5

DISPERSION AND MOMENTUM SINCE 1980

Introduction

By the 1980s, as the Puerto Rican population in the U.S. reached over two million—with vibrant communities across the Northeast, Midwest, Florida, and California—efforts for empowerment, recognition, and representation became more diverse and decentered. New migrants continued to arrive from the island during the 1980s, settling further from the core population centers of New York and New Jersey and creating communities in many smaller cities and towns in farther-flung states. Puerto Ricans fleeing the disastrous post-industrial centers of New York City, Newark, and a few other declining industrial cities contributed to the dispersion.[1] By 2010, ten states would have Puerto Rican populations of 100,000 or more; ten cities had over 30,000 Puerto Ricans, with expanding communities in Tampa, Orlando, Allentown, and Springfield growing closer in size to the still-growing populations of Philadelphia, Miami, Bridgeport, and Boston. More important perhaps were the new clusters of higher income residents in varied counties in Texas, Florida, North Carolina, Georgia, southern California, and Nevada.[2] A growing middle class of second generation Puerto Ricans, or those of more distant Puerto Rican descent, became more stable and integrated into heterogeneous middle class urban enclaves and suburbs.

Yet, because large sectors of the Puerto Rican population continued to experience varying levels of poverty or income insecurity, as well as failing educational systems, local efforts for improved access to quality education, housing, and anti-povertyservices continued to be important arenas for Puerto Rican activism after 1980, along with ongoing campaigns against discrimination and police abuse. Electoral politics became even more important for Puerto Ricans across all socio-economic levels, and Puerto Ricans in a number of cities

TABLE 5.1 Puerto Rican Descent Population in US Cities (20,000 or higher), 1990

City	*Population*
New York City	896,763
Chicago	119,866
Philadelphia	67,857
Newark	41,545
Hartford	38,176
Bridgeport	30,250
Jersey City	29,777
Boston	25,767
Springfield	23,729
Paterson	27,580
Camden	22,984

Source: PRLDEF, *Puerto Ricans Stateside 2000: A Demographic Overview*, n.d.

began to make their way into electoral politics after 1980. Despite the existence of national networks of leadership that communicated across urban centers, along with the emergence of new national organizations, no single organization emerged as the locus for these efforts. Instead, competing leaders with conflicting political dispositions—usually differing in their acceptance of liberal politics and sometimes led by recent migrants from the island—dominated the evolving Puerto Rican public sphere at different moments.

In large cities like New York, Newark, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Boston, former members of the radical organizations of the 1960s and 1970s had become journalists, lawyers, academics, and leaders of civic, cultural, and political organizations. More Puerto Ricans than ever before worked in higher education, including the founding or leadership of important centers for research and teaching. Younger Puerto Ricans grew up in more heterogenous urban environments, often in poor or working class barrios and mixed Latino and Black neighborhoods, participating in a varied social world enlivened by the struggles of the urban poor. These contacts with Dominican, Mexican, and African American neighbors, depending on the city and the region, opened new cultural and political possibilities, along with additional arenas of inter-Latino cooperation.[3]

Electoral Politics: Political Representation and National Organizing

Throughout 1980, the year that Ronald Reagan won the presidency and inaugurated a long decade of conservative leadership in the White House, pundits, journalists, and the public at large debated what looked like a new national trend: Hispanic voters, the "sleeping giant" of the American political system, were waking up—and their participation at the polls promised to change political

outcomes around the country. This attention to the Hispanic vote was partly a result of the decade-long efforts of political strategists to win new voters after the acrimonious election of 1968. Republicans had begun actively courting Hispanic voters in 1969, and Democratic leaders followed suit in 1971; in 1972, during his reelection campaign, Republican president Richard Nixon convened a "brown mafia" to win Spanish-speaking voters.[4] Mexican Americans, politically organized in some areas of the Southwest since the 19th century, were the presumptive head of the giant; but Puerto Ricans, whose community activism in Chicago, New York, and elsewhere in the Mid-Atlantic commanded serious attention in the 1970s, seemed to comprise increasingly powerful appendages.

Puerto Ricans had slowly worked their way into electoral politics, starting in the mid-1960s in New York City and over a decade later in Chicago, Philadelphia, Camden, and Hartford. Even by the mid-1980s, though, voters in New York City—the largest Puerto Rican settlement in the United States, which numbered one million by 1985—had trouble maintaining their momentum. In 1986, only ten city and state elected offices were held by Puerto Ricans—the same number as in 1976. Robert García, who won the 21st congressional district in the Bronx in 1978, when Herman Badillo stepped down to become deputy mayor to Ed Koch, was still the only Puerto Rican representative in the U.S. Congress in 1985.[5] If hundreds of thousands of voters concentrated in the larges Puerto Rican city in the Americas outside of San Juan could not increase thei direct political representation over time, how real was their role in the awakenin of the "sleeping giant"?

One problem was Puerto Rican leaders' apparent ambivalence about where to invest the most resources in the service of political empowerment. Early experiences in the 1960s taught many to question how much merely electing one of their own could serve the complex needs of the community. Herman Badillo, who had achieved the most celebrated political successes since the 1960s, was seen by both Puerto Rican and establishment political figures as a kind of "lone wolf" who was not attached or beholden to the Democratic machine. On the other hand, by the late 1970s he was also seen by many Puerto Rican leaders as not particularly responsive to his community base, especially compared to some of the other Puerto Rican activists entering the political arena by the late 1970s. Badillo, who lived in the prosperous Riverdale neighborhood of the Bronx and was married to a Jewish woman, regularly had to defend himself against charges that he was not "Puerto Rican enough" to represent the constituency of the 21st district. Democratic mayor Ed Koch went so far as to assert that Badillo was "no more Puerto Rican than I am." To this slight, Badillo responded that Koch was a "petty racialist" who incited "racial divisiveness" in the city.[6]

At the other extreme was Ramon Vélez, a powerful presence in the South Bronx district where, since the 1960s, Vélez had built a career managing large community service organizations that successfully tapped into federal and state anti-poverty funds. Vélez and Badillo maintained a political rivalry that had

become increasingly bitter throughout the 1970s.[7] During his first mayoral campaign in 1977, Ed Koch, concurring with Badillo's criticism of his Bronx rival, had criticized Vélez for abusing his influence over his impoverished constituents. Yet by the mid-1980s, after a falling out with Badillo, Koch apparently decided that Vélez's management of community funds was admirable. The mayor rewarded his Hunt's Point Multi-Service Center with over $200,000 to renovate the organization's headquarters in 1984, barely a year before Vélez navigated his way around another in a series of investigations of his mismanagement of millions in federal and state funds.[8]

Multiple allegations of legal and ethical violations against Vélez, none of which ever stuck, seemed not to trouble Governor Cuomo either; Cuomo accepted Vélez's endorsement during his 1986 reelection campaign. Such were the workings of the machine politics that Badillo had spent his political career trying to avoid. Badillo, who ran in every mayoral Democratic primary election between 1968 and 1985 without winning one, sought to find a place for Puerto Ricans in city politics that did not involve the kind of unprincipled deal-making that he accused Vélez of relying on. It seemed clear, though, that powerful politicians in New York in the 1980s were more receptive to Puerto Rican leaders who took the traditional machine-style approach than they were to those, like Badillo, who expected to be able to operate through a more direct relationship with their constituency.

