



THE MIGRANTS

There are perhaps 2 million Puerto Ricans—*island-born or, increasingly, mainland-born children of migrants—now living in the continental United States. They account for less than 1 percent of the total U.S. population and for less than one-quarter of all citizens of Hispanic origin living on the mainland.*

Yet their presence is keenly felt. By and large, they are clustered in a handful of cities: New York and its environs (the main point of entry for the 800,000 Puerto Ricans—one-third of the island's population—who arrived during the three decades after World War II) and increasingly Chicago, Gary, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Newark, Bridgeport, Hartford, and Boston. In the New Jersey suburbs of Hoboken, Perth Amboy, and Union City, across the Hudson from Manhattan, more than 50 percent of all public-school children are Hispanic, and most of these are probably Puerto Rican.

"Probably" is used advisedly. Because the U.S. Bureau of the Census has not distinguished in its decennial surveys between Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics (a policy that will change with the 1980 census), it is impossible to determine the "flow" of Puerto Ricans through the United States. While East Harlem's *El Barrio*—and New York City in general—appears to be losing much of its Puerto Rican population, no one can tell precisely where the exodus is going, who these people are, their ages, occupations, sex, incomes, or educational attainment. Because federal aid programs for disadvantaged groups are "targeted" on the basis of just this kind of information, the question is one of more than academic interest.

In general, Puerto Ricans have not prospered as much as others in this country. In a comprehensive 1976 report, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission glumly conceded what many already knew: that the "incidence of poverty and unemployment [in the Puerto Rican community] is more severe than that of virtually any ethnic group in the United States," including blacks.*

Not *all* migrants have fared badly, of course. While the estimated percentage of mainland Puerto Ricans receiving public assistance is far higher than the national average, some three-

**Puerto Ricans in the Continental United States: An Uncertain Future*, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, October 1976.

quarters of all Puerto Rican families receive *no* government assistance. Tens of thousands hold managerial and professional jobs. Many have "disappeared" into the upper middle class and the affluent suburbs, sometimes leaving their heritage (and their Hispanic surnames) behind.

But for the most part, mainland Puerto Ricans find themselves in low-skilled, blue-collar occupations, particularly in "light" or labor-intensive industries (such as the garment trade) where employment is often seasonal and layoffs are frequent. Most live in impoverished, often crime-ridden, neighborhoods. In 1975, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, the median income of Puerto Rican families—\$7,629—lagged far behind that of blacks (\$8,779), Mexican-Americans (\$9,498), and all other U.S. Hispanic groups (\$11,410).

Who's Counting?

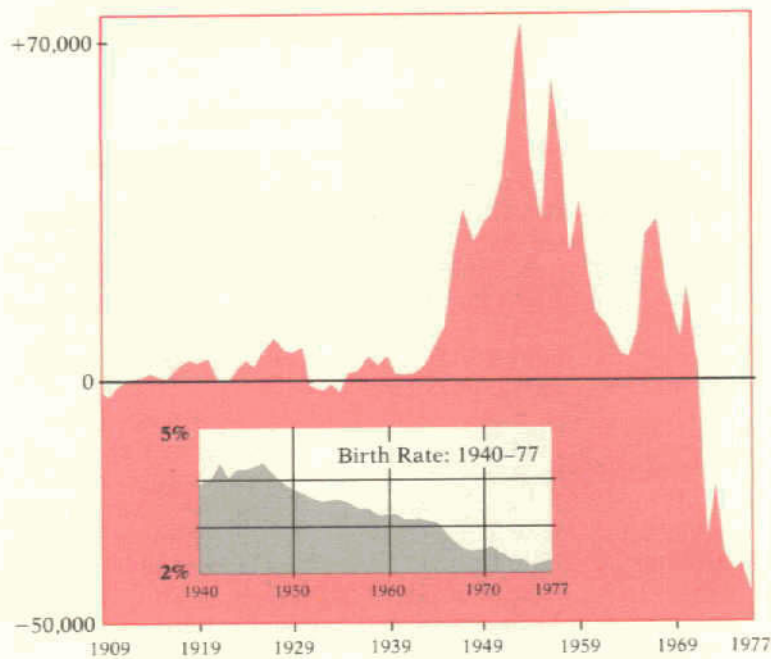
Given such statistics, the latest phenomenon spotted by newspaper and TV trend-watchers—the apparent "reverse migration" of as many as 45,000 Puerto Ricans back to the Commonwealth a year—seems understandable, even predictable. "For the first time in American history," concluded William Stockton in a 1978 *New York Times Magazine* article, "a major immigrant group is giving up on the American dream."

