




AMERICAN UNIVERSITY  
WASHINGTON, DC

## Summer 2022 Practicum

**Puerto Rico Practicum Briefing Report**

Prepared by:  
AU Practicum Team  
For:  
Equally American  
Summer 2022



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**FABRICAS CULTURALES**  
INSTITUTO DE CULTURA  
PUERTO RIQUEÑA



By: Sumi Lee  
Jessica Marques  
Peter Riess

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Puerto Rico: Seeking  
UNESCO Recognition  
of  
la Bomba

Alonso Escobar, Andrew Rahme,  
and Paul Simpson

SCHOOL of  
INTERNATIONAL  
SERVICE

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## TERMS OF REFERENCE

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) administered by the Social Security Administration (SSA) is not available to American citizens living in Puerto Rico, so much so that the citizens are unaware of how discriminatory this is. People who would qualify for SSI on the mainland do not receive it simply because they live in Puerto Rico. These discriminatory practices have severe consequences for over three hundred thousand U.S. citizens residing in Puerto Rico. As a result of these policies, these citizens are living with a low quality of life and have to survive without essential government support enjoyed by many Americans in the States.

The denial of SSI and Supplemental Nutrition Assistant Programs (SNAP) solely based on American citizens' residence is discrimination. A U.S. citizen should not have to choose between putting food on the table or spending hundreds of dollars a week on out-of-pocket expenses to buy essential medicines and basic sanitary needs. The quality of life for those that would be able to qualify for SSI and SNAP is at an all-time low after Hurricane Maria in 2017. The denial of SSI benefits for Puerto Ricans with disabilities makes it even more difficult to afford transportation and regular medical care. These factors have forced many Puerto Ricans to move away from the island to the mainland to receive the same SSI benefits many of us in the States take for granted. These U.S. citizens are leaving behind everything they know just to receive basic quality care. To shed further light on this injustice, our research and interviews aimed to answer the following questions:

- 1. In what ways is Puerto Rico discriminated against by the federal government? How and why are Puerto Ricans treated like second-class citizens?**
- 2. What is the significance of Puerto Ricans being ineligible for benefits like SSI and SNAP?**
- 3. How have these policies affected life for Puerto Ricans on the island (those in need of these benefits but are unable to receive them)?**
- 4. Is it in the U.S. national interest that federal benefits become more inclusive to U.S. territories and how so?**

### Process

We conducted background research on the history of Puerto Rico, relevant cases, and various different types of benefits. Additionally, we interviewed six individuals in Puerto Rico (Equally American provided some, others we found through friends of interviewees and by canvassing on social media). We focused our interviews on the denial of SSI and SNAP, as well as the island's Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP) and how these benefits would improve their quality of life. Our research includes first-hand accounts of the discrimination faced by these individuals; we document their views of feeling like a second-class American citizen because of the outdated and overbearing policies that maintain the status quo.

Our team also met with members of the Resident Commissioner's office, the Hispanic Federation, and the Instituto del Desarrollo de la Juventud. The purpose of these meetings was to

gain background information on the issues surrounding SSI and NAP for Puerto Rico and to understand better what policy aspects, if any, have worked and what has not to meet the needs of the most vulnerable U.S. citizens on the island.

\*\*While this topic was chosen by our client 'Equally American,' we have judged the interviews based on the reliability of the information they provided. \*\*

## KEY JUDGMENTS

### Background Info and Key Terms

#### Policy:

The issues that Puerto Rico faces begin with its historic and troubled relationship with the United States government. The following demonstrations are used to make the case that Puerto Ricans do not receive the same benefits as its fellow citizens on the mainland:

- **The Insular Cases** refer to a series of Supreme Court decisions made in 1901 concerning the constitutional rights afforded to residents of the overseas territories the U.S. had acquired in the Treaty of Paris.
- **Territorial Incorporation Doctrine:** Territories that weren't incorporated into the U.S. don't enjoy the full rights of the Constitution. (This has been particularly problematic for Puerto Ricans, who have been U.S. citizens since 1917 but lack most of the benefits mainland citizens enjoy.)
- **Territories Clause:** Congress has sole jurisdiction over disposing of and making rules and regulations regarding the U.S. Territories.

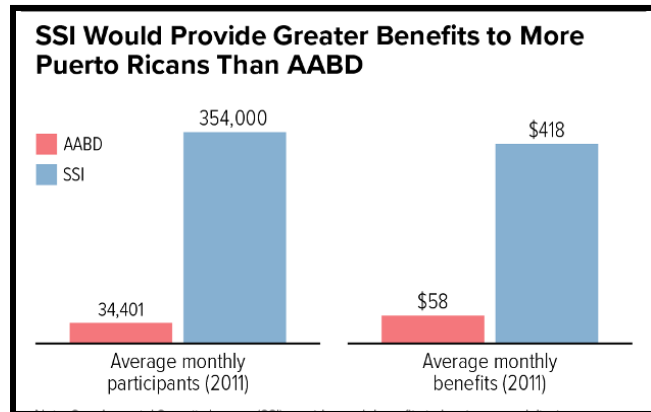
**Vaello Madero vs. the United States:** The U.S. Supreme Court found on April 21, 2022, that because the Constitution does not require Congress to extend SSI benefits to residents of Puerto Rico, the government had a right to sue Mr. Madero for over \$28,000 in SSI benefits he had received while in Puerto Rico. Mr. Madero was found guilty of collecting SSI. The ruling stated that Puerto Rican residents do not qualify for SSI benefits because many do not pay federal taxes, ignoring that Puerto Ricans pay more in other types of taxes than six states when adjusted for population.

## Types of Benefits:

### Aid to the Aged, Blind, and Disabled

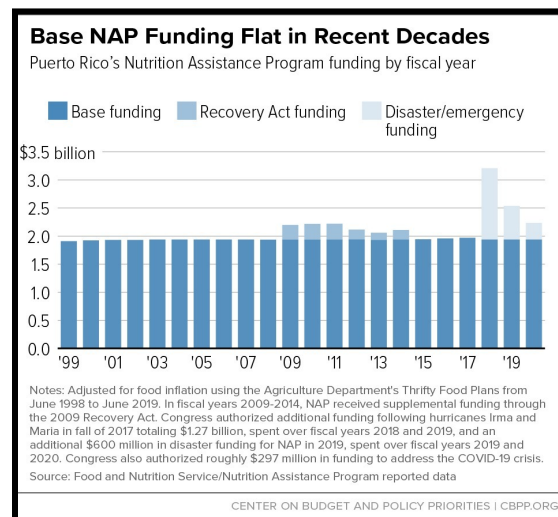
**(AABD):** Provides valuable aid to low-income adults who are elderly, blind, or disabled, helping them afford basic needs. AABD is limited in funds as it is paid through grants from the US Government. AABD only gives \$64 a month as a primary benefit. To qualify, an individual must:

- have less than \$2,000 in assets
- physical or mental impairment that will likely not improve and which prevents them from performing their previous job or any other paid work<sup>1</sup>



**Supplemental Security Income (SSI):** Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is a federal program that provides monthly payments to people with limited income and few resources. SSI is for: **People who are 65 or older, as well as for those of any age, including children, who are blind or have disabilities.** This extra income assistance that can aid in various forms, from treatment to medical necessities, is denied to residents of Puerto Rico.

- SSI is funded from U.S. federal government general revenues.
- SSI expenditures of **\$60 billion in the fiscal year 2020** were **0.27% of the GDP**



### Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

**(SNAP/NAP):** NAP provides benefits to residents of Puerto Rico with low incomes. Most are children, seniors, people with disabilities, and adults looking for work or caring for family members. NAP receives a fixed amount of federal funding each year through a block grant. Unlike funding for SNAP, which expands and contracts in response to need, NAP stays within its fixed funding levels regardless of need. Due to the block grant approach, in desperate times of need, such as during the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, there is a lag in the time for extra assistance in emergency care. In this example, it was about six months compared to the

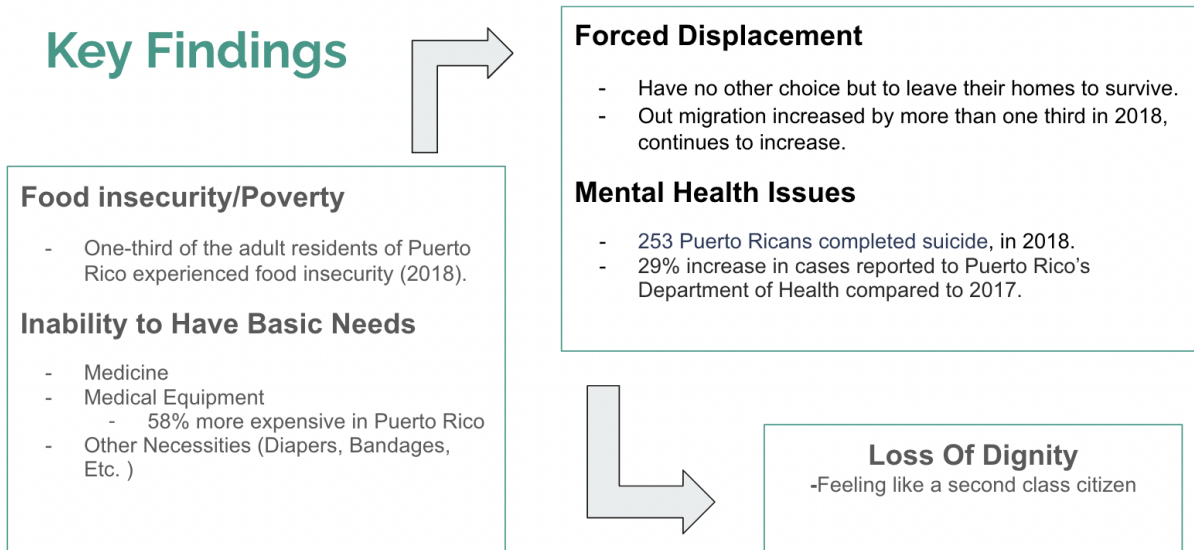
US Virgin Islands (which participate in the same nutritional assistance program as the mainland, SNAP), and received aid in two weeks. The chart shows the household incomes of those participating in the NAP program based on the U.S. federal poverty line. Indicating the need for assistance is there.

