

# Bold Policies for Puerto Rico: A Blueprint for Transformative, Justice-Centered Recovery

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Well, this is what we owe you? I think it is *you* who owes us!  
—RESIDENTE, CALLE 13, INTERVIEW, *THE NATION*, 2018

Earlier this year, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* ran a lead story underscoring the compound effects of the now 12-year-long debt crisis, and the recent devastation of Hurricane María (Zamudio-Suárez, 2018), on the University of Puerto Rico (UPR). Founded in 1903, shortly after the island passed into US control following the Spanish-Cuban-American War, UPR is among the largest public universities in the Caribbean, serving more than 55,000 students on 11 campuses, some of which were established through the 1862 Morrill Act, which created the first US land-grant colleges.

Recently, UPR has been subject to state-level austerity tied to the island's growing debt, resulting in faculty and staff layoffs, declining student enrollment, and increased dependence on student tuition. In early 2017, faculty and student union groups protested as elected officials continued to cut the university system's operating budget (see Robles, 2017b).<sup>1</sup> Later in the year, María hit, and an already grossly underfunded institution was met with severe infrastructural calamity. The *Chronicle* paints a devastating picture of UPR's campuses after María: power shortages and classes forced to meet under tarps (amid other infrastructural challenges), all while a network of underresourced student and faculty volunteers worked together for recovery.

At present, the deleterious effects on Puerto Rico's flagship educational engine must be viewed in the context of a larger human-induced dual crisis. We use the experience of UPR as a prime example of the devastation inflicted upon the island's many public goods. Climate change contributed to the catastrophic damage of two Category 5 hurricanes:<sup>2</sup> María and Irma struck within weeks of each other in September 2017. The hurricanes intensified an economic crisis dat-

ing back more than a decade. As Mora, Dávila, and Rodríguez (2017) note, Puerto Rico already was confronting a prolonged humanitarian emergency before María because of its severe economic crisis—*La Crisis Boricua*—that had been ongoing since 2006.<sup>3</sup>

At a fundamental level, the extended *Crisis Boricua* cannot be viewed separately from the racialized colonial policies that dispossessed the Puerto Rican people of their own resources and economic potential and, simultaneously, severely limited the island's sovereignty. Since the US invasion of the island in 1898, Puerto Rico's role as a site of extraction has escalated with the primary purpose of benefiting the (mainland) United States while increasing the island's dependence on the larger power (Lloréns, Santiago, Garcia-Quijano, & de Onis, 2018).<sup>4</sup> The more recent wave of purportedly debt-driven austerity has spurred a new wave of net out-migration, the largest yet in Puerto Rico's history, as well as high unemployment, declining labor-force participation, and the worsening of a host of other socioeconomic conditions (Mora et al., 2017; Méendez & Hinojosa, 2017).

Given this backdrop, it is clear that any long-term solution must involve a change in political status for the island and a social-justice-based restitution of appropriated wealth. In this working blueprint, we center on redress, calling on the fiscal/ethical responsibility of the United States to engage in debt cancellation, thereby removing the pretended rationale for austerity.

We also call, as part of a larger public investment plan, for implementation of a locally administered, island-wide, permanent Puerto Rican Job Guarantee (PRJG), with specific intent to build, staff, and maintain a sustainable renewable-energy-based infrastructure. A living-wage-based PRJG would not only help

address the island's net out-migration and employment crisis but also serve as a catalyst for building a transformative, climate-change-resilient economy.<sup>5</sup>

### DISASTER ECONOMICS AND THE ROAD TO PRIVATIZATION

The humanitarian crisis expanded quickly after Hurricane María hit, affecting 3.3 million US citizens—from the island's mountainous interior to its coastlines. In the immediate aftermath, island-resident Puerto Ricans were faced with inadequate food, water, and fuel; sparse (if any) electricity; entirely flooded towns; impassable roads and bridges; and schools, hospitals, and elder-care facilities requiring evacuation, all underscoring the unprecedented breadth of the catastrophe (Meyer, 2017).

