

**Note:** Census reports between 1910 and 1940 did not offer a breakdown of Puerto Ricans born in Puerto Rico and born in the U.S. This data is not yet available, either, for 1980.

Although employers in the manufacturing and service industries welcomed the presence of a large labor pool that would work for low wages, the general reception afforded the Puerto Rican migrant ranged from indifference to downright hostility.

### Numerous Abuses

There are numerous tales of horror about Puerto Rican migrants who were misled, cheated, and abused. Some of the worst episodes occurred in the years immediately following World War II, when migrants knew little about the pitfalls of trusting smooth-talking employment agents.

In Chicago, in 1946, for example, an employment agency imported 362 young Puerto Rican girls to work as housemaids, at about $60 a month. From this low salary, the agency deducted $125 as its fee, at the rate of $10 per month, and held an additional sum in escrow for each girl's fare home. The girls were little better off than indentured servants.

In another case, 60 Puerto Rican men were promised jobs in the North Chicago Hardware Foundry. After deductions for room and board, employment agency fees and compulsory allotments for their dependents back home, the already meager $34.50 weekly pay check shrank to virtually nothing. The employer was housing the men, during the winter, in unheated railway cars.

Once Puerto Ricans began to settle permanently in the U.S. with their families, some of the most blatant abuses ceased. But there were other problems. The Puerto Rican was "the last to be hired, and the first to be fired." The language barrier, coupled with a lack of skills made it hard to secure good-paying work. And the color of a person's skin often proved more important than what he or she could do.

On the racial question, scholar Frank Bonilla has written:

"We live in a society (the U.S.) that knows only black and white. Puerto Rican complacency and equivocation with respect to race and even our more genuine accommodations of racial differences have little place here. As we have discovered, here one is black, white, or a nonsomething. Still, Puerto Ricans—white or black—have little comprehension of the deep racial animosities that divide mainland Americans. Many are understandably reluctant to become part of a fight that is to them ugly or meaningless."

Another scholar, Clara Rodriguez, has observed that in the U.S. Puerto Ricans "find themselves caught between two polarities and at a dialectical distance from both. Puerto Ricans are between white and black." She notes, "perhaps the primary point of contrast is that, in Puerto Rico, racial identification is subordinate to cultural identification, while in the U.S. racial identification to a large extent, determines cultural identification."

Most of the newcomers were ill-prepared for their new way of life, but they tenaciously held on to the hardest, poorest-paying jobs, lived in overpriced substandard housing, and struggled to establish themselves. Some fell by the wayside, into public welfare or dependence, and a few into drugs and crime. Soon, U.S. newspapers began referring to "our Puerto Rican problem" in much the same way that newspapers at the turn of the century complained of the "filthy Hebrews" or the "dangerous Italians."

In their 1948 book *New York: Confidential*, journalists Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer articulated this hostility:

"During the last ten years and growing every year, there has descended on Manhattan island like a locust plague an influx of Puerto Ricans . . . one of every 13 New Yorkers is a Puerto Rican . . . Puerto Ricans were not born to be New Yorkers. They are mostly crude farmers, subject to congenital tropical diseases, physically unfitted for the northern climate, unskilled, uneducated, non-English-speaking and almost impossible to assimilate and condition for healthful and useful existence in an active city of stone and steel.

On and on they wrote, calling Puerto Ricans "poverty-numbed, naive natives . . . alien to everything that spells New York . . . weaklings unable physically, mentally or financially to compete, they turn to guise and vile and the steel blade, the traditional weapon of the sugarcane cutter, mark of their blood and heritage." The arrival of more Puerto Ricans, they lamented, "is growing and the sorry end is nowhere in sight."" Despite the slanderous tone of the Lait-Mortimer commentary, it is worth noting, because it both reflected and helped to shape public opinion. It also demonstrated that by the late 1940s the arrival of Puerto Ricans was indeed, having a strong impact. The most accurate part of their diatribe was their prediction that the "end" was certainly "nowhere in sight."

Between 1950 and 1960, migration from Puerto Rico to the U.S. actually accelerated. In one single year (1953), there was a net migration to the U.S. of 76,252 persons, more than the total Puerto Rican population in the year 1940. When the decade of the 1950's concluded, the census showed an increase of more than half a million persons, to 916,000, or nearly 28 percent of the migrants and their children residing in New York City. One decade later, this concentration was reduced to 69 percent as communities began to spring up in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and the New England states.

### The "Push-Pull" Theory

The reasons for Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. have sometimes been oversimplified in a "push-pull" theory, the "push" of a difficult economic environment on the island and the "pull" of opportunity in the U.S. but this theory points to an important factor in explaining the phenomenon.

Joseph Monserrat, former director of the Migration Division of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, has observed that: "The size of the Puerto Rican migration varies closely with job opportunities in the United States; i.e., when job opportunities increase, migration increases; when job opportunities decline, migration declines."

A study by Dr. Rita Maldonado, a Puerto Rican economist, supports this theory, indicating that "Puerto Ricans emigrate to the U.S. mainland primarily for economic reasons . . . specifically . . . (1) if the job market in the U.S. is relatively better than that in Puerto Rico, and (2) if the average wage in the U.S. is higher relative to that in Puerto Rico.
Rico . . . Her study also appears to indicate that the level of welfare payments and unemployment compensation in the U.S. is not a decisive factor in encouraging Puerto Ricans to emigrate.

The theory seems, also, to be strengthened by the experience of the decade of the 1960s. During that period, migration to the U.S. continued, but slackened to an average of 20,000 persons per year, compared with 41,000 persons per year in the 1950s. (Table 3)

### Table 3

**Patterns of Puerto Rican Migration to the United States, by Decade**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Total Migration to the U.S.</th>
<th>Yearly Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>35,638</td>
<td>3,563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>12,715</td>
<td>1,271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>145,807</td>
<td>14,580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>457,496</td>
<td>45,746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>221,763</td>
<td>22,176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>28,683</td>
<td>2,868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s*</td>
<td>128,063</td>
<td>12,487*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The 1980s was based only on the first three years of the decade (1980, 1981, 1982) and the yearly average for that period is one-third of the total migration to the U.S. during those three years.

Source: Calculations are based on data from Commonwealth of Puerto Rico Planning Board.

One possible reason for this is that, while the U.S. economy was still vigorous, Puerto Rico itself had begun to industrialize; hundreds of new factories opened, offering jobs and the chance for a life of modest comfort without having to leave Puerto Rico. These jobs blunted the migratory thrust somewhat, but the new factories could absorb neither all of the young persons entering the labor force, nor the farm workers made idle by the near collapse of the island’s agricultural sector.

By 1970, according to the Census, there were 1.4 million Puerto Ricans in the U.S.; of this number, 783,000 persons had been born on the island, while 646,000 were born in the U.S.

Thus, for the first time, the two Puerto Rican groups (island-born and U.S.-born) began to approach equal size. And, for the first time, birth, rather than migration, became the dominant factor in the growth of the U.S. Puerto Rican community. The implications of this new balance—in cultural, economic and political terms—are considerable.

In the 1970's, when the U.S. economy turned sour, the “push-pull” theory again continued to appear sound. Unemployment in the U.S. became widespread. Many factories closed in the New York City area. Despite the fact that Puerto Rico, too, was severely lashed by the recession of the 1970s (unemployment on the island soared to 19 percent by 1975), prospects for jobs in the U.S. were so bleak that the migration slowed down, and then reversed itself. For six consecutive years, 1972 through 1977, more Puerto Ricans returned to the island than came to the U.S. This was the first time that such a reverse migration trend had sustained itself over a prolonged period, except for the Depression years 1931-34 (see Table 1).

