

# PUERTO RICANS: IMMIGRANTS AND MIGRANTS

*A Historical Perspective*

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# Puerto Ricans: Immigrants and Migrants

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Clara E. Rodríguez

*“We proceeded along the coast the greater part of that day, and on the evening of the next we discovered another island called Borinquen . . .*

*All the islands are very beautiful and possess a most luxuriant soil, but this last island appeared to exceed all others in beauty.”*

Translated from a letter written on November 19, 1493,  
by Dr. Diego Alvarez Chanca, who accompanied  
Christopher Columbus on his second voyage to America.

Puerto Rico, an island in the Caribbean, has a long and rich history. Christopher Columbus landed on the island in 1493 during his second voyage to America. The Taino people who lived there called the island “Borinquen.” Today Boricua means Puerto Rican, and many Puerto Ricans refer to the island as Borinquen in verses, songs or conversations.

## A Mining and Trade Center

After the arrival of Spanish explorers, Puerto Rico, which means “rich port,” became a mining center for gold and silver. Soon the metals died out, as did the Taino Indians who had worked in the mines.

Interested in retaining the island as a strategic base, Spain encouraged the colonists to grow crops and forbade anyone, under penalty of death, to leave the island for the newly discovered gold and silver mines in Mexico and Peru.

In the seventeenth century, Puerto Rico developed a growing trade in livestock, hides, linen, spices and enslaved people, both African and Native American. Because of Spain’s restrictions on trade, however, much of it was contraband.

By the end of the eighteenth century, Spain had decided to liberalize its policies in the colonies with regard to trade, immigration and political rights. Having suffered serious defeats by English forces and a depleted treasury, Spain turned to colonial trade as a way of replenishing and improving its economic position.

## Nineteenth-Century Immigration Boom

By the nineteenth century, Puerto Rico had become a bustling trade center and host to thousands of immigrants.

The population grew from 70,250 in 1775 to 330,051 in 1832. From 1775 to the end of the nineteenth century, it multiplied more than 13 times.

As the population grew it became more and more diverse. Although most of the nineteenth-century immigrants probably came from Spain and its possessions, a great many came from other European countries. Common present-day Puerto Rican surnames, for example, Colberg, Wiscovitch, Petrovich, Franqui, Adams and Solivan, reflect that diversity.

## Unique Position on Slavery

Both legally owned enslaved Africans and runaway slaves continued to arrive until 1873, when slavery was officially abolished. Runaway slaves from other countries had been admitted to Puerto Rico as free and allowed to earn a wage since 1750. By the time Puerto Rico banned slavery, free Africans outnumbered enslaved ones.

Puerto Rico’s situation with regard to slavery and race relations was unusual. As Eric Williams, distinguished historian and specialist in West Indian politics, points out, “The Puerto Rico situation was unique in the Caribbean, in that not only did the white population outnumber the people of color, but the slaves constituted an infinitesimal part of the total population and free labor predominated during the regime of slavery.” Puerto Rico did not have the same need for slave labor that islands with large plantation economies did. Because it had a small-farm and diversified economy, Spain may have seen it as a less wealthy colony than others. Williams says if “Puerto Rico, by the conventional standards of the final quarter of the nineteenth century, ranked as one of the most backward sectors of the Caribbean economy, in intellectual perspective it was head and shoulders above its neighbors.” (Williams, 1970) Puerto Rican leaders

argued in Spain for the economic superiority of free laborers over enslaved laborers. This position distinguished it from other colonial possessions.

In the nineteenth century, Puerto Rican political development blossomed. By the end of the century, it appears that residents had a strong sense of national identity. This basic unity existed despite obvious political frictions and class divisions. Thus, by the time that the Spanish-American War began in 1898, Puerto Rico had evolved strong political ideals of independence and autonomy and had succeeded (in 1897, after 400 years of Spanish colonial rule) in gaining a Charter of Autonomy from the Spanish government.

Reflecting on the history of Puerto Rico prior to the United States' war with Spain, we see a long and rich history. It is interesting to note, for example, that Puerto Rico's coat of arms dates back to 1511, more than a century before the Pilgrims arrived in North America. Also, by the time the United States acquired Puerto Rico in the Spanish-American War, Puerto Rico was already older than the United States is today. It had a university whose degrees were recognized in Spain and flourishing musical, literary and cultural traditions.