Subsequently, the federal response has been slow and inadequate at all tiers—from the administrative and the distributive systems to the larger legislative levels. For example, after multiple hurricanes battered the region from the Caribbean to the Gulf Coast in succession, the US Congress approved a relief package worth \$36.5 billion for Puerto Rico, Florida, Texas, and several other territories combined. To put this into perspective, Puerto Rico's governor requested \$94 billion (a conservative estimate at best) for Puerto Rico alone (*Economist Intelligence Unit*, 2018b). On the ground, uneven power restoration by federal authorities has been well documented, with many of the island's interior and rural areas suffering neglect (May, 2018).<sup>6</sup>

In the months since Hurricanes Irma and María hit, there has been compelling evidence that the official death toll reported by the Puerto Rican government is false. Leading the effort to uncover the truth, the Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (2017) has organized a grassroots effort whereby citizens report hurricane-related deaths directly to the Centro, which then aggregates this information and publishes it online as an alternative to passively waiting for government officials to complete their investigation (see also Sosa Pascual, 2017, 2018). A *New York Times* investigation found that the official death toll vastly underestimates the number of casualties.

As of December 9, 2017, the official death toll was 64, but the actual number might be closer to 1,052, which represents the number of additional deaths that occurred after the hurricane compared against mor-

tality during the same period in 2015 and 2016 (Robles, 2017a). Reporters from CNN did a separate investigation, calling nearly every funeral home on the island. They were able to confirm that the number of deaths attributed to the hurricane by funeral directors was about 10 times the number officially reported. Even this is an underestimate both because it relies on confirmed deaths and because not every funeral director responded to the inquiries (Sutter, Santiago, & Shah, 2017).

In response to pressure by citizen groups and journalists, Governor Ricardo Rosselló announced the commission of an independent and impartial report to be conducted by epidemiologists at George Washington University (Sosa Pascual, 2018). Studies conducted by researchers at Harvard University and Carlos Albizu University in Puerto Rico, among others, estimated that there were 4,645 more deaths in the three months following Hurricane María than there were in the same three months of 2016 (Kishore et al., 2018). By surveying a representative group of 3,299 households, they were able to show that the uptick in mortality after the hurricane is statistically significant and much higher than the government's official count of 64.<sup>7</sup>

Although we may not know the actual death toll at more than six months after María, it is clear that the situation in Puerto Rico remains dire. As of February 2, 2018, the island's power authority, PREPA, estimates that 30% of households and businesses remain without power (Autoridad de Energía Eléctrica, 2018). Without sufficient power, safe drinking water and sanitation are compromised further, exacerbating pre-María water safety violations and other related infrastructural challenges (Panditharatne, 2017).

The island's economy had about 50,000 fewer jobs in October 2017, just one month after Hurricane María hit, than a year earlier (*Economist Intelligence Unit*, 2018a). All of this has produced a community-level trauma that is partly reflected in broader health statistics like the number of suicides on the island, which rose 50% in the four months following the hurricane (Vicens, 2018). At the macroeconomic level, the five-year fiscal plan submitted by the governor on January 24 is based on an estimate that gross national product (GNP) fell by 11.2% during the 2017–2018 fiscal year.

The prediction of further economic failure by the Puerto Rican Governor's Office, with likely disproportionate effects on the island's public institutions and other "collective goods," should not come as a surprise, especially within the context of a "disaster economics" environment (Bonilla, 2017; Yeampierre & Klein, 2017). Also known as "disaster capitalism," this refers to privatization, public-private partnerships, and other ways in which the public sphere is weakened after a disaster, often through what amounts to direct transfers from collectively held resources to corporate and concentrated private interests. It also refers more generally to attempts to treat disasters as "exciting market opportunities" (Klein 2007, p. 6).

The recent proposal by the Governor's Office to privatize PREPA is a perfect illustration. Calls for its privatization have been ongoing since the 1970s. In the era of fiscal crises, the public utility has been underfunded year after year. While reforms need to be made, it is highly unlikely that privatization will result in better provision of services at lower costs. Lara Merling (2018) argues that the disastrous case of Puerto Rico's Aqueduct and Sewer Authority (PRASA) is instructive.