One Puerto Rican politician in New York in the 1980s managed—with great success, at least for a time—to occupy a middle ground between the principled "outsider" and the well-connected but corrupt "insider." Robert García, who had served three terms in the New York State Senate, took over Badillo's congressional seat in 1978 when the latter became deputy mayor to Koch. García called himself a protégé of Badillo, at least early in his career, but also maintained what many saw as a stronger grassroots connection to Puerto Rican community. For politicized Puerto Rican constituents, the signature issue of García's first term in Congress was his successful push for the release of jailed Puerto Rican nationalists in 1979. García was also known as a coalition-builder, and served as the first Puerto Rican chair of the National Hispanic Caucus in Congress starting in 1981.[9] From there he led an effort at immigration reform, which was important as one of the first crossover political moments in which a Puerto Rican of national stature lobbied for reforms in support of non-citizen Latino immigrant communities. A representative of the still-beleaguered Bronx had to beat the odds to build such a strong and balanced foundation in national politics. García's constituents were hit exceptionally hard by his downfall in 1989, when he was convicted on charges of extortion and conspiracy in a minority defense contract scandal involving a Bronx company called Wedtech.[10]

Like Badillo, many Puerto Rican leaders became more conservative with age. Olga Méndez, elected as a Democrat in 1978 to represent East Harlem in the New York State Assembly (who would go on to serve 12 consecutive terms),

was the first Puerto Rican woman elected to public office in the U.S. Criticized for being an opportunistic pragmatist by liberals, Méndez ultimately rejected the Democratic party for doing little for her constituency and became a Republican, although she continued to support liberal policies like low cost housing, increasing the minimum wage, sentencing reform, and equal access to education.[11] Despite the difference of her party affiliation, Méndez's political leadership resembled that of Badillo, García, and Vélez in certain ways, particularly in terms of her lasting commitment to the community's basic needs and her staunch but idiosyncratic liberal politics.

Whereas the end of the 1980s brought dashed hopes for Puerto Rican voters in New York—who, based on their momentum in the 1970s, had every reason to expect that they would lead the political charge in the "decade of the Hispanic"—in other cities with somewhat smaller and more recently established Puerto Rican communities, the decade's political outcomes were better. In Chicago in the early 1980s, the Puerto Rican population had reached 112,000, but there was only one Puerto Rican member of the city council, and one elected municipal judge; there were no Puerto Ricans in the Illinois state legislature nor representatives of Chicago in the U.S. Congress.[12] But reform coalitions with African American leaders that shook up the boss-controlled Democratic party especially Mayor Harold Washington, helped elect Luis Gutiérrez as an alderma to the Chicago city council in 1986. After many successes in the city counci Gutiérrez was able to mobilize a majority of the Mexican American vote as wel as the Puerto Rican vote, winning a seat in the U.S. Congress in 1992 and representing a new majority-Latino district in Chicago.[13]

Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia in 1980 would have described the same challenges as their peers in Chicago: low voter registration; electoral districting that made it unlikely or impossible for Puerto Rican voters to successfully back Puerto Rican candidates; and, most important, a political machine controlled by Democratic party bosses that made little room for Puerto Rican candidates.[14] However, as in Chicago, voters and leaders in Philadelphia saw an upswing in their impact during the 1980s. Mobilizing against conservative mayor Frank Rizzo's effort to change the city charter in order to run for a third term in 1978, young Puerto Rican leaders helped double the number of registered Puerto Rican voters in the city and laid the foundation for several important electoral victories by the mid-1980s. These included the elections of Ángel Ortiz, supported by a broad coalition of progressive voters and elected to city council in 1983, and Ralph Acosta, who won a seat in the state legislature in 1984.[15] In Connecticut, too, Puerto Ricans made some electoral gains in the 1980s as a result of focused efforts at voter registration and community-level political organization, including the Hartford city council during the 1980s. (Tough times and persistent community building, plus the politically focused Puerto Rican Action Committee of Connecticut, would pave the way for the election of Hartford's first Puerto Rican mayor, Eddie Pérez, in 2001.)[16]

Community Building: Organizing at the National Level

During a decade characterized by budget-cutting coservatism at the national level—which included a backlash against affirmative action specifically and anti-discrimination efforts in general, along with a rollback of support for minority communities—it was no small feat for Puerto Ricans as a group to achieve any political gains. In the smaller cities, where Puerto Ricans were making notable progress in political representation, as well as in New York, where they only managed to maintain the status quo, Puerto Rican communities around the U.S. were bolstered in this era by the expansion of several key organizations into national entities. To be sure, the foundations of this organizational base had been laid over the course of decades, with many of the organizations emerging out of the large Puerto Rican community in the New York metro area through political groups like the American Labor Party, the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, El Comité-MINP, the Young Lords, and a variety of community and civil rights organizations like Aspira, the Puerto Rican Forum, the National Coalition of Puerto Rican Civil Rights, the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and the state-based Puerto Rican Congress of New Jersey.

The regional and national scope of organizations grew through a strategy of expanding both their membership base and their connections with allies beyond Puerto Rican communities. By the early 1980s, the Puerto Rican Forum, which had been founded in 1957 by a group of young New York leaders, had expanded to eight cities around the U.S.—including Boston, Miami, Chicago, and Cleveland—and was renamed the National Puerto Rican Forum. It served tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans, particularly in supporting employment advancement.[17] Aspira, the organization that formed in 1961 to support young Puerto Ricans' school achievement, oversaw programs in a few cities by the early 1970s. Then in 1972 its leaders collaborated with the newly-formed Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund (PRLDEF) to demand in court for the right of Puerto Rican children to bilingual education—a fight that resulted in the 1974 Aspira Consent Decree, which forced the New York Board of Education to change its policies.[18] Through this effort, Aspira joined the growing ranks of Puerto Rican organizations with a voice in national policy debates on bilingualism, desegregation, and educational access. By the 1980s, Aspira operated various state-level offices, each coordinating the work of dozens of high school and community chapters, as well as national headquarters in Washington, D.C.[19]

PRLDEF, likewise, continued to be an important force in policymaking related to Puerto Ricans throughout the 1970s and 1980s, litigating and winning victories in voting rights, redistricting, equal employment, and educational opportunity.[20] Supported by nearly all the politically involved lawyers in the Puerto Rican community and modeled around the NAACP, PRLDEF counted

Supreme Court justice Sonia Sotomayor among its board members throughout the 1980s, as she advanced in her career from a prosecutor just out of law school to a federal appeals court judge.

The work of PRLDEF was especially important for Puerto Rican voters in Chicago in the early 1980s. Over the course of two decades, 14 Latino candidates (evenly split between Puerto Rican and Mexican American men) had sought election as aldermen in their Chicago wards, and in each case the candidates lost, having been refused the backing of the Democratic machine. One political scientist, writing a few years later, observed that the neighborhoods where most Puerto Ricans lived had been "carefully gerrymandered by the machine" so voters were unable to elect a single representative to city council. Relying on the census count of 1980 to make its case, PRLDEF joined with its Mexican American counterpart, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), along with groups of African American voters and representatives of the Republican party, to mount a legal challenge to the legislative map constructed by the Democratic machine. The first Puerto Rican representative, José Berrios, won a seat in the Illinois General Assembly in 1982.[21] (Since the 1990s, PRLDEF has extended its work to include Latinos of various national origins and as a result changed it name in 2008 to LatinoJustice PRLDEF.)