### The 1980 Census

Dramatic changes in the size and location of the Puerto Rican population in the U.S. were revealed by the Census of 1980.

For the first time, the Puerto Rican community in the U.S. broke the 2 million barrier (exactly 2,013,945).

The 1980 figure represented an increase of 41 percent over the 1970 population. This was a much faster rate of growth than that of the population in Puerto Rico itself, which was up by about 18 percent between 1970 and 1980. (Table 2)

Also, the Puerto Rican population reflected notable changes in distribution. For the first time, New York State was no longer the home of the majority of U.S. Puerto Ricans. Between 1970 and 1980, the proportion of islanders living there dipped from 64 percent to 49 percent (in the Census counts of 1940 and 1950, New York City alone held more than 80 percent of all U.S. Puerto Ricans). (See Table 4)

In political terms, one can only speculate on the long-range impact of the growth and dispersion of the U.S. Puerto Rican population, but in part there will surely be.

For example, in 1980, there were 3.2 million persons Puerto Rican birth or origin in the island and in the U.S.; the U.S. portion represents 27.4 percent of the total.

By 1970, the total Puerto Rican population was up to 4.1 million, with 34.5 percent residing in the U.S. By 1980, the total increased to 5.2 million, with 40.3 percent residing in the U.S. That year, there were nearly as many Puerto Ricans in the U.S. as there had been in Puerto Rico itself just 20 years previous.

The dispersion of Puerto Ricans elsewhere in the U.S. has also been interesting.

Between 1970 and 1980, while the Puerto Rican population in New York State grew by only 7 percent, the population in New Jersey grew by 57 percent, from 138,896 to 243,540.

Illinois, now the state with the third largest Puerto Rican population grew from 87,509 to 129,165.

There was a virtual explosion in Florida (now ranked fourth) where the Puerto Rican community grew from 28,166 to 94,775 in a single decade. California’s Puerto Rican population nearly doubled during the decade of the 1970’s, from 50,917 to 93,038. Pennsylvania’s more than doubled, from 44,263 to 91,802. The same was true of Connecticut (37,600 to 88,361), Massachusetts (23,332 to 76,450), Texas (6,334 to 22,936) and Hawaii (9,300 to 19,351).

The growth of the U.S. Puerto Rican population is part of an overall expansion of the Hispanic communities throughout the nation. During this decade, the Spanish origin part of the total U.S. population increased from 4.5 percent to 6.4 percent, reaching a 1980 total of 14.6 million.

This included 8.7 million Mexican-Americans, 2.01 million Puerto Ricans, 803,000 Cubans, and 3.05 million “other Spanish” (persons from Spain, Central and South America, and anyone else who identify themselves as “Latino,” “Spanish-American,” “Hispanic,” etc.).

Between 1978 and 1982, migration from Puerto Rico to the U.S. has been renewed, at quite high levels, as the island “lost” a net of 185,000 persons during that five-year period. While the U.S. economy has by means prospered during that time (and certainly not in the past year or two), a 10 percent jobless rate in the U.S. is still less than half the prevailing rate in Puerto Rico, where by late 1982 it reached 24 percent.

Today indications are that a much broader spectrum of Puerto Ricans society can be found among the northerners migrants. In previous year the typical migrant was a blue-collar worker, followed by a relatively small cadre of island-trained professionals (doctors, lawyers, teachers, social workers) who were attracted by opportunities to serve their compatriots in the growing Puerto Rican barrios of the U.S. Now, however, Puerto Rico’s universities are supplying far more graduates than can be absorbed by the local economy. Last year, at least half of the graduating class engineers from the University of Puerto Rico is said to have left the island in search of work.

### Table 4


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>642,622</td>
<td>916,825</td>
<td>986,389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>55,351</td>
<td>138,896</td>
<td>243,540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>36,081</td>
<td>87,509</td>
<td>129,165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>19,535</td>
<td>28,166</td>
<td>94,775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>28,108</td>
<td>50,917</td>
<td>93,038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>21,206</td>
<td>44,263</td>
<td>91,802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>15,247</td>
<td>37,600</td>
<td>88,361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>5,217</td>
<td>23,332</td>
<td>76,450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>6,050</td>
<td>6,334</td>
<td>22,936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>4,289</td>
<td>9,300</td>
<td>19,351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>13,940</td>
<td>20,272</td>
<td>32,442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>7,218</td>
<td>9,269</td>
<td>12,683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>3,806</td>
<td>6,202</td>
<td>12,483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>2,971</td>
<td>4,098</td>
<td>10,227</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: There are Puerto Ricans residing in all 50 states of the U.S. As of the 1980 Census, the state with the smallest Puerto Rican population is South Dakota (231 persons). 1.49 million of the 2.01 million Puerto Ricans reside in the Northeast, which includes the New Engalnd and Middle Atlantic States.

PART III: PUERTO RICANS IN THE U.S. TODAY

With a 1980 population of 2.01 million, Puerto Ricans are the second largest Hispanic ethnic group in the United States, and clearly the principal Hispanic group in the northeastern region of the country.

And, together with more than 3 million residents of their Caribbean patria, Puerto Ricans constitute an important population—larger in size than several states of the Union, and larger than a number of independent nations.*

While Puerto Ricans in the U.S. represent less than one percent of the national population, in New York City about 10 percent of the residents (and 25 percent of the school children) are Puerto Rican. Just across the Hudson River, in Hoboken, almost one-fourth of the people are Puerto Rican. Major cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Newark, Hartford, and Boston also have large Puerto Rican communities. In short, as the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights concluded a few years ago, “the quality of life achieved by Puerto Ricans is inextricably linked with the quality of life in many of America’s key urban centers.”

Current Socio-Economic Status

In terms of residence, Puerto Ricans tend to be more clustered in central cities than are other Americans, or other Hispanics. In March 1980, 74.7 percent of the 461,000 Puerto Rican families in the U.S. lived in central cities, compared with 26.5 percent of all U.S. families and 48.2 percent of all Spanish-origin families. (See Table 5)

1970 Census figures (the most recent available for this type of data) show that only 14.8 percent of U.S. Puerto Rican families owned the dwellings in which they reside, compared with 59.1 percent of all American families. Also, nearly two out of three Puerto Rican families did not own an automobile, which limited their mobility in seeking jobs far from home.

Because Puerto Ricans are predominantly urban and poor, they are often required to live in multifamily dwellings that tend to deteriorate the quality of life. For example, a New York University study indicates that the nature of housing can be a determining factor in the crime rate, even when other factors such as racial or ethnic composition and income are relatively constant. The study of 100 low-income public housing projects, showed that in three-floor walk-up buildings, there were 30 serious crimes per 1,000 families, while in high-rise structures, 13 to 30 floors, there were 68 serious crimes per 1,000 families. High-rise public housing projects were planned and built—not by the poor—but by municipal, state, and federal planners who, in their zeal to achieve high density and lower cost per unit, apparently created conditions that are conducive to antisocial behavior.