## The United States Takes Over Puerto Rico

When the United States invaded the island in 1898, some Puerto Rican *independentistas* (independence advocates) in Puerto Rico and in New York's vigorous and well-established Puerto Rican community assisted the United States because they expected it to help liberate Puerto Rico from Spain. The *independentistas* were extremely disappointed and disillusioned when it became clear that the United States would not grant the island greater autonomy or independence.

Indeed, as a commonwealth under the American government, Puerto Rico had less political and economic autonomy than under Spain's Charter of Autonomy. The charter had given Puerto Rico rights: to elect *voting* representatives to the Spanish Congress; to participate in negotiations between Spain and other countries affecting the commerce of the island and ratify or reject commercial treaties affecting Puerto Rico; and to frame tariffs and fix customs on imports and exports. These rights were not retained under the American flag.

In many regards, the charter granted greater autonomy than Puerto Rico currently enjoys under the American government. At present Puerto Rico is represented in the United States Congress only by a resident commissioner who *cannot* vote. Residents of Puerto Rico cannot vote in either presidential or congressional elections. The president and Congress have, nonetheless, sent Puerto Rican men to fight in American wars. In addition, Puerto

Rico today does not have as much control over its commerce as it did under the charter.

## Economic Dependence

The United States' occupation made Puerto Rico both politically and economically dependent. The Puerto Rican economy experienced dramatic changes after the American takeover. The economy went from a diversified, subsistence economy with four basic crops produced for export (tobacco, cattle, coffee and sugar) to a sugarcane economy with 60 percent of the sugar industry controlled by absentee American owners. In the 1920s the decline of the cane-based industry (combined with no reinvestment and continued population growth) resulted in high unemployment, poverty and desperate conditions in Puerto Rico. These factors propelled the first waves of Puerto Ricans to the United States in the twentieth century. The 1930s saw more migration as workers sought to deal with the island's stagnant economy.

In the 1940s World War II boosted the flagging economy somewhat. The Puerto Rican government initiated reforms and entered into what has been variously called its "state capitalist development phase" and its "socialist" venture. The Puerto Rican Development Corporation established and ran government-owned enterprises, including glass, pulp and paper, shoe leather and clay products corporations. The government financed but did not operate a hotel and a textile mill. Influenced by the New Deal philosophy, this program stressed both social justice and economic growth goals. It was, in these regards, ahead of its time. Had this program succeeded, the island would have achieved greater economic independence. However, these efforts were frustrated by a combination of technical problems and opposition from local and national government officials and business interests. (Dietz, 1986)

## Migration Patterns and Communities

Puerto Ricans, and even Puerto Rican organizations, have been in New York City since the nineteenth century. It was only after 1900, however, that significant numbers of Puerto Ricans came, and the bulk of the migration occurred in the 1950s and 1960s (see the graph on page 3, "Migration from Puerto Rico, 1920–1986"). The migration of Puerto Ricans after the American takeover has been classified into three major periods. During the first period, 1900–1945, the pioneers arrived. The majority of these *pioneros* established themselves in New York City in the Atlantic Street area of Brooklyn, *El Barrio* in East Harlem and such other sections of Manhattan as the Lower East

Side, the Upper West Side, Chelsea and the Lincoln Center area. Some began to populate sections of the South Bronx. During this period contract industrial and agricultural labor also arrived, providing the base for many of the Puerto Rican communities outside of New York City.

The second phase, 1946–1964, is known as the “Great Migration.” During this period the already-established Puerto Rican communities of East Harlem, the South Bronx and the Lower East Side increased their numbers and expanded their borders. Communities in new areas of New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Illinois and other parts of the country appeared and grew, but the bulk of the Puerto Rican population continued to reside in New York.