Shortly after taking office in 1981, in the midst of a severe recession, Presider Reagan implemented a series of major budget cuts that had an especially brutal impact on the urban poor, many of whom had barely begun recovering from the industrial and fiscal crises of the 1970s. By 1983, the Reagan administration's austerity approach had encouraged large scale mobilizations from a variety of civil rights, labor, and racial or ethnic groups, including those representing Puerto Ricans. That year, the 20th anniversary of the historic 1963 March on Washington served as a powerful marker of the continuing struggles Puerto Ricans and other Latino groups that still relied heavily on underfunded public programs to offset the burdens of poverty and unemployment in the midst of recession. Now, though, two decades after the original March on Washington, Puerto Ricans were supported by large national organizations and political networks that were stronger and more diverse. Sixty-two Latino organizations, including dozens of Latino politicians, supported the march. "We are here today not only to lend support to our Afro-American friends but also because the right to jobs, peace and freedom strikes at the core of our Latin-American heritage. It is a vision of American shared by all people of conscience," announced José Rivera, a New York state legislator from the Bronx.[22]

Massive budget cuts at the local level also spurred responses. Activist Julio Pabón remembers how Puerto Rican organizations responded to New York City mayor Koch's attempts to explain and justify the large budget cuts on social programs in the devastated Bronx in 1980:

> South Bronx activist attorney Ramón Jimenez and myself worked together with other friends and members of the Coalition in Defense of Puerto Rican & Hispanic Rights to come out and greet the mayor. Our plan was simple: we asked the mayor if he came to ask for our opinion and suggestions on the budget cuts, or did he come to tell us what he already cut? He said they already had made the cuts, but he came to explain the cuts and how they would take effect. We then told him he could not speak and got all the hundreds in attendance to agree with us and that was the end of Koch's quick South Bronx visit.[23]

Puerto Ricans continued to play a prominent role in the political battles over improving city public services. In 1987 they pushed Mayor Koch to reply to recommendations made by his own Commission on Hispanic Concerns that called for massive interventions to improve schools, housing, and economic development. Angelo Falcón, founder of the Institute for Puerto Rican Policy, concluded that "the mayor really nickeled and dimed our community."[24] Puerto Rican activists and organizations continued to fight against massive spending cuts in education and social services through the 1980s and 1990s, including large cuts by Republican New York State governor Pataki, which prompted acrimonious protests.[25]

A key goal that Puerto Rican organizations strived for in the 1980s, and partially achieved, was a mutually reinforcing relationship with Puerto Rican political leaders. This trend was exemplified early in the decade by the creation of two key lobbying groups, the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, formed in 1981 as a grassroots coalition focused on social and economic equality, and the Institute for Puerto Rican Policy (IPRP; its name was changed in 2006 to the National Institute for Latino Policy), founded in 1982 by political scientist Angelo Falcón.[26] In its first year, the IPRP published extensive reports on Puerto Rican voter registration and on their representation in government employment, both of which emphasized the need for city and state governments to take action to fix disparities that hindered the political empowerment of Puerto Ricans.[27]

The growth of organizations like these represented a major departure from the patterns of community empowerment predominant in the 1970s, when leaders like Ramón Vélez fostered a clientelistic relationship to his support base. Both the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights and the IPRP sought to maintain close ties to people in the communities they represented, but they envisioned the goals of their work on the scale of shaping policy at various levels of governance. Although leaders continued to complain about both the lack of unity and the lack of mass membership in these organizations, they managed to develop models wherein highly committed leaders could respond to local needs and crises and create functional coalitions to address specific issues, while maintaining and expanding connections to Puerto Rican and other Latino leaders across the U.S.[28]

Puerto Rican policy leaders also began to take on the nationally debated issue of affirmative action in the 1980s. The Institute for Puerto Rican Policy's 1983 report "Simple Justice: Puerto Rican and Latino Government Employment in New York and the Failure of Affirmative Action," set the agenda for discussions of employment mobility and inclusion at the municipal level—a task that the National Institute for Latino Policy has continued to fulfill to this day. By the 1980s any politician seeking citywide office had to court Latino voters and appear to be responsive to this sort of data-driven criticism. During the 1980s Puerto Rican organizations also pushed for more Latino presence in many professional fields. In 1989, for example, the National Puerto Rican Forum and the National Hispanic Media Coalition filed a complaint with regulatory agency FCC about the near complete lack of Latinos employed at all levels in the media and especially in televised journalism.[29]

A consistent dilemma for leaders of Puerto Rican organizations in the U.S. has been the complexity of responding to the island's needs and problems. Puerto Rico's political status as an unsovereign U.S. territory and the migration flows that are a constant of Puerto Rican life—on the island and the mainland—continue to shape the diaspora's perceptions of its own rights and status in the U.S. Because of the continued ties of migrants and many of their children to the island but also because of the constant flow of people, culture ideas, and money between Puerto Rico and the U.S., island politics and economics are often part of mainland activism. Critical island issues find echo in the diaspora and many activists, both pro-statehood and pro-independence, use their position within U.S. political and other institutions to lobby for their views. By the 1980s, these activists increasingly converged in their perception that Puerto Rico's political status was untenable and needed to be resolved. Ideology might separate nationalists, *independentistas*, statehooders, and supporters of the status quo, but often these differences are set aside when major crises affect the island.[30]

Among the most important issues unifying island and mainland activism in the 1980s and 1990s was the movement to push the U.S. Navy out of Vieques island, part of the Puerto Rican archipelago. Two thirds of Vieques was turned into a naval base during World War II, in conjunction with the construction of the massive Roosevelt Roads naval base on the main island. Starting in the 1970s, independence, socialist, and nationalist organizations joined together with local people, especially fishermen, to end the Navy's military activities and occupation of land. When a civilian worker was killed in 1999 by an accidental bomb drop, the movement to get the Navy out of Vieques intensified, with significant participation of the diaspora as well as many U.S. politicians, who put pressure on the Navy and the Democratic party. The Navy's complete withdrawal began in 2001 and ended in 2003 with the return of both Roosevelt Roads and Vieques to Puerto Rican and U.S. Parks Service ownership.[31]

Community Building: Anti-Gentrification Campaigns

Alongside the intensifying focus of Puerto Rican leaders on city and state politics and national policy debates, activism at the community level still defined the political engagement of most Puerto Ricans in the 1980s. Since the early decades of migration from the island, Puerto Ricans in the U.S. had struggled over access to housing; and although most residents of Puerto Rican communities by 1980 had lived in the U.S. for at least a generation, making them less vulnerable to exploitative landlords, the scarcity of decent and affordable housing remained one of the most central problems for Puerto Ricans in urban areas. The safety and stability of a family's housing situation had always depended on its income and the breadwinners' employment status; discrimination was also a factor. But starting in the 1980s, gentrification added a new dimension to many Puerto Ricans' housing troubles.[32]

The pressures of gentrification—spurred by developers' motivation for steeper profits in a deregulating market—were especially intense for residents in New York City's Lower East Side, because of its location in lower Manhattan near high-rent residential and office real estate markets. Puerto Rican community leaders there had worked throughout the 1970s and 1980s to create their own tenants' organizations and collaborated with other groups whose mission was to improve housing in poor neighborhoods. Along the way, the convergence of housing activism and Nuyorican cultural production generated a cohesive identity for the community that became widely known as "Loisaida," the Puerto Rican Lower East Side. Tenants' associations managed to rehabilitate a number of city-owned buildings in the 1970s and by the early 1980s created a bulwark against developers who sought to capitalize on skyrocketing real estate values in an impoverished neighborhood. In the spring of 1986, Mayor Koch—a cantankerous independent politician who for the most part had a contentious relationship with Puerto Rican leaders—went so far as to proclaim a "Loisaida Day," recognizing the "value added" to the community after local housing organizations renovated several decrepit buildings on Avenue C.[33]

