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Puerto Rico – A Beautiful Island with Resilient People

The MBLB Chicago Office recently attended a fundraiser hosted by the Puerto Rican Bar Association of Illinois ("PRBA").[1] The PRBA is a not-for-profit entity dedicated to promoting education and community service. It was established in 1994 to address issues affecting Latino lawyers and the Latino community. The event raised funds for the PRBA Foundation Scholarship, which was established to promote diversity within the legal profession.

As a PRBA board member and Puerto Rican myself, I enthusiastically approached my team and MBLB with the opportunity to support this amazing organization. Our office had a great time networking with Chicago's legal community and supporting future lawyers. Being in a room filled with so many joyful Puerto Ricans, supporting a great cause, reminded me of the resilience of my community, and the struggles they continue to endure and overcome. I want to share some of that with you now.

A Bit About Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico, an island located in the Caribbean, became a United States territory in December of 1898, when Spain ceded the island to the U.S. as part of the Treaty of Paris.[2]

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[1] "MBLB Sponsors Puerto Rican Bar Association Summer Soiree and Scholarship Fundraiser", (August 02, 2026), https://mblb.com/firm-news/mblb-sponsors-puerto-rican-bar-association-summer-soiree-and-scholarship-fundraiser/.

[2] HISTORY.com Editors, *Puerto Ricans become U.S. citizens, are recruited for war effort*, HISTORY.COM, (Nov. 16, 2009, May 27, 2025 (last updated)], https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/march-2/puerto-ricans-become-u-s-citizens-are-recruited-for-war-effort.

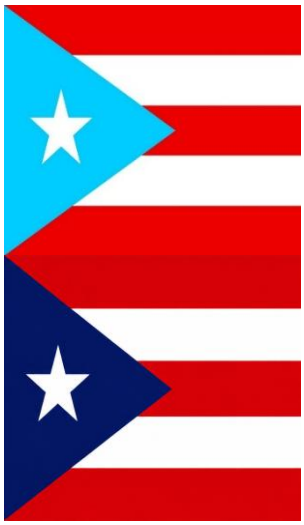
On March 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Jones-Shafroth Act, granting U.S. citizenship to the inhabitants of Puerto Rico.[3] *Fun Fact*: the Jones-Shafroth Act is still active today, so Puerto Ricans are United States citizens. This is not common knowledge. A 2017 poll by Morning Consult found that almost half of Americans did not know that Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens.[4]

Despite their status as United States citizens, Puerto Ricans on the island cannot vote in federal elections and have no democratically elected representation in Congress.

Historical Facts Not Commonly Known

This article will not cover everything, but it will hopefully provide readers with a new perspective on the resilience of the people of Puerto Rico and fellow United States citizens.

La Bandera ("The Flag")



Puerto Rico once had a Gag Law surrounding the display of the Puerto Rican flag.

In an effort to suppress the Independence movement, *La Ley de la Mordaza* ("Law 53") was approved on June 10th, 1948.[5] Law 53 "made it illegal to display or own a Puerto Rican flag; even in one's own home … the law allowed police and national guardsmen to enter anyone's home without a warrant and search and seize all property, regardless of probable cause."[6] In 1952, the Puerto Rican flag was officially adopted by Puerto Rico's government via Law No. 1 — but the color of the triangle was changed to a dark blue, from the original light blue, in order to match the U.S. flag.[7]

Law 53 was repealed in 1957, but its effects can be seen today. Every year in the month of June, New York City and Chicago have huge Puerto Rican Day Parades, where an endless sea of flags are displayed and swung with pride.

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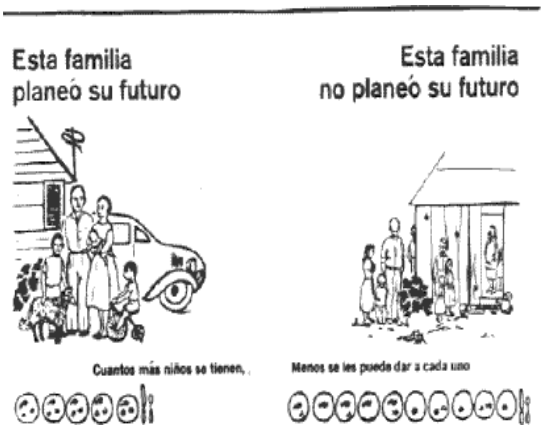
[3] *Id.*
[4] Claire Hansen, *Poll Finds Americans Don't Know Puerto Ricans Are Citizens*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP, (Sept. 26, 2017), https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2017-09-26/almost-half-of-americans-dont-know-puerto-ricans-are-us-citizens-poll.
[5] K.C. Lopez, *Ley de la Mordaza: The Law That Made the Puerto Rican Flag Illegal*, (Sept. 16, 2019), https://www.wlvt.org/blogs/lehigh/ley-de-la-mordaza-the-law-that-made-the-puerto-rican-flag-illegal/.
[6] *Id.*
[7] Magaly Rivera, *The Flag of Puerto Rico,* https://welcome.topuertorico.org/reference/flag.shtml.