A Young Population

While the median age for the 218 million people of the United States in 1980 was 30.1 years, the typical Puerto Rican was more than nine years younger (and nearly 13 years younger than the typical Cuban migrant). Only 55.7 percent of Puerto Ricans are age 18 and over, compared with 71.6 percent of all Americans. This means that nearly half of the U.S. Puerto Ricans are of pre-college age, and not likely to be in the job marketplace. This, of course, has an impact on total family income. (See Table 6)

The proportion of Puerto Rican children in the pre-school years is nearly double the national average. Only 2.7 percent of U.S.-resident Puerto Ricans are age 65 or older, compared with a national average of 10.9 percent. This is due, in part, to the comparative recency of the Puerto Rican migration, and also to a tendency of many older Puerto Ricans to return to the island.

* In the Caribbean alone, the Puerto Rican population is larger than that of several nations, including: Barbados (236,000); Belize (146,000); Guyana (850,000); Jamaica (2.22 million); Trinidad and Tobago (1.17 million). In Central America, it is larger than Costa Rica (2.16 million), Honduras (3.56 million), Nicaragua (2.46 million), Panama (1.88 million), and El Salvador (4.43 million).

Return Migration

While, on balance, more Puerto Ricans are now settling in the U.S. than are heading back to the island, there is a considerable amount of reverse migration always occurring.

In that sense, the Puerto Rican migration has been unlike any other migration in America’s history. Europeans came in great waves during the 19th and early 20th century, and relatively few returned to their homelands. But the Puerto Rican migration coincided with the jet age, and since Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, travel between the U.S. and the isla is fast (about 31/2 hours from New York), cheap (as low as $180 round trip), and unfettered by quotas or passport requirements. The homestick Puerto Rican, discouraged by cold weather, unemployment, culture shock—even a broken romance—can pack up and be home in a hurry. Virtually every Puerto Rican dreams of eventual return; as one teacher in New York said recently, “This is no place to raise kids: when I marry, back to la isla I go.” Others, in view of the better job market in the U.S., plan to retire on the island.

Return migration is already an important statistic: in 1970, the island’s population of 2.7 million included 106,602 persons born in the U.S. to Puerto Rican parents—double the number ten years before. The emotional pull of the island is so great that airlines also transport numerous coffins, complying with the last wish of Puerto Ricans who insist upon being buried in their native soil.

There are also Puerto Ricans at both ends of the spectrum (high-level professionals and unskilled laborers) whose jobs, or lack of regular work, cause them to fly back and forth frequently. One artist, asked recently where he lived, in San Juan or New York, smiled and said: “On Eastern Airlines.”

Literature on the Migration

Statistics give us only a limited idea of the scope and dimension of the Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. And, because the migration is still relatively recent, and continues to be a dynamic phenomenon, no single book has yet appeared to paint the vivid human drama involved in such a massive displacement of people to a new land.

But, little by little, over the past few years, short stories, novels, and personal memoirs have emerged in print, adding—almost brick by brick—to what someday will be an impressive edifice of literature on this migration. Not all of these works are in English, but those that are merit reading, to appreciate the commonalities, and differences, between the Puerto Rican presence in the U.S. and that of the Jews, the Italians, the Irish, the Blacks, and the other racial and ethnic groups.

Jesus Colón, in A Puerto Rican and New York and Other Sketches, tells what it was like to be among the “pioneers” who came to New York during World War I.

Dan Wakefield, the well-known American journalist and novelist, in Island in the City: The World of Spanish Harlem, offered a sympathetic and sensitive account of migration during the 1950’s, when migrants were crammed together in small planes that jounced about in the air like ships in a storm-tossed sea.

In La Carreta (The Oxcart) Puerto Rican playwright René Marqués dealt with the jarring, tragic transition of a poor family from the countryside, to San Juan, and to New York.

Spiks, by Pedro Juan Soto, offers a series of short stories concerning the grim life of Puerto Ricans in New York during the 1950’s. In a later book, Ardentí Suelo, Fria Estación (Hot Land, Cold Season), Soto explores the dilemma of cultural alienation, as a young Puerto Rican from New York seeks his roots on the island and encounters a crisis of identity.

Autobiographical accounts such as Down These Mean Streets by Piri Thomas and Benity Lopez (with the help, and tape recorder, of sociologist Barry B. Levine) offer rich personal histories that describe the anguish, and occasional joy, of Puerto Rican migration to New York.

José Luis González and Emilio Díaz Velez were two other widely admired Puerto Rican writers, part of whose work has focused on migration to the U.S.

And, in the U.S. itself, there has slowly emerged a generation of writers who contribute to the growing body of literature on the topic. “Puerto Rican Oblivian,” a long poem of Pedro Pietri of New York, is considered a classic of this genre. Carlistos Way, a novel by Edwin Torres about a young Puerto Rican hoodlum who becomes involved with the Mafia, is not only an exciting work of fiction, it also provides a rich account of life in New York’s Puerto Rican bario during the 1950s and 1960s. The most recently published personal account of note is Family Installments: Memories of Growing up Hispanic, by Edwin Rivera, which has been widely praised. (See Bibliography)
Table 5 Metropolitan-Nonmetropolitan Residence of All Families and Spanish-Origin Families, by Type of Spanish Origin: March 1980

(Numbers in thousands)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Total families</th>
<th>Spanish-origin families</th>
<th>Other Spanish 1</th>
<th>Families not of Spanish origin 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3,100</td>
<td>1,785</td>
<td>461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>58,426</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Metropolitan areas</td>
<td>39,049</td>
<td>2,587</td>
<td>1,414</td>
<td>435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In central cities</td>
<td>15,206</td>
<td>1,495</td>
<td>775</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside central cities</td>
<td>23,542</td>
<td>1,092</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>91</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonmetropolitan areas</td>
<td>19,377</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>370</td>
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</table>

PERCENT DISTRIBUTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Metropolitan areas</th>
<th>In central cities</th>
<th>Outside central cities</th>
<th>Nonmetropolitan areas</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>66.8</td>
<td>65.9</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>65.9</td>
<td>34.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Includes families with householder of Central or South American and other Spanish origin.
2 Includes families with householder who did not know or did not report on origin.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census

Table 6 Total and Spanish-Origin Population, by Age and Type of Spanish Origin: March 1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Spanish origin</th>
<th></th>
<th>Central or South American</th>
<th>Other Spanish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All ages.... thousands...</td>
<td>218,100</td>
<td>13,264</td>
<td>7,932</td>
<td>1,823</td>
<td>831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 5 years</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 9 years</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 to 17 years</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18 to 20 years</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21 to 24 years</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 to 34 years</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35 to 44 years</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45 to 64 years</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>65 years and over</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18 years and over</td>
<td>71.6</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>55.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21 years and over</td>
<td>65.9</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>49.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median....years...</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Includes persons who did not know or did not report on origin.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census
Family Characteristics

Puerto Rican families are younger and larger than the U.S. average. The 1970 Census showed that more than three-fourths of the Puerto Rican families had children under age 18, compared with slightly more than half of all U.S. families. The figure for black families in the U.S. was 61 percent. Only 1.6 percent of U.S. families had six or more children, compared with five percent of Puerto Rican families.

A 1972 Census survey showed that about 11.6 percent of U.S. families were headed by a woman. But women headed 24.1 percent of Puerto Rican families. Since the breakup of a marriage often results in the women assuming the care of the children, and since women as a group earn less than men, a high percentage of families headed by women is an economically negative factor. Also, Puerto Rican mothers have a very low participation rate in the labor force, and those who do work, earn on the average, quite low wages.

