

Puerto Rico Department of the Family

Ending Hunger in America: Examining Hunger in U.S. Territories

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Puerto Rico's Secretary of the Family
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Statement on Ending Hunger in America: Local Innovations to Inform a National Strategy

Puerto Rico is not only the biggest territory of the United States but also the most populated. The one hundred eleven point five (111.5) miles long by thirty-nine point eight (39.8) miles wide Island located in the Caribbean, has a population of 3.2 million American Citizens. From this total, 43.5% live below the poverty level (1.47 million out of 3.2 million people). This total represents more than three (3) times the US National level which is 14% . The largest demographic group living under these poverty levels are females between 25 and 34 years old, followed by females between 35 and 44 years old, and females between 55 and 64 years old.

On September 20th, 2017, Puerto Rico was devastated by a category 5 hurricane which caused \$43 billion dollars in damages Island-wide. This natural disaster had a huge economic impact on most of the population causing loss of employments, food scarcity and insecurity, mental and health issues, absence of utilities (electricity, water, communications), and a lack of basic necessities. Today, almost four years later, Puerto Ricans are still surviving the aftermath of this natural emergency. Two (2) years and four (4) months later, on January 7, 2020, Puerto Rico was struck again, but this time by a 6.4 magnitude earthquake occurred across parts of the South region of the Island. This has been the most devastating earthquake in more than one hundred-two (102) years. This major disaster destroyed eight thousand (8,000) residences leaving the occupants homeless, sheltered at tents provided by the US Army and the government. This event caused a major economic impact on the south region of Puerto Rico, affecting employments, businesses, schools, hospitals, and utilities, among others.

On March 12, 2020, only three (3) months after these earthquakes struck the Island, Puerto Rico was locked down for 90 days as a mitigation effort to stop the spread of the COVID 19 virus. This endeavor summed to the social distance, created a variety of unique situations and conditions for workers, businesses, employers, public transportation, and community support services, among others. Consequently, a large part of the population was temporarily unemployed and unable to afford basic necessities. During this time were processed more than 200,000 unemployment claims and 280,000 families requested NAP benefits because did not have resources to purchase food.

A recent study conducted by the Institute of Youth Development (IYD) in Puerto Rico is forewarning of a significant increase in the level of child poverty in Puerto Rico due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This increase in the number of youths living in extreme poverty is not limited to places like Puerto Rico. Poverty and hunger among children across the globe, including the United States, have now reached levels without modern precedent.

According to the authors of the IYD study, **“Los efectos del Covid-19 en la niñez de Puerto Rico: Vulnerabilidades, proyecciones y recomendaciones,”** in the absence of significant measures to

mitigate the trend, the percentage of children living in extreme poverty in Puerto Rico is likely to rise this year **from 58 percent to a 65 percent**. The study underlines that within the first four (4) months of year 2020, an additional 244,000 residents of Puerto Rico fell below the federal poverty line, including 43,000 children.

Before the pandemic, Puerto Rico, was whirling from an economic recession that has lasted over a decade. This resulted in a depleted labor force participation and a public debt crisis that has caused years of severe sternness policies. These economic conditions, in addition to the natural disasters that have affected the Island between 2017 and 2020, have triggered a migration of approximately 500,000 people. A significant number of those that left Puerto Rico were in their prime working age, causing a demographic shift in which people aged 60 and older now represent 26 percent of the population. Approximately 40 percent of the elderly in Puerto Rico also live below the poverty line.

Working families in Puerto Rico were already facing elevated levels of economic and food insecurity as well as associated health risks when the pandemic struck. The high percentage of single-parent households and workers susceptible to layoffs due to economic closure are additional factors that have intensified the social impact of the pandemic.

It is important to highlight that according to the Consumer Price Index Summary included on the US Bureau of Labor Statistics website, April saw the largest monthly increase in food prices since February of 1974. This increase in food prices is taking place amid the mass dumping of groceries while scores of people go hungry. For this same period, the cost of food increased 52%.

