

From Puerto Rico to Buffalo



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Please note that this is a rough-and-ready guide and that these facts will not be applicable to all Puerto Rican individuals that you meet.

Background

Puerto Rico is currently an unincorporated territory of the U.S. There is much debate over the future of Puerto Rico, usually focusing on three major choices; statehood, independence, or remaining a U.S. territory. Since 1917, its people have been U.S. citizens, and their movement throughout the states is therefore officially termed internal migration.² However, the transition made by Puerto Ricans who move to the continental U.S. can involve the same changes and challenges that most immigrants experience.

The culture and people of Puerto Rico are a blend of Native American, African and Spanish.³ Puerto Rico has one large main island and several smaller islands. The population of Puerto Rico consists of Caucasian, Black/African-American, Hispanic and Native American people. Today, there are nearly as many Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. as on the island itself.

The earliest Puerto Rican families to arrive in Buffalo settled here in the 1890s. Many initially came as migrant workers: farmers in America would hire seasonal workers from Puerto Rico to come harvest the field and then return to the island.⁴

The 1940s and 50s brought many Puerto Ricans to the East Side of Buffalo, where they found work in the steel mills and war production industries.⁵ In the 1950s, Puerto Rican migrants began to move to the West Side, and by the 1960s, the Lower West Side had become the heart of the Puerto Rican community, which it remains today.⁶

Cultural Attributes

Social and Familial Values

Family life is very important in Puerto Rican culture, including great respect for extended family. Home is the central gathering point for social events and celebrations. Strong familial ties have played an important role throughout Puerto Rican history in uniting the people in supporting one another through stressful transitions.

Religious Traditions and Belief Systems

Puerto Ricans are overwhelmingly Christian, with 85% practicing Roman Catholicism and the other 15% split between Protestant and small percentages of other religions.⁷ Puerto Rican culture celebrates festivals and religious holidays with much enthusiasm—often with dancing, singing, gambling, amusement park rides, and other festivities. Puerto Rican musical instruments, a frequent part of celebrations, are a blend of the Spanish, Native American and African cultures prevalent in Puerto Rican society.

Language, Literacy and Education

Spanish and English are the official languages of Puerto Rico, though less than 20% of the residents of Puerto Rico are fluent in English. Language has been a point of contention, with the U.S. pushing for English to be the language used in schools and Puerto Ricans advocating for the use of Spanish in schools. Currently, Spanish is the language used to teach, with English taught as a second language to all. A friendly handshake or nod of the head is a typical greeting. Men who are close friends will typically hug one another. Women who are close friends will typically hug briefly and kiss one another's cheek. It is important to address individuals by a title upon first meeting (Señor, Señora, Professor, Doctor, etc.).

Hand gestures are common in daily conversation. Interrupting is common and not offensive in Puerto Rican culture. Puerto Ricans typically stand close to one another in conversation, and stepping back can be considered offensive.

Puerto Ricans typically have two last names—one from their father and one from their mother.⁸

Employment Skills and Experiences

More and more Puerto Ricans are arriving in the U.S. with professional and technological skills. In Puerto Rico, the economy is dominated by industry, especially exports, many of which go to the continental U.S. Significant industries on the island include pharmaceuticals, electronics,

textiles, petrochemicals, processed foods and clothing. Tourism is also a significant source of income for the island, with the tourist industry employing over 50,000.⁹

Resettlement Experiences

The Puerto Rican community in Buffalo is concentrated on the Lower West Side. Many Puerto Rican individuals in Buffalo came here for employment in the steel and agriculture industries. Today, they hold employment in all sectors of society: public, private, education, government, business and finance.

The Hispanic population of Buffalo is over 27,500 individuals, approximately 80% of whom are of Puerto Rican descent.¹¹

There is a strong sense of culture within the Puerto Rican community here. Several cultural groups and festivals have been created in an effort to educate youth about the Puerto Rican and Hispanic heritage, in an effort to maintain a strong sense of identity.

Every year, on or near April 30, the Hispanic Heritage Council of WNY holds the “El Dia del Nino/Day of the Child.”¹⁰ This is an event that aims to encourage multicultural education in childhood in order to preserve the history of the Hispanic culture in Western New York.