PRASA was privatized under concession agreements with French multinational Veolia in 1995, a deal that resulted in almost tripling the operational losses (from \$241 million in 1999 to \$695 million in 2001), a deterioration of services, and fines of at least \$6.2 million by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for violations of environmental regulations (Chandra, Girard, & Puscas, 2005). In 2002, when the Puerto Rican government moved to contract with Ondeo Industrial Solutions, a subsidiary of another French multinational, Suez, various reports praised the new deal for including protections. But less than two years later the arrangement fell apart after Ondeo repeatedly requested more money than was previously planned, while simultaneously failing to update the island's water and sewage infrastructure. In the end, PRASA had to pay Ondeo to exit the contract (Merling, 2018).

The disaster-economics-situated threat to PREPA notwithstanding, Puerto Rico is also home to one of the nation's poorest public school districts. According to the *Washington Post*, nearly a third of the 1,110 schools remain without power, and an additional 21 schools were closed because of damage or low enrollment since 25,000 students, 1 in 13, have left the is-

land to seek schooling on the US mainland (Balingit, 2018; Bryant, 2018).

Not only students left. According to the same source, an estimated 200 teachers left the island, aggravating a teacher shortage that began earlier in 2017. It is no surprise that just prior to submission of this article, Puerto Rico's governor announced plans to introduce legislation that will call for more vouchers, charters, and "choice-based" reforms within the island's public school system (Coto, 2017). Again, if recent experiences are any indicator, market-based infusions in New Orleans post-Katrina ultimately demonstrated far more harm than good for low-income families of color, aggravating preexisting inequalities (Harris & Larsen, 2015).

In short, under the ideological terms of disaster economics, the privatization of public spaces and public goods, such as hospitals, schools, utilities, and other structural necessities, become the market-based solution, exacerbating inequality. As Yarimar Bonilla (2018) effectively argued, in the absence of a true plan for recovery, migration (for those who can) serves as a default form of disaster relief. This does not have to be the case.

## **BUILDING THE CASE FOR A PRJG**

Since María, Puerto Rico's dual crisis has spurred much public debate over its economic future, with numerous policy recommendations emanating from island and diasporic sources. While some proposals exist within the current neoliberal frame, which stresses free markets and trickle-down economics, our blueprint unapologetically joins a larger counternarrative that recognizes how further austerity imposed on the mainland will only increase out-migration, unemployment, and a deterioration of Boricua health and economic well-being.

Our proposal is for bold, transformative policy: a Puerto Rican Jobs Guarantee. The PRJG must exist within a framework of policies on the scale of a Marshall Plan or Green New Deal for Puerto Rico. The November 2017 Senate legislation cosponsored by Vermont senator Bernie Sanders, Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren, and others (along with its companion in the House sponsored by Representative Nydia Velásquez and colleagues) could serve as a prototype

(Chávez, 2017). This legislation directs \$146 billion in aid to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, helping those territories' debt-burdened governments and providing funds for economic development, infrastructure, a new power grid, education, and environmental remediation in Puerto Rico.

This plan is significantly more generous than the request put forth by Governor Rosselló, and it has the backing of San Juan mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz. A central element of the plan is to rebuild the power grid using renewable, "green" technology, making it more resilient than before Hurricane María hit (Chávez, 2017; Stein, 2017). Critically, the Sanders-Warren plan blocks privatization of any public entity receiving funds from the US government, ensuring PREPA remains a public utility (Aronoff, 2017). Accompanying this plan, however, is necessary discussion over the island's supposed debt, as well as its fiscal future.

Twenty-seven economists and scholars, including some of the authors of this piece, recently signed a circulated open letter outlining a new fiscal plan for Puerto Rico's recovery (Acemoglu et al., 2018). The proposed fiscal plan, which would complement a sustainable PRJG, incorporates several crucial components.