Education

A March 1979 Census survey reveals that Puerto Ricans have made significant gains in education during the past decade, but still lag far behind in this area, which is so critical at a time when the job market demands increasingly more sophisticated skills.

In 1970, nearly 24 percent of Puerto Rican adults (age 25 and above) had completed fewer than five years of school. By 1979, this figure had been reduced to 14.4 percent (the nationwide figure for persons not of Spanish origin is 2.8 percent).

As for high school graduates, in 1970 19.8 percent of Puerto Rican adults had earned a diploma. By 1979, the figure was 38.6 percent (compared with a national average for non-Hispanics of 68.9 percent).

At the college level, in 1970 only 2.2 percent of Puerto Rican adults possessed a degree. By 1979, this figure nearly doubled, to 4.1 percent, but was well below the U.S. non-Hispanic average of 16.9 percent.

It is encouraging that the rate of improvement during the decade for Puerto Ricans was more rapid than that of the U.S. non-Hispanic population, but the gap is still so wide that one finds it difficult to predict when Puerto Ricans will catch up.

If one examines educational attainment by age group, however, it does appear that progress has occurred.

For example, among Puerto Ricans age 45-64 years, only 26.3 percent have a high school diploma. In the 25-29 year age group, the attainment is dramatically improved, 59.3 percent. This is still well below the attainment level for all U.S. non-Hispanics (87.3 percent), but the rate of improvement between age groups is superior (65 percent of U.S. non-Hispanics, age 45-64, had high school diplomas).

Low educational attainment in the Puerto Rican population is, of course, a direct result of a high drop-out rate from school. The reasons for this high drop-out rate are quite complex, and deserve some analysis.

Between 1960 and 1970, the drop-out rate for school-age Puerto Ricans fell, particularly for young adults, but a severe problem persisted. During the elementary school years (age 6 to 13), the staying power of Puerto Rican children is quite comparable to the national average: 97 percent of those age 6 to 13 are enrolled in school. The drop-out problem becomes evident in the age 14-17 group. Nationwide, 93 percent of all youngsters in this age group remain in school, while among Puerto Ricans the figure slips to 85 percent.

The difference grows more acute in the age 18-24 group. Nationwide, while 37 percent of young males remain in school, only 18 percent of the Puerto Rican males are still enrolled (the figures are comparable for women). In other words, young adult Puerto Ricans are only half as likely to be in school as their peers.

Language and Culture

In 1970, more than 30 percent of the 437,000 Puerto Rican students enrolled in U.S. schools had been born in Puerto Rico.

Each year, thousands of children transfer from schools in Puerto Rico to those in the U.S. (the reverse is also occurring, creating a growing need for bilingual education, in Puerto Rico, for children of return migrants, who cannot speak Spanish). Spanish is the mother tongue of a major segment of the Puerto Rican school-age population, and is the language used most often in the home, even for those students born in the U.S.

In New York City in 1970, of 362,000 Puerto Ricans under age 18, nearly one-fourth (80,370) had been born in Puerto Rico. About one-fourth (nearly 80,000) of the Puerto Rican and other Hispanic students in New York City speak public schools speak poor or nonexistent Spanish. The linkage between birthplace and ability to speak English is an obvious one.

It is also clear that birthplace, language ability and dropping out are closely intertwined. Great disparities exist in the drop-out rates of island-born and U.S.-born Puerto Rican youngsters. Those born in the U.S. tend to enroll earlier in school, and drop out less frequently.

About 47 percent of all U.S.-Puerto Rican, age 3-34, are enrolled in school. But this overall average is misleading: 67 percent of the U.S.-born Puerto Ricans in that age group are enrolled, compared with only 28 percent of those born in Puerto Rico. The disparity is very pronounced in the age 18-24 group. Among males of this age group, for example, 33 percent of the U.S.-born were still in school, compared with only 13 percent of the island-born.

These figures indicate that the dropout rate is more severe among Puerto Rican youngsters born on the island than among those youngsters of Puerto Rican parentage born in the U.S. Island-born youngsters are more likely to have problems communicating in English, more likely to be unemployed or underemployed, and more likely to be doomed to a life of poverty.

While the education problems of Puerto Ricans are certainly not limited to the island-born, this group is more adversely affected by inadequate schooling. Language is often the key factor that makes them different from other Puerto Rican students, many of whom may sit in the same classroom, or even be siblings. The fact that these students with limited fluency in English achieve less and drop out more is compelling evidence that the schools' response to the problem has been inadequate.

One Puerto Rican parent expressed his dismay at the lack of special instruction for his children: "They are practically wasting their time because they are not learning anything. First of all, they don't understand the language. What good does it do to sit there in front of the teacher and just look at her face? It is wasting their time. They don't learn anything because they don't understand what she is saying." 5

The entitlement of students with limited English-language proficiency to instruction in a language that they can understand has been vigorously fought for by Puerto Rican and other immigrant groups in the United States. In the landmark case Lau v. Nichols (1974), the Supreme Court held that the San Francisco school system had denied the right of certain non-English speaking Chinese pupils to equal education opportunities by failing to take any affirmative steps to address their language status. But the court did not prescribe what form the remedies to English-language deficiency should take.

Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of the United States provides that instruction shall be "given in, and study of, English, and to the extent necessary to allow a child to progress effectively through the educational system, the native language of the children of limited English-speaking ability, and such instruction shall be given with appropriate cultural heritage of such children, and, with respect to elementary school instruction, such instruction shall, to the extent necessary, be in all courses or subjects of study which allow a child to progress effectively through the educational system."

The definition of who is entitled to instruction in a language other than English in United States schools has been clarified by actions initiated by specific community interest groups, such as in the "consent decree" entered in Aspria of New York, Inc. v. Board of Education of the City of New York, 58 F.R.D. 62 (S.D.N.Y. 1973) by which students in New York City whose native or home language is other than English were administered a standard test in English; those falling below the 20th percentile of all students tested and who, when tested in Spanish, score higher in Spanish than in English, are placed in bilingual programs.

Titular students are offered either English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, bilingual or dual-language programs. ESL programs only teach English-language arts. Advocates of these programs see them as the most direct solution to the language-barrier problem of Puerto Rican and other Hispanic students. Critics hold that ESL-only programs are inadequate because although students are provided with a limited exposure to English language learning, they may fall behind in regular courses which are being taught in English before they are fully proficient in that language. These critics would prefer to see the substantive subject areas taught in the student's first language and English until the students are sufficiently competent in English.

Many Puerto Rican educators such as Heman La Fontaine, who directed the Office of Bilingual Education in New York City, advocate not only
bilingual but also bicultural education. La Fontaine contends:

“Our definition of cultural pluralism must include the concept that our language and our culture will be given equal status to that of the majority population. It is not enough simply to say that we should be given the opportunity to share in the positive benefits of modern American life. Instead, we must insist that this sharing will not be accomplished at the sacrifice of all those traits which make us what we are as Puerto Ricans.”

President Reagan’s Secretary of Education revoked the Carter administration’s plans for extending and enforcing bilingual education programs. But the Supreme Court in 1982 upheld the order of Judge William Justice in United States v. Texas (506 F. Supp. 405) requiring Texas to institute bilingual education for all school grades within six years in a class action brought by limited-English proficient Mexican-American pupils.

Employment and Occupations

Among U.S. persons age 16 or over, Puerto Ricans had the highest rate of unemployment, according to the March 1980 Census.

