

Good morning, my name is Yarimar Bonilla.

I am the Director of The Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College, the largest Research Institute and Archive devoted to the Puerto Rican Experience.

I am grateful for the invitation to testify today on the question of Persistent Poverty and Chronic Disinvestment in the US Territories—though given the time limit and data challenges, I will focus narrowly on Puerto Rico.

When I gathered with my team to prepare this testimony the first question we asked ourselves was: Is Persistent Poverty really the right term for thinking about Puerto Rico's challenges?

The US government has set 20% for thirty years as the trigger of alarm, but the fact is that Puerto Rico has had twice that poverty rate for over half a century.

At 40.5 %, Puerto Rico has the second highest poverty rate in the US and the absolute lowest median income of any US Jurisdiction. A full quarter of the Puerto Rican population subsists on just 10,000 a year.

Some assume these depressed incomes are tied to lower costs of living, but the contrary is true: rent, mortgage, and utility burdens are all higher in Puerto Rico than the national average.

The US territories as a whole share these concerning metrics, leading us to ask whether this is a question of persistent poverty or, rather, of the systemic poverty of empire.

Sadly, those most impacted by poverty and inequality are Puerto Rico's children. A whopping 55% of Puerto Rican children are living in poverty; 60% in rural areas.

It has been shown that the best way to attend to income inequality is to ensure access to public infrastructure and services, like education, that facilitate upward mobility.

However, in Puerto Rico acute poverty rates have been met by a systemic disinvestment in public infrastructure due to austerity measures leading to the closing of schools, the defunding of the university system, and the privatization of essential infrastructure such as roads, tolls, and energy distribution.

Since the privatization of the grid in 2021, outages have become commonplace, even as utility costs rise. This has impacted education, healthcare, communications, sales revenue, and even the preparation of this testimony: yesterday, one of our researchers was among the hundreds of thousands without electricity due to yet another mass power outage.

The toughest part of all of this is that those who fail to provide us with the most basic of services – services which arguably be guaranteed human rights—seem to operate with complete impunity.

Although many wring their hands and accept this as the unfortunate fate of life in the colonies, we remind the members of Congress that the US constitution grants them the singular power to change the lives of the millions of Citizens and Nationals that reside in the territories.

Time and again the Supreme Court has established that Congress has the power and authority to treat the territories differently than the states. This has historically been interpreted as a congressional right to treat the territories worse, by leaving them out of critical federal programs while failing to address their systemically depressed incomes. However, Congress could just as easily treat the territories better by attending to the demographic particularities and historic legacies of systemic dispossession.

If the US government recognizes that a persistent poverty rate of over 20% for three decades warrants federal action (such as the 10-20–30 provision) we request the committee to truly ponder what is necessary to attend to communities that have had a poverty rate of over 40% for multiple generations.

To begin, Congress must exercise its oversight role to critically examine the impact of the Fiscal Board it created: what has been the tangible impact and long-term consequences of the focus on austerity and privatization?

Further, since the board conceded that a large portion of Puerto Rico's debt was unconstitutional, why is it forcing Puerto Ricans to pay it, and refusing to audit it?

In addition, HUD and FEMA must be held accountable and work in better partnership with local watchdogs. Discrimination and excessive scrutiny of Puerto Rican agencies and applicants in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria has been widely documented, and changes promised, yet we already hear the same issues unfolding in the wake of Hurricane Fiona.

Lastly, Congress must address the exclusion of Puerto Rico and other US territories from federal programs like SSI, and other federal benefits geared at precisely the most disadvantaged sectors of the population. Otherwise, it should speak clearly on what moral grounds residents of the territories are excluded from these entitlements.

Again, Congress can treat the territories differently. It should use that power to provide not just equity, but justice.