That assessment, like many similar reports, is simplistic.

Puerto Ricans are hardly the first to have "given up." Frank Bonilla, director of New York's Center for Puerto Rican Studies, has pointed out that during the peak years of immigration from Europe to the United States (1890–1910), no fewer than 4 out of 10 of foreign-born residents in this country returned to their native lands. Between 1908 and 1932, as many as 4 million immigrants went home. Immigration to the United States, Bonilla cautioned, has not always been the "once-and-for-all" decision that history books would have us believe.

Moreover, statistics on the *volume* of Puerto Rican migration (figured by calculating the difference between total arrivals to and departures from the island by sea and air) are a matter of debate. Some Puerto Rican militants in the United States have charged that island officials deliberately undercounted the volume of out-migration in order to minimize the problem. But it is more likely that the volume of return migration may have been significantly overstated. During the early 1970s, it appears that one major U.S. airline mistakenly counted Puerto Ricans arriving on the island with round-trip tickets as coming in but not going out.

PUERTO RICAN NET MIGRATION TO THE U.S., 1909-1977



Source: Puerto Rico Planning Board.

The net outflow of Puerto Ricans from the island became a net influx during the 1970s, or so it seems. What data exist are often ambiguous; the picture that emerges should be regarded only as a rough indication.

To make matters more complicated, Puerto Rico has now become a gateway to the United States for legal and illegal aliens alike. There are tens of thousands of migrants from the Dominican Republic living on the island, for example. One wonders how much "Puerto Rican" migration to the mainland actually consists of Dominicans. Conversely, many Hispanic immigrants from Mexico and other Latin countries who legally enter the U.S. mainland eventually move to Puerto Rico, attracted by the familiar language and climate.* How much of the "return migration" is made up of these new arrivals?

Finally, Puerto Rican "return migration" is nothing new,

* See "Why Puerto Ricans Migrated to the United States in 1947-73" by Rita M. Maldonado, in *Monthly Labor Review* (September 1976).

even if the volume has apparently grown. Indeed, the *circularity* of the Puerto Rican flow, the periodic back-and-forth movement of individuals and whole families, has always been the distinguishing characteristic of migration from the island, a kind of "fingerprint" that long set Puerto Rican immigrants apart from others.

Puerto Ricans are known to have lived in the United States since the early 19th century; as the Spanish-American War neared, groups of Puerto Rican *independentistas* working out of New York plotted the overthrow of the island's Spanish masters. Their numbers were small, however. The 1910 census, conducted 12 years after Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the United States, found only 1,513 Puerto Ricans living in the continental United States.

During subsequent decades, the trickle of migrants became a steady stream. U.S. tariff policies effectively undermined the Puerto Rican coffee trade, destroying the livelihood of thousands of coffee growers. At the same time, American syndicates like the South Porto Rico Sugar company assembled a patchwork quilt of small, locally owned holdings into great plantations, displacing many small farmers and creating a landless rural proletariat. In the United States, farmers began importing surplus workers for seasonal labor: harvesting peaches in South Carolina, apples in Vermont, tobacco in Connecticut.

Safety Valve

The stream swelled into a torrent in the 1950s, as an average of 40,000 Puerto Ricans arrived in the United States every year. Then as now, unemployment was high on the island, and attractive factory jobs were few. The population was growing quickly, owing mostly to improved public health, not to any rise in the birth rate, which had in fact been declining.* Thousands of Puerto Rican GIs, veterans of World War II or Korea, came home with a taste for "modern" American life. With the U.S. economy booming, employers from the mainland came down with contracts and signed up willing workers for the garment industry and the growing "service" sector—hotel work, dishwashing, house-cleaning. Many Puerto Ricans emigrated on their own, first by ship, soon by airplane.