La operacion - History of Sterilization

Another part of Puerto Rico's history that is not commonly known revolves around women's reproductive rights. "[B]etween the 1930s and the 1970s approximately one-third of Puerto Rico's female population of childbearing age had undergone" an operation which sterilizes them.[8] This operation was colloquially referenced as "*la operacion."*

In 1937, Law 116 legalized free sterilization and led to the creation of "sterilization clinics throughout the territory."[9] Throughout the 1930s, doctors in Puerto Rico pushed women into sterilizations, marketing the operation as the only means of contraception. The U.S. and Puerto Rican governments endorsed and supported a program which "began sending health department officials to rural parts of the island advocating for sterilization."[10] Puerto Rico's full support of this program was due to the belief that the island's high levels of poverty and unemployment were attributed to overpopulation.[11] Additionally, the government wanted to integrate women into the workforce more fully, as the island was seeing a growth in factory work and American corporations moving to Puerto Rican soil; childbearing was seen as an obstacle to increasing the labor force.[12]

During the 1950s and 60s, the U.S. encouraged the increased sterilization of Puerto Rican women. Through propaganda, such as the photo to the right, a false narrative that the island was overpopulated continued to spread. Puerto Rican women and their families were promised success and stability after they underwent *la operacion* because doing so meant they were planning for their future and the island's.[13] Many women were coerced, misled, or unknowingly sterilized, believing that getting sterilized or getting their "tubes tied" meant undergoing a reversable procedure, and the organ could be "untied."[14] By the 1970s, Puerto Rican women were believed to have held the title of having the highest sterilization rates in the world.[15]



"*This family planned their future. This family did not plan their future. The more children you have, the less you can give to each one.*"

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[8] Lisa Ko, *Unwanted Sterilization and Eugenics Programs in the United States*, (Jan. 29, 2016), https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/unwanted-sterilization-and-eugenics-programs-in-the-united-states/.
[9] Isabella Long, *From Forced Sterilization to Fertility Technology: Addressing Medical Mistrust in Puerto Rico*, HEALTH & HUM. RTS, (Apr. 21, 2025), https://www.hhrjournal.org/2025/04/21/from-forced-sterilization-to-fertility-technology-addressing-medical-mistrust-in-puerto-rico/.
[10] Samantha Galarza, *Sterilization of Puerto Rican Women*, INTERCULTURAL LEADER INSTITUTE, https://weareili.org/timeline/sterilization-of-puerto-rican-women/ (last accessed August 15, 2026).
[11] *Id.*
[12] *Id.*
[13] Sunpreet Singh, *The Subversion and Portrayal of Female Agency in Latinx Reproductive Rights*, https://journeys.dartmouth.edu/sunnysingh/la-operacion-directed-by-ana-maria-garcia/.
[14] Long, *supra* note 9; Singh, *supra* note 13.
[15] Ko, *supra* note 8.

Reproductive History - Birth Control Trial

In the 1950s, Puerto Rican women were unknowingly used as test subjects for the first birth control pill.[16] Following Law 116, the island had several government funded birth control clinics, and these clinics provided the perfect opportunity to recruit women into the clinical trial. A founder of many of these clinics and supporter of the clinical trials "believed that Puerto Ricans and others living in poverty should be wiped out to make room for more 'fit' members of the population, and birth control was part of that vision."[17] As a result, poor Puerto Rican were woman targeted as test subjects. While the women knew the drug prevented pregnancy, they had no idea that the drug was experimental, that they were participating in a clinical trial, or that the drug had potentially dangerous side effects. These women were not given safety information about the product, and they "experienced serious side effects like blood clots and nausea."[18] Women participating in this trial were not afforded the opportunity to make an informed choice and fully consent.

Present Day

Puerto Rico's Infrastructure

For years, Puerto Rico's "residents have experienced bouts of intermittent service due to ageing infrastructure and … inadequate maintenance."[19] Natural disasters have exacerbated the island's infrastructural issues. In September 2017, Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico and devastated the island, causing widespread destruction of the power grid, housing, and vegetation.[20] Hurricane Irma "left roughly two-thirds of the population without electricity and roughly one-third of the population without clean water."[21] Just two weeks after Irma, Puerto Rico was hit by Hurricane Maria. Maria "severely damaged 95 percent of cell towers, cutting off nearly all cell phone communication" on the island, and it destroyed what was left of Puerto Rico's electrical grid, leaving residents across the island completely without power.[22] While FEMA provided the territory funding, studies revealed that Puerto Rico received significantly less aid and a slower federal response than Texas and Florida, states which also experienced destructive hurricanes that season.[23] Following Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico experienced its longest blackout in U.S history, lasting 11 months.[24]