When you add all these factors together, an economic recession, the pass of devastating hurricanes one behind the other, the unannounced earthquakes and the sixteen months of the COVID- 19 pandemic, you come to realize how vulnerable we are to these unexpected, unplanned circumstances that could impact every citizen, without discriminating about your economic or social status.

Puerto Rico has gone through more than a decade of an economic hardship that has impacted the whole population, one way or another. During the last ten years, Puerto Ricans had experienced the fear of food insecurity, either transitional or permanently. The fact of being a **US territory** and **an Island** have a big part in building this insecurity. In addition to the fact that Puerto Rico families and individuals that have an urge for food support, receive NAP instead of SNAP benefits. Under the NAP program individuals and households' benefits are significantly less than any SNAP participant in the US mainland or territory, putting them in disadvantage with the rest of the Nation. These factors together, have been key in delaying food support and other type of aid during emergencies putting at risk their individual and families' health and wellbeing.

In order for Puerto Rico to receive emergency support or additional funds from the federal government needs written approval from the agency. Furthermore, as an US territory-Island there are federal laws and regulations that need to be applied, like the Jones Act, established in 1900, in order to receive emergency supplies from the US mainland through a sea vessel. Puerto Rico in

NOT allowed to receive any supplies or cargo if it is not transferred from Florida and transported in a US vessel. This process delays the emergency distribution of supplies and food putting the people at risk of running out of these necessities. This law establishes that anything transported by sea to Puerto Rico needs to be managed by a US mainland port and vessel. The sea route to send products between the US mainland and Puerto Rico is governed under the Merchant Shipping Act which establishes that any cargo sent between two (2) US ports (US territories and possessions included) has to be ruled by this act.

These two (2) main steps necessary during a declared disaster, delay food support coming to the Island, causing insecurity among the population. A clear sample of this transpired right after hurricanes Irma and Maria in September 2017 and during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic when people had to wait three (3) months before the food support benefits were approved. On the other hand, food retailers and distributors ran out of supplies because of the delay in transporting the goods to Puerto Rico. This summed to local business economic dearth which got even worst after the disasters hindering their capacity to not pay the port's duty taxes once the merchandise arrived at Puerto Rico docks. Regardless of these aggravations, Puerto Ricans would have never been able to overcome their need for food during this past decade without the federal support.

FEDERAL PROGRAMS THAT PROVIDE FOOD SUPPORT IN PUERTO RICO

Different from the federal food support programs in the US and other territories, Puerto Rico's funds are capped through a block grant. The benefits issued to participants are distributed among all the participants, instead of being issued by participant.

Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP)

Puerto Rico's low-income families receive NAP as a supplement to the US mainland and territories food benefit program, which is SNAP. There is a significant difference in income benefits received per individual/families when compared to the rest of the US Mainland, Hawaii, Alaska, and other territories. In addition, PR NAP funds are capped and use strictly for food support benefits. Also, SNAP participants with similar characteristics receive more than twice the benefits than NAP participants. The chart below compares the NAP with the SNAP received in the US Mainland, Alaska, Hawaii, and territories.

Persons in Family/ Household	Continental States and DC	Alaska	Hawaii	Guam	Virgin Islands	Puerto Rico (NAP)
1	\$194	\$368	\$354	\$287	\$250	\$112
2	\$357	\$675	\$650	\$526	\$459	\$216
3	\$511	\$966	\$931	\$753	\$657	\$315
4	\$649	\$1,227	\$1,182	\$957	\$835	\$410
5	\$771	\$1,457	\$1,404	\$1,136	\$991	\$499

6	\$925	\$1,749	\$1,685	\$1,364	\$1,189	\$599
7	\$1,022	\$1,933	\$1,862	\$1,507	\$1,315	\$679
8	\$1,169	\$2,209	\$2,128	\$1,723	\$1,503	\$776
Each additional member	\$146	\$276	\$266	\$215	\$188	Variable Add \$22 for elderly
Population	306.7 million ¹	737,438	1,420,491	165,718	104,914	3,400,000
Families	19,154, 194	37,928	82,343	15,631	13,384	655,746
Participants	37,914,073	84,575	160,334	44,936	27,069	1,217,596
Poverty Level	14.6%	10.2%	10.3%	22.9%	22.4%	36%
Average Benefit/pp	\$125.25	\$169.72	\$239.09	\$197.24	\$220.65	\$118.17

The main purpose of the NAP is to assist low-income families so that they can supplement food needs. In addition to the benefits issuance, this program provides nutrition education to participants and promotes the proper use of benefits issued by guiding the selection and preparation of healthy and nutritious foods. 100% of the benefits are directed to the purchase of eligible food in certified establishments.