The last period, “the revolving-door migration,” dates from 1965 to the present and involves a fluctuating pattern of net migration as well as greater dispersion to other parts of the United States. As the following graph, “Migration from Puerto Rico, 1920–1986,” illustrates, the last few years have shown net outflows from Puerto Rico that begin to rival those experienced in the early 1950s. By 1980 the majority of Puerto Ricans in the United States were living outside of New York State. Today Puerto Ricans live in every state, with the largest numbers being concentrated in northeastern cities.

## Operation Bootstrap

Between 1947 and 1951 government development of industry gave way to promotion of private investment. The new approach was called “Operation Bootstrap.” A forerunner of the economic development strategies implemented throughout the world later, the idea was to industrialize the island by luring foreign, mainly American, companies to Puerto Rico with the promise of low wages and tax incentives. The tourism industry was also developed at this time. Puerto Rico began its industri-

alization thrust and its clear incorporation into an emerging global economy.

During this period Puerto Rico improved in many areas (e.g., education, housing, drinking water, electrification, sewage systems, roads and transportation facilities). Residents of Puerto Rico felt a clear and present sense of development and progress and, for some, a more equitable income distribution.

The industry that was attracted, however, did not provide sufficient jobs. With increased population growth and displacement from traditional labor pursuits, the growing population could not be accommodated. Much of the surplus labor migrated to the United States.

## Migration to the States

The question of what prompted the migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States has numerous answers. Early theorists said overpopulation, brought about by improved medical care in Puerto Rico, was the major factor. Recently, researchers have tended to see migration as a response of surplus labor to economic changes that yielded increasingly larger numbers of displaced and surplus workers.

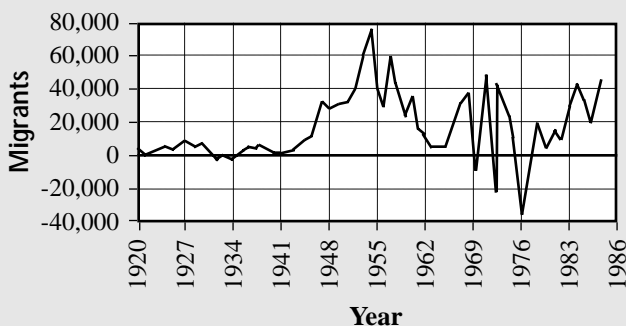
Micro-level analyses found economic push-and-pull factors relevant. Thus, when national income went up and unemployment went down in the United States, Puerto Rican migration increased. Relative wages and unemployment rates in Puerto Rico and the United States also affected migration to the United States and back to Puerto Rico. Therefore, Puerto Ricans, like many others, migrated when job opportunities looked better in the United States and worse in Puerto Rico. (Research has shown that Puerto Ricans did *not* migrate to secure better welfare benefits.)

Some writers have emphasized the role of American companies in recruiting Puerto Rican labor to work in the United States. Still others cite the role of government. Although the official position of the Puerto Rican government was that it did not encourage or discourage migration, some argue that the Puerto Rican government asked the Federal Aviation Administration to approve low rates for air transportation between Puerto Rico and the United States and asked that the Migration Division Office in New York facilitate migration. (Padilla, 1987)

Migration was undoubtedly caused by a combination of these and other factors. For example, the conferring of citizenship status in 1917 and the 1921 legislation restricting immigration directly and indirectly induced Puerto Ricans to migrate.

After World War II, era-specific factors may have contributed to the migration (e.g., greater participation in the Armed Forces; pent-up travel demand; surplus aircraft and pilots, making air travel less expensive and more accessible; and greater opportunities in the United States).

Migration from Puerto Rico, 1920–1986



Sources: 1920–1940 data: United States Commission on Civil Rights.  
1940–1986 data: Junta de Planificación de Puerto Rico,  
Negociado de Análisis Económico.

# Migration Statistics

## Department of Puerto Rican Community Affairs in the United States

The United States is a land of newcomers, with people moving both from within and outside the nation's borders. Each year millions of Americans cross county or state lines, changing their place of residence in search of educational opportunities and better working and living conditions. They include American citizens from the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

Puerto Ricans come to the United States to work. In recent decades these Spanish-speaking American citizens (Puerto Ricans gained citizenship by birthright in 1917) have filled labor shortages in many important mainland industries—the textile and garment industries of New York, the electronics industries in Illinois, the foundries in Wisconsin, the steel mills in Ohio, Indiana and Pennsylvania and farms in the East and Midwest.