But gentrification was usually a more powerful force than community action and cultural pride. By the 1990s, it had transformed Loisaida, a ghetto blighted by old housing, burnt out buildings and open-air heroin markets, into what developers began marketing as "Alphabet City," a trendy neighborhood that was primarily white. Nearly all the area's low income residents, including elderly eastern European immigrants along with their Puerto Rican neighbors, got pushed out; only the public housing residents on Avenue D remained as a reminder of the ethnic and class character of the neighborhood since the 1950s. Christadora House, a landmark building on Avenue B built as a settlement house for immigrants in 1928, became emblematic of the gentrification process when it was turned into expensive condominiums in 1988, "a conspicuous symbol of gentrification" amidst the still-blighted neighborhood. Residents who knew

the building's history recognized its symbolic value, not just as part of the community's immigrant story but also in its second act as a Lower East Side base for Black Panthers, who rented space in the building (by then owned by the city) in the 1960s. For years after the condominiums were completed, Lower East Side activists staged regular anti-gentrification protests and confrontations with police across the street in Tompkins Square park.[34]

In the South Bronx, after two decades of landlord destruction, arson, and neglect by city officials, the remaining residents of the neighborhood, a majority of them Puerto Rican, received relief from the city when Mayor Koch invested nearly a billion dollars of federal and city funds in rebuilding large parts of the area. Father Louis Gigante, an Italian American priest with strong support in the Puerto Rican community, played an important role in the rebuilding through his remarkably successful organization, South East Bronx Community Organization (SEBCO), which he had founded in 1968. By 1981, SEBCO had built or refurbished 1,100 housing units in the Hunts Point area of the South Bronx. Demand for housing in the burnt-out South Bronx was intense; when SEBCO completed a new development of federally subsidized housing in 1981, as many as 4,000 people lined up to apply for 236 units. Participation in the rebuilding also took the form of collaborative organizing among neighborhood residents. A group of neighbors calling themselves "Los Desperados" organized in the Crotona section of the South Bronx to respond to the abandonment, crime, and arson in their community. They reclaimed housing for 1,000 people throughout the 1980s, and with support from Mayor Koch, collaborated with other citywide groups to rehabilitate additional housing.[35]

Nos Quedamos ("We Stay"), another activist group based in the South Bronx, fought for similar goals. Led by Yolanda García and supported by Bronx borough president Fernando Ferrer (elected in 1987 and the second Puerto Rican to hold that office), Nos Quedamos pressured the city to allow them to build community gardens in abandoned lots and transfer ownership of abandoned buildings for rehabilitation. After years of planning and organizing, and continuous demands by Ferrer for more funding and faster work, the group led the construction of hundreds of units of housing in the Melrose section of the South Bronx.[36] By the 1990s, entire burnt out areas had turned back into stable working class neighborhoods, with 20,000 apartments and nearly 5,000 houses refurbished or newly built and offered for rent or sale to mixed income residents. Puerto Ricans could count themselves among the "core of resilient people" who stayed and "proved the place was worth saving," as journalist Robert Worth described the South Bronx's renovators.[37]

Similar struggles over affordable housing and the cultural and ethnic character of neighborhoods played out in Spanish Harlem, *El Barrio*, where gentrification and commercial displacement slowly changed the cost of housing and the character of the business district. Market forces as well as lack of city action led to increased rents as physical conditions improved and new, mixed income housing

replaced the burnt-out shells and empty lots that dotted the neighborhood before the 1990s. Anthropologist Arlene Davila has documented the efforts of community leaders to secure more attention from city agencies and to steer commercial development towards more inclusive models that would not displace the local poor Puerto Rican and Mexican communities.[38]

Local leaders and community groups in Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood also confronted demographic change and gentrification in the 1980s and worked to protect their communities from the economic fallout. Los Sures was a group founded in the 1970s to promote low income housing and tenant organizing; as gentrification intensified in the 1990s, Los Sures created additional programs to support the community, including senior centers and a food pantry, and collaborated closely with nearby Hasidic organizations in developing jobs and housing for the poor of both communities. The absence of opportunities for young people in Williamsburg inspired former Young Lord Luis Garden Acosta to create El Puente in 1982, a center for education, health, and anti-gang programs that quickly became a national model for youth social service provision. As the gentrification of Williamsburg began in the 1990s, El Puente extended its work to the development of low cost housing as well. By the early 2000s, Los Sures and El Puente, along with many other community organizations, became community development corporations a formal classification that allowed them access to government and foundation support and recognition by city agencies.[39]

Puerto Ricans in other cities, including Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia, engaged in similar activism, generating notable pushback against the forces of gentrification in their communities in the 1980s. After the Puerto Rican Humboldt Park area in Chicago lost thousands of units of housing in the 1980s, pressure from community groups spurred Mayor Harold Washington to call for an investigation of exclusion of Latinos from Chicago Housing Authority facilities. Anthropologist Gina Pérez has chronicled how, as part of these efforts, the newly formed Latinos United sued the Chicago Housing Authority and federal Department of Housing and Urban Development for discrimination in 1989. Other local efforts in the early 1990s included the creation of the "Paseo Boricua," a corridor along Humboldt Park's main thoroughfare, Division Street, that combined public space with symbols of Puerto Rican pride.[40]

In Boston, leaders of a South End tenants' organization, Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción, won financial support from a national housing organization to rebuild several blocks of residential and commercial properties in the 1990s. In Puerto Rican Philadelphia, the major force in housing activism was the Tenant Action Group (TAG), founded by Puerto Rican and Black leaders in the mid-1970s. TAG gained strength in the 1980s as it focused on political strategies—lobbying city council and state representatives, pressuring the city's Licenses and Inspections office—to take seriously the concerns and complaints of low income Philadelphia residents.[41] Similar organizing efforts animated Puerto Rican and mixed Latino communities in cities all around the U.S. in the 1980s, campaigns

not only to solve concrete problems but also to open space for expressions of Puerto Rican working class identity and culture. By the 1980s, the struggling Puerto Rican neighborhoods in many cities were dotted with community gardens and DIY parks created by community residents from the empty lots left by razed abandoned buildings, often with official approval by city agencies. Community groups also erected *casitas*, or "little houses," built in the style of rural Puerto Rican dwellings—"icons of the Puerto Rican past"—and designed to be informal community gathering places. The result of these projects, the literal building of community, was enduring networks of small, community-controlled spaces, many of which remain proud symbols of small scale local activism by Puerto Ricans and their neighbors.[42]

Work and Economic Life: Catastrophe and Its Explanations

The most important driver of the political work of Puerto Rican leaders in the 1980s was the ongoing economic struggle of the poor within Puerto Rican communities. In a decade of triumphant conservatism and Reagan's "trickle-down" economic policy, major shifts in the American economy wound up playing a far more important role than electoral politics in determining how poor Puerto Ricans fared. The study of Puerto Rican poverty became a central focus of social science scholars in these years. Most analysts failed to notice how the emphasis on ethnic and racial categorizations obscured the staggering impact of collapsing urban economies, with dire consequences for all working class people.

The debate over the causes of Puerto Rican poverty was comparative, examining statistical measures of Puerto Ricans' lives in relation to those of other populations. At the start of the 1980s, Puerto Ricans ranked at the bottom of all other racial and ethnic groups in terms of income levels and labor participation rates.[43] By the mid-1980s, data showed that Puerto Ricans were faring steadily worse than other Hispanics—Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans, and Dominican-Americans—in macro-economic measures. This trend had begun to emerge during the 1970s; at the national level, Puerto Ricans with incomes under the federal poverty level increased from 30% to 37% between 1970 and 1980. Only 55% of Puerto Rican men and women in the U.S. were active in the labor force in 1980, compared to a national average labor force participation rate of 62%. Those figures worsened as industrial restructuring continued to create an urban "rustbelt" of closed factories and warehouses; the remaining industrial jobs were those that were low wage with no prospects for advancement. Industrial decline produced a massive displacement of Puerto Ricans (and other Latinos) throughout the urban Northeast as people tried to follow the disappearing promise of industrial jobs and greater economic security.[44]

Tracking outcomes for the group as a whole, these trends all but erased the gains made by U.S.-born Puerto Ricans who in the 1960s had made their way into the higher wage, skilled or white collar sectors of the service economy.

