

CONCLUSIONS: IMPROVING THE PATHWAYS TO ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

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THE STUDIES IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE CONTRIBUTE TO THE

understanding of crucial aspects of participation in low-wage labor markets in the United States and pathways to economic opportunity for Puerto Ricans. Collectively, the authors proposed that there are three categories of factors that affect the likelihood of a Puerto Rican working at a low-wage job. The first category pertains to the human capital characteristics of the workers, such as education, migration experience, and English fluency. The second set of factors are structural, and may include the distribution of job opportunities corresponding to industries in local labor markets as well as the occupations and skills demanded by those industries. Finally, the third category involves the strength and efficacy of the institutions and policies that regulate relations between workers and employers, such as the local employment services infrastructure, the social and ethnic networks, the relations between industries and local stakeholders, and community organizations that shape local labor dynamics and outcomes.

In their article, Visser and Meléndez (2011: 4–19) examined human capital disparities that may account for a concentration of Puerto Rican workers in low-wage labor markets and find that educational attainment and language proficiency play a role. Undoubtedly, the lower educational levels of Puerto Ricans when compared to the average worker limit their opportunities. Considering workers 26 years of age and older, the authors find that the greatest price is paid by those who failed to complete high school, with Puerto Ricans having a disparity of seven percentage points (25 percent to 18 percent) when compared to the proportion of all workers with less than a high school education. However,

the distribution of Puerto Ricans in low-wage labor markets for those with high school degrees and above is similar to the distribution of all U.S. workers, with the exception of those with a college degree and above, where Puerto Ricans actually make up a lower proportion of low-wage workers. In other words, education is a critical factor determining Puerto Ricans' location in the labor market.

Migration, an important source of new entries into the labor force, and migrant human capital characteristics may contribute to the expansion of low-wage employment. Here, Meléndez and Visser (2011: 38–64) examine the skills selectivity among Puerto Ricans migrants. To ascertain the validity of the proposition that Puerto Rican migration flows are primarily composed of the most disadvantaged workers, they divided the sample into two labor market segments—those employed in low-wage occupations and those not employed in low-wage occupations. They find that workers with college degrees and low-wage jobs are more likely to migrate in either direction but that it is unlikely that recent migration is contributing to the large portion of Puerto Ricans in low-wage jobs. Also, they find no evidence that high earners in the technology and financial fields or those in professional and managerial occupations are more likely to leave or return to the island.

REDUCING THE DISPROPORTIONATE NUMBER OF PUERTO RICANS IN LOW-WAGE JOBS REQUIRES A GRASP OF THE FACTORS AFFECTING THE EDUCATIONAL PIPELINE IN GENERAL, AND SPECIFICALLY, THE TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION.

The concentration of Puerto Ricans in low-income communities, and by implication in school districts where students exhibit significant disparities in achievement, is well documented in the literature. Reducing the disproportionate number of Puerto Ricans in low-wage jobs requires a grasp of the factors affecting the educational pipeline in general, and specifically, the transition from high school to postsecondary education. Vélez and Goldsmith (2001: 20–37) use longitudinal data to examine factors influencing the transitions to wage labor and postsecondary education among Puerto Rican youth. Not surprisingly, they find that students who scored higher on math and other standardized tests as well as those from affluent contexts are more likely to enroll in two- or four-year colleges. They also find that for some, working during high school could be beneficial in the transition to work, but not necessarily for acquiring postsecondary education. However, a puzzling finding

was that for Puerto Ricans “higher levels of affluence at home boosted high school graduation rates but did not lead to higher odds of attending college” (coll:35). This contradicts the conventional status attainment model, which proposes that higher family socioeconomic status contributes to higher achievement by children. Thus, providing a more rigorous curriculum and test preparation may not be sufficient motivation, even when students come from a more affluent family background, to enroll and succeed in postsecondary education.

Taken together, these three studies suggest that the uniqueness of the Puerto Rican case is due in part to the differences in educational attainment when compared to other Latinos and to the concentration in disadvantaged neighborhoods and school districts, but the continuous influx of new migrants from Puerto Rico is not making worse the skills distribution.

FROM A COMMUNITY STRATEGY PERSPECTIVE, THE FOUR ARTICLES DISCUSSED ABOVE SUGGEST A CHALLENGE FOR THE PUERTO RICAN CASE. THE LAST THREE PAPERS ADDRESS PRECISELY THIS CHALLENGE: HOW TO ADVANCE THE CAREER PROSPECTS OF YOUNG PUERTO RICANS AND NEW MIGRANTS, WHILE CLOSING THE DISPARITIES IN EDUCATION?