First and foremost is the need to reject austerity by the Puerto Rican governor and the Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB). The FOMB's pre-María fiscal plan failed to take into account the cumulative effects of systemic budget cuts, loss of tax revenues, net out-migration, and public employee pension cuts and layoffs. The plan provides no vision for altering, much less repealing, the restrictive trade provisions imposed by the Jones Act (discussed later). The reality is that increasing public spending is necessary for macroeconomic recovery.

Second, there should be complete suspension of the debilitating PROMESA program, Puerto Rico's current debt-restructuring process. A newer, more reasonable and progressive fiscal plan would recognize that this debt is not payable in the short or the long term, implying that a debt write-down is the appropriate solution.<sup>8</sup>

Debt cancellation, forgiveness, and relief have a long history, including examples of intra-sovereign (state and municipal) debt write-off. Many countries have used debt-management frameworks to end long

periods of negative growth by reversing the policy trend away from austerity.

In December 2001, Argentina defaulted on its sovereign debt, an action that many predicted would have dire consequences. Instead, gross domestic product (GDP) grew at an annual rate of 5.6% each year in the following decade (International Monetary Fund, 2017; Weisbrot, Ray, Montecino, & Kozameh, 2011).

Modern frameworks for debt cancellation emphasize access to financial markets. The worry is that countries or territories that default may not be able to borrow money at reasonable rates in the future. An alternative approach focuses on the incentives of financial actors that too often stand to gain from lending excessively, even to public institutions that will not be able to repay fully, making poor countries more indebted.

Debt forgiveness also can provide a route toward solving moral-hazard problems and disciplining the financial industry (Darity, 1989). Vulture funds and hedge funds that continued to buy the island's bonds even after they were downgraded to "junk" status in 2014 are counting on their ability to win in the courts through massive lawsuits. They will argue that Puerto Rico's public institutions should pay back the debt at face value, even though they bought the debt at a steep discount precisely because almost everyone was aware that this would be impossible.

While debt cancellation should play a major role in getting Puerto Rico back on a sustainable path, this program is no doubt complicated by the fact that Puerto Rican individuals, corporations, and workers likely own some part of the debt. Due to a regulatory loophole, investment companies headquartered in Puerto Rico and that sell securities exclusively to residents of that territory are not required to register with the Securities and Exchange Commission and thus are exempt from certain financial regulations (Congressional Budget Office, 2017). As a consequence, Puerto Ricans may have been victims of securities fraud whereby investment banks use false or misleading claims to sell public bonds (Giel, Picker, & Zamost, 2017).

It is not known how many Puerto Rican minority stakeholders still own parts of Puerto Rico's outstanding debt, but clearly for a successful recovery this group should be treated differently, for reasons of

both social justice and economic reality. Wealth building on the island would be harmed seriously if public bonds sold to ordinary citizens were wiped out as part of the debt-relief process. Any victims of financial fraud or other legal violations should be compensated and awarded damages.

Echoing a set of proposals rooted in the civil rights movement and a plethora of established literature that has more recently been brought to the public eye, a PRJG would serve as transformative structural accompaniment to recovery, offering employment with dignity and public purpose (on jobs guarantee programs, see Hamilton & Darity, 2009; Darity & Hamilton, 2012; Wray, 2008; Tcherneva, 2012; Aja et al., 2013; Aja, Darity, & Hamilton, 2017; Spross, 2017).

A permanent public option for employment would offer a living-wage, salaried job to anyone who cannot find decent work in the wider labor market. It would include training programs, health coverage, mental health counseling, gym benefits, and a vested pension. It also would ensure a job guarantee participant due process and worker representation, with the right to join an affiliate public- or private-sector-based union.

The PRJG would directly employ Puerto Ricans to participate in a range of large- and small-scale projects ushered in by a stimulus recovery package, whether they are working on rebuilding the island's infrastructure, staffing public educational facilities, or providing care for the young or elderly. For example, the PRJG could support an emissions-free electrical grid for the entire island, centered on solar and wind energy, centrally administered to support larger urban centers or decentralized to power smaller municipalities and rural communities.