<sup>1</sup> \*\*\*Children under the age of 18 do not qualify for AABD but would be eligible for SSI if they were living on the mainland.

## Judgments

The United States government discriminates against Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans are not given the same access to federal benefits that residents living in the States have access to. Puerto Ricans are denied SSI benefits based on where they live, despite contributing more in various taxes than a handful of other states. Puerto Ricans are discriminated against because of the current legal precedent set by the Insular Cases over a hundred years ago.

As a result of Puerto Ricans not being eligible for SSI and SNAP, they are forced to pay large sums of money out of pocket just to afford a basic standard of living. This contributes to the cycle that leads Puerto Ricans to food insecurity and poverty, leading to forced displacement, migration from the island, and ultimately a lack of dignity. As a result of such discrimination, this cycle has continued on and become the norm for Puerto Rican citizens<sup>2</sup>.



Individuals continuously find themselves in this endless cycle of misfortune as there is no assistance to lift them out of poverty and allow them to establish better lives for themselves and contribute to the overall welfare of the island. This cycle (while not discussed in this report) often reflects where individuals stand on the issue regarding statehood for Puerto Rico, many have stated their support for statehood claiming this will grant them the same benefits as those on the mainland.

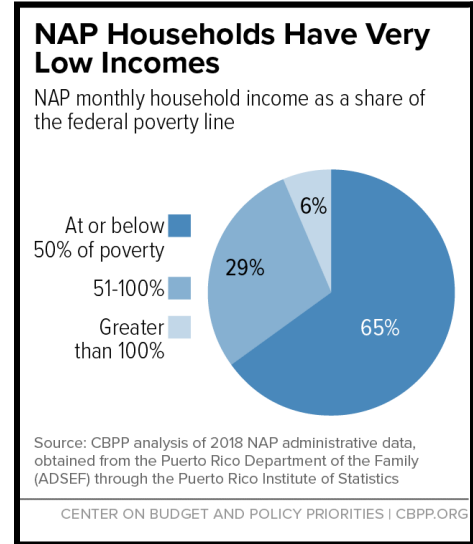
<sup>2</sup> Burnette, Denise. "Feasibility of an Evidence-Based Mental Health Intervention with Older Adults in Post-Hurricane Maria Puerto Rico." *Innovation in Aging* 3, no. Supplement\_1 (2019).



## Food Insecurity and Poverty

These policies have made the lives of Puerto Ricans exceptionally difficult in comparison to those living on the mainland.

- Puerto Rico’s poverty rate is 44.1%, double the poverty rate of Mississippi, the most impoverished U.S. state.
- In 2018:
  - 43% of Puerto Ricans lived in poverty
  - 57% of children in Puerto Rico lived in poverty
  - About one-third of the adult residents of Puerto Rico experienced food insecurity.
- A study in 2015 showed that 21.7% of people reported that in the last 12 months, there were occasions in which they had to give themselves less food than their regular portions or had to stop eating one of their daily meals because of a lack of money.
  - Approximately 25.8% of that population had to do so almost every month that year.
- 50% of the population relies on nutritional assistance for food security proving that the money granted for NAP is not enough

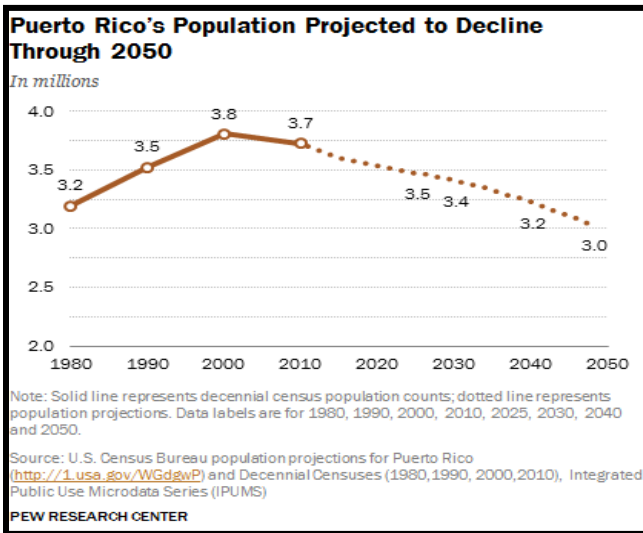


The lack of SSI means that families have to pay out of their pockets for essential goods such as diapers and medicine, which has become increasingly difficult, on top of fees for housing loved ones in hospice. Additionally, medical equipment in Puerto Rico is significantly more expensive, and the out-of-pocket prices often are the reasons that life-altering choices need to be made by individuals and families to keep food on the table or pay for next month's prescriptions.

**Table 2.1: Price Comparisons of Specialized Durable Medical Equipment**

	Puerto Rico	United States	Percent of Cost Difference
Emergency Evacuation Chair	\$2,441.07	\$1,495.00	39%
CPAP Machine	\$645.00	\$399.00	38%
Bath Lift	\$895.00	\$371.99	58%
Power Wheelchair Lift	\$3,475.00	\$3,099.00	11%

## Migration



- In addition of Covid and lingering issues faced from the aftermath of Hurricane Maria Puerto Rico's population rate as of 2020 was -1.83 (%).
- The US Postal Service received at least 6,500 change-of-address requests from Puerto Rico in 2020
- Puerto Ricans in Florida feel they are voting by proxy for those left out of U.S. democracy back home.

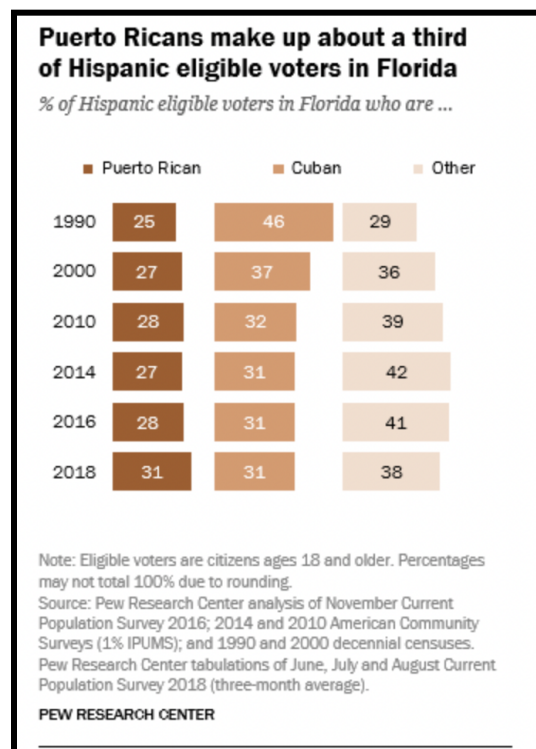
Not only does migration from Puerto Rico to the mainland influence the mental health and other aspects of the everyday lives of these citizens; it also plays a significant role in the election process. Candidates have new voters to persuade, and congressional districts are redrawn based on the census.

The effects of those leaving the island to search for better economic abilities effect the island in many ways:

- Older family members need to ultimately find a way to take care of themselves in whatever situation life may find them in
- There is a lack of doctors, nurses, and other services for seniors on the island

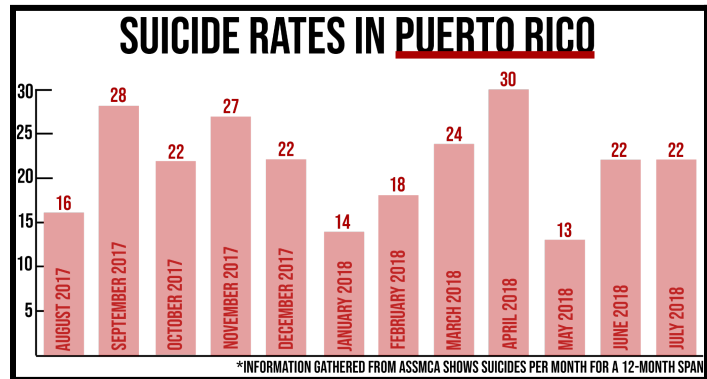
Instead, they have to make decisions that ultimately affect their survival, how they can participate in society, and their overall quality of life, which contributes to the sentiment of feeling like second-class citizens and leading to the debilitating mental health status.