The early 1980s brought even worse numbers, when the Reagan recession of 1981–84 destroyed more jobs, lowered wages, and raised national unemployment rates to nearly 11%; for Puerto Ricans, unemployment reached over 20% and was even higher for Puerto Rican youth. In addition, massive cuts in social and educational spending at all levels of government reduced opportunities and the safety net available to the urban poor.[45]

Urban youth found themselves especially unprepared for the shifts in the economy, as their education—already compromised by the problems of poverty and failing schools—did not prepare them for entry into the growing areas of the economy like construction, insurance, real estate and finance—sectors that were also known for high levels of discrimination towards minorities.[46] Even for adults with workforce experience, many of these jobs were unattainable because they all had significant training requirements. The structure of welfare benefits encouraged low income young women to remain unmarried and remove male incomes from their household as a strategy to maintain welfare benefits for children, while stagnant wages and childcare costs encouraged many to reject minimum wage jobs. The persistent flow of migrants to and from Puerto Rico made tracking poverty more difficult and distorted the statistics for long-time residents of the U.S., as recent migrants consistently landed the lowest-paying jobs and took years to improve their conditions.

There were some improvements in income during the second half of 1980s, but in 1989, as in 1979, a third of employed Puerto Rican men earned incomes below the poverty level while real hourly wages increased only 3%. According to one labor economist's analysis, "The progress of the second part of the 1980s . . . had little effect on [Puerto Ricans'] decade-long economic position."[47] This new crisis of poverty, which hit women and more recent migrants from the island especially hard, produced multiple policy and grassroots responses, some of which would take years to yield any results. For activists and scholars, the worsening poverty of Puerto Ricans was deemed to be not only an economic problem but a civil rights crisis.

Journalists, policymakers, and scholars, including those working in the field of Puerto Rican Studies, increasingly focused on the downward socioeconomic slide of many Puerto Ricans during the 1980s. As economic suffering intensified in urban ghettos in the early 1980s—along with its attendant social costs, including drug abuse, drug-related violence, and incarceration—scholars began to debate whether a permanent "underclass" existed in the U.S. that had completely lost access to work. The debate was bitter, with the most vehement disagreement on the question of whether structural causes or individual behavioral factors—related to the so-called culture of poverty—should be blamed for the apparent intransigence of poverty in communities that seemed to experience only downward mobility. Two decades of steady economic hardship for Puerto Ricans in particular inspired scholars to ask whether there were any self-reinforcing disadvantages keeping Puerto Ricans locked in extreme poverty.

Scholars and commentators on the right relied on culture-based explanations of poverty and failed to consider the decline of local economies and schools in the Northeast and the effects of major losses in manufacturing jobs. In 1991, President Reagan's staff director of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Linda Chávez, added a new degree of rancor to the debate with her book *Out of the Barrio: Toward a New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation*, which described Puerto Ricans as a "tragic and curious exception" to the growing successes of Latinos as a group nationwide. Citing statistics on welfare dependency and low marriage rates, and making a fuzzy case for a causal relationship between them, Chávez posited that it was Puerto Ricans' access to social benefits and anti-poverty programs, rather than the structural disadvantages of migration, poor education, and discrimination that caused their suffering. "Puerto Ricans have been smothered by entitlements," she asserted, "which should serve notice as a warning to other Hispanics." Chávez concluded that the Puerto Rican "exception" to Latino upward mobility was caused by cultural deficiencies of the Puerto Rican poor. Scholars who had studied the growth in poverty and the labor market problems of Puerto Ricans responded with a vigorous rebuttal to Chávez's flawed methods and culturalist blame-the-victim arguments.[48]

A more productive debate took place among scholars and policy analysts who noted with concern the increased poverty of large segments of the Puerto Rican community and tried various approaches to explain these dramatic increases. Sociologist Marta Tienda, a leading liberal voice in the "underclass debate," argued that "underclass" status was best understood as a function of long-term labor force withdrawal. She found that rates of Puerto Rican men's "chronic detachment" from the labor market were much higher and accelerating faster than that of Cuban and Mexican American men. Other scholars noted that much of the increase in poverty was explained by the continued arrival of low income workers from the island itself, where cyclical fluctuations and the harsher effects of the 1983 recession boosted emigration. When recent emigrants were excluded from the data, the poverty rate for Puerto Ricans was much lower, with significantly lower rates (nearly half) for U.S. born second generation Puerto Ricans and long-established migrants who arrived before 1970.[49]

In a field that by the 1990s grew to include hundreds of books and articles, scholars explored a variety of explanatory approaches. Economist André Torres noted that Puerto Ricans were behind African Americans in the acquisition of federal, state, and local public sector jobs, especially white collar jobs that provided a path out of poverty and were somewhat immune to the decline in industrial employment. By the 1950s Puerto Ricans held postal, police, and civil servant jobs, but their numbers did not compare with African American gains in public sector employment, which had picked up momentum since the 1940s. A late start and language and educational barriers kept more Puerto Ricans in New York from entering public sector jobs after the city's recovery from its fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s.[50]

Most scholars agreed that the crisis of deindustrialization and the larger problems of the industrial cities of the Northeast hit women the hardest and pushed them out of the labor market. Puerto Rican women's participation in the workforce between 1950 and 1980 shifted from the highest measure among all racial and ethnic groups to one of the lowest in 30 years. There were many reasons why older women stopped working. Some retired, while many former factory workers found themselves ill-prepared for the demands of a white-collar economy that often discriminated against dark-skinned people with accents and working class origins.[51] Explanations for low incomes and unemployment among younger people pointed to the crisis-ridden urban school systems of New York, Newark, Philadelphia, Chicago, and other declining urban centers that scarcely prepared students for the new labor market or for higher education; no longer could they count on a living wage at a nearby factory, as many of their parents had. Additional challenges—residential segregation, early pregnancy, and the fact that welfare benefits were more accessible than decent employment—compounded the likelihood of long-term poverty for young adults. In summarizing the lessons of two decades of poverty studies, sociologist Hector Cordero Guzmán asserted that, in order for social scientists to explain the role of racial, ethnic, and class differences in the lives of poor people, they needed to move beyond analyzing "individual level attributes" (educational attainment, labor force participation, and wages), and look at "social disparities in material and cultural resources, differences in institutional practices, and differences in the structural level conditions that set the parameters under which individuals operate."[52]

Given the alarming increase in the poverty rate and the larger urban crisis, the absence of coordinated policies directed specifically at the urban poor amounted to a tragic failure. Federal anti-poverty programs were all but dead; job training programs like the Federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (1973–82) and the Job Training Partnership Act (1982–98) were underfunded and mostly ineffective. Confirmation of this neglect lies in its principal exception: food supplementation became the most critical federal intervention for the urban poor. At the state level, policy responses were also few but provided minimal relief with health services and low cost housing. Even liberal governors agreed that government did little to change the larger pattern. In 1985 New York Governor Cuomo convened a commission that issued a report confirming the dire conditions of urban minority populations, but the effort yielded no policies.[53] Puerto Ricans were left to respond to the crisis on their own and through their own efforts.