According to the 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-year estimate, the Hispanic population of Buffalo is 46% below the poverty line, with 42% of people age 16 years or older with no earnings in the past 12 months.¹¹ Only 29% of the Hispanic population above 16 years of age in Buffalo has a full-time, year-round job.¹² Another 29% get earnings from another source—including part-time or seasonal jobs.¹³ For the population above 25, two thirds (67%) have completed a high school education or higher, while 14% have completed a Bachelor’s degree or higher.¹⁴

The correlation between education and higher paying jobs has been proven time and time again, and by easing students’ assimilation into the Buffalo educational system, we can encourage future growth and development. Raising awareness and creating policies to aid Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in overcoming the language barrier can make it a more realistic goal for them to obtain higher-level education.

Local Resources

Hispanics United of Buffalo

254 Virginia St, Buffalo, NY 14201

<http://www.hispunited.org/>

Hispanics United is a community based human service organization focused on the development of Latinos in Western New York

Puerto Rican and Hispanic Day Parade of WNY

P.O. Box 166 Buffalo, New York, 14201

www.prhdp.org (716) 310-8644

An annual parade held in Buffalo, with the mission "To promote and celebrate our Puerto Rican and Hispanic traditions by planning events that will enrich our culture, and maintain its viability. To educate our youth today for future generations by faithfully engaging in the preservation of our heritage."

Panorama Hispano Newspaper

266 Elmwood Ave., Suite 927 Buffalo, NY 14222

www.panoramahispanonews.com (716) 228-7498

A Spanish newspaper distributed in Buffalo, Rochester and Erie, PA, focusing on the Hispanic and Latino(a) communities in the region.

Hispanic Heritage Council of WNY Inc.

P.O. Box 361 Buffalo, NY 14201

www.hispanicheritagewny.org(716) 402-1442

*"The Hispanic Heritage Council of WNY Inc. is a nonprofit organization that exists to foster and inspire awareness, understanding, and appreciation of past, present, and future contributions of the Hispanic Community in Western New York."*¹⁵

NOTES

¹ Inglese, Ashley. "Map of Puerto Rico." Puerto Rico. 2009. Accessed May 1, 2015

² "Migrating to a New Land." Library of Congress. Accessed June 23, 2015.

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/cuban3.html>

³ Christoforo-Mitchell, Rose. "The Heritage and Culture of Puerto Ricans." Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. 1991. Accessed May 1, 2015.

⁴ Wypijewski, Joann. "Buffalo's Lower West Side." Milton Rogovin: Social Documentary Photographer. 1994. Accessed May 1, 2015.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Id.

⁷ "Puerto Rico." CIA World Factbook. June 15, 2015. Accessed June 23, 2015.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rq.html>

⁸ Rivera, Magaly. "Beyond Language." Puerto Rico's Culture. 2015. Accessed May 1, 2015.

⁹ "Puerto Rico: Tourism, Trade, Taxes." InterNations. Accessed June 23, 2015. <http://www.internations.org/puerto-rico-expats/guide/working-in-puerto-rico-15628/puerto-rico-tourism-trade-taxes-2>

¹⁰ "Events Calendar." Hispanic Heritage Council of WNY. 2015. Accessed May 1, 2015.

¹¹ "Poverty status in the past 12 months by sex by age (Hispanic or Latino)." American FactFinder. United States Census Bureau. Accessed August 6, 2019.

https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/ACS/17_5YR/B20005I/1600000US3611000

Note: The American Community Survey defines "earnings" as income from salary/wages or self-employment.

¹² Id.

¹³ Id.

¹⁴ "Sex by educational attainment for the population 25 years and over (Hispanic and Latino)." American FactFinder. United States Census Bureau. Accessed August 6, 2019.

https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/ACS/17_5YR/C15002I/1600000US3611000

¹⁵ Hispanic Heritage Council of WNY. 2015. Accessed May 1, 2015.

This fact sheet is one in a series of “snap shots” of Buffalo’s immigrant and refugee populations, made possible by a grant from the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo. They are free of charge at www.ppgbuffalo.org/publications.

The fact sheets in the series are:

- **Nepali Bhutanese Refugees in Buffalo**
- **Burman, Karen, and Chin Refugees: From Burma to Buffalo**
- **Eritrean Refugees in Buffalo**
- **From Puerto Rico to Buffalo**
- **Refugees from Sudan in Buffalo**
- **Yemeni Immigrants in Western New York**
- **Refugees from Somalia in Buffalo**
- **Refugees from Iraq in Buffalo**
- **Afghan Refugees in Buffalo**
- **From Central Africa to Buffalo: Refugees from Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, and Burundi**



Partnership for the Public Good
www.ppgbuffalo.org
237 Main St., Suite 1200, Buffalo NY 14203