These policies resulted in forcing Puerto Ricans to make painful choices between staying on the island of Puerto Rico they know and love or moving to the mainland US to receive SSI benefits to fund essential medical and health needs. With the systemic deficiencies plaguing Puerto Rico, people needing medical treatment and assistance like Carlos (see page 9) have had no choice but to move away.

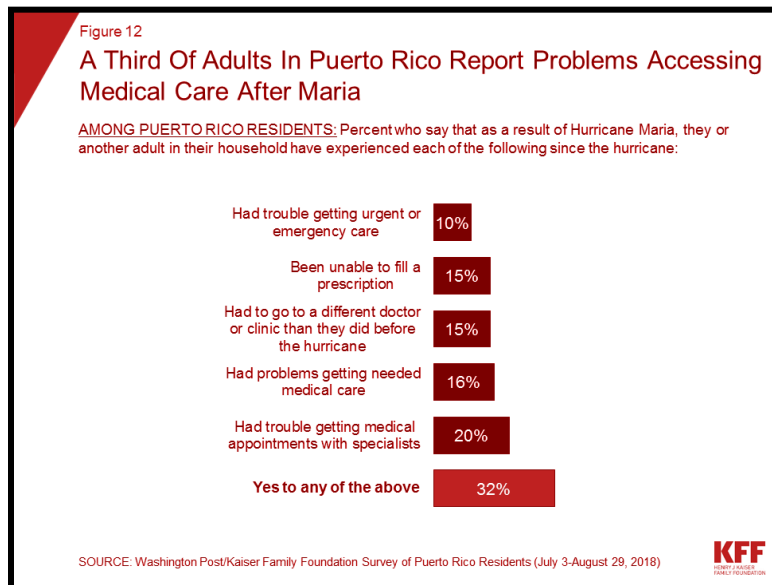


## Mental Health Issues

The lack of SSI benefits and the inability to afford basic necessities or a comfortable place to live causes citizen's mental health to decline rapidly. The culture within the island heavily relies on people-to-people connection, as well as being one of closeness and familiarity. Mental health disorders tend to increase without such relationships, as well as the internal battle to survive in the impoverished conditions individuals live in. These continued mental health struggles and newly developed disorders would be avoided should SSI be attainable on the island.



- In a study conducted by the CDC, 38 % of persons age 65+ reported fair or poor mental health:
  - 20% had been diagnosed with a depressive disorder by their doctor.



After Maria, the suicide rate on the island had increased by 29%, “(more than double for people ages 65-69 and tripling for those of 75-79)<sup>3</sup>.” The lack of resources, especially in a time of disaster: having no electrical power, no available medical personnel/equipment, and shortages of medicine and oxygen would make even a less vulnerable person worry about their necessities. The decline in quality of life has gravely affected the elderly and people with disabilities’ mental health, as shown in the personal anecdotes below.

<sup>3</sup> Esposito, Lisa. “Seniors in Puerto Rico Face Appalling Conditions after Hurricane Maria.” U.S. News, 2017

## INTERVIEWEE PROFILES

**\*\*All names approved by individuals to be used for the purpose of this brief\*\***

### **Carlos Rivera :**

Carlos was born and raised in Morovis, Puerto Rico, where he worked at the local gas station and was beloved by the neighborhood. Carlos is a hard-working man, having grown up at the center of the island to a family of farmers. Now, because of his age and the long list of injuries (in need of knee reconstruction surgery, a pinched nerve in his back restricting his mobility, two fractured ankles), he's had to leave the only home he's known. With these injuries, it is hard for anyone to have a good quality of life; he's had to trade his childhood home in the countryside for a single cramped room in California.



Although he would qualify for Social Security Income benefits living in the States. Carlos had little to no options in Puerto Rico. To save up money for a knee replacement surgery, he's had to work part-time while living with his sister, away from the island and locals he loves. Now, **simply because he resides on mainland soil**, he is eligible for SSI and is applying for it. Had Carlos been able to receive SSI benefits in Puerto Rico, **he would have been able to get his knee replacement surgery and would not have to leave his hometown.**

He does not qualify for AABD because even working part-time at the gas station, he made more money than the **required baseline** of \$75 a month. Making even a dollar over that seventy-five dollar mark would make him ineligible for the limited \$900 annual income (which would not cover the hospital's in-patient cost). In contrast, benefits would cover his surgery and recovery on the island if there were equal benefits.

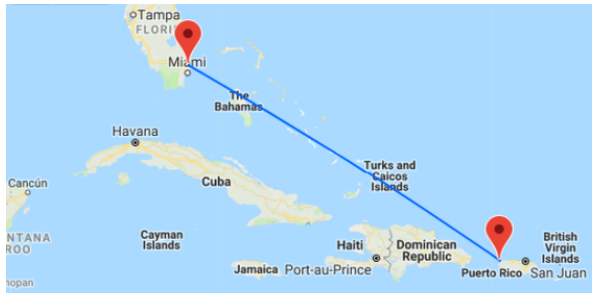
Carlos never wanted to leave his home, but he felt **he had no choice.**<sup>4</sup> Carlos wants nothing more than to return to his home and be able to live freely as he used to. Without SSI benefits on the island, **he cannot come home.** Carlos would not have to leave Puerto Rico, risking the strenuous travel and his mental health, having left everything he knows and loves, *“I am 46 years old and arrived at California November 17, 2017, and am counting the days and minutes until I return.”*

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<sup>4</sup> Esposito, Lisa. “Seniors in Puerto Rico Face Appalling Conditions after Hurricane Maria.” U.S. News, 2017. Paul Stearns worries about his 81-year-old mother, Heida Stearns Rivera#, who would also qualify for SSI, that he may have to consider relocating her to the mainland, *“I am worried she may become depressed after going back to the States and she leaves family, friends, and other acquaintances behind. Her home has a large front porch with people passing by all day; she will lose that when she returns with me to my house”*

## **Beatriz Casero:**

Beatriz, a mother of three kids, is always running around picking them up from school for after-school activities and events while working full time. She has little time to spare as she takes care of her family, but worrying about her mother takes up a large portion of it. Her mother (82) has severe Alzheimer's, **previously lived in Florida**, where she qualified for SSI benefits because of her age and condition. However, when her husband passed in 2016, she moved back to Puerto Rico to live with Beatriz so she would not be alone. The minute she stepped onto Puerto Rican soil, her benefits were stripped away. *"Just an address is not an excuse to not get benefits,"* Beatriz says.



Without the monthly income of about \$700, **medical equipment, necessities, and medicine would have become too expensive to acquire. A single tablet of medication to treat Alzheimer's has cost Beatriz over \$175, while diapers can cost up to \$200 a month.** Beatriz has her hands full with her three children and now has to worry about these expenses that were previously covered. She anguishes over where

she will find this money for her mother. Due to the lack of resources and time, Beatriz had no choice but to check her mother into a retirement home, **which she's had to pay on her own** where SSI would have otherwise covered the expense.

Beatriz worries for her mother's and other members of the community's mental and physical health, as resources like transportation are virtually nonexistent for the elderly and persons with disabilities. *"Few transportation options exist when no public transportation is available, such as in rural areas. Many PWDs (People with Disabilities) in Puerto Rico simply never leave home<sup>5</sup>".* Being stuck inside without interaction has apparent effects on one's mental health. Beatriz thinks of this daily and has considered the most extreme outcome, "If worse comes to worst, I'll have to pack my mom up and move to the States." SSI benefits are the most significant and only motivator for Beatriz to consider moving to the States.

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<sup>5</sup> Burnette, Denise. "Feasibility of an Evidence-Based Mental Health Intervention with Older Adults in Post-Hurricane Maria Puerto Rico." *Innovation in Aging* 3, no. Supplement\_1 (2019).

### **Laura Delgado:**

Laura and her sister are both self-employed, single (unmarried) household members, living separately. Her mother is currently residing in an assisted living home in Puerto Rico. Laura's mother has Alzheimers, and **if she lived in the mainland United States, she would qualify for SSI benefits and assistance based on her age and having this disease;** however, **because she is living on the island, she cannot qualify.**

Laura mentions that because her mother is facing multiple health issues, she is unsure how long she and her sister will be able to keep their mother in the home she is currently, or if they will have to move her to a different location on the island. Prices are high for quality care in assisted living areas, and there are few activities on the island for older generations. They currently pay **\$4,000 monthly** for their mother's residence, not including all the medical care and supplies she may need. Laura mentioned living in **“constant worry”** about the expenses and how they are **“atrocious.”** Having to spend hundreds of dollars on supplies such as bed pads, adult diapers, medicines, and other necessities. She states that about **16-adult diapers are used a day, which costs about \$10 / a day, approximately \$300 a month for just this essential expense.** With the extra SSI benefits ranging from \$600-\$800 each month, Laura and her sister would be able to pay for these necessities and not have to worry.