Work and Economic Life: Recovery through Labor Activism and Education

When the Center for Puerto Rican Studies founder Frank Bonilla co-authored "A Wealth of Poor: Puerto Ricans in the New Economic Order" in 1981, the

prospects for most working class Puerto Ricans were bleak and the poverty crisis was creating havoc in their urban communities. According to Bonilla, Puerto Ricans were trapped between the structural changes of a capitalist economy and a shrinking welfare state. Bonilla's approach was useful as a frame for understanding the flow of people from the island and how crises in the U.S. affected the working poor. But in focusing on a structuralist framework, he too suffered from blind spots, merely hinting at strategies developed by Puerto Ricans themselves to recover from poverty and overcome the obstacles to their social mobility. As in previous decades, these efforts depended on the public sector, educational improvements, and the labor movement, and they relied on collective mobilizations as well as family-based efforts to combat economic insecurity. The recovery, in other words, would emerge from the diverse efforts of workers and their families as they reoriented themselves in a changing economic landscape.[54]

Bucking the worst of Bonilla's predictions in "A Wealth of Poor," Puerto Ricans did begin to experience a partial recovery from the extreme poverty they had experienced in the 1970s and 1980s. Puerto Ricans' poverty rate dropped from its peak of nearly 40% in the mid-1980s to 32% in 1990 and achieved its greatest decline to 25.8% by 1999.[55] The sources of these slow but significant improvements were varied. A growing economy brought significant gains in employment and incomes, which in turn helped bolster rates of high school and college graduation and para-professional training. The economic growth during the Clinton presidency (1993–2001) created favorable conditions for employment, wages, and social welfare spending; growth also improved the island's employment levels, which produced a decline in migration.[56] Public sector jobs recovered significantly, as did public sector unions. A growing service economy for the high-income urban demographic (which was now moving back into city centers) added additional job opportunities, especially in New York City.[57] During the years of sharp decline in the industrial economy of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, thousands of U.S.-born Puerto Ricans had moved to states with more job opportunities and better housing; and migrants from the island were also settling in more varied mainland locations with growing economies, in cities like Tampa, Los Angeles, Houston, and New Orleans.

The growing economy helped with Puerto Ricans' recovery, but so did the efforts of Puerto Ricans and their allies who continued to work with labor and civil rights organizations to improve their lot. For labor leaders in service, public sector, and health related unions in particular this growth created opportunities for organizing campaigns and wage improvements, especially in New York and New Jersey. Unions like the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the New York Transit Workers Union, the Buildings Services Union, the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE), United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) continued to be important for tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans because of their continued struggle to gain better wages.

Latino membership, leadership, and employment in these unions increased dramatically during the 1990s. Latinos at this point comprised more than 10% of the nation's largest union, the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), and fought national AFL-CIO leaders for greater involvement in union leadership. This resurgence was perhaps strongest in New York City, and boosted the efforts of labor leaders like Eddie de Jesús, a longtime activist and former Young Lord, who established a labor task force through the National Council for Puerto Rican Rights to help consolidate the Puerto Rican presence in the labor movement. The career of Dennis Rivera, who became president of the National Health Care Workers' Union (Local 1199) in 1989, exemplifies the powerful possibilities of union leadership positions, as well as the importance of healthcare unions for Puerto Rican workers since the 1980s. Rivera migrated from the island in 1977 and worked as an organizer in Local 1199, also joining the National Council for Puerto Rican Rights. Under Rivera's leadership, the union improved wages in hospitals by 140% (the membership was 20% Latino in the early 1980s).[58] By the end of the 1990s, Puerto Ricans worked together with Mexican Americans, Central Americans, Dominicans, Cubans, and others to build new unions that merged together the shrinking membership of older labor organizations and fought to extend membership to workers in the increasingly low wage service economy.

Anti-discrimination advocacy work was also part of the story of the gains achieved by Puerto Ricans in the labor market in the 1980s and 1990s—despite declining federal support for work equity lawsuits since the Reagan administration. In New Jersey, a Puerto Rican lawyer was named in 1995 to direct the state's anti-discrimination office, which handled thousands of work and housing complaints yearly. More lawsuits were led by the principal Latino civil rights organization in the Northeast, LatinoJustice PRLDEF (formerly the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund). The emergence of Puerto Rican law firms that work on employment, equity, and anti-discrimination cases also added to the growing network of advocacy for Puerto Rican workers. [59]

For a community that originated overwhelmingly in patterns of working class migration, access to education has proved to be the most critical path for Puerto Ricans' gains in mobility, security, and equity in the workplace. Gains were slow to accumulate, but high school graduation rates for Puerto Ricans, as well as most students served by underperforming urban schools in impoverished communities, improved steadily during the late 1980s and 1990s, especially for Puerto Ricans born in the U.S. as opposed to on the island. Educational attainment, a major predictor of income levels, increased from an average of 9.84 years in 1979 to 10.48 years in 1985 and 11.14 years in 1989. Between 1980 and 2000 the percentage of Puerto Ricans with some sort of post-high school education tripled, from 15.6% to 36%, while the percentage of adults without a high school education declined from 60% to 27%. These slow-paced but steady changes, marked in many areas by family movement towards school districts perceived as better, have improved the overall economic gains made by Puerto Ricans since the 1980s.[60]

Puerto Ricans' gains in the higher education arena went beyond access to degrees and social mobility. Students who pushed their colleges and universities to establish programs in Puerto Rican Studies in the late 1960s were not just interested in studying their own history; they also wanted the opportunity to study with sympathetic and supportive faculty in what were often alienating institutional settings. These goals matured during the 1980s, when larger numbers of Puerto Rican youth began pursuing college degrees, especially at public universities. On many campuses during the 1980s and 1990s, Puerto Rican activism combined with the emerging presence of other Latinos, especially Dominican and Mexican students, to continue to press for access. During this period, many programs and departments that had been founded in the 1970s as "Puerto Rican Studies" transitioned to become more inclusive of all Latinos in their curricula, students, and faculty.

Increasing the presence of Puerto Rican and other Latino faculty and staff in the academy has been a key dimension of student activist demands since the 1980s and 1990s, especially within the public universities of the Northeast. However, even at campuses of the City University of New York (CUNY)—the university system with the largest population of Puerto Rican students in the country—results were inconsistent and tended to concentrate Puerto Rican faculty in a small number of ethnic studies departments. Sociologist Felipe Pimentel directed an effort in the 2000s to pressure the CUNY administration to hire more Latino faculty as numbers had stagnated. His data shows that while the number of Puerto Ricans with PhDs increased and their presence in the academy at the national level grew significantly between the 1980s and 2000, the number of Puerto Rican faculty had declined within the CUNY system since the mid-1970s. With pressure from students, politicians, and various community leaders, the chancellor responded by creating a special hiring initiative that yielded modest results at the college level and a negligible impact at the graduate level.[61] Similar controversies played out in other public university systems where Puerto Ricans constituted a significant proportion of the student body, including Rutgers, the University of Connecticut, and the State University of New York.