At that time, U.S. Puerto Rican unemployment was 11.7 percent, compared with 8.9 percent for all Spanish origin persons, and 6.6 percent for all Americans (only 5 percent for Cubans). Later that year, when total U.S. unemployment was reported as 7.1 percent, the figure for “Black and other races” was 13.2 percent.

Puerto Rican workers are heavily concentrated in low-skilled blue-collar jobs. Furthermore, many are employed in declining areas of labor intensive industry and are subject to layoffs or seasonal employment. However, Puerto Ricans did not have the lowest percentage of “professional, technical and kindred workers” in their labor force. That distinction fell to the Mexicans, only 6.3 percent of whose workers were in that category. For Puerto Ricans the figure was 8.9 percent (slightly better than the average for all workers of Spanish origin, but only about half the figure for all U.S. workers.)

The largest cluster of Puerto Rican workers (29.8 percent) was in the category of “operatives, including transport,” which would encompass factory workers and truck drivers. Next largest (19.1 percent) was “clerical and kindred workers,” followed by “service workers” (18.6 percent), which would include hotel and restaurant employees. (See Table 7)

Even in the “better” occupations, U.S. Labor Department studies show that Puerto Ricans are grouped near the bottom of the earning scale. Those in professional and technical work are primarily technicians. Puerto Rican managers and administrators are mostly in wholesale and retail trade, rather than in manufacturing, or with large corporate organizations. Among persons in sales, Puerto Ricans are mostly retail clerks rather than insurance or real estate agents. In the clerical field, they are usually clerks, typists and machine operators, rather than secretaries. 19

Many Puerto Rican families have, however, moved up the socioeconomic ladder. Between 1960 and 1970, for example, the number of Puerto Ricans in “professional, technical, managerial and administrative” jobs more than doubled, from 15,869 to 34,016. And the number of Puerto Rican families with incomes over $15,000 per year increased from less than 1 percent to more than 6 percent.

But these gains are modest when viewed in the larger context. During the same period, the percentage of all U.S. families with income of $15,000 or more per year increased from 4.6 percent to 20.6 percent.

It should also be noted that official unemployment figures, cited earlier, do not describe the true picture, which is worse.

The unemployment rate refers to that portion of the civilian labor force that is jobless. But the “civilian labor force” is not synonymous with the entire working-age population. It includes only those persons who are working or actively seeking work. It does not include the disabled, or those persons who for various reasons (lack of skills, lack of motivation, lack of opportunity) are not actively seeking work. In other words, the chronically unemployed, those who have lost hope, are not included in official unemployment statistics.

For example, while 86 percent of all U.S. adult males are part of the labor force (working or actively seeking work), only 76 percent of the Puerto Rican males are so defined. While nearly 60 percent of all U.S. women are in the labor force, this was true for only 32 percent of Puerto Rican women.

This result is in very dramatic changes in official statistics. For example, a March 1972 Census survey showed that 8.8 percent of Puerto Rican men and 17.6 percent of Puerto Rican women were unemployed.

If Puerto Ricans participated in the labor force at the same rate as the total population, and the number of persons with jobs remained constant, unemployment among Puerto Rican men would have to be adjusted upward from 8.8 percent to 18.7 percent, and for women from 17.6 percent to 56.4 percent. For both men and women, the “official” rate of 12.6 cent soared to 33.0 percent. In other words, about one of every three working age Puerto Ricans in the U.S. is jobless.

Such a high level of unemployment represents a disaster of serious proportions. Amid the relative affluence of the U.S., Puerto Ricans are living in conditions worse than those of the Great Depression of the 1930s.

And time has apparently not improved the situation. In 1960, the labor force participation rate for Puerto Rican men and women was better than it was in 1970; it appears that the U.S. job market in 1960 was more accommodating to the skills possessed by Puerto Rican workers. Health may be cited as another reason for the low labor force participation rate. About 25 percent of Puerto Rican men under age 65 who were outside the labor force were listed as “disabled” in 1971. Childcare is another factor. Of 25 percent of white U.S. women had to care for children under age compared with 44 percent of Puerto Rican women.

There is a further distinction of labor force participation among husband-wife families. In fact, Puerto Rican husbands ranked very high in comparison with other ethnic groups. In 1970, in a comparison of the husband who “worked at some time during the year,” the Census Bureau found that Puerto Rican husbands had a labor force participation rate of 88.9 percent, compared with 89.9 percent for all white husbands, 88.8 percent for blacks. In the category of husbands who “worked for twenty two weeks or more,” Puerto Rican husbands ranked highest of all—with 7 percent—compared with 69.3 percent for whites and 62.2 percent for blacks.

Low Income

The Puerto Rican family has the lowest income of any major racial or ethnic group in the United States, with the possible exception of American Indians, and it appears that it is not catching up.

According to the 1980 Census, Puerto Rican families had a median annual income of $9,885. This was far below the figure for all family of Spanish origin ($14,269) and for all U.S. families ($19,661).

The largest single grouping of Puerto Rican families (23.5 percent) had incomes of less than $5,000 a year; this was true of only 7 percent of all U.S. families. At the other end of the income scale, 12.5 percent of Puerto Rican families had incomes of $25,000 a year or more, but this was true of 20.7 percent of all Spanish origin families, and 34.6 percent of all U.S. families. (See Table 8)

Most alarming, perhaps, is the fact that Puerto Rican family income in comparison with U.S. family income in general, is falling behind. In 1959, for example, Puerto Rican families, with median income $3,351 per year, earned 67 percent of U.S. family income. By 1970, the figure had dropped to 60.5 percent, and by 1980 it was down to only 51 percent.

In other words, while Puerto Rican family income has increased over the years, it has done so at a much slower rate than it has for white (a black) families in the U.S. In relative terms, Puerto Rican families are less than they did in 1959, before the declaration of the so-called War on Poverty.

Current data from the U.S. Census Bureau is not yet available to compare the socio-economic situation of blacks, whites and Puerto Ricans in the United States. Some data from a decade ago is available, and there is evidence that the relative position of these groups has shifted significantly.

In 1971, U.S. Census Bureau data showed that median family income for white families in the U.S. was $10,672, and for black families was $6,492. The figure for Puerto Rican families was $7,548, but was $6,112, for Puerto Ricans.

In 1959, Puerto Rican median family income was 54.6 percent of white median family income. At that time, black median family income was 35.6 percent of white family income.

By 1971, Puerto Rican family income had dropped, in relative terms to only 57.9 percent of white family income, while black family income rose to 63.3 percent of white family income.

In 1970, 6.6 percent of white families had incomes under the Federal poverty level, compared with 29.8 percent of black families and 27.1 percent of Puerto Rican families.

That same year, comparative figures were drawn for the state of New York, which contains the largest Puerto Rican population in the U.S.

At that time, unemployment was 3.4 percent for whites, 5.6 percent for blacks and 6.1 percent for Puerto Ricans.

Median family income was $11,084 for whites, $7,297 for blacks and $5,698 for Puerto Ricans.
Table 7  Employment Status and Major Occupation Group of the Total and Spanish-Origin Population 16 Years Old and Over, by Type of Spanish Origin: March 1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment status and occupation</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Spanish origin</th>
<th>Other Spanish</th>
<th>Not of Spanish origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons, 16 years old and over...</td>
<td>164,265</td>
<td>8,305</td>
<td>4,886</td>
<td>1,088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In civilian labor force...thousands...</td>
<td>103,239</td>
<td>5,310</td>
<td>3,266</td>
<td>560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent unemployed...............</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed...thousands...</td>
<td>96,526</td>
<td>4,838</td>
<td>2,958</td>
<td>694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent..........................</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, technical, and kindred workers...</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers and administrators, except farm...</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales workers...</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical and kindred workers...</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft and kindred workers...</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operatives, including transport...</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laborers, excluding farm...</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers and farm managers...</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm laborers and supervisors...</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service workers...</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Represents zero or rounds to zero.