Laura faces the difficult decision of whether she should remain on the island or relocate. As she states, *“My friends and I speak about what to do when we get older, if we should retire together elsewhere, but we don't want to leave the island.”* While worrying about her mother's health, she must now also focus on her own and what this means for her, her sisters, and her friends' futures.

Laura acknowledged not knowing about this SSI issue before the Vaello-Madero Supreme Court case. This issue was almost invisible on the island, and because nobody received the benefits, citizens on the island did not understand what they were and still are missing. Since this case took **headlining news**, she and millions of others on the island now find themselves angered over the issue, being treated as second-class citizens, having paid into Social Security their entire working lives but not receiving the SSI benefits.

**Ivette Chardon:**



Ivette is a resident of Ponce, Puerto Rico. Ivette shared with us a range of issues she, as a U.S. citizen living on the island, has encountered but would not while living on the mainland.

She is frustrated by the amount of taxes she pays on the island, whether it be the 10.5% sales tax and the discrimination faced by Puerto Ricans needing to pay into social security for their working lives but receiving no SSI benefits once getting older. She has not yet experienced the harmful effects of not obtaining these benefits. Still, she knows the stories of people moving to the mainland to receive SSI, whether older people from the island or younger parents who must move for their children with disabilities.

Ivette also mentioned that **“many Puerto Ricans who move to the mainland searching for these benefits, among others, would want to eventually move back home to the island.”** Ivette attributed much of these issues to being a *“second-class citizen.”* She stressed the issue and importance of Puerto Rico becoming a state because the current territorial status for those on the island is discriminatory. She herself believes that statehood would be the answer to receiving these benefits, and that it would assist the elderly and those with disabilities in Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans on the island pay millions of dollars a year in taxes to the United States Government, and the critical injustice regarding the approximate **35,000 Puerto Ricans being able to serve in the military but not being able to vote for the commander in chief who will potentially send them to war.** These are issues and injustices Puerto Ricans constantly face while living as second class citizens in the territory.

## Ivelisse Vázquez:

Ivelisse has been known to be vocal about her experiences regarding SSI through social media. She shared her experience moving to the United States in 2012 to get her intellectually impaired son better learning opportunities. In **Puerto Rico, there were virtually no educational resources for him at the time, leaving her no choice but to relocate**. In a comment under El Nuevo Dia's post about SSI being Discriminatory, she writes, *"one lives in the United States (mainland) basically by obligation, by force, especially when one has a little boy with disabilities... when one lives paycheck to paycheck and away from family, there is ALWAYS a want to come back to the island."* Ivelisse detailed how the educational system in Puerto Rico did not have the resources to accommodate her son. As a single mother, Ivelisse could not afford the overpriced tutors that may have helped take a bit of that load off of her. There were no available resources Ivelisse could have used on the island, so she had no choice but to take her son to the States and leave her family and home behind.

Now residing in Texas, the schools are better equipped to provide access to disability accommodations for her son. After Hurricane Maria, when the government shut down more than 250 schools and the educational system scrambled to relocate both students and staff<sup>6</sup>; technological equipment, books, and materials to accommodate students with learning disabilities were not accessible on the island. The lack of resources for children with learning disabilities continues to be a serious problem, long after Ivelisse moved away in 2012. In 2018, the Department of Education had yet to fill the vacancies of 132 special education teachers, and the number of vacancies continues to increase as teachers' salaries are consistently reduced. As a result, hard-working mothers and children like Ivelisse and her son are facing even more austere conditions in the schools. As a result, many are compelled to make the painful decision to leave Puerto Rico in order to provide a better quality of life and future for their children.

Once Ivelisse arrived in Texas, her son was automatically eligible for SSI. The money she receives from SSI now goes towards paying for an after-school tutor while Ivelisse works three jobs. She emphasized that money does not go anywhere but to her son. *"It's not for me to go buy nail polish or make-up; it's for my son, so he can function in daily life and live his life independently."* With the cost of living and other expenses increasing, *she wishes for nothing more than to be able to return home to her island* after almost a decade. Her son is now 23, and with the help from SSI, he can afford necessities to live independently with few accommodations, thanks to the special education system resources he received early on in his life. If these resources had been available or less expensive in Puerto Rico, Ivelisse would have never left, **"I leave Puerto Rico brokenhearted each time I visit."**

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<sup>6</sup> Gurney, Kyra. "HUNDREDS OF PUERTO RICAN SCHOOLS CLOSED AFTER MARIA. SPECIAL NEEDS KIDS GOT LEFT BEHIND ." *Miami Herald*. 2018.



## CONCLUSIONS

Puerto Ricans residing in the States receive a yearly SSI benefit of approximately \$9,000. The chart below compares how many Puerto Ricans in both the mainland and the territory receive benefits showing the effects of migration from the island to the mainland, where the number of individuals that qualify for benefits is significantly higher than on the island.

	Puerto Ricans living in the states	Puerto Rican residents living on the island
<b>Total Households</b>	1,873,440	1,192,654
<b>SSI/AABD Households</b>	215,445	37,000
<b>Mean Yearly Income</b>	\$9040	\$900

**Table 4.1: SSI/AABD Comparison of SSI/AABD Benefits of Puerto Ricans Living in the States Versus Puerto Rico**

Over 45% of households in the 50 states do not earn enough to pay federal taxes, and there is a chance that an SSI recipient in the States does not pay federal income taxes. It is unfair to exclude four territories from SSI because residents are not required to pay federal taxes on their local income. Individuals like the ones we interviewed and countless others with ties to the island should not have to choose between their next meal or today’s medications.

- **According to the table on the right, almost half a million residents of Puerto Rico would be eligible for SSI benefits.**

Puerto Ricans are supported by many in Washington, particularly in districts and states with a high number of Puerto Rican diaspora residents. These elected officials are to change the status quo. For example, Orlando Congresswoman Val Demings (FL-10) released a statement after the latest Supreme Court ruling stating:

**Table 4.2: Populations Eligible for SSI Benefits<sup>118</sup>**

Population by Age, Disability, and Poverty Status (Income in the past 12 months below poverty level)	Puerto Rico
Under 5 years, with a disability	1,173
5 to 17 years, with a disability	25,235
18 to 34 years, with a disability	31,029
35-64 years, with a disability	128,868
65 to 74 years, with a disability	49,967
65 to 74 years, no disability	79,812
75 years and over, with a disability	77,770
75 years and over, no disability	42,032
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>435,886</b>

*“Today’s ruling means that roughly 300,000 aging, low-income, and disabled Americans will continue to be treated like second class citizens. This is simply unfair. The American citizens of Puerto Rico, like all other Americans, deserve the equal rights and responsibilities of citizenship, which is why last year I voted to extend fair and equal federal benefits to Puerto Rico and other*

***U.S. territories. 'Equal treatment under the law shouldn't depend on where in America you live. The Senate must stop stalling and follow our lead to immediately defend the equal rights of all Americans. I will continue to advocate for equal treatment for our brothers and sisters in Puerto Rico.'***

Safety nets continue to serve as a way to provide equity for the population and raise the spirits, income, and ultimately dignity of individuals all over the world. Approximately 36 percent of impoverished people globally have been lifted out of poverty by safety nets. With such a large percentage, it seems evident that safety nets are a necessity, not only among the States on the mainland, but also in the territories that the United States has sworn to protect and look after. These safety nets could keep families together, food on the table, and medical needs met. The few anecdotes of actual experiences in this report supports this. Carlos and Ivelisse would never have had to leave their homes, Laura's mother would be able to have a better quality of life, and Beatriz could afford adult diapers for her mother. Safety nets could serve as the key into digging Puerto Rico out of its misfortune.

## APPENDIX

### **Additional Info:**

Supreme Court Ruling of United States v. Vaello Madero

Disparate Treatment of Puerto Rico Residents with Disabilities in Federal Programs and Benefits

## **Team Bios**

### **Alexandra Campos:**

Alexandra was born and raised in Puerto Rico, this topic indeed hits home for her. When she saw the opportunity to have a project like this as her Master's Capstone, she had to take it. Alexandra will be graduating in May 2023 with a Master's in International Relations with a Concentration in Comparative and Regional Studies of Latin America. Her passion for helping not only the island she grew up in but all Latin American countries is what drives her to be in this field.

### **Randi Doan:**

Randi grew up in Orlando, Florida with a large Puerto Rican population around her. She understood the culture and its people. When seeing this project she thought about her friends and their families back home.. She has several years of experience in political campaigns, noticing the shift to get the Puerto Rican vote but candidates missed getting to know the Puerto Rican people. Randi is a Master's of Global Governance, Politics and Security degree candidate at American University and will be graduating in December 2022. She would like to continue to use her campaign background into a more global setting.