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[16] Erin Blakemore, *The First Birth Control Pill Used Puerto Rican Women as Guinea Pigs*, HISTORY.COM, (May 09, 2018), https://www.history.com/articles/birth-control-pill-history-puerto-rico-enovid.
[17] *Id.*
[18] *Id.*
[19] Coral Murphy Marcos, '*As if a hurricane had passed': Puerto Ricans at breaking point after weeks without water*, (July 13, 2026), https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/jul/13/puerto-rico-water-shortages.
[20] Charley Willison et al, *Quantifying inequities in US federal response to hurricane disaster in Texas and Florida compared with Puerto Rico*, 4 BMJ GLOBAL HEALTH 1, 1 (2009).
[21] Michon Scott, Hurricane Maria's devastation of Puerto Rico, NOAA CLIMATE.GOV, (Aug. 1, 2018), https://www.climate.gov/news-features/understanding-climate/hurricane-marias-devastation-puerto-rico.
[22] *Id.*
[23] Willison, *supra* note 20.
[24] GAO, *El Apagón—The Blackout. Puerto Rico's Continuing Struggle for Stable Electricity*, (July 08, 2026), https://www.gao.gov/blog/el-apagon-blackout.-puerto-ricos-continuing-struggle-stable-electricity.

The territory's infrastructure has not fully recovered from these hurricanes. "Power outages have gotten worse in recent years," and in 2025, the entire island experienced a total blackout which lasted 2 days.[25] Additionally, the island currently "loses up to 65% of its clean, treated drinking water to leaks and pipe ruptures."[26] The situation worsened drastically in June when a 72-inch super aqueduct pipeline ruptured.[27]

Puerto Rico's Governor "activated the National Guard to circulate four 2,000-gallon tanker trucks through communities."[28] The rupture, compounded with the driest July on record, forced Puerto Rico's government to intervene and impose "a rationing program that shut off water service in the capital of San Juan and its surrounding neighborhoods for 48-hour intervals" on a rotating basis.[29] Residents were lining behind tanker trucks with plastic water bottles in order to preserve water.

A total of $42.6 billion has been allocated to Puerto Rico for disaster relief; however, only roughly $13.1 billion has actually been disbursed.[30] To break this down further, approximately $14 billion has been allocated to support Puerto Rico's electrical grid recovery in the last decade, but only 25% has been disbursed, meaning $10 billion in assistance remains unused.[31]

The funds to repair Puerto Rico's infrastructure and modernize its utility grid are difficult to access due to bureaucratic processes. In 2016, Congress created a federally imposed oversight board through the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act, essentially stripping the island of its financial autonomy. The unelected oversight "board strictly controls the island's treasury, meaning local agencies are legally barred from shifting public funds."[32] This is a problem because FEMA requires Puerto Rico to fund multi-million-dollar infrastructure projects up front and seek reimbursement later.[33] However, reimbursement is not guaranteed. "[U]nder restrictive agreements unique to the island, FEMA maintains the power to revoke previously approved reimbursement claims,

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[25] *Id.*
[26] Coenia Sanchez, *Congress Has a Responsibility to Reverse the Water Crisis It Caused in Puerto Rico*, (Aug. 10, 2026), https://inthesetimes.com/article/puerto-rico-water-crisis-trump-congress.
[27] Marcos, *supra* note 19.
[28] Christian Thorsber, *Puerto Rico Enters Third Month Without Running Water As Infrastructure Falters*, CIRCLE OF BLUE, (July 14, 2026), https://www.circleofblue.org/newsletter/the-stream-july-14-2026-puerto-rico-enters-third-month-without-running-water-as-infrastructure-falters/.
[29] Christopher Cann, *Federal agencies involved in Puerto Rico Water crisis response,* USA TODAY, (Aug. 10, 2026), https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2026/08/10/puerto-rico-san-juan-water-crisis/91239243007/; Ian Aikman, *Puerto Rico rations water supplies due to intense drought,* BBC, (Aug. 09, 2026), https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cqlxgk7r2vwo.
[30] Sanchez, *supra* note 26.
[31] GAO, *supra* note 24.
[32] Sanchez, *supra* note 26.
[33] *Id.*

forcing local municipalities to take on massive financial risks just to clear debris or repair a substation."[34] This leaves Puerto Rico in a vicious cycle; without the financial autonomy to reallocate and redistribute its budget in response to crises, massive infrastructural projects cannot begin, infrastructural issues worsen, and the need for federal intervention increases.

A Challenge

Through years of trials and tribulations, Puerto Ricans remain resilient. I challenge *you*, the reader, to teach another person something you learned here. Puerto Rico's history is American history, and it's so important that we know the history of our country. All of it. We can all advocate for Puerto Rico by encouraging our law makers to vote for legislation which treats Puerto Rico fairly.

Pa'lante.

[34] *Id.*