Police Abuse and Community Response

The urban working class communities in which many Puerto Ricans lived had long suffered from blight and decay, gang violence and petty crime. During the 1980s and 1990s, with expanding illegal drug markets that emerged with the epidemic of crack cocaine and increasingly violent crime, conditions in these communities reached a crisis point. Police departments responded with aggressive "zero-tolerance" campaigns, which tended to heighten police brutality and produced a spike in civil rights violations; a related problem was the easy drug money that corrupted hundreds of officers and even entire police precincts. Amid the growing urban crisis, regular incidents of police violence in Black and Latino neighborhoods—most notably in large post-industrial cities with "majority

minority" communities, but also in smaller cities and towns—brought increasing national attention to the issue. The Rodney King case, involving the brutal beating of an African American taxi driver in Los Angeles in 1991 and then the acquittal of the four officers involved, sparked a dramatic and deadly riot in 1992 that garnered international media coverage. In cases involving Puerto Ricans, swift reactions from Latino or Puerto Rican coalitions and civil rights organizations emphasized the community's long history of responding to police abuse.[62] Below, we offer a case study of Puerto Ricans' increasingly forceful response to police abuse in New York City, which joined with the chorus of voices around the nation demanding reform and legal action.

One of the incidents that served as a catalyst for the growing Puerto Rican community response during the 1980s was the August 1979 police killing of Luis Baez, a mentally ill man who spoke only Spanish. The community responded with large protests against police abuse led by an alliance of Black and Latino leaders. As was often the case, the police response to protest created more conflict. Leaders of PRLDEF and other civil rights organizations considered lawsuits especially after the police attacked with their cars, threw bottles, and aimed guns at peaceful demonstrators. Activists asked the Federal Department of Justice to probe the New York police department's patterns of abuse and civil rights violations, but a local grand jury refused to indict the policemen involved in the shooting, and FBI and federal civil rights investigations resulted in no charges.[63]

In 1981, motivated by the increase in violence and rights violations in Puerto Rican communities around the country, activists in New York City founded the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights (NCPRR), with early leadership by former members of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party and former Young Lords Juan González and Richie Pérez. Although police brutality was the primary issue motivating the NCPRR, the group also participated in the 1983 March on Washington (the 20th anniversary of the historic 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom), in demonstrations against apartheid in South Africa, and against U.S. intervention in Central America throughout the 1980s. By 1983 the level of conflict with the police in New York City led to Congressional hearings on police abuse, which drew 500 people and dozens of testimonies, including participants from PRLDEF, the NCPRR, and the NAACP. Mayor Ed Koch and his police commissioner dismissed the complaints as exaggerated and politically motivated or claimed they had already been dealt with. Within a few years, the NCPRR opened chapters in several cities and became a prominent voice in debates about police brutality, lobbying for the suspension of abusive police officers and mobilizing public outrage over police shootings. [64]

Despite these responses, horrific incidents continued. One prominent case taken up by the NCPRR was the police killing of an unarmed 14-year-old, José Lebrón, in Brooklyn in 1990. Less than a year later, five police officers were indicted and found not guilty after they beat and choked an unarmed car theft suspect in Queens. Police claimed the suspect, Federico Pereira, aged 21, died

from a cocaine-induced frenzy, but the state's medical examiner declared he had been by choked to death. Pereira's mother offered a wrenching description of the injustice:

> This was well orchestrated, a set up. I don't trust the judicial system, and those police officers who taunted me and called me names, they were delighted a person of color was killed. But what hurt me most were the Latino and African American cops who cheered right along with the white racist cops—that hurt me even more . . . These cops know that they have free rein to kill people of color and that they will never have to make restitution for their crimes—you can compare our police departments throughout this nation with the death squads in Central or South America. There's no true justice here for people of color.[65]

Two months later, when the largely-Puerto Rican Hispanic Society of the NYPD invited Pereira's stepfather, a popular musician, to perform at their annual scholarship dinner, the predominantly white Patrolman's Benevolent Union (PBU) decided to boycott the dinner. Hispanic Society leaders were careful to not brand the entire PBU as racists but noted that their membership included "devout racists." One leader expressed to a reporter his "surprise" that the federal Department of Justice had taken years to review police brutality complaints.[66]

Conflicts continued through the 1990s, with police shootings only the most visible part of the problem; residents of many neighborhoods reported feeling under siege by both street crime and the police. Responding to another shooting incident in 1992, New York resident Juan Gutiérrez complained to journalists that "the police consider this a drug slum . . . It's not like that. A lot of people sell drugs here. A lot of people live here and work here too. But they treat everybody the same. They have no respect." Another local businessman suggested that "they don't care about innocent people." The statements came on the heels of the police killing of Jose Uviles, a factory worker from Puerto Rico who was shot after he raised his hands to surrender after having stolen a car. When police tried to break up a memorial procession in his honor, some of his Bushwick, Brooklyn neighbors resisted by burning two police cars and setting dumpsters on fire and firing bullets in the air.[67]

Perhaps the most prominent case of these years was the killing of Anthony Baez (no relation to Luis Baez), who died as the result of an illegal chokehold while in police custody. Baez, a 29-year-old visiting from Florida, was playing football with his brothers in front of his family home in the Bronx on a December night in 1994 when he got into an altercation with police after the football hit a parked police car. Baez's brother was arrested during the confrontation that ensued, and when Baez protested his brother's arrest, he was restrained by Officer Francis Livoti, who put Baez in a chokehold until he was unconscious. Despite evidence that Baez, face down on the floor and handcuffed, could not

breathe, police allowed him to lie unconscious for 15 minutes, ignoring pleas by his father for medical assistance. The judge concurred with Baez's father that his son had been "treated like a piece of meat" when shoved unconscious into a police car and allowed to die from trauma to his larynx and lack of oxygen.[68]

For years the Baez family demanded justice, without success. For Baez's father the problem was that

> when you tell police you know your rights, that's a problem, especially if you're Latino. They think because we are Latino we are not intelligent people. But my son, Tony, was a well-educated man . . . My kids all got education, and they treat us like criminals!

The Baez family asserted they were let down not just by city officials in general but by the Puerto Rican community's leaders and politicians. One of the few allies they found was the NCPRR, which devised a strategy of pressure, confrontation, and public shaming through two failed trials against Livoti.[69]

Finally, after a trial marred by police perjury, Officer Livoti was convicted for violating Anthony Baez's civil rights and sentenced to seven years in a federal prison. The city paid $3 million to the Baez family in compensation.[70] Even the *New York Times* agreed that the Livoti case was not an aberration, as claimed by Mayor Giuliani and the police commissioner, but provided evidence of "how violent behavior has been tolerated by the department's top echelons." This admission came after police commissioner Safir fired 106 officers for brutality, theft, and corruption. These practices led to multiple lawsuits over civil rights violations resulting in $87 million in payments between 1990 and 1995. Years later, Mayor Giuliani proposed naming a street after Anthony Baez, calling his killing "a terrible thing . . . [that] should never have happened."[71]

By the time Livoti killed Baez, the police abuse crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s had already led to intense pressure for a civilian review board, which Black and Puerto Rican activists had been calling for since the late 1950s. David Dinkins, New York's first Black mayor, elected in 1990, finally approved the Civilian Review Board (CRB) in 1993. Opposition by police to the creation of the board was swift and nearly unanimous. Thousands of officers, backed by the police union, demonstrated at City Hall, blocking traffic and shouting racial epithets; Rudolph Giuliani (elected mayor a year later, but at that time in private law practice) participated in the protest.