### **Lacey Lattin**

Lacey is a Masters of International Development Candidate at American University focused on Global Health. Her professional experience includes working for the House of Representatives in her home district in foreign affairs and military matters. She has a B.A. in Political Science and International Studies with a regional focus in Latin America which drove her interest towards this graduate program. Her graduate research focuses on global public health development conflicts with a special interest in her regional focus area of Latin America, which is what led her to choose this graduate capstone project.

### **Joseph Martin**

Joe is studying to receive his masters in the U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security at American University. Upon hearing about this project, he was interested in learning more about Puerto Rico's unique status as a territory, and as a bridge between the mainland U.S. Latin America. Additionally, he was drawn the the policy aspect of Puerto Rico's status, and the legal precedents that continue to maintain its unequal status with the U.S. mainland. Joe is also more broadly interested in U.S. policy towards Latin America and the Caribbean. He has experience working in the House of Representatives and the Senate and is also interested in the relationship between foreign policy and the legislative process. He is currently interning full time with the House Foreign Affairs Committee, with a focus on U.S.-Latin America relations given the recent and upcoming presidential elections in Colombia and Brazil, and the ongoing migrant crisis in the Northern Triangle.



Photo cred: [wandererinstus](#)

# FABRICAS CULTURALES

INSTITUTO de CULTURA  
PUERTORRIQUEÑA

**By: Sumi Lee**

**Jessica Marques**

**Peter Riess**

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## Project Statement and Scope

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This report summarizes the results of research, interviews, and analysis into the effectiveness of the Fábricas Culturales program offered by the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (ICP) and explores what can be improved in future programs. According to ICP, the goal of the program is to help artists and cultural managers develop an “entrepreneurial mindset”.<sup>1</sup> In support of this objective, American University students conducted research, analysis, and recommendations on the successes of the Fábricas Culturales program and what can be improved in future programs.<sup>2</sup> We also identified research for overall professional development and best practices in the arts sector.

## Methodology

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To understand the Fábricas Culturales program, we conducted analytical research via online articles, reviewed program surveys provided by ICP staff members, and initiated semi-structured discussions (in-person and virtual format) with the following personnel: three ICP staff members, one Universidad del Sagrado Corazón program director, one staff member at Guayacán, and four alumni of the program (see Appendix A for “list of participants”). Through key observations collected during the process of discovery (see Appendix B for “quotes from participants”) we gained valuable insight on the successes of the program as well as opportunities for improvement. Of note, we believe this analysis to be informative but recognize that our report does have some limitations (see Appendix C for “limitations”).

## Findings

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The response from the participants of the Fábricas Culturales program alumni was overwhelmingly positive, albeit with some calls for improvements. Despite significant challenges (natural disasters, pandemic restrictions, and budget cuts) faced by ICP, it has managed to successfully implement a program that provides useful entrepreneurial information to artists, and which can be easily replicated and expanded to other districts and municipalities.

Notable observations on successes:

- Format: Well-structured workshops
- Attendance: High participation
- Value Added: New opportunities
- Awareness: High visibility

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<sup>1</sup> The goal is clear. “We want our artists to be able to make a good living from their work, their art, and their creativity,” says Jessabet Vivas Capó, program advisor. The executive director of the ICP, Carlos Ruiz Cortés, stated that “this new project of cultural factories will give all artists and cultural managers the necessary tools to develop their skills within a business model.”

<sup>2</sup> <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:3c087eab-7116-3977-ac4d-a74e425fa73d>

However, we have also determined that success varied by participant, with the key determinant being the selection to the next round of the program (Guayacán enterprise) for further project development—which provided participants additional resources and support (seven additional months of mentoring, technical assistance, and \$1,000-\$2,000). Participants who were not selected to advance found the program informative but desired the additional resources provided by Guayacán to maximize their experience.

Notable observations on challenges:

- Logistics: Inconvenience of attending workshops
- Opportunity Costs: Varied by participant
- Resources: Insufficient in some cases
- Impact: Insufficient follow up and support in some cases

## Successes

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### **Fábricas Culturales is well-structured with high-quality training in entrepreneurship and excellent instructors.**

- Based on our research and the interviews with the four alumni of the workshops, we determined that the Fábricas Culturales workshops have been very successful. The participants of the programs learned new skills, concepts, and terms like business fundamentals, which led to the improvement of their business mindset and capacities (Y No Había Luz: “Fábricas Culturales program was very important and valuable to me. I could learn essential business skills and it made me feel like going back to college.”)
- Instructors from the Fábricas Culturales were well prepared and knowledgeable in their respective fields. Each of the four alumni in different areas of arts (handcrafts, performing arts, theater, and digital design) spoke highly of their instructors (Salón Boricua: “The instructors were amazing, and we have learned a lot from them.”)
- Fábricas Culturales has been seeking to diversify and show inclusiveness by expanding the workshops to different fields of art, from performing arts to music, visual arts, and design. In 2021, despite the difficult situation of the pandemic, the Fábrica Cultural de Refuerzo progressed in a virtual format. Twenty-seven artists from all over the island participated in the workshop, which offered them different experiences and tasks in arts and an opportunity to adjust their strategies to the new demands in the market.



### **Fábricas Culturales attracted many local artists and achieved a high participation rate.**

- Organized course materials, curriculum, and good instructors led to high participation in the program. (Javier from El Mundo de los Muñecos: “We saw an opportunity from Fábricas”; Y No Había luz: “We made a profit by publishing books from what we have learned at Fábricas and could reinvest in other products.”)
- The workshops were for two hours on two weekday nights for several weeks. Although attending class after work was challenging and intensive, all interviewees responded that the classes and homework were very helpful for their personal and career development.
- According to ICP, every workshop participant had to attend at least 75 percent of the classes to be certified. Penalties were applied to those who did not comply, which encouraged students to be more responsible and dedicated during the workshops.

### **Fábricas Culturales provided the artists with new opportunities to learn entrepreneur skills and a business mindset, move up to Guayacán, and share best practices with the community.**

- Through Fábricas Culturales, the participants learned new entrepreneurial skills, and some of them could expand their businesses. Y No Había Luz: “We learned about marketing and administration skills through the workshop. We could learn how to print books, and by making money from selling fairytale books, we reinvested it in making other products.”
- After taking workshops, the participants brought a ripple effect to their communities. By utilizing skills, they have learned in the workshops, they could share best practices with the community. Y No Había Luz: “After Hurricane María, the theme of the fairytale book started as a play, and we could spread the story of our culture and country to the community.”
- Although some participants expected more or misunderstood what support they would get after the course, Fábricas Culturales opened an opportunity to bridge into Guayacán for high performers. During the 2019 Fábricas Culturales of performing arts, four finalists earned “Fast Passes” to EnterPRize of Grupo Guayacán through a selection. They had access to workshops, mentoring and equity-free seed capital. The Fast Passes winners, Y no Había luz and El Mundo de los Muñecos, said they could achieve new learning and business opportunities through EnterPRize (Y No Había Luz: “EnterPRize was the next level of Fábricas, and it brought us new different resources.” El Mundo de los Muñecos: “After finishing EnterPRize, we collaborated with other organizations.”)

### **Fábricas Culturales have a good reputation, as shown by its strong social media presence.**

- ICP is well-known and highly respected in the artistic community, being portrayed as the leader and defender of preserving Puerto Rican culture and the ultimate entity to affiliate

with for success in the industry. Only a small percentage of artists are affiliated with ICP, which has become a sought-after stamp of prestige for artists. The organization has credibility as both a government agency and a community organization.

- Fábricas Culturales have been successfully promoted on social media. ICP's Facebook has around 98,000 postings, and Instagram has more than 16,000 followers, which indicates that Fábricas Culturales is well recognized and trusted among local artists and Puerto Rican society. Furthermore, through a meeting with ICP, we found out that Fábricas Culturales has continuously distributed over 1,000 emails and newsletters, maintaining constant contact with their partners.

## Areas of Improvement

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Although the Fábricas Culturales were well received with participants for their structure and comprehensive knowledge provided, there were some areas of improvement identified by participants. These varied depending on the demographic of the artist and their specific needs, but mainly dealt with the stages after the process and logistics of the workshops themselves.