1Includes Central or South American and other Spanish origin.
2Includes persons who did not know or did not report on origin.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census

Table 8  Income in 1979 of All Families and Spanish-Origin Families: March 1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family income</th>
<th>Total families</th>
<th>Spanish-origin families</th>
<th>Other Spanish</th>
<th>Families not of Spanish origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total families...thousands...</td>
<td>58,426</td>
<td>3,100</td>
<td>1,785</td>
<td>461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent........</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $5,000........</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$5,000 to $7,499........</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$7,500 to $9,999........</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 to $14,999.....</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000 to $19,999.....</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000 to $24,999.....</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$25,000 or more.........</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median income...........</td>
<td>$19,661</td>
<td>$16,569</td>
<td>$15,171</td>
<td>$9,855</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1Includes families with householder of Central or South American and other Spanish origin.
2Includes families with householder who did not know or did not report on origin.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census
Despite the grim picture of poverty in the Puerto Rican community, it should be noted that Puerto Rican workers contribute a great deal to the economies of the areas where they reside.

In 1970, for example, 79,863 Puerto Rican families (24.5 percent of all Puerto Rican families) relied on some form of public assistance to provide, or supplement, income. This amounted to approximately $188.9 million in public assistance or welfare payments. However, three-fourths of the Puerto Rican families (more than 250,000) were self-supporting, had earnings of nearly $2 billion, and paid income taxes of about $300 million.

Also, 1980 Census figures show that 35 percent of Puerto Rican families had "no workers," compared with 13.5 percent of other Spanish origin families, and 12.6 percent of non-Spanish origin U.S. families.

There is, apparently, a direct relationship between low family income and the high incidence of one-parent (female) families in the Puerto Rican community.

For instance, the proportion of Puerto Rican families maintained by women was much larger (about 40 percent) than for families of Mexican origin (15 percent) and other Spanish origin (17 percent).

Focusing more sharply on this question, a Census query concerning work experience of persons maintaining the family showed that 41.4 percent of family heads of Puerto Rican origin "did not work last year," compared with about 19 percent of other family heads. This probably refers, in many cases, to mothers raising small children, receiving public assistance.

**Discrimination**

One likes to think that with the gains made by the Civil Rights movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s discrimination has been effectively erased from the national scene.

While no one would deny that progress has been made, and even after taking into account factors such as language barriers, lack of skills, etc., the evidence is compelling that racial and ethnic discrimination are still barriers to equal opportunities for Puerto Ricans in the United States.

In 1970, all U.S. adults with a high school diploma earned a median income of $9,091. Hispanic adults with the same level of education earned $7,980.

Among all Americans with one or more years of college, median income was $11,887, and only $9,114 for Hispanics.

A Federal government study concluded that "these income differentials undoubtedly reflect to some degree the discrimination in hiring and promotion which confronts Spanish-speaking workers." What is true for Hispanics in general is even more pronounced for Puerto Ricans, the most disadvantaged Hispanic group.

Employment discrimination, for example, according to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, is not only "the result of isolated instances of bigotry, but of seemingly neutral practices such as word-of-mouth recruitment systems and employment tests, which have had a far more adverse impact on minority groups and women."20

Institutional discrimination occurs in the personnel operations of both the public and private sectors. In 1971, more than 10 percent of New York City's population was Puerto Rican. But they held only six percent of the 300,000 jobs in city government, and had far less access than blacks or whites to high-paying jobs. Only three percent of the administrators and two percent of the professionals were Puerto Rican. In 1974, only 500 (1.8 percent) of the city's 30,000 police officers were Puerto Rican.

In 1972, Puerto Ricans were five percent of New York State's population. They held only two percent of the 171,000 State government jobs. In 1970, for instance, Puerto Ricans comprised only 0.6 percent of the 27,000 employees at the State University of New York (SUNY). In 1975, the New York Advisory committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights declared that SUNY was "grossly discriminating against black and Puerto Rican administrators."21

In New Haven, Connecticut, "serious qualitative and quantitative inequities" in municipal government employment practices were viewed as "racially discriminatory, regardless of intent," by the Governor's Council on Spanish-Speaking Opportunities.21

In Massachusetts, the "schools, State agencies and employment programs in Boston and Springfield suffer from a continuing lack of Spanish-speaking personnel," according to a similar study carried out in that state. Similar patterns are found in other parts of the nation. In Chicago in 1974, the rapidly growing Hispanic community accounted for more than 7 percent of the population, but only 1.7 percent of the city employees.

Arbitrary requirements (such as height) have sometimes blocked Puerto Rican entry to civil service work. In New Haven, Puerto Rican applicants to the police force were often disqualified because they did not measure at least 5 feet 8 inches tall. In New York City, the civil service is perceived as a "mystery" to most Puerto Ricans and is allegedly "built to keep those in, in, and those out, out," according to one Hispanic active in city politics.22

Puerto Ricans have made little headway in gaining access to, or leadership posts in, some New York City labor unions. Fair and equitable representation for Hispanics "is not yet a reality in most referral unions and apprenticeship programs," according to the U.S. Employment Opportunity Commission.23 Another observer has charged that, except for carpenters and bricklayers "the skilled trades remain practically all white." In trades requiring less skills, such as excavation, concrete laborers and mason tenders, for which many black and Puerto Rican workers could immediately qualify, the unions, in collision with the contractors, and with the tacit approval of city authorities, have succeeded in restricting employment to just slightly more than a token number of nonwhite union construction workers.24

A U.S. Commission on Civil Rights report published in October 1971 found that "based on such key indices as income, education, unemployment and incidence of poverty, Puerto Ricans in the United States are a severely disadvantaged minority group." Although this same Commission noted that "one obstacle to the effective implementation of government action to aid Puerto Ricans is the lack of reliable and continuous socio-economic data," the U.S. Census findings of 1980 have not been reported and it is understood that there may not be funds available to make their publication possible.

In its latest report, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights addressed the general issue of discrimination against minorities given the October 1980 Bureau of Labor Statistics figures of 9.3 percent unemployment for white Americans, 20.2 percent for black Americans and 15.2 percent for Hispanics in general.

Voting and Registration

Of the approximately 6.8 million Spanish-origin persons of voting age in 1978, only 1.6 million (or 23.5 percent) were reported as having voted in the 1978 Congressional elections. This voting rate was only about one-half of that for the non-Spanish population (46.9 percent). Of the 3.2 million Spanish-origin men of voting age, only 25 percent voted in that election, compared with 48 percent of non-Spanish origin men. Also, the proportion of Spanish origin women who voted in the 1978 election (22 percent) was only about half the proportion for non-Spanish women (46 percent).

The substantially lower voter participation rate of Spanish as compared with non-Spanish persons may be partly due to the relatively higher proportion of non-citizens among Spanish-origin persons. For example, in 1970 Census showed that 13.1 percent of all persons of Spanish origin were not citizens of the U.S., compared with only 1.2 percent of non-Spanish persons.