On the overall response to the creation of the CRB, Human Rights Watch reported that "police protested violently and engaged in actions, according to a police department report, that were unruly, mean-spirited and perhaps criminal."A few years later, the CRB's director, a Puerto Rican civil rights lawyer named Hector Soto, resigned from the position, citing lack of support from the mayor's office and the board's ineffectiveness. In 2001, Republican mayor Rudolph Giuliani—who had campaigned on a law-and-order platform—would

acknowledge these problems and the lack of public confidence in the NYPD by turning the CRB into an independent civilian agency.[72]

Less than two years after the creation of the Civilian Review Board, another major case of police violence gripped Puerto Rican New York. Two robbery suspects, Anthony Rosario and Hilton Vega, were killed by 28 police bullets—all shots to their backs—inside a Bronx apartment. For nearly 15 years, Anthony Rosario's mother, Margarita Rosario, pursued prosecution of the police officers responsible. Through the press and in public forums, Ms. Rosario demanded explanations and prosecutions. Vigils and protests were held and murals were mounted; Rosario and her supporters were dismissed by the police commissioner as "a bunch of fools." A grand jury refused to indict but the Civilian Review Board found that the detectives had used unnecessary and excessive force, with evidence and testimony indicating that Rosario and Vega were shot once they surrendered and were face down on the floor. But, due to the political climate of the Giuliani administration—which was openly hostile to complaints about abusive policing in poor neighborhoods—the city in the end settled a civil lawsuit for $1.1 million in damages, avoiding public scrutiny and further investigation of the shootings.[73]

In these years of Giuliani's law-and-order offensive, hardline "zero-tolerance" policing meant that even minor crimes or nonviolent drug-related violations were treated as predictors of greater criminal offenses. This meant that Black and Latino working class neighborhoods were policed in a way that criminalized most young men, producing constant harassment by police. Despite the fact that crime rates were declining rapidly by the mid-1990s, both nationally and across New York City, the Giuliani administration adhered to its highly aggressive policing tactics. In late 1995, a few months after the shootings of Rosario and Vega *El Diario-La Prensa* noted a 30% increase in the arrest of children and youth, mostly for minor offenses. With another headline pronouncing "*más brutalidad*" (more brutality), *El Diario-La Prensa* also announced the worsening of police abuse complaints, which had increased 32% in the first half of 1995. In one case, a Puerto Rican police officer reported he had been subjected to civil rights violations by other police in his own house in Staten Island. The situation in New York became so bad that Amnesty International carried out a special investigation and issued a harsh review of the violent practices of the NYPD and its failures to discipline abusive officers.[74]

For decades, Puerto Ricans and their neighbors in poor communities had suffered from aggressive and violent policing in addition to the crime and poverty that surrounded them. (Indeed, violent treatment by police was something that Puerto Rican migrants complained about as far back as the 1920s; one man, Félix Loperana, interviewed by an oral historian in the 1970s, asserted that "the police were the first who discriminated against us.") But the problem of police brutality took on a new urgency by the late 1980s and 1990s, exacerbated by the growing problems of drugs and gun violence. Even after significant declines in the drug

trade and violent crime compared to the previous decade, the *New York Times* noted in 1998 the "continuing fear of police brutality in black and Hispanic neighborhoods."[75]

Hampered by the stigma of living in crime-ridden areas, relatives and activists often had difficulty in their pursuit of justice in individual cases. But, as these advocates generated an increasingly loud and visible protest movement against police brutality, they were joined by civil rights organizations and leaders. In 1999, the National Council of Puerto Rican Rights achieved a major gain in the campaign against police brutality when it won a lawsuit against the NYPD's elite Street Crimes Unit regarding its "stop and frisk policy." This case would turn out to be the first big victory in the legal challenge to the police department's practices of racial profiling, which would eventually be outlawed after a federal judge ruled them to be a violation of civil rights. Although the problem of police brutality may not have improved materially due to the increased media attention or to a series of legal victories related to racial profiling, Puerto Rican leaders and activists who had been working on police abuse issues since the 1960s (or even earlier) were moving toward the possibility for real change, in New York and around the U.S..[76]

Conclusion

The urban crisis that began in the 1970s and worsened during the 1980s resulted from familiar problems—poverty and unemployment, decaying housing and neglect by landlords and city officials, police abuse and violence—the impact of which was intensified by an expanded illegal drug trade and a rollback in public services during a severe recession followed by Reagan's austerity policies directed at the poor. Despite the seemingly endless challenges, residents of these neighborhoods pursued the same aspirations for a secure life that had motivated early communities of Puerto Rican migrants in New York City in the 1920s, and that continued to motivate all the later generations of Puerto Ricans that lived and worked all over the U.S. By the 1980s and 1990s, Puerto Rican activists and leaders had amassed decades of experience in advocacy for their communities and had created large networks capable of mobilizing support from many Puerto Rican and Latino communities, along with other non-Latino allies. Particularly with the help of a handful of national organizations created between the 1960s and 1980s, Puerto Ricans had achieved much greater recognition and some concrete legal and policy changes in a number of key areas, including voting rights, affirmative action, labor union leadership, educational equality and access, and campaigns against police brutality.

Another significant if less visible accomplishment in this era was the growing presence of Puerto Rican intellectuals and academics poised to gain a louder voice in the public sphere. Scholars connected to the field of Puerto Rican Studies had created archives and libraries to document the history of

the Puerto Rican diaspora in the U.S., assembling personal and organizational papers and photographic collections donated by Puerto Ricans around the country. Challenging the limitations of mainstream disciplines, these scholars made pioneering contributions to understanding a variety of issues specific to Puerto Ricans, including colonial labor migration, bilingualism, and the history of U.S. colonial policy. Whereas few mainstream scholars had paid any attention to their work in the 1970s or even the 1980s, by the 1990s, Puerto Rican scholars began to get more credit for their contributions to social science, history, and cultural studies. Puerto Ricans now participated not just in national debates about issues concerning "the underclass" and "the culture of poverty," but also developed new intellectual understandings of issues like globalization, colonialism, and transnationalism. By the 1990s, Puerto Rican Studies scholars had built new connections to the broader field of Latino Studies, bringing their research into dialogue with scholars from related but distinct cultural and intellectual traditions.

In addition to forging greater connections with other Latino groups academically, Puerto Ricans also began to conceptualize connections with Latinos more broadly at the community and political levels. In both community- and national-level organizations, Puerto Rican professionals and activists found themselves serving an increasingly diverse (and often undocumented) Latino immigrant population, especially Mexicans and Central Americans. In Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey, where decades of activism by Puerto Ricans yielded significant gains, organizations like the Puerto Rican Family Institute and the Puerto Rican Action Committee continued to engage with the new Spanish-speaking immigrant populations, often adjusting their focus to match the needs of the new communities. PRLDEF changed its name in the early 2000s to LatinoJustice-PRLDEF, to better reflect the actual scope of its work. Likewise, the Institute for Puerto Rican Policy, founded in 1982, became the National Institute for Latino Policy in 2005.[77] In broadening their vision in order to extend services and advocacy to new communities, many of which had difficulty voicing their own demands because of lack of citizenship rights and extreme poverty, these organizations exemplified the expansiveness of the ongoing struggles for Puerto Rican rights.

Notes

1 "The Latinization of Allentown, Pa." *The New York Times*, 15 May 1994; Silver, Patricia. "Puerto Ricans in Florida." In Edwin Meléndez and Carlos Vargas Ramos, eds., *Puerto Ricans at the Dawn of the New Millennium*. New York: Centro, 2014, 62–81; Silver, Patricia. "Latinization, Race, and Cultural Identification in Puerto Rican Orlando." *Southern Cultures* 19, no. 4 (2013): 55–75; Otterstrom, Samuel M., and Benjamin F. Tillman. "Income Change and Circular Migration: The Curious Case of Mobile Puerto Ricans, 1995–2010." *Journal of Latin American Geography* 12, no. 3 (2013): 33–57; Duany, Jorge. "The Orlando Ricans: Overlapping Identity Discourses among Middle-Class Puerto Rican Immigrants." In Jorge Duany. *Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States*. Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2011, 105–34.