### The Job Market's Influence

Today, Puerto Ricans live in every state. Their migration to the mainland has fluctuated in accord with the job market. During the 1950s, when mainland jobs were relatively plentiful, an average of 45,000 Puerto Ricans left the island each year to live in the United States. During the 1960s Puerto Rico's Operation Bootstrap industrialization program created enough new factory jobs to absorb many of the unemployed, and migration to the mainland decreased to an average of 20,000 per year.

During the first half of the 1970s, the economic recession in the United States sharply reduced job opportunities. Because of this, Puerto Rican migration to the mainland actually reversed itself; more people returned to the island than migrated to the United States.

In addition to Puerto Ricans living on the mainland, several thousand migratory workers come each spring and summer to fill farm labor shortages in many states along the eastern seaboard and in the Midwest. Most of these workers return to Puerto Rico at the end of the farm season. The slack season in sugarcane (the winter crop in Puerto Rico) coincides with the peak farm season in the United States, so this arrangement enables mainland farmers to obtain much-needed labor and Puerto Rican agricultural workers to obtain work.

### The Department

The Department of Puerto Rican Community Affairs in the United States was created according to Public Law 101-58 on August 16, 1989.

The mission of this department is to take joint action with the Puerto Rican community in the United States for the purpose of making the rights of this community valued and respected, and to strengthen the mechanisms that will permit it to secure for itself the means necessary to live a dignified life.

### Services Provided

The Political Orientation and Action Program (ATREVETE) coordinates voter registration drives as well as offers information on voters' rights, information on the use of the voting machine and general information on elections and other electoral processes.

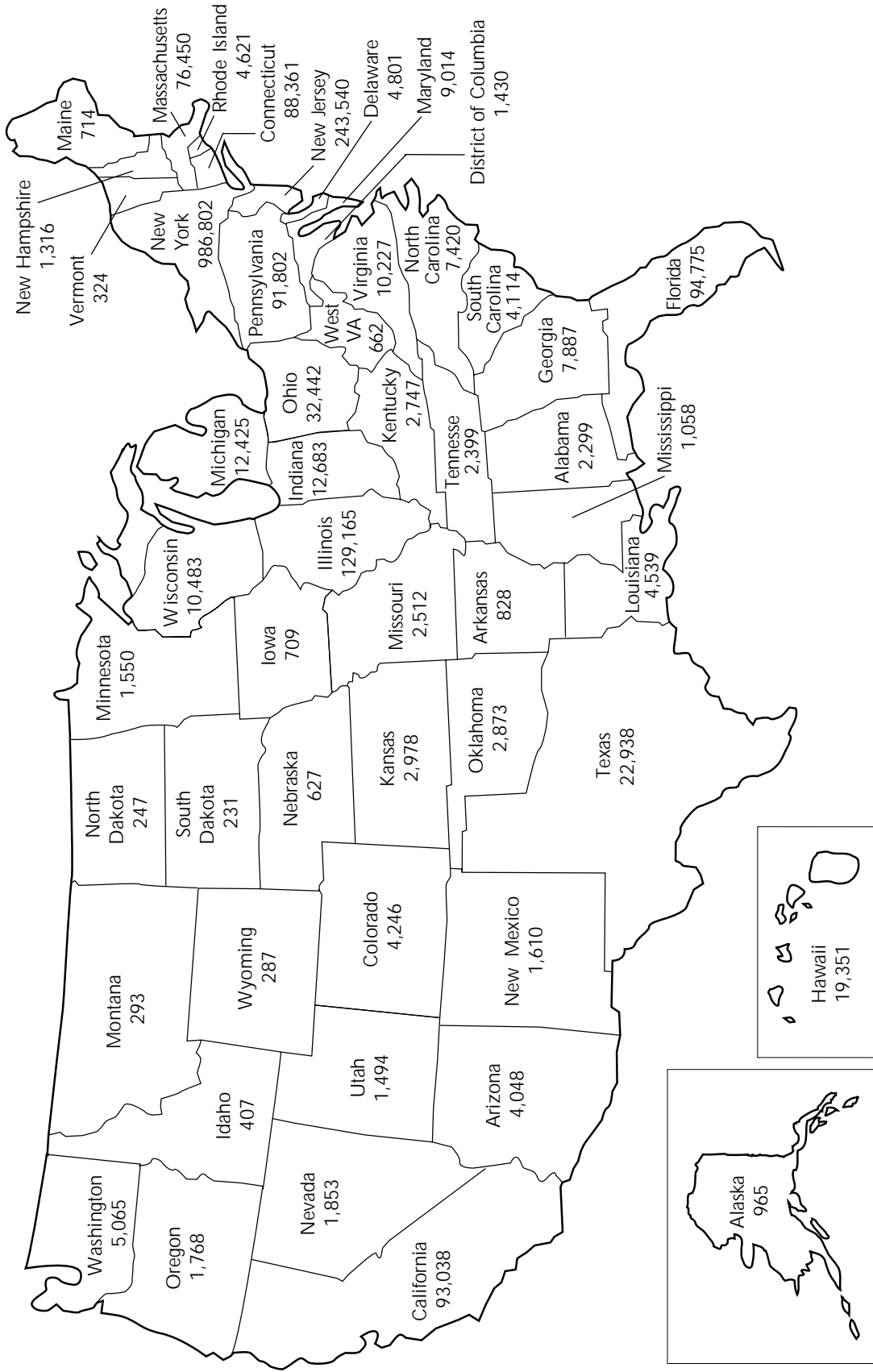
The Social Services Program provides information on educational opportunities and educational issues in the United States and in Puerto Rico. Orientation and referral services on employment opportunities are provided along with occupational counseling. This program also maintains information on social services programs throughout the United States and in Puerto Rico.