As with the non-Spanish population, younger persons are less likely to vote than older persons. Only 1 of every 10 Spanish-origin persons aged 18-24 voted in November 1978, but about 1 of every 4 persons aged 65 and older voted in that election.

There is also some evidence that educational attainment is related to voter participation. For example, the proportion of Spanish-origin persons with fewer than eight years of school completed who voted in the 1978 election was only 20 percent, compared with 27 percent for those who had completed high school and college respectively.

Also, voting patterns of employed Hispanic persons differed by occupation group. A significantly larger proportion of Spanish persons employed in white-collar occupations voted in the November 1978 election than did Hispanic persons in blue-collar jobs.

While no specific data was available on Puerto Rican participation in the November 1978 elections, it is safe to assume that their participation rate was probably lower than the 23.5 percent for all Spanish-origin persons. An indication of this assumption, because the data show that voting participation declines in accord with socio-economic status and Puerto Ricans are at or near the bottom of the ladder among Spanish origin persons, with respect to income and occupations.

The fact of low Puerto Rican voter participation has been a source of puzzlement and frustration to many observers. It is pointed out that the island the voter rate is invariably at the 80 percent level, among
highest rates of participation in the world. Also, as U.S. citizens, Puerto Ricans face no barrier to their right to vote. In addition to their low socio-economic status, it has been pointed out that Puerto Ricans are often alienated from the political process in the U.S. because of language, frequent mobility of residence (often caused by constant job layoffs), life in large impersonal urban settings (as contrasted with smaller towns on the island where voters identify closely with local candidates and issues), and also (in the case of island-born adults) a feeling that their votes do not count. This is the sense of urgency to establish permanent social and political links where they reside.

A recent study of New York City found that two-thirds of the city's eligible Hispanic people, most of them Puerto Ricans, have not registered to vote. "If this sleeping electoral giant can be awakened, the political consequences for New York and the nation would be considerable," says the report, by the Institute for Puerto Rican Policy. Representative Roberto'>Garcia of the South Bronx (the only Puerto Rican in the U.S. Congress) says he is "optimistic" because young people, whatever their ethnic background, are less likely to vote. As the average age of Hispanics rises, he predicts, so will the number of residents voting. If Puerto Ricans had the same 1 percent presence in the House of Representatives as they do in the general U.S. population, Congressman Garcia would have at least three more Puerto Rican colleagues. But this prospect is quite unlikely in the foreseeable future. Voting participation among Hispanic Americans is far below that which is observed among population majority in a particular Congressional District, it is virtually impossible for one of their candidates to win. Only in Congressman Garcia's South Bronx District is this the case, and in November of 1982 he was easily re-elected. The only other person explicitly speaking for Puerto Rican interests in the Congress is Baltasar Corrada de! Puerto Rican Coalition, (NPRC) held its Second National Conference in October 1982 in Washington, D.C. and attracted a good turnout from across the nation. The NPRC, composed largely of leaders of various Puerto Rican community organizations throughout the U.S., also seeks an advocacy role in Washington to speak out on issues that affect the island, in the same way the American Jews voice their concerns over U.S. policy towards Israel. But, whatever the strength of the Puerto Rican community in the U.S., it is quite impossible that it can, in the future, come close to matching the tremendous political influence of the Jewish community, which is very strong in the Capitol and the White House.

Paradoxically, the other cause for optimism about the future of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. apart from a possible realization of their electoral potential is the youth of the community. While the fact that nearly half of the Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. are still of school age is clearly a factor in keeping Puerto Rican family income the lowest of any racial or ethnic group in the U.S., other than American Indians, it does mean that the next generation of Puerto Rican workers may be better educated for a more technological job market. It may be that the job market will not continue to be in labor-intensive industries in the central cities, which have been the greatest absorbers of Puerto Rican migrant labor up to now. Another demographic trend that may bring hope to the next generation of Puerto Rican workers is the rapid growth in the U.S.-born Puerto Rican population. In 1950, only about 25 percent of the 300,000 Puerto Ricans in the U.S. had been born there. But by 1970, the U.S.-born had multiplied to 646,000, compared with 783,000 island-born migrants. Figures for 1980 are not yet available, but it is likely that the Puerto Rican population of 2 million is split about evenly between U.S.-born and island-born. The two groups can already be perceived as quite different. The median age for migrants in 1970 was 30 years (about the same as for all Americans) while it was only 9.3 years for U.S.-born Puerto Ricans. In 1970, island-born Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. had completed a median of 8.4 school years. At the same time, U.S.-born Puerto Ricans had a median of 11.5 school years, only slightly below the figure for all Americans (12.1 years) and above the figure for "Negro and Other Races" (10.0 years).

Also in 1970, families headed by a person born in Puerto Rico had a median income of $5,500. Family heads born in the U.S. had a median income of $7,435, a difference of $28 per week. While nearly 28 percent of families headed by Puerto Ricans from the island were below the poverty level, the figure was 20 percent for U.S.-born Puerto Rican family heads. This was some improvement, but still nearly double the figure for all American families below the poverty level (10.7 percent). Because of the relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S., and the ease of travel between the two points, one cannot expect the Puerto Rican community in the U.S. to totally assimilate as did most other migrant groups.

Puerto Rico has an official unemployment rate of more than 22 percent, and a true rate between 30 and 40 percent. The island cannot absorb its unemployed. Thousands of Puerto Ricans migrate north each year, in search of better economic opportunities, ensuring that the U.S. Puerto Rican community will always have a large share of island-born Spanish-language predominant, many of whom lack marketable skills. Soon half the Puerto Rican population will live on the island and half in the United States. Half of those who live in the U.S. will have been born there. This half and half status is Puerto Rico's political and economic dilemma. Supporters for both commonwealth and statehood status each commanded almost half the votes cast in the last ballot on the issue, in November 1980. Many Puerto Ricans spend half their lives on the island and half in the United States. Puerto Rico represents a classic problem in decolonization for the United States. Having permitted—indeed encouraged—the island economy to become totally dependent on the metropolitan economy, the U.S. now in effect blames Puerto Rico for its political status dilemma. U.S. leaders now tell the Puerto Ricans that it is up to them to freely determine their political status. But the United States has not addressed itself to its obligations to provide a livelihood, comparable to that enjoyed by other American citizens, to the Puerto Ricans who shuttle between the island and the U.S. As President Reagan noted in a statement in the Wall Street Journal on February 11, 1980, the problem is economic as well as political. The then Presidential candidate said:

"If we in the U.S. cannot design a model for a political economy that is sufficiently attractive, if we can't win over our fellow citizens in Puerto Rico to the nuptials that statehouse involves, how can our model succeed as an instrument of foreign policy anywhere in the world?"

As President, he has not yet offered a solution.
Chronology

1493 On November 19, Christopher Columbus claims the island of Boriquén for Spain, on his second trip to the New World. He calls it San Juan Bautista. An estimated 30,000 Taíno Indians live on Boriquén at the time.

1508 Juan Ponce de León is named Governor of the island and founds the first settlement, called Puerto Rico from 1511. The Indians are forcefully recruited, under the encomienda system, to mine gold or do farming tasks.

1513 Ponce de León sails from Puerto Rico and discovers the North American mainland.

1514 A census shows less than 4,000 Indians remaining in Puerto Rico. Some had rebelled against Spanish rule and were killed in battle. Others died of disease, while others fled to neighboring Caribbean islands.