Currently in Puerto Rico, 44.5% of the population lives below the poverty levels, being women, older adults, and families with several children the most affected groups. This percentage has been increasing consistently. As of May 13, 2021, we have provided nutrition assistance services to 1,538,525 participants out of a 3.3 million population. Of these 56.65% are women and 43.35% are men, which represents a slight decrease in the demographic profile by gender in females when compared to the previous fiscal year when the ratio of women to men was from 57.05% to 42.95%.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF) is also capped and is limited to assist just one (1) unemployed parent, instead of two (2) unemployed parents as the rest of the US.

The TANF program provides services to **one** (1) unemployed parent within a household with children. As of May 2021, the program has served **45,548** participants, of whom **28,179** (61.87%), are **women** and **17,370** (38.13%) are **men**. Of these participants, an average of **7,467** (16.39%) are **minors**; **17,266** (37.91%) are persons aged **65 years or older**; **12,426** (27.28%) are **disabled**; **214** (0.47%) are **homeless** and **260** (.57%) are **post-secondary or vocational students**.

These numbers represent a 22% growth towards the low-income males, when compared to previous years, that revealed a proportion of **62.10%** of **women** and **37.91%** **men**. The data indicates important characteristics of the populations living under poverty levels.

¹ Based on 2020 Census Data.

Temporary Emergency Assistance Program (TEFAP)

The program distributes nutritional food, bestowed by the Federal Department of Agriculture, to low-income families eligible under NAP and TANF participants under all its categories (elderly, blind, disabled and single parents with minor children), living in sectors of extreme poverty and in public housing projects. From **July 2020 to April 2021**, the program served **92,768 families**. The **total** amount of food distributed to these families was **4,690,268.41 pounds**, which represents **\$5,287,852.65 dollars**. This program has aided families from **336 communities** and **310 public housing projects** throughout the Island. As a result of the **COVID-19 pandemic** which has caused a great demand for food, we established an additional food distribution collaboration agreement (besides the Food-Bank agreement) with a non-profit organization called Marc Ministry. As a result of this arrangement, we were able to **distribute 749,718 pounds** of food, which represents approximately **\$963,107.43**, between July 2020 and March 2021.

Commodities Supplement Food Program (CSFP)

The CSFP program works to improve the health of low-income seniors 60 years of age and older by supplementing their diets with nutritious USDA foods. In Puerto Rico, the CSFP was established as a Pilot Program which began in January 2019 in the Bayamón Region. Through this program participants receive a box of food monthly. The program's initial budget was \$57,090.00. Currently, eleven (11) centers for older adults have received benefits representing 995 participants. Aware of the big demand for food surrounding this population, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) authorized an increase of 995 additional participants, which allows us to serve a total of 1,990 participants under the CSFP program.

Soup Kitchen Program

The Soup Kitchen is a sub-program under the **TEFAP Food Distribution** program whose purpose is to distribute food to non-profit institutions that serve prepared meals for homeless people, abused children and women, drug addicts, HIV-positive people, and AIDS patients, living temporarily at these institutions. From September 30, 2020, to May 2021, services have been offered to **one hundred thirteen (113)** centers /institutions, distributing a total of **751,191 pounds** of food.

The Department of the Family has a collaboration agreement with the **Puerto Rico Food Bank** to distribute food to non-profit entities that do not receive SOUP Kitchen benefits. A total of **63,290,000** pounds of food have been donated to the Food Bank, estimated in **\$336,620.00** between July 2020 and March 2021.