The program could employ energy workers directly, both those trained and in training, to install solar-power generators in harder-to-reach parts of the island (Yeampierre & Klein, 2017). A PRJG could help rebuild roads and bridges while moving toward sustainable transportation systems, favoring light rail and other green-based mass transit. Rail transit boomed at the turn of the twentieth century, and in the 1920s and 1930s a national railroad system circled the island with over 300 miles of track. Presently the most popular rail transit is El Tren Urbano, which has 16 stations spread over just 10.7 miles. A PRJG could also employ people

to staff libraries or serve as auxiliary support for public schools, including the public university system, community centers, public health and elder-care facilities, all of which were subject to the violence of austerity before María.

Potentially, the PRJG will have larger economic implications. A job guarantee would reduce Puerto Rico's high unemployment and out-migration rates, while building a public workforce to counteract the prevailing trends toward the privatization of public infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> To provide context, consider how the ongoing economic and governance crises have dramatically reshaped the island. Puerto Rico's real GDP shrank by 15.9% between 2004 and 2017,<sup>10</sup> and the island's total population fell from 3.8 million in 2004 to 3.4 million in 2016, a net loss of more than 400,000 people (IMF, 2017; Krogstad & Sandstrom, 2017). The most recent estimate puts the population at under 3.34 million, highlighting the unprecedented speed of the population decline. Localized losses are even more severe. Even the county of San Juan, which includes the capital city, saw its population shrink by 10% in just the five years between 2010 and 2015 (Krogstad, 2016).

A PRJG situated in a larger Marshall-like plan has the potential to slow down the large net flow of migrants from Puerto Rico to the US mainland and thereby address population decline as well. Table 1 shows the extent to which out-migration contributed to depopulation, based on data from the US Census's American Community Survey.<sup>11</sup> On net, about 675,000 people migrated from Puerto Rico to the mainland, including Alaska and Hawaii, from 2005 to 2016, but there has been a marked increase in the pace of out-migration starting in 2011.

Over the past three years for which we have data, there has been a net annual migration of about 68,300 people from Puerto Rico to the US mainland. Approximately 40% said the main reason for moving was work related, while another 39% said it was primarily due to family or household reasons (Krogstad & Sandstrom, 2017).

Table 1 demonstrates that in every educational category and in every year between 2005 and 2016, with only one exception, out-migration from Puerto Rico has far outweighed in-migration from the US mainland to the island. The largest group of emigrants

**Table 1. Net Migration From Puerto Rico to the US Mainland for Adults, by Education, and Total Net Migration**

Year	Adults ( $\geq 18$ years old)						All ages
	Less than high school	High school	Some college	College degree	More than college	Row total	Total
2005	1,704	224	2,048	1,384	372	5,732	12,318
2006	6,380	9,287	4,459	4,528	488	25,142	34,769
2007	2,186	8,412	6,600	3,252	2,282	22,732	32,660
2008	3,118	4,415	6,418	3,993	592	18,536	22,663
2009	3,885	9,424	5,651	5,317	2,412	26,689	27,177
2010	8,215	3,905	9,470	2,915	-131	24,374	25,772
2011	12,081	12,326	10,806	5,663	2,270	43,146	55,242
2012	5,349	10,226	12,757	5,445	242	34,019	47,919
2013	9,364	8,731	12,543	3,005	2,505	36,148	51,968
2014	10,063	14,526	12,909	8,247	2,830	48,575	68,099
2015	12,773	9,751	15,327	11,068	3,506	52,425	67,686
2016	7,667	14,174	15,035	11,201	3,980	52,057	69,137
<i>Total</i>	<i>82,785</i>	<i>105,401</i>	<i>114,023</i>	<i>66,018</i>	<i>21,348</i>	<i>368,227</i>	<i>675,017</i>

Source: Authors' estimates using US Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) and Puerto Rico Community Survey (PRCS) for 2005–2016 in the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS).

by educational attainment are those with some college education, followed by those with a high school degree. About one quarter of the net migration from the island involves those who have completed a college degree or a graduate degree, and the proportion has grown even higher in the last three years.