### **Fábricas Culturales were held in Old San Juan, which posed a logistical challenge for participants from more remote areas.**

- Because the programs were held in the headquarters of ICP, the logistics of attending the workshops were difficult to those that lived in areas that were located further away from the city. With high prices of gasoline, subpar infrastructure, and the lack of alternative transportation options for those in rural areas, the viability of travel became a tiring barrier to attendance. For some, the travel time of 1-2+ hours was tedious during weeknights, and for others it was a safety concern to travel back and forth each day after class. Others worked all day before attending the evening classes, and then had to travel home to be able to attend work the next day as well as fulfill household duties, increasing their level of exhaustion.
- Another logistical factor was the cost and availability of lodging, as affordable accommodations were not readily available for participants, given the touristy district of Old San Juan. Neighboring hotel-dense areas like Condado were also heavy tourist hubs, meaning inflated prices that local artists could not afford. One mentioned during the interview "I'm from Puerto Rico and I don't even stay here, it's too expensive and I can't afford it." Alternative accommodations like Airbnb's were also deemed out of reach financially, and most participants resorted to traveling to and from the workshops daily.
- The common denominator among the participants surveyed was to "get out of Old San Juan," to take the workshops around the island to the other municipalities to diminish some of these barriers

- Another logistical barrier to participating in the workshops was the technological barrier for elderly participants, as well as those from lower socioeconomic classes. Most in those groups did not have basic knowledge of how to use tools like Zoom and email and struggled to attend virtual offerings.

**Fábricas Culturales attendance also had opportunity costs.**

- Participants noted the time dedicated to the workshops resulted in less time to sell, produce, and promote their goods and services. Along with the personal costs of participation mentioned above (lodging, transportation, food), participants attended while also juggling their other responsibilities and obligations.
- As artists were required to be affiliated with ICP to participate in the workshops, the underlying costs associated were also strenuous for some of the smaller grossing artists who had to complete the *Fomento* certification as well as the ICP affiliation process. Some noted this pre-certification process was time-consuming.
- While the focus areas of the workshops are legal, accounting and branding, varying levels of previous experience and exposure inhibited some from taking that information the next step of implementation.

**The resources provided did not always meet the expectations of the participants regarding follow-up.**

- Due to funding constraints and a deficiency of private-sector partners, the programs cannot offer much outside of the course material itself, for those not promoted to Guayacán.
- Given that the programs were run with federal funding, there were no opportunities for additional incentives to be offered to participants at the conclusion of the program on pitch day, aside from a potential fast track into the Guayacán program for a lucky few. Participants noted the extensive level of preparation and dedication required for their pitches, but the lack of further engagement after was disheartening for them. They had hoped to be able to expand their proposals or gain additional assistance/guidance on how to take their knowledge acquired to the next level.
- Other artists said they were unclear on the next steps of the program and the level of future support they would receive.
- Some artists belonged to collectives composed of several members and found it difficult to pass the acquired knowledge to others in their group that did not attend the workshops.

**Fábricas Culturales can increase impact through strategic follow-up programs.**

- The level of value added varied depending on the demographics of the participants themselves, from age, type of industry, and socioeconomic status to tech savviness, comfort with material, and

accessibility to resources. Those from elderly demographics noted that limited staff were available to help them understand administrative tasks that were crucial to growth, filling out paperwork, and IT issues resolution. ICP noted their limited availability of staff, and the participants noted that while the information provided was essential, not having the assistance to implement their learning was a barrier.

- Limited opportunities for further development upon completion of the program were also a challenge, as most felt there was no next step or second level outside of the Guayacán program, which only a small fraction attend.
- Others felt that although the connection between artists was productive, there was inadequate time for meaningful interaction and networking given the tight schedule of the program. Most felt they barely spoke to the person next to them and would have liked to have more time for interaction to network and present themselves to one another to create more lasting connections and relationships. Several were discovered to have similar business models and interests during interviews but were not aware of one another. While WhatsApp groups were created amongst some participants, others noted they became burdened with irrelevant information, and most had muted their group.

## Conclusions

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In the last two decades, ICP as well as local artists has faced some significant challenges to include the natural disasters, COVID-19 pandemic, and government austerity measures.

### Natural Disasters

“Before Maria, after Maria” is a metaphor commonly used in Puerto Rico to describe the impact of the dual 2017 hurricanes (Irma and Maria) which killed over 2,900 people.<sup>3</sup> The impact of event and the subsequent delay in the federal government’s disaster relief response caused significant challenges to include a lack of supplies, delayed reconstruction, demographic shifts, and increased unemployment.<sup>4</sup> According to one study conducted by the Puerto Rican economic consulting firm *H. Calero*, the economic impact of the hurricanes is assessed at \$139 billion, and potentially up to \$159 billion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/09/puerto-rico-a-year-after-hurricane-maria/#:~:text=As%20of%20April%202018%2C%20FEMA,billion%20to%20help%20with%20rebuilding.>

<sup>4</sup> <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:6bae5758-05f7-3299-ae13-a3f4f8c9d6a5>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/12/04/hurricane-maria-economic-impact-puerto-rico/2209231002/>

Compounding this hardship, on January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020, a 6.4 magnitude earthquake struck—resulting in hundreds of additional family relocations as well as the forced closure of schools.<sup>6</sup> It was during this challenging time of natural disasters that the arts played a critical role in maintaining popular morale as access to the arts and culture was like “breath for the people”.<sup>7</sup>

Despite its challenges, the experience brought on by the natural disasters did lead to some positive developments that are worth mentioning. First, because of the difficulties of reaching communities that were affected by the natural disasters, as well as the forced closures of schools, the recognition of a virtual delivery format for communication was conceptualized and implemented (once power was restored). This transition to virtual and later hybrid would prove to be invaluable when stay-at-home orders and restrictions on in-person gatherings were instituted at the height of the pandemic (discussed more in COVID-19 subsection).

Moreover, partially because of the federal government’s inadequate response to disaster relief, and partially because of a genuine desire to help, an opportunity for the Puerto Rican diaspora on the mainland and abroad to reconnect with the island emerged; with material and financial support provided by thousands. As a result of this collaboration, ICP has been able to seize the opportunity to expand programmatic efforts beyond the island.<sup>8</sup>

## **COVID-19 Pandemic**

The pandemic and its associated restrictions severely affected the livelihood and economic subsistence of artists and art-related organizations.<sup>9</sup> According to a May 2022 report entitled “COVID- 19 Pandemic Impact on The Arts,” the pandemic’s financial losses to the national non-profit arts and culture organizations were estimated at \$17.97 billion dollars (as of July 2021). This drop in revenue exacerbated existing financial challenges that some organizations like ICP already faced (discussed more in government austerity measures subsection); necessitating programmatic restructuring to adjust to the new circumstances.

At the micro-level, the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines were especially burdensome as stay-at-home orders and restrictions on in-person gatherings disproportionately impacted artists who relied on events (fairs, festivals, workshops, etc.) as their main commercial setting for direct sales.<sup>10</sup> While restrictions have since eased and art jobs have rebounded, the arts continue to recover at slower rates than other sectors.<sup>11</sup>

To address this challenge and to overcome in-person gathering limitations during the pandemic, ICP took some innovative steps. The following are examples of some programs/events implemented in a virtual format:

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<sup>6</sup> <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:6bae5758-05f7-3299-ae13-a3f4f8c9d6a5>

<sup>7</sup> Jessabet Vivas Capó, ICP Headquarters, 6 June 2022

<sup>8</sup> “For every challenge, there is an opportunity”. Freddy E. Velez Garcia, ICP Headquarters, 6 June 2022

<sup>9</sup> <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:6bae5758-05f7-3299-ae13-a3f4f8c9d6a5>

<sup>10</sup> <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:6bae5758-05f7-3299-ae13-a3f4f8c9d6a5>

<sup>11</sup> [www.AmericansForTheArts.org/node/103614](http://www.AmericansForTheArts.org/node/103614)

- **Campechada:** An annual festival inspired in a historical figure that brings arts to the community for three days.
- **500 Años:** Celebration of the date when the Spanish Crown authorized the move of the capital of Puerto Rico from Guaynabo to San Juan Bautista; featured artists from different fields and showcased artisans and their works.
- **Cultura Rodante** (now *Cultura Virtual*): A disaster relief program that developed after Hurricanes Irma and María in 2017. Artists travel directly to the community, specifically to elder homes, shelters, public plazas, and barrios to share their work and offer workshops.
- **Archivo Virtual ICP:** Virtual archive of historical documents, recordings, magazines, newsletters, etc.
- **Fábricas Culturales:** capacity-building seminars to a group of artists. Three different groups ranging from 15 to 20 participants have completed the program. Marketing, sustainability, and copyrights are among the topics covered.

## Government Austerity Measures

Due to the repeal of Section 936, multiple recessions, and years of government mismanagement, public debts totaled just over \$70 billion when the Puerto Rico Management and Economic Stability Act (P.L. 114-187; PROMESA) came into effect on June 30, 2016.<sup>12</sup> Fortunately for Puerto Rico, after years of wrangling over debt repayment obligations, in 2022 a federal judge approved a plan that restructured the central government’s debt—reducing it by 80% and saving the island more than \$50 billion in debt service payments.<sup>13</sup> However, to meet its obligations, Puerto Rico’s central government enacted severe budget cuts that have had a significant impact on government agencies and businesses.