Family Markets

The Family Market Program provides the Nutritional Assistance Program (NAP) participants access to farm markets to purchase locally grown fresh products directly from the farmers. The program gives priority to fresh fruits and vegetables, minimally processed, that guarantee a balanced

nutrition. In addition, it promotes community self-management and economic development by providing employment opportunities to NAP participants during bountiful harvests without affecting their NAP benefits.

By year 2019 the Family Markets were held island wide. After a temporary halt of several months due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in March 2020, the Family Markets program resumed operations in November 2020, implementing a drive-through modality to comply with our government COVID-19 mitigation standards. Family Markets budget is \$62 million dollars (\$62,143,223.00) and it comes from a 4% NAP benefits set aside in their EBT cards. During this year (2021), after receiving an emergency funds allocation from the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, the Family Markets participants received an increase of approximately 2% in addition to the pre-established 4% to purchase locally grown farm products.

Pandemic EBT

Puerto Rico started receiving PEBT benefits in February 2021. Through this program, eligible school children received temporary emergency nutrition benefits loaded on EBT cards that were used to purchase food while studying virtually from their homes. To be eligible for this program, children had to be part of the free or reduced-price meals program under Puerto Rico's National School Lunch Program (NSLP) prior to the pandemic. In addition, the schools had to be closed or operating with reduced hours or attendance for at least 5 consecutive days. Since Puerto Rico's public and private schools were closed for the whole 2020-21 school semester and classes were offered virtually, all children under the NSLP were eligible for receiving PEBT benefits. In addition to students from K to 12, the PR PEBT program served child care children from 0 to 6 years old. Also provided benefits to cover the summer of 2021 for both, child care and K to 12 eligible students.

The total funds that were distributed under the PEBT programs were \$737 million dollars which impacted 338,100 students from K to 12 grades and 80,253 children in child care island wide.

The detailed description of the funds received to assist our people during a decade of emergencies, are just temporary. In less than a year, Puerto Ricans who received these additional benefits will go back to receiving their basic benefits or not receive them at all. This situation will worsen needy family's economic situation and take them back to food insecurity as a result of the increase of the cost of living, specially, after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Solutions to End Hunger in Puerto Rico

To ending hunger requires more than just giving people a meal today. Addressing the root causes of hunger — primarily poverty — is just as important. As long as people do not have the economic resources to put food on their table, hunger will continue. Food security also works for policy reforms to ensure economic self-sufficiency over the long-term. Development assistance programs are intended to reduce poverty and encourage economic growth. They include programs for agriculture, health, education, the environment, among others.

When disasters like the ones lived by our people strikes, hunger often follows. These emergencies resulting from pandemics, or from climate or economic conditions slowly build into food shortages, deficiencies, and conflict. These emergencies often have devastating side effects including gender-based violence and situations that can quickly go from bad to worse if we do not respond quickly enough, they could end in food insecurity, poor health, and extreme poverty.

We have to recognize the importance of linking short-term emergency response and long-term development assistance. Even though our communities have seen immense progress including how weak economies could grow stronger, and people moving from hunger and poverty into more stable lives these hard-won gains can deteriorate quickly in humanitarian emergencies, especially if we do not act fast.

Even though Puerto Rico received the federal assistance described throughout this document, there is imperative that a conversion from the NAP benefits program to SNAP takes place. This will not only increase the participants regular benefits level significantly, but also will provide for additional funding for job training and placement, as well as other funding flexibilities that do not exist under the NAP program. The disparity of benefits' levels between both programs impedes that the neediest sectors of Puerto Rico's population, 1.5 million American citizens can have a better nutrition and quality of life.

There are many situations that could be prevented if actions are taken faster. The employment stability improves the food quality in our families, it has been demonstrated that low paid jobs and unemployment leads to bad nutrition. Families that do not receive food support need to select between paying the rent or utilities rather than a balanced and health nutrition.

Equal food assistance benefits, health programs, better paid jobs, and more education and training opportunities can help us better prepare our people and prevent future food insecurity and extreme poverty.