Aside from the larger beneficial macroeconomic effects of a PRJG, which would ignite an array of stimulus effects in the economy at large, it also would have a positive impact on austerity-threatened occupations. For example, with many working-age adults migrating from Puerto Rico to the US mainland, the elder-care burden on the island for both the remaining family and the public sector may rise. Coupled with the well-documented out-migration of health-care professionals, there is a clear need for public policies supporting care work.

A recent Urban Institute study found a series of overlapping challenges for the health-care system in Puerto Rico, all tied to the larger economic crisis pre-María (Perreira et al., 2017). Thus, a job guaran-

tee could resolve the caregiving-induced gender earnings gap tied to the larger American “care economy” (Dastur et al., 2017) and also prevent out-migration of professional care workers, serving as a direct route to the public provision of services in Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico's weak labor market is also a key driver of out-migration. On average, the labor-force participation rate is 18 percentage points lower in Puerto Rico and the unemployment rate is 9.4 percentage points higher than on the US mainland (see table 2). Taken together, tables 1 and 2 demonstrate that bold, transformative economic policies are necessary in the context of Puerto Rico's compound crisis to ensure a just recovery.

There are other necessary measures that grassroots groups from Puerto Rico and diasporic communities have called for, including the removal of the long US-imposed Jones Act of 1920.<sup>12</sup> In fact, in the aftermath of two earlier twentieth-century hurricanes (San Felipe in 1928, San Ciprián in 1932), the presence of this policy, officially known as the Merchant Marine Act of

1920—which requires shipped international goods to stop first on the mainland rather than the island—has yielded an array of harmful, long-term environmental to economic effects.<sup>13</sup>

Not only has it given unfettered access to US corporations, who would sell their products at inflated prices that the typical Puerto Rican would struggle to afford, but it also accelerated increased privatization of state services. Moreover, it furthered the corporate acquisition of the island’s resources (Aja and Ortiz-Minaya, 2017).<sup>14</sup>

Increased sovereignty would allow the island to implement industrial and trade policy, simultaneously protecting the environment and its own shipping workers through labor unions, while creating economic alliances with other Caribbean nations. This would be especially crucial for Puerto Rico should the United States retract its current reactionary foreign policy toward Cuba, which is a leader in disaster preparedness and response (Bodenheimer, 2017).

In essence, a job guarantee via a bold, anti-austerity recovery plan opens the door for a more com-

prehensive application of reparations theory, given Puerto Rico’s colonial status and decades of environmental, community, and individual harm caused to its people. Puerto Rico could be just the beginning. The stimulus also can serve as a demonstration of the tremendous economic potential of what a more wide-scaled US federal job guarantee could achieve across the mainland.

We also recognize that any Marshall-like plan can be co-opted, used as a temporary stopgap with neoliberal strings attached, or never make it beyond paper. Our aim as interdisciplinary scholar-activists is to provide a bold alternative, situated in a people-centered frame that can inform the political process from the island to the diasporic side (see Martínez, 2018). This frame, as we understand it, is grounded in overwhelming empirical evidence that austerity and unfettered market-level practices only will deepen Puerto Rico’s fiscal misery, high rate of out-migration, and unemployment crisis.

In fact, in late February 2018, the Puerto Rican government announced another round of austerity

**Table 2. Labor Force Participation Rate (%), Unemployment Rate, and Total Population: Puerto Rico and the US Mainland**