For example, during Fiscal Year 2016-2017, the total budget for ICP was \$18,561,565.<sup>14</sup> In 2017, the new budget was \$1,932,000—representing nearly a 90% budget cut.<sup>15</sup> Demonstrating this impact, in the 1980’s, ICP used to have close to 500 employees; it now has 146.<sup>16</sup>

As a result, ICP has had to adapt to this new reality with one employee concurring that the agency is “doing more, with less.”<sup>17</sup> As mentioned earlier, ICP has successfully implemented a plethora of initiatives and programs as well as reforms to ensure sustainability. For example, in its bid to increase transparency and efficiency, ICP now produces reports that tracks program metrics and funding outlays. Given ICP’s officially designated role to administer all financial report support received from the NEA and the State in conjunction with the SAA Partnership Agreement, this is a positive development.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R46788.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/19/1074034082/puerto-rico-judge-bankruptcy-debt-deal>

<sup>14</sup> <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:6bae5758-05f7-3299-ae13-a3f4f8c9d6a5>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> According to Jessabet Vivas Capó, ICP Headquarters, 6 June 2022

<sup>17</sup> Freddy E. Velez Garcia, ICP Headquarters, 10 June 2022

<sup>18</sup> <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:6bae5758-05f7-3299-ae13-a3f4f8c9d6a5>

On the funding front, relief is expected to come with the 2021 Commonwealth of Puerto Rico (CPR) Fiscal Plan anticipating \$110 billion in federal funds over the coming decade.<sup>19</sup> In the interim, the Puerto Rican government has allocated \$250 million to ICP for the reconstruction of thirty-nine of its properties. Thus far, ICP has received 10% of the funding.<sup>20</sup> Complimenting this effort, ICP has taken entrepreneurial steps to shore up its funding with “rentals” of their properties serving as the main source of non-governmental income. In addition to property rentals, “alliances” with local universities, non-profits, museums, etc. provided ICP welcome partners.

However, one ICP employee noted that the most significant challenge facing ICP is the difficulty attracting new partners at the local, domestic, and international level.<sup>21</sup> But, this need to solicit and attract new sources of funding also presents an opportunity (recommendations can be found in the next portion of this report) to ensure sustainable funding and possibly, programmatic growth if more resources become available.

In conclusion, despite significant challenges (natural disasters, pandemic restrictions, and budget cuts), ICP has managed to successfully implement a program that provides useful entrepreneurial information to artists, and which can be easily replicated and expanded to other districts and municipalities.

## Recommendations

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To enhance the impact of the *Fábricas Culturales*, we offer the following recommendations:

- To assist with the varying levels of previous knowledge base and preparation of participants, separate the courses into varying levels of expertise: beginner, intermediate, and advanced according to their needs to ensure maximization of learning. Those in underserved populations may need assistance with more basic information, while those with formal higher education may require more advanced knowledge. To enhance success of the participants, offer programs for different demographics based on their technological capabilities. For example, offer in-person programs when available to elderly demographics to combat barriers, and virtual or hybrid models for creative design and virtual artists.
- To ease transportation and logistical difficulties, expand the *Fábricas* to the other municipalities outside of Old San Juan. This was one of the major statements that resonated with the artists, the need to expand outside the tourist hub and value the provinces. ICP has buildings around the island and using those locations to take the programs to the people in more rural areas will ease the logistical barriers and ensure a wider variety of artists are being reached. This also gives the opportunity to previously unreached regions to engage in the process and minimizes the impact of travel and exorbitant costs for the participants. Engagement and follow through on final projects will be higher as artists will be able to focus on the workshops and not the barriers to get there.
- To establish clear expectations regarding follow-up procedures, provide participants a factsheet with clearly set expectations prior to enrollment-outlining the scope and resources offered of the program to avoid surprises at the end, and implement a comprehensive follow-up plan to measure outcomes after the program is concluded. While there is an open call (*convocatoria*) that announces the program, some participants noted their lack of comprehension of the scope of the workshops themselves and were disappointed when their expectations were not met. In

addition, sending out a survey to participants to understand their challenges, benefits, and perspectives on the program will enable better structuring of future programs.

- To ensure additional administrative and technical assistance resources for *Fábricas* participants, and later graduates, enlist university interns who could provide these services to artists free or at low cost and help fill the gaps in for staff. The Sagrado Corazón project is another good example of additional services, as they have secured grants for providing these administrative services to artists.
- To enable artists to communicate among themselves after finishing the workshops, create a platform for them to connect and collaborate, such as an alumni program. This will enable participants to connect with each other in a more meaningful way and continue to multiply the impact of the program in the community. Many participants were found to have similar interests and proposals which would be an opportunity for collaboration, but they were unaware of the existence of one another. Having the space to connect and collaborate will contribute positively to the outcomes of the program of developing artists into business-oriented entrepreneurs.
- To maximize long-term and potentially larger funding opportunities, develop a comprehensive sponsorship package when soliciting new or existing partners.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R46788.pdf> p.38

<sup>20</sup> Freddy E. Velez Garcia, ICP Headquarters, 6 June 2022

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



## Annex I: Participants

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- Y No Había Luz- Julio Morales
- Puppet World PR (El Mundo de los Muñecos) - Javier Cortés
- Salón Boricua - Wilmer and Mikeyla
- Rutas Artesanales - Johanna Rocío del Mar Flores Pérez
- Universidad Sagrado Corazón - Javier Hernandez Acosta
- Guayacán - Katerina Sánchez
- ICP - Jessabet Vivas Capó, Freddy E. Vélez Garcia, and Mireily Rodríguez

## Annex II: Quotes from Participants

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- “Guayacán gives participants the tools they need to make money and have a quality of life.”
- “The Fábricas were the only program that talked about intellectual property, which is very important for our business. We loved this inclusion and found it very helpful.”
- “Through the Fábricas we saw new possibilities that we hadn’t thought of before, it really changed our mind about being entrepreneurs.”
- “The workshops provided essential information that we need as artists, but we struggled to implement it without further resources and technical assistance. You can tell us what we need to do, but we also need help doing it.”
- “You have to get out of Old San Juan!!” - all of the participants
- “*Fábricas Culturales* was very important and valuable to me. I could learn essential business skills and it made me feel like going back to college”
- “The instructors were amazing, and we have learned a lot from them”
- “We saw an opportunity from *Fábricas*”
- “We made a profit by publishing books from what we have learned at *Fábricas* and could reinvest in other products”
- “The workshop was great, but networking (follow-up) left something to be desired”
- In-regards to ICP funding challenges, “It’s a matter of performance”

- In-regards to new ICP partners, “We need better practices working with the private industry”
- In-regards to challenges facing ICP, “changing things that have been the same for over 25 years”
- “*Fábricas Culturales* was very important to us as we got experience delivering a pitch”
- From *Fábricas Culturales*, “there was a shift in how we do business in our company”
- “What started that fire [business opportunities] was *Fábricas Culturales*”
- “What we got in [Guayacán] enterprise polished what we got in *Fábricas* because of the concepts”
- In-regards to what ICP could do better, “lack of people”
- In-regards to what could ICP do better, “communication could be better”
- In-regards to what could ICP do better, “Need to provide funding for execution. If not, [participants] will stay in the education loop”
- In-regards to what could ICP do better, “ICP never discussed impact, outcomes” (KPI)

### **Annex III: Limitations**

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- Interviewees were chosen by client, with a potential for bias but deemed credible by our team
- Practicum was constrained by a 7-week timeline
- Participants is not reflective of all those who participated in the program (demographic, program. etc.)
- Close-knit community, hard to penetrate unless connected
- Cultural barriers - (norms and customs)
- Language barriers – one of three team members didn’t read or speak Spanish

Puerto Rico: Seeking  
UNESCO Recognition  
of  
la Bomba

Alonso Escobar, Andrew Rahme,  
and Paul Simpson



SCHOOL *of*  
INTERNATIONAL  
SERVICE

## Overview

This project examines the prospects for Puerto Rico's effort to gain intangible cultural recognition through UNESCO for la Bomba. Previous approaches were started to gain recognition, but due to systematic flaws in UNESCO and Puerto Rico's status as a U.S. territory, these plans could not move forward successfully. The UNESCO research team worked closely with leadership at the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (ICP), community members as well as scholars in Puerto Rico to learn more effective ways to address recognition.

The initial focus in this project began with improving the team's understanding of the UNESCO organization and its processes. The research began with looking at the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Once the criteria required for consideration were understood, the team began to focus on la Bomba and whether it qualified. With support from the ICP, various academics, community leaders, and locals, the team began to grasp that:

- La Bomba fulfills the criteria as a unique tradition and as a Puerto Rican tradition.
- Due to the lack of U.S. membership, and with Puerto Rico's territorial status, the pathways to achieve this recognition under UNESCO will be hard, but not impossible.

Once the team established the guidelines for recognition, the team focused its attention to finding technical support for the application process. Afterwards, the research focused on finding other means of recognition that could work simultaneously with the UNESCO process.

