

## **Puerto Rican Research and Policy Initiative**

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As a result of the deliberations and recommendations of the search conference titled “In Pursuit of Puerto Rican Studies,” Centro spearheaded a CUNY-wide research and policy project tentatively titled “Puerto Rican Research and Policy Initiative.” To implement the initiative we propose an ambitious plan: create working groups composed of researchers who participated in the roundtables at the search conference and others; organize a series of conferences; and to issue calls for papers for special issues of the CENTRO Journal.

The following areas of research were established as priority for research:

**Economic Opportunity:** The abnormally high poverty rates affecting the Puerto Rican community in New York City and elsewhere result from a weak standing in labor markets, manifested in intermittent (part year, part time) work and low wages. And because work-related earnings and benefits are the foundation for financial stability, access to good jobs is critical for the economic well being of the community as a whole. However, having access to stable employment and above-poverty-level earnings is just a first step towards economic opportunity. Asset and wealth accumulation, such as housing ownership and possession of other financial assets, is an important component of economic opportunity. Centro’s research in the economic opportunity area focuses on three topics: Low-Wage Jobs and Workforce Development, Career Advancement of Professionals, and Asset Building.

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**The Educational Pipeline:** Centro, which founded the National Latino/a Education Research Agenda, highlighted in its publication (CENTRO 2003), the issues of teacher recruitment, retention, and training as the second most important problem needing attention (after that of accountability and assessment in terms of school reform.) One of the main reasons the teaching corps situation is so dire is that the number of Latino/as attending and completing four years of college as well as entering teacher-training programs is critically low. In response to this situation, a working group has been organized at Centro around the data needed to inform efforts to engage in reform strategies from the perspectives and experiences of Puerto Ricans and other Latino/as. The group will examine exemplary programs

addressing teacher preparation and will make recommendations for strategies on improving the recruitment of Latino teachers.

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**Health Equity/Mental Health:** Equity is an ethical concept meaning social justice and fairness. Health equity has been defined as the “absence of systematic disparities in health (or in the major social determinants of health) between social groups who have different level of underlying social advantage/disadvantage” (Braveman & Gruskin 2007). The presence of health disparities, therefore, signals health inequities and social injustice. Health data on Puerto Ricans/Latinos in the United States points to unmet health care needs, lack of health insurance, high rates of diabetes, HIV, chronic liver disease, homicides, unintentional injuries. Although various factors affect health outcomes, the impact of socioeconomic status (SES) has long been found to have a consistent inverse relationship. Centro’s research agenda on health equity will address the systematic unjust distribution of multiple social determinants associated with health inequity, with life-threatening outcomes and poor quality of life.

Regarding mental health, data on Puerto Ricans point to higher rates of depression/substance use/anxiety than other Latino groups (Acevedo et al, 2007). Mental health equity for the Puerto Rican community is a challenging and complex proposal that will propel various Centro initiatives: (1) development of a comprehensive bibliography of the psychological health literature of the Puerto Rican diaspora for the Centro Library (2) a book of readings on Puerto Rican mental health for students, researchers and general public (3) a panel/forum on mental health issues in the Puerto Rican community that can become a CENTRO Journal Issue (4) an analysis of public use NHIS data amongst other projects.

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**Criminal Justice System:** In 2000, life expectancy of Puerto Ricans was the lowest among New Yorkers. In response to this statistic, a working group has been started at Centro to look at the disparities which exist in health among the Puerto Rican community as it compares to other ethnic groups in the city. The group will look at issues of mental health, drug use, disability, and the role of socioeconomic factors in influencing access and use of public health facilities and receiving medical care.

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In addition to the research on social conditions, Centro researchers conduct research in the following areas:

**Political Participation, Race and Migration:** The paradox of Puerto Rican political participation is simple: voter participation is generally extremely high on the island and much lower in the United States. The answer is complex and contextual. Centro's research program in this area focuses on an examination of how race and migration mediate Puerto Ricans' political participation. First, the question of racial identification is important, so we propose to address the question of how racial identification varies according to place of settlement and migration status. Second, we propose to examine the inauspicious environment for the formation of pan-Caribbean strategic coalitions and political mobilization in the diaspora. We will examine whether Caribbeans exhibit a variety of identities, some of which may be in competition, contradiction or simply too fledgling to withstand challenges from political entrepreneurs who seek to create distinct bases of political support. A final project seeks to address the challenge of developing new tools to measure culturally shared racial categories. This project will be conducted in collaboration with researchers from the University of Puerto Rico.

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**Visual Art and Culture:** The Center for Puerto Rican Studies has a prime collection of works on paper. The educational value of this collection is augmented by Centro's collection of books and archival materials on Puerto Rican artists. In this context, the works on paper collection provides a unique entry point to understanding the history of the stateside Puerto Rican community. Centro's research in history focuses on three interrelated areas of inquiry. First, we examine the relationship between the Puerto Rican art movement and the social movements to reform civil society in the 1960s and 1970s. A second area of inquiry concerns the emergence of a unique Puerto Rican identity and aesthetics. A final area of research is concerned with the broad impact of Nuyorican art on the city.

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[7]**Florida and other new Puerto Rican communities:** Puerto Rican diasporic communities have grown rapidly in recent decades in many places far removed from the areas more traditionally identified with Puerto Rican Studies. Rural, urban, and suburban communities have emerged as new patterns of movement have followed shifts in U.S. economic opportunities from the Northeast to the South and West. Florida, in particular, now has the second-largest Puerto Rican population in the U.S. and the percentage of Puerto Ricans to total population in the Central Florida area around Orlando is now greater than that of New York. Puerto Ricans who headed north in the mid-20th century were largely working-class people arriving directly from Puerto Rico. These new migration patterns are cross-class and include those who have never before left Puerto Rico as well as those who have lived all or much of their lives in New York and other diasporic communities. Centro's research agenda in this area begins with Florida. We are examining the history and actuality of the social conditions, political needs, and cultural identities that are emerging there, especially in Central Florida.

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