1519 African slaves are imported. An epidemic of smallpox, apparently transported by the slaves, kills nearly one-third of the Indians, and numerous Spanish settlers.

1521 The capital city is relocated and renamed San Juan, and the island takes the name of Puerto Rico (Rich Port).

1530 With the limited gold supply exhausted, many colonizers are attracted to Puerto Rico; others devote themselves to agriculture.

1598 George Clifford, the Count of Cumberland, captures San Juan with 4,000 men and holds it from June through November.

1625 Dutch fleet attacks San Juan on September 24, but is rebuffed after its troops sack the city.

1775 Population is 70,250, including 6,467 black slaves. Indian population has disappeared, although traces of Indian blood (through intermarriage) are visible in many inhabitants.

1812 Ramón Power is the first Puerto Rican to represent the island in the Spanish Cortes (Parliament).

1868 On September 1868, patriots in Lares declare an independent republic, but the revolt is quickly squashed.

1873 Slavery is abolished.

1897 On November 25, Spain grants autonomy to Puerto Rico. Population is 894,302. It grew rapidly during the late 19th century due to large scale immigration from Spain, other parts of Europe, and Latin America.

1898 On February 15, the battleship Maine blows up in Havana Harbor; on April 21, the Spanish-American War begins; on July 25, American troops land at Guanica, on Puerto Rico's south coast.

1899 The Treaty of Paris is ratified April 11, and Spain cedes Puerto Rico to the United States.

1900 The Foraker Act makes the island an "unincorporated" U.S. Territory. The U.S. military government is replaced by an American Governor appointed by the President.

1917 The Jones Act is passed by the U.S. Congress on March 2, granting U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans.

1930 Pedro Albizu Campos is elected president of the militant Nationalist Party; the world depression hits poverty-stricken Puerto Rico very hard.

1937 On March 29, police open fire on a nationalist parade, killing 19 and wounding 100. The event becomes known as "The Ponce Massacre."

1938 In July, Nationalists fire at U.S. Governor Winship during a ceremony to mark the 40th year under American rule. Two Puerto Rican bodyguards are wounded; nine Nationalists are indicted for murder.

1940 The new Popular Democratic Party wins the elections; Luis Muñoz Marín becomes Senate President.

1946 On July 21, President Truman names Jesus T. Piñero as the first native Governor of Puerto Rico.

1947 On August 4, President Truman signs the Crawford-Butler Act, permitting Puerto Rico to elect its own governor.

1948 Popular Democrats win elections; Luis Muñoz Marín becomes the island's first popularly elected governor.

1950 On July 4, President Truman signs Public Law 600, permitting Puerto Rico to draft its own constitution. On October 30, five armed Nationalists attack the governor's mansion and uprisings occur in other island towns, causing 27 dead and 90 wounded. On November 1, two Puerto Rican Nationalists try to kill President Truman in Washington; a White House policeman and one assailant die. Albizu Campos and other Nationalists are given long prison sentences for complicity.

1951 On June 4, 387,000 Puerto Ricans favor Public Law 600, and 119,000 are against, while 200,000 registered voters abstain.

1952 On March 3, the new constitution is approved in a referendum by a narrow margin, thus interrupting 28 years of Popular Democratic Party; the world depression hits poverty-stricken Puerto Rico very badly.

1953 The United Nations authorizes the United States to cease transmitting annual reports on Puerto Rico as non-self governing territory.

1954 On March 1, four Nationalists open fire in the U.S. House of Representatives, wounding five Congressmen. By now, Puerto Rican migration to the U.S., which grew to major proportions following the end of World War II, has caused the creation of large Puerto Rican barrios. In 1940, the Puerto Rican population in the U.S. has been only 69,967. By 1950, it was 301,375.

1959 Congress rejects the Fernández-Murray Bill, which sought to increase Puerto Rico's autonomy under the Commonwealth status.

1960 Census shows Puerto Rican population as 2.3 million, while population of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. has grown to 887,662, including 272,278 persons of Puerto Rican origin, born in the U.S.

1964 Muñoz Marín steps aside after four consecutive terms as governor. His long-time aide, Roberto Sánchez Villegas, becomes the Popular Democrats' candidate and is easily elected.

1967 On July 23, in a political status referendum, Commonwealth wins 60.5 percent of the votes, compared with 38.9 percent for U.S. statehood and 0.6 percent for Independence. An hoc committee is to be formed, to work out the perfection of the Commonwealth status.

1968 A rift in the Popular Democrat party allows Luis A. Ferré, of the pro-statehood New Progressive Party, to win the gubernatorial race by a narrow margin, thus interrupting 28 years of Popular Democrat rule, and setting back plans for more autonomy.

1970 The census shows 2.8 million persons on the island and 1.5 million Puerto Ricans in the U.S.

1972 The Popular Democrats regain power, as Rafael Hernández Colón wins the governor's post.

1976 The island's economy reels under the impact of the U.S. recession; unemployment exceeds 18 percent, inflation is triple the U.S. level, and the Commonwealth government, for the first time, borrows millions to balance its budget. The New Progressive Party, led by Carlos Romero Barceló, wins the elections.

1980 Despite the island's severe economic problems, Governor Romer is re-elected in a very tight race; the House and Senate are controlled by the Popular Democrat opposition. Census shows Puerto Rican population at 3.2 million, with another 2 million in the U.S.

1982 The island's economy is in the doldrums. Official unemployment hits 25 percent. Roughly 60 percent of the population is on Food Stamp Congress reduces Federal aid to the island, and removes it from "necessity" treatment under the Food Stamp program. Island receives "nutritional assistance" block grant, and distributes monthly check, not Food Stamps, to recipients.


**Economics**


**Puerto Rican Migration to the U.S.**


**Poetry & Fiction About Puerto Rican Migration to the U.S.**

There is a growing body of poetry and fiction about Puerto Rican migration to the U.S., which provides valuable insights into this historical phenomenon. Here is just a sampler of the works available:

Díaz Valcárcel, Emilio. *Harlem Todos los Días.* Río Piedras: Editorial Huracán, 1978. (Fiction)


Note: The Center for Puerto Rican Studies, associated with the City University of New York, produces studies and analyses of topics relating to Puerto Rican Migration.
The Reports already published by the Minority Rights Group are:

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Puerto Ricans are a people divided between two nations — neither of which truly belongs to them. Of the 5 million Puerto Ricans today, 3 million live on the island of Puerto Rico and more than 2 million in the USA, principally in New York and the north-east. They are the descendents of Spanish settlers, African slaves and other immigrant communities. Their first language is Spanish yet they live in a nation where English is the main language.

The island of Puerto Rico, formerly a Spanish and then a US colony, from 1952 has had ‘Commonwealth’ status with the USA — neither independence nor statehood. Its people have had US citizenship since 1917 and can move freely between the island and the mainland — yet the island has no representatives in the US Congress. Different political groups campaign for the three options of independence, greater autonomy or US statehood but the political situation remains stagnant.

Economic depression pushes many Puerto Ricans to immigrate to the US cities, where they face discrimination and severe problems in employment, education and health. Today they are the second poorest ethnic group in the US.

Puerto Ricans in the US, Minority Rights Group report no 58, describes the situation of Puerto Ricans on the island and the mainland. Written by Kai Wagenheim and produced by the New York Minority Rights Group, it is an important contribution towards increased understanding of this increasingly-important but little known group.

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