After conducting the research and interviews, the team determined three strategies that ICP can pursue to achieve recognition of la Bomba internationally via UNESCO. The three strategies are:

- Puerto Rico
  - Continued focus on promoting awareness and coordinating with the governor for both outreach on island as well as associate membership in UNESCO.
- Mainland
  - Rally resources in the mainland to support passage of an amendment in the federal appropriations bill to enable membership to UNESCO via U.S. or as an associate member while simultaneously working on a resolution via the Resident Commissioner.
- International
  - Collaboration with international organizations to provide assistance in the UNESCO mechanisms to achieve intangible cultural heritage status for la Bomba in addition to encouraging the U.S. government to overcome barriers in rejoining UNESCO.

## **Puerto Rico Strategy**

According to community leaders and academics on the island, la Bomba has become more visible in popular Puerto Rican culture in the last 15-20 years. Before that time, many Puerto Ricans did not recognize la Bomba as inherently Puerto Rican as it was reserved for tight knit communities with clear afro-descendancy. Outside of these communities, the Puerto Rican population generally did not engage with la Bomba outside of large events meant to showcase it. With support from the ICP, Bomberos on the island and academics have worked since then to gain greater recognition and encourage involvement. Younger Bomberos worked by region to collect information and learn from elders in la Bomba communities, and have compiled enough data to continue teaching la Bomba to broader communities. Although these efforts were successful, those interviewed expressed the need for expanded support in education and data collection and continued long-term progress in creating a larger, more cohesive history of la Bomba and its many practices.

### *Recommendations:*

- Continue and expand partnerships with academia and experts to provide technical support to further document the essence of la Bomba.
  - Utilize academic Chairs of UNESCO at University of Puerto Rico for technical support.
  - Create an internship program (paid or unpaid) to research and document la Bomba practices for greater visibility and reference through ICP.
- Maintain and continue building partnerships with la Bomba communities utilizing younger and older Bomberos to establish historic commonalities among five regions.

Greater visibility of la Bomba will be reached through academic spaces, and the data collected will strengthen Puerto Rico's member state application, which the Governor's administration can submit. After greater visibility of la Bomba is reached, community organizing is needed to put pressure on the governor to apply for membership through UNESCO as an associate member state, with the end goal being Intangible Cultural Recognition for la Bomba listed specifically as Puerto Rican. If enough communities organize through academic spaces and community-based classes, the overwhelming support will influence the Governor to push for cultural sovereignty of Puerto Rico.

### *Recommendations:*

- Mobilize and unify five separate regions to put pressure on the Governor to apply through UNESCO for associate membership.
- Provide compiled data/information of history and functions of la Bomba to create a stronger application through the support of community leaders and academics.
- Host community dialogue with the Governor (such as an open forum) to express desire of la Bomba being recognized as a Puerto Rican tradition.

## Mainland Strategy

According to the research and interviews, there are a variety of paths via Washington that ICP can undertake to promote UNESCO recognition for la Bomba. A major obstacle to this process has been the U.S. withdrawal from UNESCO in 2018 in response to Palestine joining as a full member state given that under U.S. law, no federal funding can be given to any United Nations agency that recognizes Palestine as a full member state. In October 2021, an amendment to this law was included in the appropriations bill introduced to the Senate which would waive this limitation. This bill is still under consideration in Congress and provides an opportunity for ICP to leverage congressional allies to pass into law.

Lobbying is essential for this legislation to open the way for the U.S. to rejoin UNESCO. Based on interviews, cultural organizations and foundations are likely to assist in this process. Additionally, many of the interviews made reference to the Puerto Rican diaspora and how the Bomberos in the mainland can help encourage lawmakers to pass the appropriations bill.

### *Recommendations:*

- Coordinate with cultural foundations to encourage the U.S. government to pass the appropriations bill with the waiver included. The following foundations were provided as potential allies via interviews with academics and community leaders in addition to research:
  - American for the Arts
  - Ford Foundation
  - Mellon Foundation
  - Miranda Foundation
- Rally the Puerto Rican diaspora on the mainland to reach out to their Members of Congress to encourage them to pass the appropriations bill (a list of the states on the Appropriations Committee is in the appendix).

Absent legislative remedy to U.S. non-participation in UNESCO, organizations such as the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) may be the best pathway in building support for recognition of la Bomba in the mainland as well as cultural sovereignty.

### *Recommendations:*

- Continue to work with the NEA to establish Puerto Rico as culturally sovereign, including using the NEA convention as an opportunity to highlight Puerto Rican culture.
  - Engage NEA members in your struggles for cultural sovereignty as well as create a narrative that speaks about Puerto Rican visibility.
- Continue to apply for grants to assist in the preparation for UNESCO intangible cultural heritage application.

Additionally, the Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico can introduce a congressional resolution that would ultimately state la Bomba as an official Puerto Rican tradition. The Resident Commissioner can use her relationships with other Members of Congress to get the resolution passed. This would allow la Bomba to be recognized in an organization outside of UNESCO and further strengthen the application via UNESCO.

*Recommendations:*

- Coordinate with the Resident Commissioner to introduce a congressional resolution that would declare la Bomba as Puerto Rican tradition.
- Mobilize the diaspora to pressure the Resident Commissioner to introduce the resolution.

**International Strategy**

Through the research and interviews, the team found various organizations that could help with both the technical support and a political strategy to introduce la Bomba as a Puerto Rican tradition whilst pushing for international recognition of Puerto Rico's cultural sovereignty. The team encourages continued collaboration with IFACCA, ICOMOS, and UNITWIN to assist in finding connections that can help Puerto Rico receive cultural sovereignty in the international community and help with the eventual UNESCO application.

**UNITWIN** is a UNESCO program that grants academics the title of UNESCO Chairs. These chairs are tasked with specific research in their field. The program serves as a means for building collaboration between higher education and research institutions throughout the international system. Puerto Rico has two UNESCO Chairs, both from the University of San Juan.

*Recommendations:*

- Reach out to the current UNESCO Chair for technical support in the application process.
- Collaborate with other UNESCO Chairs in countries that have worked on their own UNESCO applications.

**ICOMOS** is a non-governmental organization associated with UNESCO. It was one of the critical technical advisors in the Convention for World Heritage. It is an advisory body of the World Heritage Committee and helps review nominations of cultural world heritage. It has worked to create the framework of heritage on an international level. Puerto Rico has worked with ICOMOS and has various associates who provide advisory and consulting to UNESCO. Since 2017, Puerto Rican ICOMOS associates have been negotiating with the organization to either become a voting member of ICOMOS as a Puerto Rican National Committee outside of the mainland or create a coalition with other territories to form a voting committee. This will put pressure on ICOMOS to allow Puerto Rico to have a voice in an international organization.

*Recommendations:*

- Collaborate with ICOMOS to understand the UNESCO application process as this will prove useful when ICP needs technical assistance for their application.
- Work with ICOMOS with their petition (provided in appendix) to create a National Committee within the organization.
- Rally allies on the local level, the diaspora, and the international field to sign the petition the ICOMOS petition to create a National Committee.

**IFACCA** is a federation that works to focus on international voices and perspectives that understand arts and culture are a public good that is shaped by all people. Puerto Rico is an affiliate member of IFACCA, with the ICP being its representative. Within the federation, there are various regional groups with Puerto Rico and the United States being labeled within the Americas region.

*Recommendations:*

- Use the relationship with the NEA (the U.S. representative to IFACCA) to rally other countries or regions to create a statement that proclaims that Puerto Rico deserves cultural sovereignty and that la Bomba is a culturally intangible tradition of Puerto Rico.
- Use the Americas region, especially those that have dances on UNESCO list of traditions (including Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, etc.), to create a statement that proclaims that Puerto Rico deserves cultural sovereignty and that la Bomba is a culturally intangible tradition of Puerto Rico.

**The 9<sup>th</sup> World Summit on Arts and Cultures** will take place in 2023 hosted in Stockholm. This summit is important for IFACCA members to come together and convene over the selected theme. This summit's theme will focus on Safeguarding Artistic Freedom. Puerto Rico, as an affiliate member, is invited to the summit and may use it as an opportunity to network with other members in similar situations while also finding supporters to their cause.

*Recommendations:*

- Use your participation in the World Summit to continue and expand the conversation that labels Puerto Rico's cultural sovereignty as a priority.
- Lobby for Puerto Rico to be given a voice during the conference as one of the chosen speakers.
  - Use this opportunity to engage other members in your struggles for cultural sovereignty as well as label how members can help by rallying together as a federation to proclaim territories as having cultural traditions.
- Rally other affiliate members and supporting members to create the conversation that could signify to UNESCO that Puerto Rico can use other international organizations to claim cultural sovereignty.

## **Conclusion**

While the process will be challenging, the strategies listed above can work in tandem to effectively gain intangible cultural recognition for la Bomba through UNESCO. Through technical support, partnerships, continued efforts by ICP, and the mobilization of la Bomba communities and the diaspora, the application can be strengthened to not only gain recognition through UNESCO, but also build visibility within international communities. Considering the political environment may change before or during implementation of the above strategies to allow for easier pathways to cultural recognition of la Bomba, it is vital that the application form be completed alongside these strategies in anticipation of the final application submission.