At the institutional level, the publicly financed workforce investment system and community responses to employment disparities play a critical role in structuring opportunities for Puerto Rican workers. Also in this special issue, Borges-Méndez (2001: 64–93) examines the local public workforce development system in cities with high concentrations of Puerto Ricans—New York, Hartford, and Springfield/Holyoke—focusing on Puerto Rican community-based organizations and their level of engagement with low-wage workers. This study is based on the premise that intermediaries play a unique role in connecting employers and workers, providing skills training and the supports necessary to gain and sustain employment. The findings revealed significant disparities on how the Puerto Rican population is serviced: little or no participation of Puerto Rican community-based organizations in the workforce development system in New York City, the area of greatest concentration of Puerto Ricans, relative to Hartford and Springfield/Holyoke.

In addition, in New York, the prevailing model is the “work-first” approach, notorious for its low impact on skills and long-term earnings progression, whereas in Hartford and Springfield/Holyoke, sectorial and career-ladder approaches are part of the program mix. The latter models offer better long-term employment and wage prospects for Puerto Rican and other low-wage workers.

From a community strategy perspective, the four articles discussed above suggest a challenge for the Puerto Rican case. The last three papers address precisely this challenge: how to advance the career prospects of young Puerto Ricans and new migrants, while closing the disparities in education?

THE CHALLENGE NOW IS FOR LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION, GOVERNMENT, AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS TO ENGAGE WITH EMPLOYERS AND INDUSTRY LEADERS IN ADDRESSING THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF THE PUERTO RICAN WORKFORCE.

Torres-Vélez (2001: 94–113) points out that there are no government-supported economic development programs to help minority groups access opportunities within the emerging energy-efficiency labor sector. However, there are a number of local initiatives that have advantageously used federal monies to address job-creation for the marginalized urban poor. Torres-Vélez concludes that since Puerto Rican community-based organizations have been at the forefront of the environmental justice movement in New York City, programs through these groups could provide opportunities to overcome the green-jobs gap in the city, while creating career ladders for Puerto Rican low-wage workers in the energy-efficiency and retrofitting industry.

In a second case study addressing this challenge for the Puerto Rican community in the U.S., Mercado (2011: 114–36) makes program and policy recommendations for the design of effective pathways to teaching careers. Such pathways would combine college readiness with workforce development in sectors where there are opportunities for entry-level employment with minimal credentials and the potential for advancement at a salary above the minimum wage. These opportunities are especially promising for some of the most vulnerable members of the Puerto Rican community, such as young males, ages 16 to 24, who are in high school, unemployed, or employed in low-wage industries. According to Mercado, the teaching industry, which comprises the largest workforce in the nation, has much to offer Puerto Rican youth. First, the growth of the U.S. school population, in which one in four students is Latino, justifies targeted workforce development for a profession that is overwhelmingly non-Hispanic white and female. Second, teacher-shortages in

English language learning and early education for children ages 3 to 5 have serious consequences for the Latino community. Recruiting and preparing Puerto Rican teachers is an excellent strategy for addressing these shortages; among Latinos, Puerto Ricans are often the most proficient in English with Spanish language competence and possess “location specific knowledge” (2011: 118) that is associated with good teaching.

Finally, the De Jesús article (2011: 136–55) explores program models that address obstacles to Puerto Rican adults’ successful entry into social work careers. These models target those employed in social work and related fields who have not completed a bachelor’s degree and may benefit from programs that address barriers to obtaining post-secondary credentials. An examination of three higher education partnership models using a cross-case analysis, show some common features of best practices such as a particular focus on recruitment practices, links with employers, and support services available for Puerto Rican adults. Programs include such features as tuition assistance, transportation assistance, child care, support in strengthening verbal and written English skills, and access to networks of employers. Replication of these programs in the field of social work could offer additional career pathways in Puerto Rican communities.

The lessons from these case studies are important for developing community strategies and designing public policy for Puerto Ricans workers, especially young people who could benefit the most from career pathways. By design, the case studies selected for analysis by the various authors share some elements: they target industries with significant employment potential; they involve higher education and community partnerships; and they focus on serving the Puerto Rican and Latino communities. The challenge now is for leaders in higher education, government, and community organizations to engage with employers and industry leaders in addressing the unique needs of the Puerto Rican workforce.

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