Just as important, Puerto Rican politicians encouraged the

*Between 1899 and the 1940s, Puerto Rico's annual rate of population growth rose from 14.3 to 20.1 per 1,000 people; the annual death rate fell from 31.4 to 15.8 per 1,000; the birth rate declined from 45.7 to 40.6 births per 1,000. See *A Summary in Facts and Figures, 1964-65*, Puerto Rico Department of Labor.

outward flow, even lobbied the Federal Aviation Administration for low plane fares on the New York-San Juan airborne "highway." (Until the early 1960s, a two-way ticket for the three-hour trip cost less than \$100.) They saw migration as a "safety valve"—a counter to growing pressure for jobs—that kept life tolerable for the Puerto Ricans who remained behind. Migration made the island's economic "miracle" possible. According to one estimate, without migration Puerto Rico's unemployment rate would have been 25 percent in 1970; but in fact, island unemployment dropped from 15 to 10 percent between 1950 and 1970. Encouraging migration was an easy alternative to coming to grips with Puerto Rico's underlying economic problems.

Coming Home to Roost

For reasons that remain unclear, the pace of migration began to slow during the 1960s; by the early '70s, as noted, the net outflow from the island reversed itself and became a net inflow of substantial, if not precisely knowable, proportions. Several factors were probably involved: the 1967-68 black riots, which ravaged many Puerto Rican neighborhoods in U.S. cities; two severe recessions; the narrowing of the wage gap between Puerto Rico and the mainland; the extension of "transfer" programs—e.g., welfare, Food Stamps—to large portions of the island population; unusually cold mainland winters; and the sentimental urge of '50s migrants, now retired, to return home.* It is impossible to say just what weight one should assign to each of these reasons. (It is interesting to note that even as many Puerto Ricans began going back to the island, many U.S. blacks started leaving Northern cities and returning to the South.)

The economic impact of increased return migration could be serious for Puerto Rico. The island is already beset by a growing "resident alien" problem due to migration from the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, and other nations in the Caribbean whose residents do not need visas to enter Puerto Rico. Due in part to return migration, Puerto Rico's population increased by 48 percent (706,000) between 1963 and 1976 (compared to 25 percent in the mainland United States during the same period). Those who return suffer far higher unemployment rates than Puerto Ricans who never left home, partly because their low status on the mainland frequently led to high absenteeism and job turnover rates. Too, there is subtle discrimination against these "Neoricans." Return migration tends to ac-

**Economic Study of Puerto Rico*, United States Department of Commerce, 1979.

celerate when the island can handle it least—during economic downturns in the United States, which unfailingly ripple through the Puerto Rican economy.

In effect, the tranquility of the Commonwealth is premised on massive *out*-migration; that premise has been overtaken by events. There is a growing belief among politicians and intellectuals in Puerto Rico today that yesterday's "safety valve" may be tomorrow's time bomb.



ANGEL AND AUREA

by Pedro A. Rivera

Once, after World War II, policymakers and economists saw the massive Puerto Rican migration to the United States as a partial and temporary solution to the island's poverty and unemployment (as well as a cheap source of labor in the fields and factories of the U.S. mainland). The migrants, too, often saw their sojourn as temporary, hoping to return someday to Puerto Rico and buy a house and a small plot of land, a *parcela*.

For many of the migrants, this hope foundered on reality. Instead, they found themselves in a recurring cycle of migration and return. Yet people like Angel and Aurea Ortíz, despite the odds, and despite their own disappointments, are confident they can succeed where tens of thousands have failed.

Angel, 37, and Aurea, 31, live in Hoboken, New Jersey, across the Hudson River from Manhattan. Hoboken is a city of 45,000, an old, ailing garment center whose Puerto Rican population (now more than 10,000) has doubled in the last decade, even as its total population has declined. Angel and Aurea pay \$100 (plus utilities) per month for a four-room apartment in a community comprising Italians, Irish, blacks, and Puerto Ricans like themselves. It is a solid, working-class neighborhood. The Ortíz children—Sandra, 15; Elsie, 13; Angel, 11; and David, 8—all attend local public schools.

Angel and Aurea are both garment workers, he a skilled coat