	<i>Labor-force participation rate, age 16+</i>		<i>Unemployment rate, age 16+</i>		<i>Total population</i>
	<i>Puerto Rico</i>	<i>US mainland</i>	<i>Puerto Rico</i>	<i>US mainland</i>	<i>Puerto Rico</i>
2005	48.4	65.9	15.2	6.9	3,865,280
2006	47.6	65.0	15.7	6.4	3,927,776
2007	46.1	64.8	16.0	6.3	3,942,375
2008	47.4	65.9	14.8	6.4	3,954,037
2009	47.5	65.3	18.9	9.9	3,967,288
2010	47.2	64.4	19.0	10.8	3,722,133
2011	46.0	64.0	18.5	10.3	3,706,690
2012	45.3	63.8	17.3	9.4	3,667,084
2013	44.8	63.6	18.1	8.4	3,615,086
2014	44.5	63.3	18.5	7.2	3,548,397
2015	44.7	63.1	18.9	6.3	3,474,182
2016	44.7	63.1	16.2	5.8	3,411,307
2017					3,337,177

Source: US Census Bureau/American FactFinder (2017), based on 2005–2016 ACS 1-year estimates.

imposed on public employees, including the UPR. This is unconscionable policy making, based on largely unchallenged market-based ideologies that have dominated public discourse while perpetuating inequalities for most and directing even more wealth into the hands of the few. A just economy is one that offers everyone at least a living-wage job with benefits and workplace rights, and those jobs can be tied directly to a new, transformative model for sustainable economic development. The acute crisis of climate change, coupled by growing global wealth disparities and civil unrest, demands such action.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 There is a long history of strikes for better working conditions and increased access to quality education at the UPR. Since 2007, students have been responding to fiscal cuts; 2010–2011 was a particularly active period, with protests and strikes against student fees, teacher layoffs, and other issues (LeBrón, 2015).
- 2 Hurricane María made landfall officially as a Category 4 storm, with winds of 155 miles per hour, just 2 miles per hour shy of Category 5.
- 3 The authors would like to thank scholars Marie Mora and Yarimar Bonilla for their comments and expertise, which helped improve this article.
- 4 As an example of Puerto Rico–based “dependent-development,” often referenced is the mid-twentieth-century industrialization-based stimulus program Operation Bootstrap, Lloréns et al. (2018) aptly summarized its effects as offering “only marginal gains to the citizenry and instead set it on a path of depopulation, unsustainable development, heavy reliance on imported fossil fuels, and even greater economic dependency on the United States” (p. 1).
- 5 For more on climate-change adaptive infrastructural measures designed for hurricanes and intense storms more generally, see Walsh-Russo (2018).
- 6 Kate Aronoff’s (2018) investigative reporting provides a recent example, finding that materials necessary for island power-utility officials to restore had been hoarded by federal authorities.
- 7 The 95% confidence interval associated with the estimate is from 793 to 8,498 excessive deaths (Kishore et al., 2018).
- 8 During the plan’s initial unveiling, Senator Warren (D-Massachusetts) was quoted arguing for “full debt relief” and noted that the “vulture funds that snapped up Puerto Rican debt should not get one cent from the island, not one cent” (Chávez, 2017).
- 9 In January 2017, PREPA’s union workers and other affiliates came out strongly against the governor’s plan to privatize the energy company. A PRJG could serve as a permanent stopgap to this and similar privatization efforts.
- 10 Authors’ calculations are based on IMF (2017).
- 11 Because these data are based on representative surveys, the figures are estimates of the true number of migrants. Moreover, Mora et al. (2017) note that the scale of the net out-migration is even larger, as a significant number of people also migrated from the island to other countries.
- 12 For examples of recent commentaries that compare the role of the Jones Act to larger policy-level inequalities, see García (2018) and Denis (2017).
- 13 This particular Jones Act, the popular term for the Merchant Marine Act (1920) when referring to Puerto Rico, is not to be confused with the Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917, which imposed US citizenship on the Puerto Rican people.
- 14 Lloréns et al. (2018) further underscore the subsequent effects of Operation Bootstrap: “The steady decline of the island’s sugarcane industry and the increasing dependency on food imports meant that thousands of agricultural workers were rendered unemployable. At the same time, in conjunction with the local government, stateside industrial farms began to recruit and employ Puerto Rican agricultural workers. By the end of the twentieth century, Puerto Rican migration to the mainland—both seasonal and permanent—had become a way of life” (p. 2).

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