*The Puerto Rican Department of Labor assists workers leaving the country in finding jobs in the United States.*

# Puerto Ricans in the United States, 1980

## Distribution by States



Source: United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1980 Census of Population, Washington, DC, 1981.

## States with Major Puerto Rican Populations, 1980, 1970 and 1960

State	1980		1970		1960		Percent of Puerto Rican Population in the United States		
	Rank	Total	Rank	Total	Rank	Total	1980	1970	1960
New York	1	986,389	1	916,608	1	642,622	49.0	64.1	72.0
New Jersey	2	243,540	2	138,896	2	55,351	12.1	9.7	6.2
Illinois	3	129,165	3	87,477	3	36,081	6.4	6.1	4.0
Florida	4	94,775	7	28,166	6	19,535	4.7	2.0	2.2
California	5	93,038	4	50,929	4	28,108	4.6	3.6	3.2
Pennsylvania	6	91,802	5	44,263	5	21,206	4.6	3.1	2.4
Connecticut	7	88,361	6	37,603	7	15,247	4.4	2.6	1.7
Massachusetts	8	76,450	8	23,332	11	5,217	3.8	1.6	0.6
Ohio	9	32,442	9	20,272	8	13,940	1.6	1.4	1.6
Texas	10	22,938	13	6,333	10	6,050	1.1	0.4	0.7
Hawaii	11	19,351	10	9,284	12	4,289	1.0	0.6	0.5
Indiana	12	12,683	11	9,269	9	7,218	0.6	0.6	0.8
Michigan	13	12,425	14	6,202	13	3,806	0.6	0.4	0.4
Wisconsin	14	10,483	12	7,248	14	3,574	0.5	0.5	0.4
Virginia	15	10,227	15	4,098	15	2,971	0.5	0.3	0.3
<b>Totals</b>		<b>1,924,069</b>		<b>1,389,980</b>		<b>865,215</b>	<b>95.5</b>	<b>97.0</b>	<b>97.0</b>

Sources: 1980 United States Census Supplementary Report SI-7; 1968 United States Census, "Puerto Ricans in the United States," PC (2) 1K, Table 15, pp. 103-104; and United States Census, "Persons of Spanish Ancestry," PC (SI)-30, February 1973, Table I, p. 1. In compiling this data, the Migration Division noted that "actual figures may be much higher due to a Census Bureau undercount of minority groups on the mainland."



